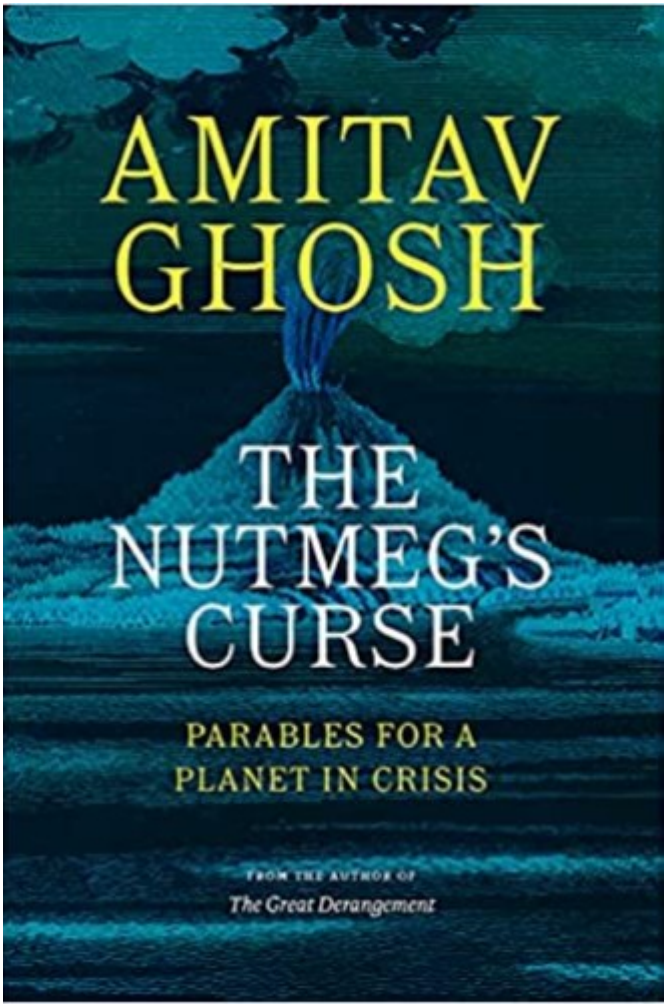
When nature is its own protagonist

Amitav Ghosh’s book sings the ancestral story of nutmeg.

by Trish Zimmerman in the December 2022 issue

In Review



The Nutmeg’s Curse

Parables for a Planet in Crisis

By Amitav Ghosh
University of Chicago Press
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What if the trees are waiting us out? They've been on earth longer than our species, and their lifespans often exceed ours, notes Amitav Ghosh. Perhaps they are "gardening humans." As they throw off settlers in drastic climate events, they root us out, the empire of landscape striking back.

This kind of exhilarating change of perspective threads throughout *The Nutmeg's Curse*. An extraordinary storyteller and master of the decisive detail, Ghosh sings the ancestral story of nutmeg, summoning from the smallest of nuts a universe of both blessing and curse. "Taking a nutmeg out of its fruit is like unearthing a tiny planet," he writes, and in this planet the nutmeg reveals itself as an agent of mythic vitalism. A Dutchman visiting Indonesia's Banda archipelago in search of the nutmeg hears a sound one night, an overturned lamp triggers a full-scale slaughter, and the tale becomes an intricate unfurling of how such a geopolitical pressure point arose—and, even more insistently, how it speaks to our own time of environmental peril. This story, assures the bard, can save us.

Ghosh reweaves myth as a source of power, showing nature to be its own protagonist in tales of volcanoes, islands, spices, and other nonhuman entities. A clove sculpture atop a fort's monument reveals botany as an icon of the dynamics of empire. Replacement myths and wars over renaming displace nature's vibrant material power with visions of European male scientific knowledge. The Dutch may have exported their "mythmaking of modernity" with illusions of freedom from material dependence, but the small islands in the Indian Ocean that are home to the nutmeg intone a more honest and liberating truth.

Like in the fable of the emperor's new clothes, some people insist they see a reality of inert matter that clearly contradicts most of our data and deepest convictions. For a species that insists its methods stay overtly objective, this kind of willful ignorance requires an awful sleight of hand. Ghosh writes,

When and how did a small group of humans come to believe that other beings, including the majority of their own species, were incapable of articulation and agency? How were they able to establish the idea that nonhumans are mute, and without minds, as the dominant wisdom of the time?

