



A God in Every Stone

Kamila Shamsie

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July 1914. Young Englishwoman Vivian Rose Spencer is running up a mountainside in an ancient land, surrounded by figs and cypresses. Soon she will discover the Temple of Zeus, the call of adventure, and the ecstasy of love. Thousands of miles away a twenty-year old Pathan, Qayyum Gul, is learning about brotherhood and loyalty in the British Indian army.

July, 1915. Qayyum Gul is returning home after losing an eye at Ypres, his allegiances in tatters. Viv is following the mysterious trail of her beloved. They meet on a train to Peshawar, unaware that a connection is about to be forged between their lives – one that will reveal itself fifteen years later, on the Street of Storytellers, when a brutal fight for freedom, an ancient artefact and a mysterious green-eyed woman will bring them together again.

A powerful story of friendship, injustice, love and betrayal, *A God In Every Stone* carries you across the globe, into the heart of empires fallen and conquered, reminding us that we all have our place in the chaos of history and that so much of what is lost will not be forgotten.

A God in Every Stone Details

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From Reader Review A God in Every Stone for online ebook

Hussam says

There should be a 3.5 star rating because mine borders on "liked it" and "really liked it". This book transports the reader across centuries from 515 BC to Colonial India during WW1 and its aftermath. We are introduced to Vivian Rose Spencer who is an archaeologist working on a dig site in Ottoman Empire when war breaks out. She goes there under the influence of one man who professes his love for her before she departs from Turkey and tells her his deepest secret. But here's the annoying part, I found Vivian to be quite a daddy's girl. She is always trying to fulfill her father's wishes of a son and in doing so betrays the secret of her lover which gets him killed. I mean what kind of a person does that?? I really hated Vivian for that and she hated herself for it as well (at least the guilt is her saving grace). We get glimpses of the suffragettes movement in England at that time in the form of it's champion Mary who is Viv's friend. She is at least a worthy character. There are other characters Qayyum Gul of the 40th Pathans who lost an eye at Battle of Ypres and his brother Najeeb Gul who metamorphises from being a boy to an accomplished archaeologist. Najeeb is set on the path of Scylax the Explorer and his crown of fig by Vivian Rose Spencer when she first comes to Peshawar. The story is advanced through a flurry of letters and telegrams sent between Najeeb and Vivian to convince her about funding a private dig site at Shah ji ki Dheri near Peshawar for the crown of Scylax. It ends with the massacre of Qissa Khuwani Bazar on 23rd April, 1930. I sort of drifted off towards the end because the story drags on and on about the same event from different people's point of views. I think it could have ended better. Also, I'd have liked to read more about Scylax's adventures down the river Indus. For that reason it's a 3.5 for me. This is the first novel I have read by Kamila Shamsie although I've heard her name and she managed to convince me enough to give her other novels a try.

Sue says

A God in Every Stone is an ambitious novel in both theme and scope, but in the end one that I think over reaches itself.

Set largely in British India between 1914 and 1930, it tells the stories of Qayyum, a 20-year-old Pashtun soldier and Vivian, an adventurous young British woman with a passion for archaeology. Caught in the immense upheaval of the First World War and then the Indian uprisings, both characters experience devastating personal losses, and have to discover for themselves the cost of betrayal and the meaning of loyalty.

It should be an affecting read and yet it is hard to feel much for any of the characters. One reads about what they see, and sense, in often overwhelming detail, but very little is written about how they feel or how their thinking changes. The result is surprisingly dull.

The novel opens with quotes from Herodotus and scraps from the life of an ancient adventurer, Scylax. We soon learn that he was the faithful servant of empire who came to decide that his loyalties lay with his own people rather than to the Persian Emperor Darius. His story is connected to the present of the novel, firstly, through the quest for his missing silver headpiece, and secondly through the obvious analogy between the trusted Scylax and other servants of empire in the story: Tashin Bey, the Armenian Turk, who secretly supports the cause of independence, and the other loyal Pashtuns, who are sent to the frontlines in France to fight for the British Empire and then begin to question where their allegiance really lies.

It is Scylax's lost silver circlet, symbol of imperial patronage, which brings Tashin Bey, and then Vivian to India, and finally connects all the characters as Vivian inspires her Indian protégée Najeeb to continue the search.

