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## Romesh Gunsekera: The decisive moment

*His early life encompassed Sri Lanka, Manila - and Liverpool. Judith Palmer talks to Romesh Gunsekera about culture clashes, collecting and cricket*

"Timing is the thing," begins Romesh Gunsekera's new novel, *The Match*. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, when the author fails to make an appearance at the allotted hour of our interview. He was supposed to have been here, at his publisher's Soho Square offices, half an hour ago.

For me, the timing is fortuitous. I've had a filling replaced in the morning, and my anaesthetised mouth is still incapable of forming recognisable words. By the time he finally bustles apologetically through the door, my powers of speech are miraculously restored.

He has, it turns out, been trapped on the Tube. The drawstring on his rucksack became caught in the closing doors, and it took him some time to tug his way free.

Life has hereby delivered an able exposition of the themes of Gunsekera's new novel: the significance of good timing, the frailty of verbal communication, the ramifications of cutting yourself off, and the importance of knowing what to hang on to and what to let go.

In a series of episodes from 1970 to 2002, *The Match* (Bloomsbury, £14.99) follows the fortunes of Sunny, a Sri Lankan expatriate, from the fug of his teenage bedroom in Manila, wrapped up in centrefold fantasies, minor self-abuse and filial contempt; through his lonely student days in London; and the drift into uncommunicative middle age as father to his own teenage son.

"The old idea that you grow wiser as you get older, and you learn from your elders, is actually completely wrong," says Gunsekera. "That's the big reversal in this book. In a sense you begin to learn from your youngers. It makes me think of the story of Auden revising the poems of his youth. The revisions of a young man's poems by an old man is completely the wrong way round."

Like Sunny, Gunsekera was born in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, and moved to the Philippines with his father in the 1960s; he travelled to the UK to study, and went on to make London his home. "There, the similarities end," he maintains. "I like inventing things when I write, rather than autobiography," he says. "For this book I wanted to use a personal geography rather than a personal history - to use that shape of a journey.

"I think a lot of writers have experienced some sense of dislocation," he continues. "I probably felt most out of place as a young kid growing up in Sri Lanka. My mental world was somewhere else, partly because of reading and day-dreaming. I had also travelled with my father when there were lots of restrictions to travel outside Sri Lanka."

He was, he says, the only child he knew who had seen television: "I had that sense of being very different because I'd seen things I couldn't really articulate or tell people about. That felt very strange. As years have passed, partly because of the books, I've felt more and more at home in Sri Lanka. I have almost a role there and a place from where I can try to understand or look at it."

His previous fictions had all been rooted, one way or another, in Sri Lanka: the spellbinding Booker-shortlisted novel, *The Reef*, with its elegiac reminiscences of culinary magic in an abandoned homeland; the nine

shimmering short stories of Monkfish Moon; the lush and war-torn Eden of Heaven's Edge. For the first time, in *The Match*, he begins to explore the terrain of his teenage years: suburban life among the international execs and whiskey-swilling journos in Marcos's pre-dictatorship Philippines.

Lester, Sunny's father, had come to Manila in order to work as a journalist in 1967, excited by Marcos's pledge that the Philippines would have the freest press in Asia. When the novel begins, words have begun to fail him, and he has moved into PR. Disillusionment is growing, and he is no longer able to communicate with his son. The generation gap is briefly bridged with the formation of an inter-generational cricket team, for a single momentous match, played out on a makeshift pitch on a golf course.

OK, there is more real life in there, Gunsekera admits. His own father left Ceylon to start an Asian development bank, like another of the characters in *The Match*, and many of the closest family friends were journalists. "I had a sense of people working with words from an early age," he says. "As a youngster I think I said I wanted to be a journalist, but that's a disguise for being a writer."

It was in Manila that he first started scribbling down poems and stories to share aloud with his teenage buddies. "I was completely besotted with the Beat writers," he says. "These were writers who not only had a rebel side, they wrote from the 'now', and in a sense paraded themselves as writers. Before that there were books. There weren't writers."

Brought up bilingually, speaking Sinhala and English, Gunsekera has only ever written in English. "I liked English more," he explains, "partly because I only read books in English. That's part of colonial history as well."

In the mid-1970s, he joined his mother in Birkenhead, and discovered the joys of the British public library system. "That's when the reading part of it came in," he says, "and I started to think about writing not just for the moment, but as something that'll last a bit longer."

In the novel, after false starts as an engineer and an accounts clerk, Sunny settles into a low-key career as a photographer. He lives his life in waiting; never quite giving up hope of experiencing, and capturing on film, the perfect moment. "There's an element of that comes into writing: trying to do the impossible and capture the moment," says Gunsekera. "I have a sense of time passing, and that's my urge to write - the sense of cheating time - of getting out of the grip of time. Faulkner used to talk about writing being like scratching a mark on the wall of oblivion. If you didn't believe that was possible, there wouldn't be a story or a book."

Gunsekera does take lots of photographs, he admits, and like Sunny, he does have a fascination with old cameras. Was it, I ask, a talismanic moment for him, getting his first camera? As ever, the fictional life has exerted the stronger pull. "Sunny getting a camera is much more vivid than anything that happened to me," he says.

Is he a collector? Does the desire to capture a moment spill out into a desire to gather other precious things to him? He's a hoarder, he says, mainly of clippings unsystematically snipped from newspapers. "I don't throw things out, but I don't collect to a purpose," he adds. "Funnily enough, my name is meant to mean that. 'Gunsekera' broken down means 'collector of good things'."

As a writer, however, he throws things out obsessively, honing and revising until the very last minute. "Publishers get mad with me because I tend to meddle with books quite a lot." With dismay, I discover that he's been tweaking the text even since the proof copies were issued. In effect, we've been discussing a different book. The changes, I later discover, are few, but cumulatively influential - subtle calibrations, ever so slightly affecting the characters' understanding of the world.

Although only a few pages of *The Match* are set in Sri Lanka, events in the island continue to influence Sunny's life back in England. The chronological episodes dividing up the text are significant not just in the characters' personal histories, but in the history of Sri Lanka. The novel's penultimate chapter marks the year 1996 - which in Sri Lankan terms means two things: the horrific bombings in Colombo, and the triumph of the Sri Lankan cricket team over Australia in the final of the cricket World Cup.

Not a cricket buff, Gunsekera nonetheless realised he wanted to write something which tapped into the cricketing drama. "It's been the other side of the Sri Lankan experience," he says. "The more positive one."

*The Match* concludes in 2002: the year of the ceasefire, which halted three decades of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka that has claimed in excess of 64,000 lives. With the recent upswell of violence, and the need for a new set of peace talks in Geneva next week, does Gunsekera feel he ended the novel too soon?

"Chasing the perfect is a very rich vein to explore philosophically," he says. "It's almost a refrain through the book of whether perfection itself is a temporary thing, and whether you have to accept that."

## Biography

Romesh Gunsekera was born in Sri Lanka in 1954. He spent his childhood in Colombo, then moved to Manila as a teenager. He read English and philosophy at Liverpool University and later worked for the British Council, covering first Eastern Europe and then East Asia. He has published one collection of short stories, *Monkfish Moon* (1992), shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and four novels: *Reef* (1994), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994; *The Sandglass* (1998), which won the BBC Asia award for literature in 1998; *Heaven's Edge* (2002); and *The Match*, published by Bloomsbury this week. In 2005 he received a *Ranjana*, the national honour of Sri Lanka. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, he lives in north London, with his wife and two daughters.

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