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Go east, young man

A Londoner returns to his grandfather's island in search of an imagined Eden he cannot find

Reviewed by John Freeman
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Heaven's Edge

By Romesh Gunesekera

GROVE; 234 Pages; $24

In colonial days, a man was encouraged to go east in search of adventure. He could hop on a boat or plane, disappear for a half a year and then return home with the kind of stories that drew gasps in drawing-room conversations.

Nowadays, history has turned that journey inside-out, lending it a sad twist. The diaspora of fallen colonial regimes spread people of impoverished nations far and wide. A generation or two later, it is now these peoples' turn to head east. They do so not for adventure, but in search of some part of themselves they -- or their ancestors -- left behind.

Here is the voyage that Romesh Gunesekera's oddly touching third novel describes. Set in a war-torn island country that resembles the author's native Sri Lanka, "Heaven's Edge" concerns the plight of Marc, a London man who has traveled there in hopes of unlocking the secrets of his past. As he explains in one scene, "My father's father was born here. My father died here. I thought I might find some remains. Something, maybe, about who he was and who I am."

From the outset, it looks like Marc will not discover much beyond the obvious. The island is beautiful, that much is apparent from the start, but it's been tainted by violence. Young men with submachine guns linger in shop doorways, their boredom a dangerous fuse. Bottled beer is available, but drinking too much can cause problems.

Just when Marc resigns himself to having a "Rough Guide" trip through the Third World, he gets involved with a local woman whose plant-growing hides a more revolutionary bent. They make love over and over, and Marc becomes hooked on her like a narcotic. Then one morning soldiers storm his hotel and Marc wakes up woozy on his way to what seems to be an island prison, his lover nowhere to be found.

From this point onward, "Heaven's Edge" turns into an intriguing hybrid, one part post-colonial adventure story, two parts coming-of-age tale. That the book cannot decide what it ought to be is to its detriment, but Gunesekera melds these two elements together by having each narrative comment on the other.

Like his Booker finalist novel, "Reef" (1995), this book relies heavily on flashbacks. One step forward, two steps back: This is the syncopated march of "Heaven's Edge," as the whiff of a flower, the call of a

parakeet or the scent of freshly mulched history brings Marc back to the hazy days of his youth, when he sat at his grandfather Eldon's knee sipping elderberry tea.

In this fashion, "Heaven's Edge" assembles a portrait of the emigrant's quandary, how even three generations beyond departure, an unnamable loss informs each waking moment. That loss was strong enough to lead Eldon to take his son, Marc's father, on a roots trip back to this unnamed country. The impression was powerful enough that when he became a man, Marc's father returned, only to give his life trying to help the cause of the island people.

The deeper Marc involves himself in the freedom fight of this nation's people, though, the more he must question whether he is not just some form of adventure-seeker as well. Rather than prompt this question directly, Gunesekera poses it subtly by having Marc evolve into a rather naive back-to-the-woods naturalist. He begins courting dreams of finding a small spot to retire to, of reuniting with his island love -- who goes missing -- and settling down.

Gunesekera wrote of the desire to purify and preserve in "Reef," which featured a biologist obsessed with saving a local reef, but "Heaven's Edge" goes one step further by adding a psychological dimension to such concerns. Marc's attempts to return to the landscape, and the people who inhabit it, to a state of peace are laudable, but there's a stridency to his statements that hints at their complicated agenda. Unable to fathom his own past, Marc fetishizes that of the island itself, turning it into an Eden in his mind.

In the past, critics have heaped praise on Gunesekera for the quality of his prose, likening it to "a murmurous sea" or an "incandescent" flame. Those might be apt similes to use here were there not so much of it. "Heaven's Edge" is a short novel, but it feels positively epic given how much riffing Gunesekera does on the island's landscape, its groves of mango and jacaranda trees, the lushness of its lantana blossoms.

Perhaps Gunesekera wants a reader to feel oppressed by the landscape's beauty; after all, that's how Marc feels as he wanders farther into the jungle,

the derelict oil palm plantations giving way to utter wildness. Here, he thinks to himself, life will be pure; here he can begin again. And yet as Gunesekera makes painfully clear, there is no Eden on this island, or for that matter, any other place on Earth.

John Freeman's reviews have appeared in the New York Times Book Review and the Wall Street Journal.

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