For me the Scylax story was problematic. It promised something epic, some interesting new perspective on the story of struggle between colonizers and colonized, but it didn't really deliver. Beyond the truism that empires rise and fall and the observation that:

"If a man is to die defending a field, let the field be his field, the land his land, the people his people",
there is not much more of substance to be had here.

The circlet though is the first of many circular references rippling through the novel. There are unraveling turbans, characters spinning on train platforms, journeys that end where they began, and chapters repeating the events of previous ones to give us a revolving perspective on all that is happening. The effect is somewhat dizzying. Enclosing it all though, just as Scylax's story encloses the narrative, there is the great cycle of history and the sense that Vivian and Qayyum are part of something bigger. It is here I think that the novel over reaches.

Its climax unfolds on the Street of Storytellers from which perhaps we are supposed to intuit that these two stories are never really their own, but belong instead to a never ending and often shifting narrative. Unfortunately this has the effect of reducing the characters to somewhat predictable ciphers and in the absence of a more robust cache of ideas this reader simply lost interest.

One never doubts for example that Qayyum will begin to realize that his real loyalties lie with his own people. His trajectory of political awakening is a familiar one. Sent to fight along side the British in France during the First World War he is initially in love with this new world and full of pride for both his people and their service to Empire. In battle he loses an eye and as he recovers in a hospital in Brighton he begins ironically to "see" his situation differently. At first he is overwhelmed by gratitude that the British are looking after him. Their empire is like the great light of the chandelier in his hospital where:

"the King was the silver dragon, one single claw bearing the weight of smaller dragons, glass lotus flowers, a star of mirrors".

Slowly however he senses something darker. All the young nurses are withdrawn from caring duties to Indians because Natives can't be trusted with "our" women. Next he is forcibly denied access to his best friend and then lied to. When he eventually returns to India he is full of anger.

He remains torn however. His strongest sense of loyalty is still to the members of his brigade who are fighting in Europe. He feels ashamed of himself for being injured and he is alarmed by the radicalization of his friend Kalam, now back in India and working with the Turks to overthrow the British. As he tries to recover from a loss even greater than that of his eye, he learns to remove his "blindfold" and turns away from the path of revenge and blood feud and towards the cause of non violent struggle.

Despite this somewhat predictable political awakening, Qayyum's character is the most fully developed and most interesting in the novel. Although it is hard to get a real sense of his inner struggle as he moves from faithful servant to campaigner for freedom, his grief at the loss of a friend is well handled, as is his desperate search for his younger brother Najeeb at the end of the novel.

Vivian on the other hand seems to become more one dimensional as the novel progresses, until she is finally

just a faceless character trailing after others in a burqa. At first she is something of a romantic heroine, a naïve young Englishwoman finding her first love in the exotic setting of a dig in India. There are girlish blushes of embarrassment and thrilling vistas of “cloudless blue skies”.

Although she is depicted as a very unconventional young woman for her era, she also holds very conventional views. Opposed to women’s suffrage and comfortable with a world in which there are rulers and ruled, Natives and Englishmen, like Qayyum one never doubts that this story will be about her finding where her true loyalties lie.

Both her burgeoning romance and her naïve worldview are shattered by the outbreak of World War 1 when she returns to England and the grim routine of nursing victims from the war. Unfortunately her transformation happens at light speed. For me the great weakness of this book is the way in which it races through moments of trauma and transition while lingering on the decorative and descriptive.

While Qayyum is at least given some recovery time in which to process his losses, for Vivian it all happens in one short chapter. We are told about the horrors of nursing (there are bugs and dead people), her breakdown gets one quick paragraph and when we meet her next she is on her way back to India.

Here we’re taken back into a Merchant Ivory production. Lots of swirling sounds, colours and sensual descriptions as she bathes, sweats and wanders about.

It’s very unsatisfying and also quite unbelievable especially her putative passion for archaeology and quest for the circlet. When asked by her young protégée Najeeb “ Why do you English like to dig?” She gives the dim answer “To find history” and when he sensibly responds “Why?” She replies, “I don’t know”.

I’m not sure this is a credible response from someone who we are supposed to believe later becomes a senior lecturer at University College. It is however typical of the dull exchanges between her and others in the novel.

Overall I found the novel disjointed and unaffecting.

The last part of Book 2 is titled “The Only Question”. For me this was “What is happening?” Closely followed by “Do I care?”

Unfortunately the answer was no.

