

## General Firebrand and His Red Atlas

**Tathagata Bhattacharya**

Seagull Books (Jul 6, 2024)

Hardcover \$25.00 (184pp)

978-1-80309-357-4

With elements of magical realism, Tathagata Bhattacharya's rollicking satirical novel *General Firebrand and His Red Atlas* covers the machinations of political alliances and regimes.

On the Indian subcontinent, the guerrillas of Sands fight for independence against the fascist nation Tantilash, which is backed by the western might of World Island. It's a struggle reminiscent of many underdog wars for self-determination in which Ho Chi Minh is referenced. And while the World Island leaders have tongue-in-cheek names like Admiral Limpdick, President Bum, and Lieutenant-Commander Tinpot, the novel froths with deeper implications and meaning.

The unlikely hero of the novel is the head of the seceding faction: Colonel Firebrand, an aging, alcoholic, irreverent legend after numerous hard-won battles. While Firebrand is on night watch, he is visited by "a great long-horned bird" who tells him to convene a top-brass guerrilla meeting. There, a giant black panther, flanked by six flying ospreys, foretells the future.

Aided by these creatures and the ghosts of historical wars, the defenders of Sands face an invasion. At the first skirmish, the greater firepower of the opposition's joint forces are defeated by primitive guerrilla tactics including insects, snakes, sharpened bamboo spikes, and World War II-era bullets. But when Firebrand's estranged son, now a World Island agent smuggling a nuclear bomb into Sands, is captured by the guerrillas and tortured, it challenges the general's priorities. Meanwhile, mystical characters use a red atlas in their witchcraft and set the landmass of Sands adrift. Such fantastical elements make for a heady brew that augurs a massive war blowout on which the narrative more than delivers.

Clever references to historical battles and wars wend into *General Firebrand and His Red Atlas*, an allegorical meditation on the costs of freedom, the limits of resistance, and the cataclysmic birthing of new orders.

ELAINE CHIEW (July / August 2024)

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