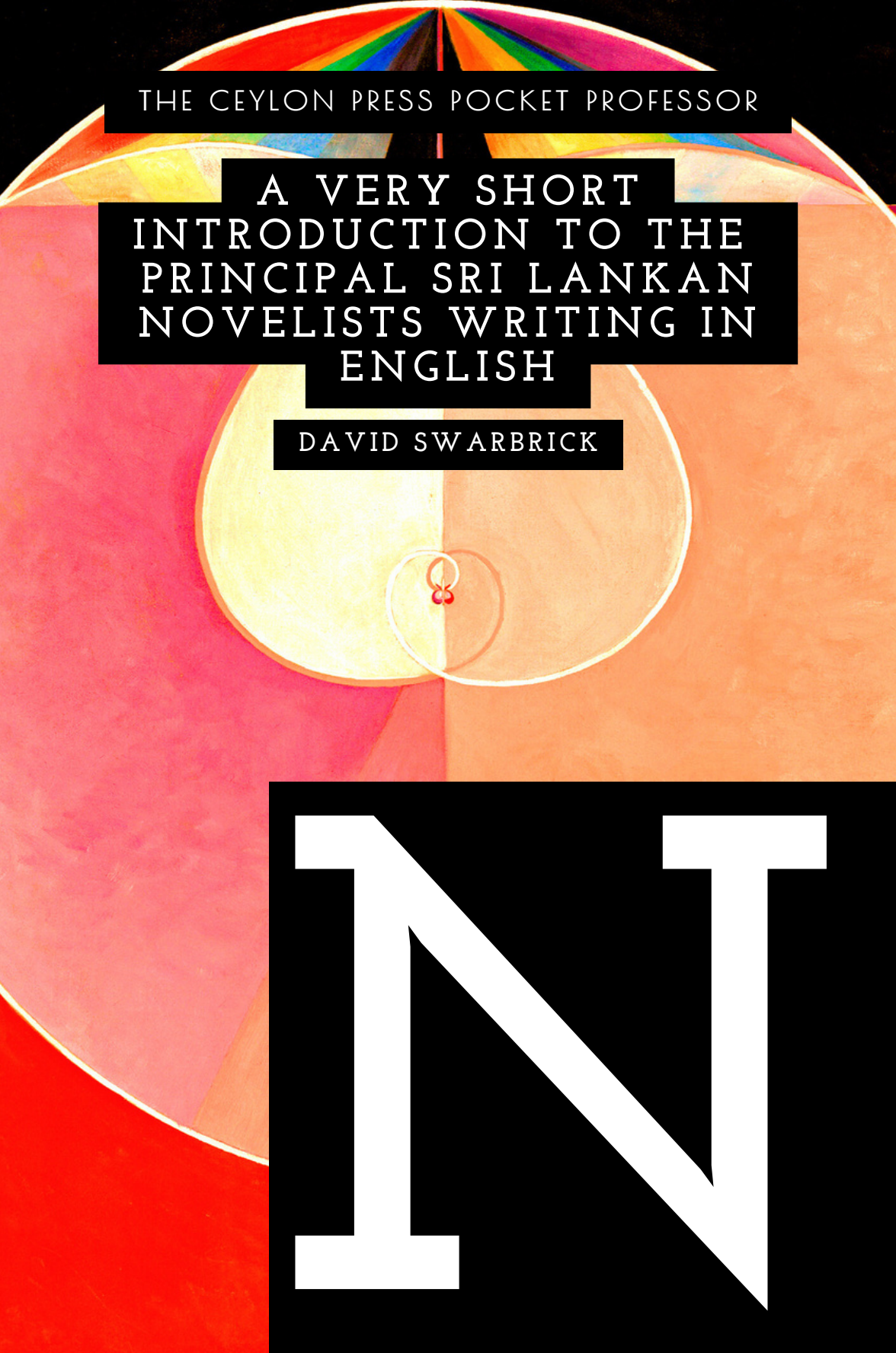




THE CEYLON PRESS POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT
INTRODUCTION TO THE
PRINCIPAL SRI LANKAN
NOVELISTS WRITING IN
ENGLISH

DAVID SWARBRICK

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& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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FOR FELICIA

Gorgeous icon and
inspiration behind every
decent book club, from
the discreet streets of
alphabet city in west
London to Seaview on
the Isle of
Righteousness; and
every wine shops in
between.

1

PREFACE

"But
Moominmamma
was quite
unperturbed.
"Well, well!" she
said, "it seems to
me that our guests
are having a very
good time."

"I hope so,"
replied
Moominpappa.

"Pass me a
banana, please
dear."

COMET IN
MOOMINLAND

“Compared to most other Asian, let alone South Asian countries, Sri Lanka is small, tiny really, not least of all overshadowed by what at first seems to be a battery of literary explosions from its northern neighbour, India.

Even so, like David and Goliath, when it comes to the modern novel, the country has taken on the best, India included, and come away triumphantly glowing with accolades from Colombo to New York, London to Frankfurt.

Its novels have burst like much-needed firecrackers over the somewhat sagging silos of commoditised fiction chased by editors and literary agents in the West.

There are any number of thought-provoking papers, monographs and journals erupting with new notions on quite how to compartmentalise, comprehend, dissect, and evaluate Asian fiction.

This guide has no desire even to pretend it can offer insights any bit as clear or revealing.

But what is missing in all of this is a robust list of recommendations and authors to argue with; to become gladly enmeshed with; to read, to quibble with – and most of all to find new friends amongst authors or books not yet encountered.

And perhaps also to read them in some kind of surreptitious sequence, an exoskeleton that does not propose the next read by plot or theme, by

author or the colour of the book jacket – but instead by when the first breakthrough book of each writer first hit the shelves.