Never able to fully eradicate evidence and intuitions to the contrary, people who hold sinister forms of power will inevitably resist such a retelling, mock its resacralizing as naive or irrational, and offer corrupt consumerist rewards to those who collude with their own impoverished, barren, lifeless world. But after reading Ghosh, I was able to believe that the storytellers and mythmakers can win.

Ghosh connects colonialism's brutal biopolitical wars against Indigenous peoples to our current climate catastrophe's unprecedented omnicide. Countering the basic tenets of the European scientific revolution and its justification of extractive exploitation economies, he retrieves and retells the saving story of an enduring subterranean tide of vitalism.

"Terraforming," a concept borrowed from science fiction, steals inert land, maps it with Euclidean precision, and modifies it for the profit of people in an entirely different habitat. It requires violence to enforce and justify. While various peoples have always warred, Ghosh heads off the counterargument that Indigenous people fought and enslaved one another too. The scale and pace of the transformation of land by European colonialism brought an entirely different kind of war—one that weaponized environments.

Ghosh in no way suggests an idealized noble savagery to counter European explorer modes. Rather, he carefully deconstructs the premises that allow for such continued carnage. By eradicating buffalo, bringing smallpox and other diseases, introducing habitat-destroying cattle and pigs, and damming and rerouting rivers, the colonizing settlers showed that "invasion was not an event but a structure." This is why solutions to such programs must include more than simply removing the colonial presence. They must burrow down to the very mythic structure that made such brutality possible and retrieve the powerful alternatives that have always been there.

Ghosh asks many questions that cannot be fully answered but are nonetheless paradigm shifting. For example, did the century and a half of planetary cooling known as the Little Ice Age, with its drop in atmospheric carbon, result in part from the genocide of North American Indigenous peoples? With the eradication of 70 percent of some populations on two different continents—people who were eco-specialists and crop tenders—did the carbon levels change enough that the entire planet breathed differently? Even if only in part, what would it mean to ritually name this in our litany of historical grievances with long effects?

Do the material properties of oil ensure its hoarding for the wealth and power of the ruling classes in ways that water's material properties do not? Petrostates that benefit by controlling small shipping lanes belie the so-called free market that has always relied on enslaved labor, class war, and genocide. By hearing this story of ancestral conquest, how might we extract ourselves from militarism that relies on plant life—whether fossilized as oil or trafficked as opium? Can we regain a place in a forest of clean energy interdependence? Ghosh shows that the power embedded in a carbon footprint moves behind individual choices such as biking to work. Are we willing to name this power and reconnect to healthy biologically dependent modes of living? He shows us precisely who will benefit.

We desperately need storytellers who can link our multiple modes of understanding: science, religion, politics, and environmental studies. An artful historian, Ghosh shows us how to read silences, philosophies, monuments, intercultural exchanges, and global interactions while focusing on particular landscapes and peoples.

Western science, for example, has often secretly depended on other ways of knowing, collaborating in ways it dared not name. Classification is prescriptive as well as descriptive: Linnaeus's overt categorical racism systematized not only plant life but also White supremacy. Understanding history can restore geo-spirits, not as primitive but as foundational. Ghosh is not naive in reconstructing such an Eden. He names simply and brutally where we have gone too far to heal.

Ghosh's attention to the inherent power of material forces refuses to allow the descendants of colonizers to efface our own culpability in the destruction of our planetary home. Those on the margins will always suffer the greatest from tsunamis and wildfires, as well as from dangerous economics and theologies. Ghosh believes that we must return to mutual dependence with all the earth's vital beings in order to effect the "seismic shift in consciousness" that climate change demands of us.

As authors like Robin Wall Kimmerer, Suzanne Simard, and Merlin Sheldrake have recently shown, we can retrieve the intimacy of science. The wisdom of mutuality amid creaturely vitalism may have gone underground, viciously hunted and rooted out by those whose exploitative tactics it condemns. But like all powerful streams, it can resurface. What fallen lamp will restart this movement? Perhaps Ghosh's story of honest hope.