Lucy Barnhouse says

This book is devastatingly perfect. I hesitate to compare it to anything else, but between the presence of Herodotus and the importance of archaeology, it reminded me a little of a more anti-imperial English Patient. There are also glorious, subversive echoes of Rudyard Kipling's Kim. And it is a book of dazzling, sensual, stunning prose; of vivid characters. Shamsie loves language, clearly, and it shows in how her characters engage with the world, as well as in the writing itself. A historical tapestry of immense scope is crafted through small and arresting details. I hesitate to say too much, lest I deprive the novel of any of its breathtaking power for others... but I loved it. Perhaps, as a historian, as a feminist, and as a romantic, I was especially likely to love it... but I will be recommending it to people who may identify with none of those labels. I have already recommended it. I loved this passionately; it brought me to tears, and I am so glad that I bought my own copy before returning the one I got from the library.

Morana Mazor says

"Bog u svakom kamenu", K. Shamsie, Buybook, 2016.g.

Povijest, arheologija, borba za neovisnost, međuljudski odnosi... a sve to jako lijepo složeno u priču o britanskoj arheologinji i dva brata Indijca čiji se životu isprepliću tijekom prve polovice 20st. i indijske borbe za neovisnost od Velike Britanije. Kompleksan roman utemeljeno na povijesnim činjenicama o kojima i nema puno knjiga...Bravo za autoricu!

Hugh says

This is one of the best books I have read this year.

A cleverly constructed multi-threaded historical novel, largely set in the city of Peshawar - the central personal stories are gripping, and the novel explores deeper themes of empires and their legacies, the nature of archaeology and the experiences of Asians who served the British in Europe during the First World War.

Moving, lyrical and highly impressive.

Laura Lacey says

This novel is shortlisted for the Bailey's book prize and it held a lot of appeal to me: a female archaeologist studying Classics around the first world war, a star-crossed love story, interwoven experiences centuries apart and the exoticism of colonial India.

Shamsie delivers in many ways, her study of the changing role of women around the turn of the century and during WWI was interesting:

"How quickly everything that was inconceivable for a woman has become her duty. Isn't it miraculous that competence has sprang up in us in the exact shape of men's needs"

Vivian spent her youth trying to make up to her father for being born a girl - she achieves academically, travels Europe as an archaeologist and later works hard as a VAD nurse when war breaks.

The archaeology of Turkey, the bustling streets of Peshawar and the Qissa Khwani Bazaar massacre are all vividly drawn however I was not enough engaged with the characters to be drawn into this world. There are several marvellous coincidences which are meant to demonstrate the hand of fate but in most cases come across as contrived narrative techniques.

This is quite a short novel and is split between the perspectives of Vivian, Qayyam and Najeeb - it was too short to feel attached to any of them: either this could have been Vivian's story, or an epic exploring all three characters in depth.

The ending of the novel was more exciting and the brief love story described more passionate and

memorable than any of the previous relationships or interchanges, but still not enough to make this a remarkable novel.

Thepocobookreader says

I must admit, I delayed reading this book. Traversing two continents and digging through the remains of three empires, I am not ashamed (well, maybe slightly!) to concede that I was put off by the mere scope of this novel. Jumping from 515bc to 1914 in the first two pages didn't help matters (I mean there's historical fiction and then there's this!) but I pressed on and I'm glad I did. The sheer ambition of this novel is admirable. Centred around the lives of Vivian Spencer, an aspiring English archaeologist and Qayyum Gul, the young Pathan and world war veteran, Shamsie deals with the interwoven stories, lives and breadths of human history and empire in an evocative and erudite manner. Whilst some have criticised the character development, I found her portrayal of Vivian as slightly aloof effective. Shamsie could have encumbered the story with vivid, sprawling descriptions of Vivian's experience as a V.A.D nurse. I'm glad that she didn't. After all, such accounts are readily available and have been the focus of many literary works. What is perhaps less readily available is her emphasis on the historically diverse and culturally rich city of Peshawar. Shamsie's treatment of empire and colonial attitudes are clear and beautifully surmised in the closing passages of the book, yet something in the execution of the novel fell short for me. It felt rushed and instead of imparting any lasting impression once I had finished (as all great books do), I was left wanting more. Whilst this was disappointing, I will say that it is not the defining feature of the novel. What I take from it, what stood out most for me was discovering a (now) Pakistani city as the focal point, as a crossroads for empires throughout the ages, "... Because there's more past than present there. Two and a half thousand years of history beneath its soil." It was refreshing to read a pre 9/11, pre partition telling of the city as a vibrant, historical place of interest and even better to see a Pakistani female writer putting it back on the map.