This arrangement gives a sense of how themes, genres, and all the other magic hidden between the pages of a good book have developed organically, one upon another.

And for this particular area of fiction, this green Sri Lankan paddy that has flourished with such extraordinary speed and brilliance, that more nuanced understanding gives in turn a richer understanding of the island that inspired it all.

The authors here are all, in one sense or another, Sri Lankan.

Most were born on the island; many left, all too often part of the horrifying diaspora created by civil war and corruption.

But in Canada and Australia, the UK, New Zealand, Africa and elsewhere, each has written the sort of novel only a Sri Lankan could, bringing a unique sensibility and a sharp - often ironic - eye to the themes that preoccupy every great novel - from war, sex, fashion, addiction and love to loss, pets, the jungle, fame, fortune, bankruptcy.

And, of course, family; for in Sri Lanka, as almost nowhere else, the family really does come - inconveniently, beautifully, reassuringly, alarmingly - first.

Of the scores of novelists to choose from, this guide selects over twenty of the most prominent and recent writers who between them offer over eighty novels or collections of short stories to enjoy.

So read on – find new authors to enjoy, new books to buy; and pass each on to your very best friends.

2

RESIDENT ALIENS

"I'm afraid we
shall waste an
awful lot of time."

"Don't worry,"
answered Snufkin,
"we shall have
wonderful dreams,
and when we
wake up it'll be
spring."

FINN FAMILY
MOOMINTROLL

Two of the twentieth century's more remarkable thinkers made Sri Lanka their home, at either end of a hundred years.

The country, especially for the first author, Leonard Woolf, was to profoundly change his outlook on life and shape much of what he would later contribute to it.

Famous for his writings, The Hogarth Press, socialism and his marriage to Virginia Woolf, Leonard Woolf is best remembered in Sri Lanka for his remarkable novel "The Village in the Jungle," published in 1913. "Anyone can be a barbarian," he remarked; "it requires a terrible effort to remain a civilised man."

Despatched to Ceylon in 1904 after university, he became Assistant Government Agent in the Hambantota District. Living in isolation on the distant south coast, he taught himself Sinhalese and Tamil. He travelled relentlessly through his district, dealing with agriculture, justice, public health, roadbuilding, taxation and pretty much anything else that required settlement.

It was an experience that was to change his life and mould his future liberal views. Uniquely - amongst other writers on either side of the imperial fence - his story focused on the poorest of the poor and the monstrous injustice experienced by a family at the hands of both colonial rulers and local village authorities. Despite being little known, it remains in the words of

Victoria Glendinning, "a foundational novel in the Sri Lankan literary canon".

Born in 1917, when Zeppelins were still considered the future of aviation, Arthur C. Clarke moved to Sri Lanka in 1959, by which time he was already renowned as one of the most influential of space writers. "I don't want to insist on it, Dave," he was to write in one of his books: "but I am incapable of making an error."

His book, "The Exploration of Space", persuaded President Kennedy to send men to the Moon. His 1968 screenplay "2001: A Space Odyssey" is one of those creations that will forever define and celebrate the century he lived through.

A scuba diver with, at best, an intricate private life, he was just one of a handful of people to be awarded the Sri Lankabhimanya, the Pride of Sri Lanka, the country's highest honour. His novel, "2001: A Space Odyssey," became the most influential science fiction novel of all time.

3

A NEW RECKONING

"It looks rather ordinary," said the Snork. "Unless you consider that a top hat is always somewhat extraordinary, of course."

FINN FAMILY
MOOMINTROLL

From around the late 1960s to the early 1970s a profoundly trenchant new sensibility shaped Sri Lanka's fiction, with a band of new writers emerging for whom nothing was any longer out of bounds - from the incipient civil war, belief, ethnicity, and feminism to gender, and, of course, the perennial themes of the island: family, love, the jungle, loss, and living.

You touched / your belly to my hands / in the
dry air and said / I am the cinnamon / Peeler's
wife. Smell me."

In a field of exceptional talent, Michael Ondaatje stands out, a multiple award-winning novelist and poet whose novel "The English Patient" catapulted him to global recognition.

Despite being seen as a Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer, The Guardian presciently observed that "the more you look, the more dizzyingly kaleidoscopic he seems to become: a Canadian citizen who remains profoundly Sri Lankan."

His first novel, "The Collected Works of Billy the Kid," published in 1970, is a stunning recreation of the legendary outlaw's life. Many more novels followed, interspersed with collections of other works, including poetry. "Coming Through Slaughter", published in 1976, brings to life the jazz world of New Orleans, but it was only in 1982 that he really touched on Sri Lanka with "Running in the Family", a memoir, finely wrought as any fiction, of the

elaborately rococo marvels of his Dutch-Ceylonese family. In 1987, "In the Skin of a Lion" was published – a compelling tale of a man in search of a vanished millionaire beneath Lake Ontario.

The 1992 publication and later film of "The English Patient" put him squarely on the world's literary stage; the novel is populated by characters haunted by the enigma of a nameless burned man lying in a room of an Italian villa at the end of World War Two.

In 2000, "Anil's Ghost" came out, one of his most impressive works, a cornerstone of his tremendous reputation, a mystery set in Sri Lanka and riven with love, fear, identity, and antiquity.

In 2007, "Divisadero" was published, a deeply private novel set around the hard rural outback of California. "The Cat's Table," published in 2011, is set on board a 1950 ship bound from Colombo to London, whose haunting passengers give three boys a journey that will live with them forever.

"Warlight," published most recently in 2018, is set in 1945 London, where two siblings appear to have been abandoned by their parents into the care of The Moth. "I like to leave the door open," he wrote – and so he does in books at once captivating, mysterious, and sharply accessible.

Books to read include:

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid," published in 1970.

"Coming Through Slaughter" published in 1976.

"In the Skin of a Lion" published in 1987.

