

Ghosh tries something new with sci-fi thriller

The Calcutta Chromosome

Amitav Ghosh
Vintage Canada

They say India's greatest exports these days are writers. It is true that India produces a veritable plethora of talented novelists, many of whom have settled in the West. Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie and newcomer Arundhati Roy whose first, Booker Prize-winning novel has been hailed by John Updike as a "Tiger Woods-ian" debut, are all powerful novelists.

The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium, & Discovery is the latest work by Amitav Ghosh, an author who has already established himself as a writer of considerable merit with his critically lauded works *In an Antique Land*, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Circle of Reason*. In this particular novel, Ghosh tries something his compatriots haven't by dabbling in science fiction. The book in fact received the 1996 Arthur C. Clarke Award for the

year's best science fiction novel.

A warning to readers tackling this novel: be prepared to read it twice! The word "complex" is perhaps too euphemistic an adjective to describe this work. I am not ashamed to say that the end left me a little perplexed. Take your most complicated *X-Files* episode, multiply its complexity by one hundred, and that's a close proximation of what you're dealing with in this novel. This protagonist makes Mulder and Scully look like a couple of amateurs, and the story blends suspense and science fiction in a maze of intertwining story lines whose settings range from New York in the not-so-distant future to nineteenth century Calcutta.

Antar, an Egyptian computer clerk, stumbles across an ID card of an old colleague of his, Murugan, who has mysteriously disappeared in Calcutta. While attempting to unearth information on his whereabouts, Antar is drawn into the mystery that shrouds

the medical history of malaria research, a topic that has a great deal to do with Murugan's disappearance. Before pulling his vanishing act, Murugan had discovered that Sir Ronald Ross, the British scientist who pinpointed the mosquito as the vector for the malaria contagion, may have unwittingly been pushed towards this discovery by a secret group of "counter-scientists". This group knows more than anyone could dream to know about malaria, and believes that it might be the key to immortality.

The story is gripping to say the least. Make sure you don't start the novel the night before an exam. The fact that the novel is clamoring for just a few more such a page-turner makes the

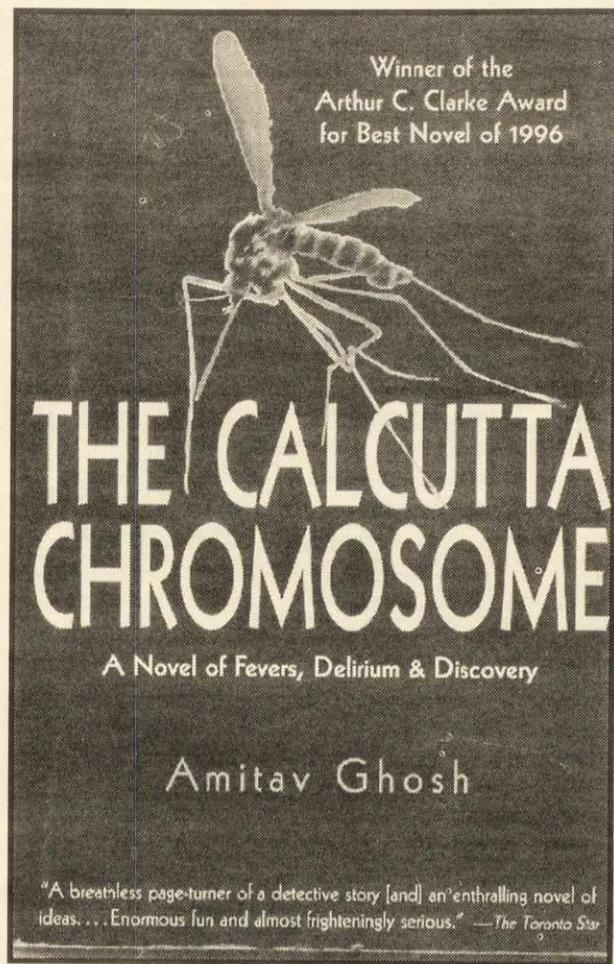
ending seem like a let down. The last page leaves you

loose ends the author leaves dangling in your face.

The first 307 pages are so absorbing that one is able to keep up with Ghosh in spite of the novel's labyrinthine and disconnected storyline, but the last page forces the reader to try and form his own conclusions.

The writing itself isn't too heavy. Ghosh is probably trying to make his work a little more accessible to a mainstream audience. Critics have said that the novel contains thoughts on free will versus predeterminism, and one has even called it a "post-colonial allegory".

Although I didn't catch a great deal of the novel's "metaphysical subtext" that these other critics seem to think it contains, I can recommend *The Calcutta Chromosome* as an intelligent novel that is



also enjoyable as an easy weekend read.

KARAN SHETTY

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