Andrew says

I think this book probably warrants 3.5 stars rather than 4 as there was so much about it that was interesting yet I did not feel totally emotionally drawn to the characters so at the end I was ambivalent about the outcome which perhaps may say more about me than the efforts of the author. The story has at its beginning two threads as World war one begins. Qayyam Gul is an Indian soldier serving on the western front, he is injured and in the story we learn about the appallingly racist way that Indians were treated to the extent that in Brighton when recovering they are treated as prisoners and English nurses are no longer able to treat them in case they morally corrupt the women, Qayyam returns to Peshawar where he re-joins his muslim family and eventually is drawn into the independence movement, this thread is excellent with a fascinating snapshot of India at this time including the non violence strategy. The second thread involves Vivian Spencer a young English woman who is the son her father never had and goes to India to assist her father's Turkish friend on an archaeological dig to find the lost city where Darius had invaded from Persia. On return she commits an act which has long term repercussions for her and another character, she then nurses soldiers at the wars outbreak before her mother persuades her to return to India on an archaeological dig, she is haunted by finding a headband given to an ancient king. In Peshawar she meets Qayyam's younger brother Neejab who helps her with the dig despite his families opposition. We then leap in the latter part of the book to 1930 when Vivian returns to begin a new dig and the story revolves around the events of the Qissa Khwani Bazaar massacre when British troops massacre unarmed peaceful demonstrators. I've got to say even as I read this I

am thinking what a brilliant book this should have been however I simply found that the characters lacked a depth which drew me in so that when they are in jeopardy I did not feel the emotional pull that turns a really good book into a classic and here I can only really compare it to one of my top five books 'A Fine Balance' where I was repeatedly moved, shocked and engaged by all the events. Still I would recommend the book for anyone who enjoys stories set in India and for a snapshot of how the colonial soldiers were treated in the first world war and I will definitely read her again.

Sylvie says

Some novels grow larger as the ideas multiply. In this novel, Kamilla Shamsie has tried to contain hers into a small space. So much so, that it can be mistaken for a first novel. The result is that transitions between the different characters and the spaces they inhabit feel abrupt, not to say initially confusing. The saving grace is Shamsie's prose style and her integrity as a writer.

Vivienne Rose Spencer has been brought up to be an independent person by her family. This was quite a liberal attitude, in an era of suffragettes and their struggle to obtain the vote. She may not approve of her friend's efforts in that direction, yet she believes in a woman's right to follow her own path. She remembers being enchanted as a child by tales from Herodotus, which were told by a family friend, the Turkish archaeologist Tahsin Bey. One story in particular inspired her, the story of a silver circlet embossed with figs that once belonged to Scylax at the time of the Persian Empire. The mystery of this buried treasure lures both her and Tahsin Bey to the East. In 1914, she finds herself in Labraunda (Caria) taking part in an archaeological dig alongside some Germans and Tahsin Bey. He embodies everything she loves about the East. She falls in love with him and with the region itself. Much as she loves her father, this is where she thinks she belongs. World events are about to shatter her ambitions, for now.

According to Herodotus, Darius sent an expedition to find out where the sea joined the river Indus. Scylax was a member of the expedition, one of his true men. He was from the city of Caspatyrus in the land of Pactyike. He was given the circlet of embossed figs for his loyalty and enterprise.

The quest for Scylax's circlet is a thread that runs through the novel, and the circlet and Scylax acquire an aura of significance, mystery and beauty in Vivienne's mind; yet subsequent events in the region conspire to alter perceptions. Caspatyrus is believed by some historians to be Peshawar, and that is how it is seen in the story. Eastern Afghanistan, Pakistan, where the river Kabul flows, it is a volatile area where different tribal loyalties reside, reflected in the various spoken languages, loyalties that are capable of causing crises and dilemmas, and igniting deadly conflict.

No less than three empires play their part in the novel – the Persian Empire, the British Empire and the Ottoman Empire. It is the more intimate relationships, however, that are the most engaging, in particular that between the Englishwoman and the two Pashtun brothers.