"The English Patient" published in 1992.

"Anil's Ghost," published in 2000.

"Divisadero," published in 2007.

"The Cat's Table," published in 2011.

"Warlight" was published in 2018.

Writing novels and stories "about men and women who lead their own kind of life in villages outside cities;" who "are real and alive much as anywhere in the world" lies at the heart of Punyakante Wijenaike's many novels and short stories.

" I could feel the power of her will bending my will," she once wrote, "breaking my strength like the giraya cutting arecanut into pieces. And she would get Lucia Hamy to sweep up the pieces that had once been an individual with a mind of her own, and hide them away in a drawer..... "

Her books, such as "The Enemy Within," "Amulet," "The Waiting Earth," "When Guns Fall Silent," "To Follow the Sun" and "Unbinding," do not simply win prizes; they tell the tales rarely told. If ever there was a writer who deserves her entire backlist to be posthumously reprinted, it he her collections of short stories and novels. One of her 2023

obituaries noted that "through her writing, she demonstrated a clear critique of the aristocracy and the feudal order, while exploring gender roles and the place of women in a patriarchal and classist society.

Her contribution to Sri Lankan literature was invaluable, and she has rightfully earned her place as a literary giant in the country's literary history."

Her third novel, "Giraya," published in 1971, is considered by many to be her masterpiece and one that was later made into a powerful teledrama, setting her squarely in the landscape she most revered.

"In this story," wrote a reviewer, "recorded in a diary, a sensitive young woman is caught like an areca nut between the blades of giraya. Surrounded by twisted, abnormal characters, in an atmosphere of frustration, passion and thwarted desire, living in a crumbling old walauwe which is hostile to a fast-changing society, where she is desperate." Among her books are:

"Giraya," published in 1971.

"The Enemy Within," published in 1998

"Amulet," published in 1994.

"Unbinding," published in 2001.

"When Guns Fall Silent," published in 2010.

To be an academic teaching English literature is an almost necessary condition to disqualify you

from ever writing perfect novels yourself. Unless you are Yasmine Gooneratne. Thankfully, the angels gave her a long life – almost 90 years, in which she materialised as a poet, short story writer, a leading literary professor, essayist and novelist.

Honours piled upon her for all she did, not least in Australia which was also her home. Despite being born into the Bandaranaike family, she had a profound sense of the whole glory of the island, not simply its Singhala heartland. Its good sides and its bad.

"It did not take him many years of observation," she once wrote, "to convince him that the cream of his country's liars and lapdogs, its crooks and con-men, its time-servers, turncoats, thieves and traitors were to be found in its Houses of Parliament."

She wrote only three novels. The last of which, published in 2006, "The Sweet and Simple Kind", is quite possibly one of the greatest novels published in English about Sri Lanka in the past one hundred years.

Set in the newly independent nation, this coming-of-age tale of two cousins, Tsunami, and Latha, intertwines with language and religion, politics and privilege, humour, and passion. It is quite simply not a book to start unless you are prepared to stay up all night long to finish it too.

Her first novel "A Change of Skies" was published in 1991 and is a story of the diaspora told through an Australian lens.

Her second novel, "The Pleasures of Conquest," published in 1995, comprises four stories about modern-day privilege and imperialism.

Both are deftly worked books, but they pale into insignificance on reading "The Sweet and Simple Kind", for, in her case, the absolute best was left to last. Excepting that is, some of her poetry. "And even the gone away boy/ who had hoped to find lost roots, lost lovers, / lost talent even, out among the palms, makes timely return giving thanks / that Toronto is quite romantic enough / for his purpose," she writes.

Her books include:

"A Change of Skies" was published in 1991.
"The Pleasures of Conquest," published in 1995.
"The Sweet and Simple Kind," published in 2006.

Since 1992, Romesh Gunsekera has won the highest and most successful of literary spaces for Sri Lankan literature across the world. Born in 1954 to a Sinhalese Christian family, he grew up in Sri Lanka and the Philippines before moving to London. His career began in 1992 with "Monkfish Moon", a collection of stories about people miles away from the island itself

whose lives are most suddenly and utterly disrupted by it all the same. But it was his novel "Reef," published in 1994, that really placed him dead centre for those who love fiction.

"What did they do with the mango stone I sometimes found in their bedroom in the morning? All chewed up and wasted; rubbed out like a rock smoothed in a desert, or a gift passed from one to the other over and over again, mouth to mouth. Mango for the skin? A body tonic? For the lips? A lubricant for them to live to the full the life of man and woman, or some weird object of shared desire?"

The slow-burn "Reef" is the story of a young chef so committed to pleasing a seafood-obsessed master that he is oblivious to the unravelling of his own country.

It is one of the island's outstanding contemporary novels. "It's not what you do every day," he writes, "but the thoughts that you live with that matter [...] That, after all, is the total of your life in the end."

"When it is just yourself," he wrote, "you can put things off, you can do away with things; when you have to serve only yourself sometimes you let yourself off: there are no obligations."

"The Sandglass," published in 1998, unfolds the mystery of two feuding families set in what one magazine called a "heady mix of 1990s London and postwar Sri Lanka."

"Powerful—dense, cadenced," is how The Telegraph reviewed his next novel, "Heaven's Edge," published in 2002, a vertiginous thriller set in a fallen Eden – not unlike Sri Lanka itself.

As if in search of less outside drama, "The Match" came next, in 2006, a story of exile, love and sadness across three continents and 30 years.

The Prisoner of Paradise," published in 2012, followed, set in 1825 as Miss Lucy Gladwell heads to Mauritius with her aunt, Mrs Betty Huyton.

Despite corralling the broody companion of an exiled Ceylonese prince to his tale, Gunsekera instead elects, much more brilliantly, to recreate a brutal hierarchical society, a melange of peoples, cultures, and races.

