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Romesh Gunsekera: After an odyssey, paradise regained

Violence and its dark attractions shadow Romesh Gunsekera's haunting fictions, set in island idylls. As the prospect of an end to the killing arrives, at last, in his native Sri Lanka, he talks to Amer Hussein about the lures of war and the arts of peace

It's a question of memory," Romesh Gunsekera says, looking out on a rainy London landscape. "Should we remember things as a way of learning, or forget them as a way of healing? That's one of the major questions for the characters of *Heaven's Edge*." Gunsekera is enthusiastic about his new novel (Bloomsbury, £16.99). He is also reluctant to pontificate about a book that took him five years and several revisions to complete. It started as an investigation of language but soon spiralled into a story about journeys - one character speaks of a journey of love.

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"The other question", Gunsekera says, "is whether violence is ever justified. These questions are pretty simple and straightforward for many people, but for me they become more and more difficult. The characters in my book are on a journey, trying to answer those questions. The journey of violence entails a choice between defending or accommodating violence, or seeing that you're mistaken. Kill or be killed, yes, but by killing you're also dying."

For Marc, the British narrator, who travels to the novel's semi-fictional island, the journey is one of learning to handle remembrance by turning it into a story to use as a way of staying alive. Marc's starting-point is London; his baggage, his grandfather's memories of home. But he is also in search of a lost father whose aircraft was shot down on the war-torn island.

Lyrical and dreamlike, *Heaven's Edge* encompasses both history and myth. Marc's grandfather recalls the Second World War and passes on to Marc his pacifist ideas. He also theorises about home and belonging: only a foreigner, he holds, has a genuine sense of arrival.

Marc sets off in his father's footsteps, in pursuit of a lost paradise. "That idea charmed me. What runs deeper is a sense of identity and difference - the whole notion that no one ever really belongs in one place. Even animals migrate," Gunsekera says. "And the idea of paradise and islands is connected in the mythic imagination with the idea of quest, whether it's in the story of Jason, the *Odyssey* or the *Ramayana*.

"Myths cross," he explains. "I wanted to look at the interface between our lives and the lives of the gods as we imagine them. To map out that, you start out with ideals and theories, which begin to fray at the edges; to engage with a series of myths and parallel Marc's journey finding his father with my own imaginative journey. It's what you do when you're writing a story: search for the source of it all."

Marc meets and falls in love with the enigmatic Uva, only to lose her. He embarks on a peril-ridden journey to find her, which, as Gunsekera is quick to point out, entails the sacrifice of his companions, who are attracted to, and forced to protect, his vulnerability. It is only at the end that the quasi-visionary Marc, to preserve the

illusory paradise he has created, is faced with his own choice between pacifism and violence. "I'm posing the question of whether the act of being like someone else involves a certain kind of violence - to yourself and to your ideas, if nothing else."

In the aftermath of recent events, Guneseekera is beset with a sense of *déjà vu*: "The escalation of violence, the increasing acceptance of it - various things were happening in different parts of the world, and I'd been learning a lot about them. The *déjà vu* part came when, particularly after 11 September, I began to hear people talking out of a book I'd already written; ideas flying straight out of the minds of people in my book.

"But that's the nature of life and fiction - things do converge. At the same time, look at Sri Lanka: there's a peace process on the way, which is very positive and very different from what I tried to create."

Guneseekera's own journey began in Colombo, where he was born and grew up. As a child he was a misfit, escaping at an early age into the world of "paperback trash". The climate in Sri Lanka, then heatedly nationalist, was negative toward the English language.

Guneseekera, who speaks of the Sinhala language's rich and ancient literary tradition, was bilingual at the time, but drawn to English. When he came upon "its classics, a different range of books", he started to write himself.

As a teenager, he moved with his family to the Philippines, and then to England, where he completed his education. "I never saw myself as fitting into a bigger cultural situation - a natural condition for those who end up writing.

"I suppose the real distinction was being willing to live on the page; that's what gave me an imaginative dimension. Something has to happen before belonging becomes a central issue. Most of the rest of the time you're slightly alienated. It has nothing to do with being in a different country. For the first 20 years here, I didn't write about Sri Lanka."

Guneseekera served a 10-year apprenticeship, working at a day job - "I didn't want be poor" - and publishing in little magazines before his first book was accepted. He had thought this would be a collection of poems, but had been submitting stories to *Granta*, who offered to publish a volume when they set up their new imprint. Convinced that no one read short stories, he was doubly surprised when the stories of *Monkfish Moon*, linked by Sri Lankan themes, came together with more of a unity than he had imagined: "My connection with Sri Lanka has deepened with my books, because I've explored certain things, explored the history."

Monkfish Moon is brief, succinct and blindingly clear. Published the year that Sri Lankan-born Michael Ondaatje won the Booker Prize, and before the so-called boom in South Asian fiction began with the publication of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, it was a success with readers and critics. It established a reputation, and still holds its own in the Guneseekera oeuvre.

The novel *Reef*, rich and allusive, which followed two years later, captured the public imagination at a time when the post-colonial trend flourished; it shared a Booker nomination in 1994 with Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*, and remains the most popular of Guneseekera's novels.

It was followed by *The Sandglass*, sweeping and multi-layered, a favourite with critics. "*Monkfish Moon* was contemporaneous with my own life; *Reef* was a journey from the perspective of the present to the past, to understand the mid-Sixties and the mid-Seventies. *The Sandglass*, though it mirrors history, was an invented colonial history of alcohol and its effects on society in general, full of ideas about corporations and dynastic ambitions."

People, Guneseekera says, tend to see his books as being about the lost past or paradise. He is interested in lost time, but contends that he writes about people and their ideas, not places.

"In *Heaven's Edge*, which is set 30 years from our present, I invent both the future and the past - I want to take us on a journey, look at things we know about in a backward glance, and go out into the unknown, see the lost future, not enter into a huge discussion about what it all has to do with a place. It's a risk I'm taking with my readers."

His place a writer is assured. He accepts with modesty that his name (along with those of a handful of others including Ondaatje and Sam Selvadurai) has helped to put Sri Lankan fiction on the map. He has a growing number of readers in Sri Lanka. A genial, forthcoming public speaker, he is comfortable on platforms with other South Asian writers, but he nevertheless feels it is his readers' job to label him a British or a Sri Lankan writer.

"With this new book done, I feel my sense of belonging is to my other books; that's where it all fits together. It's also tied up with my two children, who were born here. I've lived in London longer than most people; this is a city that's a part of me, whether I want it to be or not.

"I would never have thought of myself as British, but that's not a big issue. I'm not uncomfortable, whether it's Britain or elsewhere. In the end, belonging has to do with the people you're with - not with places."

Romesh Gunsekera: a biography

Romesh Gunsekera was born in Sri Lanka in 1954. He was educated in Colombo, the Philippines - where his father had moved on a mission to start an Asian development bank - and England. He read English and philosophy at Liverpool University (where he won the Rathbone prize for philosophy) and later worked for the British Council, covering first Eastern Europe and then East Asia. He has published one collection of stories, *Monkfish Moon* (1992), shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and three novels: *Reef* (1994), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994 and won the Premio Mondello in Italy; *The Sandglass* (1998), which won the BBC Asia award for literature in 1998; and now *Heaven's Edge* (published this month by Bloomsbury). He lives in London with his wife and two daughters, but travels widely and has recently been a writer-in-residence in Copenhagen, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Aamer Hussein's new collection of stories, 'Turquoise', will be published by Saqi Books in September

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