The story towards the end is devoted to the Indian war of independence. Vivienne's love of the people and the country do not prevent her from being seen as the British outsider, always the "English Lady", the one who belongs to a conquering Empire. These were impressionable times. As the Pashtun are at the centre of the story.. everything is coloured by their point of view. They are the ones who were subjugated after all, and it is natural to side with them. Despite all this, the appearance of two newish characters, who had earlier flitted in and out like ghosts, sits uneasily inside the story. The balance has shifted.

There are many interesting strands, of divided loyalties, of changes in how friends, family, former attachments, one's country are perceived, many parallels with the past, and even the present, but their very multiplicity weakens their impact. However much Kamila Shamsie focuses on the distant past, with King Darius and his Scylax, there is altogether too much emotion invested in the relatively recent episodes in Indian history before partition, to make it an entirely satisfying read, or the equal of *Home Fire*. Still, this is Shamsie territory, sensuous and immediate, and it is a delight.

Here is a description of the skin of a snake:

...a weightless, transparent snake, even the shape of its eyes intact. When he held it up against the sunlight, rainbows danced crazily along the length of it, as though something were swirling into life and he dropped it in terror.

This is evocative, and at the same time an insight into the mind and spirit of Najeeb, the young Pashtun:

Through the alleys he goes, through one bazaar and then the other. Everything silent and bolted, it is as though he is looking at a half finished sketch of the city. Everything static, except for him. Oh, and a large red butterfly drifting lazily through the wafting stench of a caravan of camels
He is grateful that the clutter of the present is largely absent so that nothing obstructs his view of the Old City walls and arched gateways, the ancient hills and mountains. What he most loves in Peshawar is the proximity of the past. All around the broken bowl of the Peshawar Valley his glance knows how to burn away time. So in a single day he might encounter the Chinese monk Fa Hien throwing flowers into the Buddha's alms bowl at Gor Khatri, while recalling the eight elephants who with their united strength could not drag the alms bowl away from the monastery, the Kushan King Kanishka laying the foundation for the Great Stupa which the Buddha had prophesied he would build, the Mughal emperor Babar....

And again:

He runs towards a tumult. Everyone in the Walled City seems to have heard what has happened, dozens making their way to the Street of the Storytellers; people standing on roofs and leaning from balconies catching rumours out of the air and tossing them down into the alley. A car on fire, an Englishman knocked down with a stone; a horse, something about a horse; an Englishman run over by a motorcycle, No, an Englishman on a motorcycle run over by a horse.....

Lauren says

Another super ambitious book by Shamsie, this one about Peshawar just after WWI and then again in the 1930s and featuring an English archeologist, a young Pakistani boy with an interest in history and his older brother, a veteran of the British army who gets involved in anti-colonial politics once he returns to Pakistan. It doesn't all come together and I would have loved a Peshawar street map but I really admire what Shamsie is trying to do. And you do want to know about Greco-Buddhist art because it's fascinating.

Rahul Sharma says

Kamila Shamsie is easily one of the finest storytellers from Pakistan and I have been an ardent fan. I LOVE

her! However, 'A God In Every Stone' left me disappointed; it left me wanting for more. In fact I was searching for 'The Kamila Shamsie' of Kartography and Burnt Shadows.

Like all her books the story here is also set in the sub-continent. The protagonist travels from Britain to Turkey to India in search for a past that fascinates her. The story unfolds what covers the travels of the fifth-century BCE explorer Scylax, working on behalf of the Persian king Darius. Kamila weaves an interesting story full of adventure and mystery as the protagonist wishes to find the 'circlet' somewhere in Peshawar. I was glued to the story initially but as it progresses and moves back to Britain and parallely Qayyum's story comes into play, I couldn't help but feel tired. After a point I felt I was reading some other author. To put it simply, I was bored.

The only time I felt Kamila was at her usual self was in the last few pages. I could feel the love, sorrow, pain and most importantly 'India'(Now Pakistan)in it. I could connect more to Diwa who appears towards the end than to Vivian who is all over the place. I also liked the way she etched out Najeeb's character. Kamila is a genius when it comes to love stories and she proves it yet again when she talks about Najeeb and Diwa's love towards each other. Also, like always the city is an important part of her stories and after reading it I would love to visit Peshawar before I bid adieu to the world!

A God In Every Stone is undoubtedly good but with Kamila, I wouldn't settle for anything other than Best.