"Noon Tide Toll", published in 2013, draws back on the ghosts of the Civil War in a set of short stories about the passengers of a hired driver as he ferries his human cargo across the island.

"Suncatcher," published in 2019 and set in 1960s Sri Lanka, is a poem of a tale –about two boys growing up and learning how the world really works.

His books include:

"Monkfish Moon," published in 1992.

"Reef," published in 1994.
"The Sandglass," published in 1998.
"Heaven's Edge," published in 2002.
"The Match" published in 2006.
"The Prisoner of Paradise," published in 2012
"Noon Tide Toll" published in 2013.
"Suncatcher," published in 2019.

Carl Muller and his famous trilogy are to Sri Lankan literature what John Galsworthy's "Forsyte Saga" is to England or "The Godfather" is to New York.

"And so she died," he was to write, "and the shrieks and wailings and the broken sobs of the men were terrible to hear. And only Sonnaboy, dry-eyed but with an ache in his heart that could not be eased, said, 'Viva never came...Papa, Viva never came...He killed our mama, and he never came.'"

A saga writer first and foremost, he is rightly celebrated for the three books he published from 1993 onwards about the Burghers of Sri Lanka as told through "The Jam Fruit Tree," "Yakada Yaka", and "Once Upon A Tender Time."

Born in Kandy in 1935, he was one of the first Sri Lankan writers to publish a book internationally, setting a clear road for all who came later.

His trilogy unpacks a time when the world was golden, a kinder halcyon life that the later civil war would render almost unbelievable.

He wrote several other novels, including a dramatic set-piece story of Colombo's history, beginning with the ominous arrival of a Portuguese fleet blown off course in 1505, which still ranks as one of the best books to settle down with before settling into Colombo itself.

"Colombo," he writes, "is in the throes of an explosion. Its face changes continuously, its vices are legion, its future as yet obscure, and its paths speak of sunlight as well as of shadow...."

His books include:

"The Jam Fruit Tree," "Yakada Yaka", and "Once Upon A Tender Time," published from 1993

"Colombo," published in 1995.

A Renaissance woman who possessed formidably empathic talents, Jean Arasanayagam was one of the country's celebrated tribe of Dutch burgers.

Born in Kandy in 1931, she died in 2019, her literary legacy largely drawn from brave, raw poetry that tackled, without even a hint of pink romantic tincture or bravado, the country's many tribulations, war, poverty, and loss.

"But I was innocent only because I did not carry firearms," she wrote:

"Whoever has witnessed death as I have seen it, men falling, hit by

bullets, dying under a clear sky, not knowing sometimes from what direction they were fired upon, could not think himself to be innocent."

Her fiction was a much rarer gift, just as heart-stoppingly lyrical - and almost as gritty. Her most popular fiction is "All is Burning," published in 1995, a collection of short stories drawn from the lives of Sri Lankans striving for some sense and rationale during the terrible Civil War.

Despite the book's title, hope still, occasionally, shines. Similar themes were followed up in 2000 with "In the Garden Secretly and Other Stories" and "A Nice Burgher Girl," published in 2006, an atypical full novel and a most personal one at that, offering a glimpse of what it was like to grow up as part of a minority in old Ceylon. But sadly, much of her most compelling fiction is hard to find, let alone buy, including "Peacocks and Dreams," "The Outsider," "The Cry of the Kite," and "Inheritance."

Perhaps someone, somewhere, in some distant gleaming corporate publishing office in New York or London, could put this right by sprinkling the most modest of this year's profits on bringing back to print this much-needed, important backlist – just for the love of literature?

Her poetry alone deserves it.

"The Brahmin chants his / Pooja to the gods,
camphor / And incense stream out / Of the
stone door into the evening light," she writes in
"Other Poems," truly a pioneer of Sri Lankan
writing in English, who did so much to place it
on the global literary map.

Her books include:

"All is Burning," published in 1995.
"In the Garden Secretly and Other Stories,"
published in 2000.
"A Nice Burgher Girl," published in 2006.

Nihal De Silva's untimely death on 28 May
2006, by a land mine explosion at the Wilpattu
National Park, ended the career of one of the
country's most talented thriller writers, winner of
many awards and accolades.

Sri Lanka's long agony of war and corruption
was his most certainly too. His first and greatest
book, the war story "The Road From Elephant
Pass" (2003), was also made into a film, and
together the two forms captured the times like
little else, winning a place in the minds of all
who followed the story of the LTTE Tamil woman
and her Sinhalese army officer. "

"The Far Spent Day," published in 2004, tells the
story of Ravi, returning to Sri Lanka only to be
caught up in political violence, the ruin of his
family and home and the vengeance that this
creates. Despite his early death, several more

books were posthumously published including most famously "The Giniralla Conspiracy" in 2008.

" When you say Sinhalese are vicious murderers, you imply that ALL Sinhalese are like that. Surely that is not true," he was to write.

His obituarists rightly mourned the end of a man who wrote: "courageously about political parasites and their terminal torture of a nation and its helpless masses."

His books include:

"The Road From Elephant Pass," published in 2003.

"The Far Spent Day," published in 2004.

"The Giniralla Conspiracy" in 2008.

4

LIKE MAGIC

"It looks rather ordinary," said the Snork. "Unless you consider that a top hat is always somewhat extraordinary, of course."

FINN FAMILY
MOOMINTROLL

And then, as if by magic, the island's writers moved on, articulating a measured and confident certainty of their passion to write across any genre, in whatever way they chose, whatsoever. And with it came the most compelling insights into the unique sensibilities of the people they envisaged, singular, stubborn, intense, shrewd, casual – and, most of all, belonging, despite all tribulations, homemade or imported.

