

Sense of the City: Colombo

The BBC is asking novelists who have a profound understanding of the city they live in to reflect on the fiction it has produced and the various works of literature set there.

Sometimes there are ways in which a city becomes almost a character

Romesh Gunsekera is a Sri Lankan novelist. His 1994 book, Reef, was nominated for the Booker Prize. His latest work, Heaven's Edge, was published in 2002.

I think Colombo is a very evocative city in itself, and it conjures up all sorts of different ideas.

Obviously there isn't a single Colombo, just as there isn't a single any city in the world I guess. But it is a place that travellers have come to and gone from for centuries really.

And that I think gives, certainly for someone like me anyway, a sense of unexpected depths to it, and different levels at which it seems to operate - including the level of the imagination, which is the one that attracts me I suppose.

And people have, right back from, I don't know, there was a Chinese travel writer Fa Hien, who was there in the 4th Century I think. Marco Polo, and then you have people like Mark Twain who have come and gone.

My favourite couple of people who have come from the outside and gone are Pablo Neruda, who lived in Colombo for I can't remember how many years, but in the 1930s he was there.

He lived in a house in Wellawatte on then the outskirts of Colombo.

The period when he was in Sri Lanka was really when he was feeling very sad.

He had an affair which is interpreted in different ways with the woman who was cleaning the house for him.

The relationship between fiction and places is a very, very complicated one

But the bit I like most is that when he left Sri Lanka, he left a woman pregnant but he went away with a mongoose.

Another story I came across is how Anton Chekhov, the Russian writer, came to Sri Lanka, spent a few years, and went away with two of them.

There is a sense of a cosmopolitan city and a city that has changed a lot. And I think in more recent times writers who live in the city, writers who were born in the city like me, then left, continue to be involved with the city in their imagination.

The relationship between fiction and places is a very, very complicated one. It's not a simple relationship. And it's certainly not a relationship of explanation.

And fiction, the kind of fiction I suppose that I am interested in, is driven more by characters.

Characters, of course, are formed by the places they live in and grow up in, so in that sense there is a link. And sometimes there are ways in which a city becomes almost a character.

I used to be the kind of writer where I would be the 'out of the window' or 'in front of the front door' kind of writer

There are other writers in Sri Lanka who have written about Colombo.

Carl Muller, for example, has a novel called Colombo, which does take a lot of the history, the politics - the underworld, if you like, as well as overlays in the city and plays around with it.

It's difficult to work out where the best place is to write about the city.

I used to be the kind of writer where I would be the "out of the window" or "in front of the front door" kind of writer - I would write about things that were happening on the street outside.

I think distance helps someone like me.

I think Joyce was the one who said you need cunning and you need exile and silence to write. And of course there is a man who has written and recreated a city which for many people is Dublin, but he wrote it when he was in Switzerland, and he probably couldn't have written it if he was there.

The important thing for me, I suppose, is a city or a place is a little bit like a piece of land or a garden out of which things grow, in the sense that the plants which grow out of it aren't about it, but they come out of it.

And I think Colombo, over, I don't know, certainly the last 10 or 15 years, has grown more complicated, more complex.

There has also been more and more writing, more and more writers in Colombo.

I think it's something to celebrate and also something to nurture.

And I would hope if political problems can be solved and if economic problems can be solved, then those things will lend themselves to a flowering of more and more writing.

And the more writing there is, the better chances there are of writing being better.

Sense of the City can be heard on the BBC World Service programme The World Today until Friday 8 August, and includes Orhan Pamuk talking about Istanbul.

Story from BBC NEWS:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/3126565.stm

Published: 2003/08/05 23:40:42 GMT

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