Paula says

After Salt and Saffron, which I found silly, I decided not to read more Shamsie books. But someone told me that if I liked Uzma Aslam Khan's The Geometry of God, which came out several years ago, I'd like A God in Every Stone. My response: that's the problem.

The Geometry of God begins with a girl in Pakistan finding a rock that turns out to be a fossil of great consequence. From there the story traces' the girl's struggle to overcome political and social barriers to be credited for her discovery, and be included in more adventures and finds, against gorgeous descriptions of rocks, and the natural landscape of north Pakistan. Shamsie's book has a different milieu; pre-partition India (in the region that's now Pakistan, close to where Geometry is set), WWI, and the role of Indian soldiers in British armies. The latter is handled quite well, hence two stars. But the borrowed central metaphor annoyed me. In The Geometry of God, to "dig" is to look below the surface to find a history that is unseen, unsung. And also to find God -- a God who is inclusive and felt most by those who have lost their physical sight (one of the strongest characters is blind). Doesn't this sound familiar? Khan has from her earliest work explored themes of nature, marginalization, and God (see her profile in The Hindu: <http://www.thehindu.com/books/books-a...>), while Shamsie's earlier works scarcely acknowledge a tree or anything not from an elite Karachi drawing room. I should be glad her newer work is evolving, yet I'm feeling uneasy. Even the titles are too alike.

Alterdego says

This book is a delight. It is an evocatively written, highly intelligent, multi layered novel. It is constantly surprising, with a narrative frequently changing direction, making reading it a bit like herding the proverbial cats.

The story opens with Vivian Rose Spencer, a young Englishwoman, fascinated by archaeology, working on a dig in Turkey with German and Turkish academics on the eve of World War I. As she works she gradually becomes aware of a mutual attraction with one of her workmates. The writing makes the relationship stunningly erotic whilst also remaining chaste. Before things can progress, global conflict catches fire and Viv is returned to London where she becomes a nurse caring for wounded soldiers.

The second main chord of the narrative is introduced in the form of Qayyum Gul, a soldier in the Indian army fighting on the Western Front. Initially patriotic towards the imperial power, his experiences slowly open his reluctant eyes to the reality of his situation.

The two tales intersect fleetingly as Viv and Qayyum meet briefly on a train travelling to Peshawar, she in search of her lost love, he returning home.

As Viv meets and becomes mentor to a young boy, the story moves on from World War I to being a tale of the struggle for Indian independence.

At the basic level, this is the story of Viv's search for her lover, and for a lost artefact, of Qayyum's journey from empire loyalist to rebel, and of the young boy, Najeeb's intellectual development. Shamsie uses these tales to explore themes of imperialism, of individual morality, of gender politics and of personal and political betrayal in both the 20th century and in the ancient world.

The writing is enormously vivid, especially in the scenes set in the Walled City of Peshawar where the confusion of noises and sights become at times almost hallucinogenic. This is a book which contains scenes of great violence but somehow remains very gentle and positive about the human spirit.

The end of the book is also perfect. It is not an explosive crescendo. It is a bittersweet moment which captures in the reactions of individuals, all of the themes of imperialism and independence which have come before.

Highly recommended.

Maria Espadinha says

Viagem a Peshawar

Viagem à culturalmente rica e exótica Peshawar, revolvendo um subsolo onde jazem os 2500 anos de história que a edificaram.

Um romance histórico estranho e original !

Becky says

Having recently watched and loved Indian Summers, and being already interested in the era of the British Empire in India, I was looking forward to reading this novel.

Evocatively written, Shamsie transported me to Peshawar and created a cast of believable characters, from Vivian, the fearless young woman trying to make her way in a man's world, Qayyum, injured in fighting a war for Britain, and Najeeb, a boy intrigued by culture and history.

However, the first half left me desperate for some action. We had met three characters, but the introductions felt brief as much of the text was given to lengthy descriptions of archeological discoveries from thousands of years ago, and stories from Greek mythology, which I struggled to maintain an interest in. Two of the most intriguing characters, two local women caught up in a massacre, were disappointingly brought in moments before the book ends.

All of the action happens in the last 30 pages of the book - a disturbing exploration of a terrible moment in history thrillingly told - and demonstrated Shamsie's talent as a writer, but ultimately this didn't translate through the whole novel and I felt much of the archeological detail detracted from the thrust of the story. The end of the novel was disappointing - there was no real resolution, and I felt that trying to span so many years just didn't work. It's possible I don't know enough about the struggle for independence, India's role in the First World War, or Greek history, but a decent novel probably shouldn't leave me wondering if this would have improved my enjoyment.