Author of "Funny Boy," "Cinnamon Gardens," and "The Hungry Ghosts," Shyam Selvadurai knows enough about identity to ensure his novels are nothing less than magnetic.

Born to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father, exiled to Canada, gay, funny, astute, ironic, his lovingly observed books are one of the reasons why Sri Lankan English-language literature is as popular as it is all around the world.

But on first encountering any of his novels, one is immediately faced with that rarest of all literary conundrums: can I sit down at one go and read them all? For that is what they beg, in tones both modest and addictive.

Driven from his homeland after the terrible civil pogroms and riots of 1983, when he was just nineteen, it took him barely ten more years to burst back upon the consciousness of his country.

with "Funny Boy", a novel described by leading critics as one that "keeps repeating with quiet conviction that the human condition can, despite everything, be joyful. You are not alone, it says to the reader, I understand you. I was there. I remember."

"I glanced at the sari lying on the rock," he was to write, "where I had thrown it, and I knew that I would never enter the girls' world again."

In 1998, "Cinnamon Gardens" came out, cementing (not that any building materials of any sort were ever needed) a reputation for effortless fiction, with a story set in 1920 Colombo and the hatred of splintered elite families.

The emotions found an (almost) kinder balance in 2007 with the publication of "Swimming in the Monsoon Sea", a love story to electrify even the most cynical heart, when a teenage fisher boy falls for his Canadian cousin.

When he published "The Hungry Ghosts" in 2013, it became immediately clear quite how unfair talent can really be – for this novel surpassed all before it with its depiction of a powerful Sri Lankan matriarch, a wily kumara hari with "an insatiable longing for land, houses, money and control".

And in the publishing of the 2022 novel, "Mansions of the Moon", he took on a bold.

and winning subtly the sixth-century BCE story of Yasodhara, the wife and cousin of Lord Buddha. Not all writers make you long for even their next shopping list, still less another novel, but Selvadurai does, time and again.

Though, interestingly, and in ways yet to be fully understood, he was most moved in 2016 when he discovered a new spider had been named after him: *Brignolia shyami*, a small goblin spider.

His books include:

"Funny Boy," published in 1994.

"Cinnamon Gardens," published in 1998.

"Swimming in the Monsoon Sea," published in 2007.

"The Hungry Ghosts," published in 2013.

"Mansions of the Moon," published in 2022.

An emigree Sri Lankan since her teenage years, Michelle de Kretser is today a major Australian Sri Lankan writer. "I think he glimpsed, obscurely," she was to write, "that the grand narratives were writing us of our age. Nationalism, empire, socialism, capitalism. It was necessary to choose between them."

Since first publishing "The Rose Gower" in 1999, a romance-cum-thriller set during the French Revolution, she has made it clear that her theme was precisely whatever she wanted it to be, unbounded by any duty of heritage or paternity unless so chosen.

Her second novel, published in 2003, "The Hamilton Case" tells the story of a famous beauty "gone native" in the jungle, a girl who once danced with the Prince of Wales.

Her utterly unpredictable and brilliant third novel, "The Lost Dog," published in 2007, seems to be all about a professor searching for his dog in the Australian bush. Except that it isn't.

Her fourth novel, "Questions of Travel," is a soulful narrative about two people enthralled by travelling, one a publisher, the other an unwilling tourist.

In 2014, she released "Springtime: A Ghost Story", set with wonderful éclat in sunny, suburban Australia.

In 2017, she returned to the themes of travel with her novel, "The Life to Come", set in Australia, France, and Sri Lanka.

Her reception and rich success are also marked out by a brilliant track record of literary awards from across the known world.

Her books include:

- "The Rose Gower" published in 1999
- "The Hamilton Case," published in 2003.
- "The Lost Dog," published in 2007.
- "Questions of Travel," published in 2012.
- "Springtime: A Ghost Story" published in 2014.

It is impossible to think of Ameena Hussein without also thinking of her genius of a husband, Sam Perera. Together they have done more than any other living creatures, mammalian, auralian or otherwise, to ensure that contemporary Sri Lankan fiction breaks through the gorgeous island shores that first inspired it.

Most, if not quite all, the greatest Sri Lankan writers in print today owe to them a debt of gratitude for mentorship, guidance, advocacy, and often first publication too.

Their publishing house, Perera Hussein, squeezed into part of a family mansion, the last in a street of once glorious Edwardian mansions, is an incubus of the best of Asia's independent publishing and an inspiration for all other indies, be they in Edinburgh, Scotland, or any other Edinburgh from Ohio and Canada to Tristan da Cunha.

This mission, great for the reading public, is less giving to those who wish just to read Ameena's books.

Busy as an editor, amongst so much else, her fiction is milled in slow, exquisite grinders.

But of the three adult fiction offerings now out, they have nevertheless been worth the wait.

"Fifteen," published in 1999, is a viby, sparkling collection of short stories about being young, relatively free and female.

"Zillij," published in 2009, digs far deeper, with a story collection revolving around identity and family, history, and the present in modern-day Sri Lanka.

"Now as he walked through the devastation," she was to write, "nothing prepared him for what he saw. It was worse than a war. It was the obliteration of entire communities. It was hundreds and thousands left homeless, destitute, and in shock."

It was "The Moon in the Water," also published in 2009, that brought all her passion and creativity together in a tremendous drama of love, and maybe even forgiveness, about a woman called back to Sri Lanka by a killing only to uncover still more terrible secrets.

Like only the very best and most impossible creative people, she refuses to be pinned down to any genre or publication date - but given other works on erotic fiction, children's stories, transgenderism, and a book in search of the fabled Moroccan Scholar Ibn Battuta, only the most foolish bookies would take a bet on the subject of her next publication.

Her books include:

"Fifteen," published in 1999.

"Zillij," published in 2009.

"The Moon in the Water," published in 2009.

