
Book Review

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 196 pp., \$22.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-226-32303-9.

I spend a lot of time in Argentina and have become an enthusiastic consumer of that country's cinema, most of which remains unknown in the United States. One of my favorites is titled *De Eso no se Habla* ('One doesn't talk about that').¹ The story centers on an imperious woman named Leonor who is intensely protective of her daughter, who is a dwarf. The 'that' that one does not talk about is the perfectly obvious fact that the daughter is a dwarf. To mention that fact is to unleash Leonor's unlimited fury, and everyone in her circle knows that and so avoids the subject. Leonor's daughter's condition is the proverbial elephant in the room. The Indian-born writer Amitav Ghosh, best known as a novelist (*The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, and *The Hungry Tide*, among others) focusing primarily on South Asian themes, has written *The Great Derangement* to ask why literature in general—with the possible exception of science-fiction—'doesn't talk about' climate change, which he sees as the most pressing problem of our time. At least that is the stated, narrowly focused objective, but clearly Ghosh is aiming more widely, implicitly asking why society as a whole seems so unconcerned. His conclusion is basically an elaboration of the interconnectedness of things: society—writers explicitly included—gives lip service to the crisis and the need to take meaningful action, but all the while we are so deeply enmeshed in our late-capitalist lifestyle dependence on fossil fuels that we cannot step out of it in any definitive way.

The 'great derangement' of the title is the contradiction between our expressed desires and our failure to act on them. The book ranges widely even as it leans heavily on the author's personal experience and general South Asian intellectual milieu, citing numerous authors quite unfamiliar to me (but upon investigation proving very interesting and worth reading!) and examples of environmental issues little-known or -publicized in the West (I am a little more familiar with some of them than most readers are likely to be just because I teach tropical ecology—but only a little more!). It is copiously, and very helpfully, footnoted. Ghosh is not a big fan of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (the one the Trump Administration wants to 'nullify')—he views it as a cynical papering-over of the problem. He is an enthusiastic fan of Pope

1. Editor's Note: Although the official English title is 'I Don't Want to Talk About It', Shapiro's choice of the indefinite pronoun more accurately reflects the idiomatic nuance of the original.

Francis's 'environmental' encyclical *Laudato Si*, which, he feels, cuts directly to the moral issues. But he is virtually silent on how that moral teaching can be converted into effective action. As an environmental educator, I have a somewhat different take on this. I find that the public, even the well-educated public, has a very poor understanding of the planet we live on. When I teach biogeography or tropical ecology, I find hardly any of my University of California undergraduates can explain such fundamental concepts as the causes of seasonality or the difference (and relationship) between weather and climate. The same is true of their parents, when they attend my public lectures. It is easy for the merchants of disinformation to dupe people who don't know enough to suspect they are being duped! We can try to motivate people in a political/economic context, but we are far more likely to succeed if they understand and can articulate the basic physical science underlying the issue. There is a widespread and mostly incorrect perception that these things are too abstract and technical for laypeople to understand—so why try? But I find that after a half-hour chalk talk, people come up to me and say things like 'You know, I've always tuned out the weather discussion on TV—all I wanted was the forecast—because I had no idea what this stuff about highs and lows and fronts was all about. I thought you needed advanced math and physics for that! But you just made it perfectly comprehensible.' It's a lot easier to take something seriously when it actually makes sense. Ghosh says:

When future generations look back upon the Great Derangement they will certainly blame the leaders and politicians of this time for their failure to address the climate crisis. But they may well hold artists and writers to be equally culpable—for the imagining of possibilities is not, after all, the job of politicians and bureaucrats. (p. 135)

I would add that educators, from kindergarten through college, should share the blame too. In many schools geography is not taught at all, and planetary or geoscience is presented as a series of narrowly focused topics often taught at too high a level. The most effective background for an environmentally aware and active citizenry is a solid understanding of basic geography and planetary science, taught not with a didactic or indoctrinational slant, but simply as something that every person needs, perhaps more than ever before. I commend *The Great Derangement* as a thoughtful and motivational exposition of the 'that' that one all too often does not talk about. And when you finish it, get a book called *Why Geology Matters*—subtitled *Decoding the Past, Anticipating the Future*—by Doug Macdougall. It will fill the lacunae in your planetary-science education. When you have finished it, you will be well prepared to go forth and talk about 'that'.

Arthur M. Shapiro
Department of Evolution and Ecology
University of California, Davis
amshapiro@ucdavis.edu

Reference

Macdougall, Doug. 2011. *Why Geology Matters: Decoding the Past, Anticipating the Future* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press).