Tripfiction says

This is a BIG and complex novel – moving from an archaeological dig in Turkey in early 1914, across the first year of the 1st World War, and through into Peshawar in both 1915 and again in 1930. It is also pretty challenging on one's knowledge of ancient Persian mythology...(did you know that the Caspatyrus of mythology is modern day Peshawar? Or that Syclax betrayed Darius, the Emperor of Persia, and sided with the Carians against the Persians?). In Shamsie's version of the story, Syclax has a valuable circlet given to him by Darius and the circlet then subsequently disappears. The search for its rediscovery is central to the storyline of *A God in Every Stone*.

The constant throughout the story is Vivien Spencer. Before the outbreak of the War, the young Viv went on an archaeological dig in Labraunda, Turkey. She was an 'intern' working with Turkish archaeologist, Tahsin Bey, a quite old (in both senses...) friend of her father's. Bey's 'Holy Grail' was to rediscover the circlet that Darius had given to Syclax. She fell in love with Bey (and he with her), but they were separated when war broke out. Viv worked for a short while in London as a nurse looking after the war wounded until she received a 'coded' Christmas card from Bey suggesting that she visit Peshawar where he hoped to join her. She (with difficulty) persuaded her parents to let her go and set off into the unknown.

The second theme of the story develops in parallel. Qayyum, a Pashtun soldier, is wounded fighting with the 40th Pathans at Ypres. He loses an eye, is invalided out of the army, and sent back to his native Peshawar. On the last part of his journey home he shares a railway compartment with Viv. Viv, when she arrives at the station in Peshawar, is befriended by a local boy called Najeeb. She teaches him English, the classics, and fosters his love of archaeology. Only much later does she discover that Najeeb is in fact Qayyum's younger brother. His lessons with Viv are when he is meant to be at the Mosque being instructed in the Qur'an – a fact which his mother finds out and bans the lessons from continuing.

Viv deduces from archaeological evidence (and shares with Najeeb) that Darius' circlet is possibly buried alongside a white stone Buddha at a site in Peshawar, and that this is the message that Bey was trying to communicate to her. But they cannot get permission to dig and she returns to England. Fast forward 15 years

to 1930.

Najeeb is now working at the Archaeological Museum in Peshawar, and has got permission to dig at the site. He writes to Viv suggesting he join her and asking for funds to finance the adventure. She travels out – and finds a very different Peshawar. Ghaffar Khan, a leader of the non violent protest movement against British Rule in India is in the ascendancy, and his Khudai Khidmatgar has many followers. Tensions run high... and eventually burst over on 23rd April 1930 when the infamous (and actual) massacre in the Street of Storytellers takes place. A British army officer panics, orders his men to open fire, and carnage reigns. 'Many' (estimates range from the official number of 30 to up to 500) were killed. This single act changed the face of the Indian fight for independence.

Viv is caught up in the aftermath as she searches for Najeeb, and tries to piece together what happened to him. She re-encounters Qayyum (15 years on) who is on the same mission. Together they find the truth.

As I started by saying, *A God In Every Stone* is a BIG book. It brilliantly portrays the culture and way of life of Peshawar (none perhaps more so than in explaining the different reaction to Viv when she is 'disguised' in a burqa as she searches for Najeeb after the massacre). It also has a real sense of history and, in particular, the history of empire – or, rather, 3 empires. The decline of the all powerful Persian Empire of ancient times, the decline of the Ottoman Empire as the effects of the 1st World War impacted – and the beginning of the decline of the British Empire (Peshawar is, in fact, in modern day Pakistan after independence and the break up of British India...).

It is a book that I really enjoyed and would wholeheartedly recommend. I possibly wish, though, that I had first taken a refresher course in Persian mythology...!

Kim says

I discovered this novel when I listened to an interview with its author on a radio arts programme. Shamsie was interesting and engaging and the novel sounded appealing. It certainly ticked a lot of boxes: a focus on the separate but interwoven experiences of a young English female archeologist and of an Indian soldier during and in the aftermath of WWI, themes of individual, family and national loyalty and a vast sweep of history touching on the fall of three empires.