If there is a writer to carry you straight into the most private and convincing of all Sri Lankan lives, it is Ashok Ferry. Since 2003, his novels have appeared with – for the committed fan – a regularity that is way too slow, but as close to story-tale perfection as it is possible to get. Pick up just one of these, and you will soon have the others all on order from Amazon:

“Colpetty People” (2003) - probing, funny, loving vignettes about the lives of modern Sri Lankans as they navigate the world between Ceylon and the West.

“The Good Little Ceylonese Girl” (2007) - dark stories of love from Sri Lankans around the world – be they admirals, priests, or fake fiancées.

“Serendipity” (2009) - a comedy of manners where a young London barrister returns to Sri Lanka to take charge of her family’s share of the inheritance.

“Love in the Tsunami” (2012) - four fantastically funny stories about love, humiliation, and triumph.

“The Ceaseless Chatter of Demons.” (2016) - ‘I was born ugly. That’s what my mother always said.’ So begins the story of a young, multiethnic Sri Lankan living in a large family house on the mountain, belonging to his father, in Kandy.

"The Professional (2017) - a maths graduate and an illegal immigrant lives out an increasingly eccentric life on a building site before becoming a love god – of sorts.

"The Unmarriageable Man." (2021) - Grief and love in Brixton, when every girl looks like Princess Diana but not every boy looks like Prince Charles.

Deeply personal, unregimental, and profoundly moving, his books are also extremely funny – satire and humour delivered like the bubbles of champagne, or even Lion Lager.

Like a W Somerset Maugham for the modern world, his powers of compassion and identification, let alone of the ridiculous, are irresistible. What is even more remarkable is the convoluted path that Ferrey took to his craft – doubtless one during which he picked up more material than he would ever have time to use fully.

Though born in Colombo in 1957 and now living here once more, Ferry was raised in East Africa and educated at a British Benedictine monastery school before studying pure mathematics at Oxford – a track that first and most profitably led him to become a property developer in Margaret Thatcher's London. "One of my all-time great literary heroes," he confesses, "is R K Narayan," and it is clear that they are ever more indivisible.

5

STORM

"The Hemulen slid
down onto the
grass completely
exhausted.

"Oh!" he moaned.
"There has never
been anything but
trouble and
danger since I
came into the
Moomin family."

FINN FAMILY
MOOMINTROLL

The growing catastrophe of the island's civil war, the suffering, corruption, bravery, cruelty and longing it provoked, and the mighty diaspora it caused, drew a deep, indelible line across its fiction. Like the air you breathe, the war was everywhere.

You could no more ignore it than you could avoid the hundreds of checkpoints erected across the country's roads. And still life went on, as ever it did, as ever it should.

Aged just ten, Roma Tearne moved into exile to London with her Sinhalese mother and Tamil father in 1964. "Once you have been tortured," she wrote, "you can never belong in this world. There is no place that will ever be your home."

Forty-three years later, she was shortlisted for the coveted 2007 Costa Book Awards First Novel prize with her first novel, "Mosquito."

Since then, she has had little chance to look back, with novel after novel winning prizes, sales and reviews that would cause even a duchess to blush. "Bone China," published just a year later, is a story of escape as the once-great de Silva family loses its capacious tea estates and looks desperately into the future.

"Brixton Beach," published in 2009, was her third great novel, set during the time when bombs brought London to a halt.

In 2010, "The Swimmer" came out – a haunting romance about an illegal immigrant from Sri Lanka who has arrived in Norfolk to be taken in hand and loved by a woman twenty years his senior. I

In 2012, "The Road to Urbino" was published, an art heist that stretches from Sri Lanka to London and Tuscany that depicts the destruction of the already wrecked and wacked lives of its desperate protagonists.

Published alongside it was "The Dark Side of the World," a set of compelling short stories weaving Sri Lanka and England together in the world of people hungry for a better life.'

"The Last Pier," published in 2015, looks back on a chain of devastating family secrets from 1939.

Hope is a previous commodity in Tearne's world, and none more so in her most recent 2017 novel, the dystopian "White City": "every day when I stand on high ground and look towards the Tower, to where the river used to be, I see it melt a little more."

Her books include:

"Mosquito," published in 2007.

"Bone China " published in 2008.

"Brixton Beach," published in 2009.

"The Swimmer," published in 2010.

"The Road to Urbino," published in 2012.

"The Dark Side of the World," published in
2012.

"The Last Pier," published in 2015.

"White City," published in 2017.

Two novels mark out the world of Ru Freeman, a
Sri Lankan born in Colombo and well-known
writer and activist whose name pops up
regularly in The Guardian, The Boston Globe,
and The New York Times.

Her first novel, "A Disobedient Girl," published
in 2009, tells the coming-of-age tale of Latha,
who "loved fine things and had no doubt that
she deserved them..."

Her second, "On Sal Mal Lane," published in
2014 by Penguin, is set in 1979 Sri Lanka down
a quiet street that will soon erupt in violence.

Despite her modest output of novels, her
position in the literary world is in no doubt.

Lorraine Adams, the Pulitzer Prize winner, wrote
of this in her second novel that "Ru Freeman has
written the masterwork of Sri Lanka's bellum
civile, a novel that patiently and lucidly
witnesses the daily lives of children on a single
lane as the violence builds. There are no
acronyms, no convoluted battles, no dreary
expository detours. This is a civil war about a
garden wall, a cricket game, a bicycle ride,

music lessons, the shopkeeper that won't sell to you anymore and a teenager choosing between the house of one friend or another's to burn. It distils one of the last century's most complicated wars into what it really was on the ground--the everyday reality of that timeless threat, the neighbour turned killer."

Her books include:

"A Disobedient Girl," published in 2009.

"On Sal Mal Lane," published in 2014.

"If a liar tells you he is lying, is he telling the truth?" The question, posed by Shehan Karunatilaka in his first novel, "Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew", sets the moral landscape for most of his fiction. North, south, east, west – all are never where they are meant to be.

For this Sri Lankan writer has done more than bring his country to the attention of the world, he has turned the genre of fiction itself upside down, most notably with his Booker prize winning "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida," an epic satire about a dead war photographer, gambler and closet queen, whose afterlife obsession is settle the scores that settled him and release the evidence that will rock war torn Sri Lanka.

No book in the past 50 years has been written with such horror, humour, satire, love, and sheer grip.

It is more a performance than a novel, and most other books by most other authors will strut like meek boffins in the park after this one.

The clues were all there in his first novel, "Chinaman," published in 2011 and missed by most of the reading public until he won the Booker. "I was waiting for my death sentence when I made my decision," he writes in "Chinaman;" "The last months of my worthless life would be dedicated to a worthy cause. Or at least a wordy one. Not world peace or cancer cures or saving whales. God, if he exists, can look into those. No. In my humble opinion, what the world needs most is a halfway decent documentary on Sri Lankan cricket."

"The Seven Moons" was first published as "Chats with the Dead" in 2020, but it took a new title and a new publisher to propel it to the top it so richly deserves.

"You know why the battle of good vs evil is so one-sided, Malin?" he wrote, "Because evil is better organised, better equipped, and better paid."

In 2022, he also released "The Birth Lottery and Other Surprises". "It's a simple car bomb, and it's rigged to a busload of schoolgirls. No one knows it is there except for me."

And so it begins, a collection of stories that kicks off with a Sri Lankan president in the back of a London cab.

A rock musician born in Galle and educated in New Zealand, Karunatilaka writes across all known and occasionally less known genres from advertising shorts to weighty features, novels to children's literature and has gone on record as now living "in Colombo and Kurunegala with a wife, two kids, five guitars and fifteen unfinished stories."

His books include:

"Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew," published in 2010.

"The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida," published in 2020.

"The Birth Lottery and Other Surprises." Published in 2022.

Reading one of Anuk Arudpragasam's novels is like being a fly on the wall above two lovers, or a grandson and his grandmother.

His prose is full of intimate currents, so laden with inheritance and family, love, and disposition, and served up with such elegance and precision that it all too rapidly becomes a drug, better even than whiskey, cigarettes, and long tropical nights in far-off places where lorises sing dark songs.

Winner of multiple international awards and translated into most of the more-read languages of the world, his first two novels, "The Story of a

Brief Marriage," published in 2016 and "A Passage North", published in 2021, are so Graham Greene-like in their shatteringly secretive complexity as to belie the fact that the author was barely thirty when the last of the pair was published.

In his debut, "The Story of A Brief Marriage," a young man caught up in the last bloody stages of the LTTE retreat discovers that the only way to save a stranger, let alone himself, is to marry her.

Five years later in "A Passage North", another young man finds two worlds collide when he heads north to help his bereaved grandmother just as his strangely aloof lover returns, rekindling the political activism they once shared.

"He couldn't help thinking," he wrote, "as the train hurtled closer toward his destination, that he'd traversed not any physical distance that day but rather some vast psychic distance inside him"

Despite coming from a wealthy Tamil family and shielded from much of the civil violence that destroyed the world where his family originally came from in northeast Sri Lanka, his powers of empathy and imagination take your breath away.

The New York Times notes that "Arudpragasam,

who has a doctorate in philosophy from Columbia, poses essential, existential questions about how we should live in a world with so much suffering. What are our obligations to others, especially those, like Rani, who have been marginalised and oppressed? The novel offers one answer: We owe them our full attention."

"The Story of a Brief Marriage," published in 2016.

"A Passage North," published in 2021.

Despite coming from a wealthy Tamil family and shielded from much of the civil violence that destroyed the world where his family originally came from in northeast Sri Lanka, his powers of empathy and imagination take your breath away.

"They had once dug the earth for yams and planted seeds and prayed for rain. Now they dug for life and planted the dead and prayed for the end, " wrote Shankari Chandran, author of "Song of the Son God," published first in 2017 by the outstanding independent publisher Perera Hussein. It kicks off its shattering tale in 1932 Colombo as a boy hears of his beloved younger sister's death, just as he witnesses the sight of a self-immolating monk.

Chandran's novels are not for the faint-hearted. Like most things Sri Lankan, including the country's vegetarian dishes, they are a mighty

serving because the writer, like her peers, is utterly and thankfully unafraid to take on any subject, however vast or diminutive.

By contrast, "Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens," published in 2023, seems to evoke a calmer, kinder world – yet this quiet suburb of Sydney is home to the residents of a nursing home who recreate the many divisions and divided loyalties that are each one's separate calling.

And proving that form is no obstacle to talent, Chandran's thriller, "The Barrier," evokes a world laid waste by viruses and religious wars, a harbinger of what was just around the corner for us all.

The child of Tamil refugees and part of the great Tamil diaspora so forlornly and wastefully despatched from Sri Lanka's shores, Chandran was born in London in 1974 before moving to Australia and then again to London.

Her fourth novel, "Safe Haven," published in 2024, brings her back to many of the familiar and compelling themes of "Son God".

Her books include:

"Song of the Son God," published in 2017

"The Barrier," published in 2017.

"Chai Time at Cinnamon Gardens," published in 2023.

"Safe Haven," published in 2024.

6

NO
STRINGS
ATTACHED

“One has to
discover
everything for
oneself. And get
over it all alone.”

MOOMINLAND
MIDWINTER

As the new century took hold, Sri Lanka's writers, by now hailing as much from Colombo as Toronto or London, Sydney as Kurunegala or America, took as their theme or genre, their style or perspective anything and everything they wished, hitching the island sensibilities they captured with literature written in English across the world.