The novel delivers on its promise in a number of ways. Shamsie writes beautiful prose and her evocation of time and place is powerful. The scenes set in Peshawar and the description of the Qissa Khwani Bazaar massacre are particularly strong. However, character development is much less successful: I struggled to care very much about Shamsie's three main characters. This was a shame, because individually and collectively they had lots of potential and I wanted to be more moved by their stories than I was.

I think I would have liked the novel better if it had concentrated on just one of the interwoven narratives and given me either Vivian's or Qayyum's story in more depth. Either that, or if it had had been a longer epic. As it is, the novel's too short and not detailed to be an epic and too much happens in too few pages to adequately carry the work's important themes. I like Shamsie's writing and I want to read more of it, but my first experience of her work was somewhat disappointing.

Another interesting buddy read with Jemidar.

Ben Dutton says

Kamila Shamsie's fiction crosses international boundaries. *Burnt Shadows*, her last novel, was a globe-trotting novel set in Japan, India, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay and the US. I said of that novel that it was about people caught in "the tidal swell of history", and it is a comment that could apply usefully to her new novel, *A God in Every Stone*.

In his histories, the father of the subject, Herodotus, told the story of Scylax, a man from Caryanda, who set off on a journey from the city of Caspatyrus, in the land of the Pactyike. This city is modern-day Peshawar, in the borderland of western Pakistan, close to the Afghan border. Shamsie uses this story to bookend her new novel, as her own characters travel to Caspatyrus, or Peshawar. As with *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie uses a historical setting to explore more modern issues. In a novel that covers twenty-odd years in the life of its central characters – archaeologist Vivian Spencer, and Pathan soldier Qayyum Gul and his brother Najeeb – from the battle fields of Ypres to the streets of Peshawar – they become involved in a quest for an ancient artefact as the British rule in this city begins to loosen, and violence spills out onto its streets.

A God in Every Stone contains moments of descriptive brilliance. It is no surprise to learn Shamsie was selected by *Granta* as one of the Best of Young British Novelists; there are lines here to savour. She is very good on the minutiae of a life, of creating those moments that live on the page with intensity. The relationships between Vivian, Qayyum and Najeeb are expertly drawn, and when her focus narrows to the interactions between them, Shamsie's novel truly sings. There is a scene in a train carriage, headed towards Peshawar, when Vivian meets Qayyum for the first time, and you can taste the tobacco laced in the air, the dust of the landscape rushing by, and the fizzling heat of fascination they breed in each other. In such scenes Shamsie manages to ask many of the novels overarching themes with economy and grace, such as when Qayyum muses on what it means to be Pashtun, uncomfortable at first with such description, and Vivian attempts to navigate, somewhat unsuccessfully, the cultural differences that divide them.

For all its success, however, there are moments when *A God in Every Stone* does fail. The first half of the novel covers two years after the First World War, and the second a short number of days in April 1930. The first half of the novel rushes through history, barely allowing the reader time to catch a breath – we are pulled along by that tidal swell of history. In these post-WW1 moments, it is difficult to gain much emotional understanding of Vivian, and even less of Qayyum; they are characters suffering history, buffeted by its storm. It is only in the second half that we truly begin to appreciate the characters. Certainly the first half is not wasted – this history feeds into the characters and affects them and their actions – but in comparison with the effort and control Shamsie exerts in the second half, the first feels underdrawn.

A God in Every Stone, then, whilst not as successful as *Burnt Shadows*, is nevertheless a strong, potent novel, whose historical canvas is used to tell another riveting, important story with contemporary resonances. Shamsie should be applauded for writing about such intersections of history, where culture and faith come into conflict with politics and identity; few novelists are willing to take on the 'Big Subjects'. That she does so without becoming dogmatic or dull, and retaining heart within her narrative, is testament to her brilliance. *A God in Every Stone* might not be Shamsie at her finest, but it is a damn sight better than many another writers' best.

Jemidar says

Buddy read with Kim :).

Michael Livingston says

An epic historical novel, spanning about 25 years in and around Peshawar. There's archaeology, war, betrayal, heartbreak and the stirrings of the Indian independence movement. All these plot points are weaved around three main characters - an English woman who originally goes to Peshawar to look for an ancient artifact and two brothers whose lives intersect with hers. It all felt a bit self-consciously grandiose to start with, but the plot slowly sucked me in and by the end I was swept up in it all.