Prose you may want to eat" is a typical judgment made by critics of Nayomi Munaweera.

Her writing is breathtakingly lyrical and delicate - most triumphantly debuted in 2012 when Perera Hussein published her first novel, "Island of a Thousand Mirrors".

"Below me the island glistens verdant green," she wrote, "I imagine all that it holds. Such things of horror and exhilaration as seldom gathered together....."

Her second, published in 2016, was "What Lies Between Us", set in the glorious hill country of Sri Lanka and centred on the confession of a woman, driven by a terrible past, to an unforgivable crime.

Or is it?

"Hers are the sort of books that you pass onto friends and family, the sort you read again. The truths and sweeping histories that cradle her

characters are addictive dreamscapes, exercises in imagination not quickly forgotten," wrote one critic.

Her books include:

"Island of a Thousand Mirrors" was published in 2012.

"What Lies Between Us" was published in 2016

A rocket across the literary landscape, Amanda Jayatissa shot to prominence in 2017 with "The Other One", described by her friends as belonging to the "steampunk" side of sci-fi.

"Is Kaavi dead?" she wrote: " NOPE!
Does Amaya want to kill Kaavi? NOPE!
Is Spencer a decent guy?
NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOPE!"

Enid Blyton was, she claims, her great heroine and in the bold and appealing story lines she creates, it is easy to notice some of the best albeit unexpected parallels. Compelling, commercial, and authentic, her novels pick the cream inherent in any genre to tell their tale.

"My Sweet Girl," published in 2021, begins with a dead and disappearing body in an overpriced San Francisco apartment, a thriller killer to read at one go. "

"You're Invited," published in 2022, begins with

a lavish Sri Lankan wedding celebration that not everyone will survive. *Island Switch*," published in 2024, brings the Gothic (if ever more was needed) to Sri Lankan folklore to tell the story of the daughter of a demon-priest.

Her books include:

"The Other One," published in 2017.
"My Sweet Girl," published in 2021
"You're Invited," published in 2022
"Island Switch," published in 2024

Born in 1987 in Trincomalee and now living in America, S. J. Sindu is a wonderfully impossible-to-place writer who has published a hybrid chapbook, gothic short stories, and a graphic novel as well as the two full-length novels on which her dazzling reputation rests.

The first, published in 2017, "*Marriage of a Thousand Lies*", tells the very everyday family story of Lucky and her husband, Krishna, both gay. Humour, loss, love, and the marvels of domestic life are the topography she so brilliantly recreates.

The plot of the 2021 novel, "*Blue Skinned Gods*", is one of futuristic magic realism when a boy with blue skin is born in Tamil Nadu, so kicking off a tale that travels from India to New York's underground rock scene, encompassing all the best themes as it goes, from ethnicity to gender, love to faith. "Ayya had done so many

terrible things," she was to write, "but I'd always been taught that hate wasn't an emotion gods should have."

As one review put it: "Sindu's ferocious yet still eloquently accessible style pierces through the fog to show us slices of human nature at its core."

Her books include:

"Marriage of a Thousand Lies," published in 2017.

"Blue Skinned Gods" published in 2021.

Akil Kumarasamy may have only written two books so far, but she is heralded as "spellbinding; " a singular talent.

Her first book, "Half Gods", was a collection of short stories focused on the civil war, carrying with every sentence profound moral questions that rarely detracted from the plot or got in the way of the characters.

Her second book, "Meet Us by the Roaring Sea," published in 2022, begins with the daughter's discovery of her mother's body star-fished on the kitchen floor in New York.

What follows is a complicated masterpiece described as leaving "dangling threads that go beyond the unanswered questions" that mount up, page by page.

"You find a flowery weed in the backyard and begin to pluck the petals:" she wrote, "1. Have baby / 2. Don't have baby / 3. Place baby in a basket and send it down the Hudson River / 4.

Turn into an asexual, womb-less mythical creature"

No easy writer, The Los Angeles Review of Books wrote that "Akil is an unpredictable visionary who is not afraid to try out new forms, genres, and practices," but one, noted another review who is defiantly worth the trouble, not least because her "quirky language and wit are dazzling."

Her books include:

"Half Gods," published in 2018.

"Meet Us by the Roaring Sea," published in 2022.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born Cornish, in Colombo and raised with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. He gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as possible.

He worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board director for sales, art, and marketing; at HarperCollins India; Hachette's consumer learning division; and launched Oxford University Press's first online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka to rescue a spice plantation that had gone feral in the jungle. Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams, and overseen by several small schnauzers. It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at sriolankapodcast.com.

DISCOVER MORE

THE SRI LANKA PODCAST

Exploring what makes Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan at srilankapodcast.com.

A HISTORY OF SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka's serpentine history.

THE CEYLON PRESS COMPANIONS

The essential things that make up the island.

THE POCKET PROFESSOR VERY SHORT INTRODUCTIONS

Demystifying subjects.

ALTERNATIVE GUIDES

The places and subjects without crowds.

CUTHBERT'S GOLDEN TREASURES

Exploring the unexpected, in glad and random ways.

HISTORICAL ATLASES

The story of Sri Lanka through the maps of its forgotten cartographers & explorers.

TINY GUIDES

A quick canter through the facts that matter most.

ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently, "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centered on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel has been renovated and furnished with art & antiques, and its healthy menus fuse street food with fine dining. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Today, its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa, rubber, coffee, vanilla, cinnamon, coconuts, and scores of trees from ebony to sapu – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Visit www.flametreeestate.com. It also houses and funds The Ceylon Press.

As a reader of this book, you naturally qualify for special treatment should your holiday ever bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Drop the general manager a note to let him know how you came across us and to make arrangements that best suit you:
GeneralManager@flametreeestate.com.