

Interview: Romesh Gunesequera

on 'Independence' [A Short Story]

You have written about Sri Lanka in *Independence* as well as in previous work, including *Reef* and *The Sandglass*. What is it about the country that you find so inspirational?

Although I don't live in Sri Lanka, it is part of the world I inhabit. I am often there and I have strong links to people and places there. In writing, one sentence leads to another. As one explores a character one discovers their background, the place they live in, the place they come from. Both *Reef* and *The Sandglass* start in Britain and lead to Sri Lanka. *Independence* is different in that it is set entirely in Sri Lanka. I was interested in bringing together the political reality which comes from the history of a place and the emotional reality of a couple living there. Also the story happened to start when I was there, writing.

You paint a vivid portrait of ordinary people getting on with their lives in an unpredictable and often frightening environment. Did you find it difficult to create this scenario in such a plausible way?

I try to describe what is going on as accurately as possible and as true to the story.

Sonya and Rohan are both clearly drawn characters. How do you set about creating complex characters within the short story genre?

I don't accept the conventional idea that a short story has to be simple, or about a single incident. If the fiction works then the reader attends to the imagined world not the form. And an imagined world does need characters that you can see and believe in. I like to think that a good short story is as memorable and imaginatively real as a good novel. The stuff that goes to make it is much the same.

The tension between Sonya and Rohan pervades the story. Can you talk a bit more about this?

This is a story of a breakdown in a relationship. But perhaps there is no relationship to breakdown. For me the tension in that question provides the drama.

The figure of Nara almost seems to represent the inconsistencies of life in Sri Lanka, for example the apparent contradiction between his political allegiances and his financial interests. What gave you the inspiration for him?

Observation, I think. In drawing characters like Nara (or Peter in *Monkfish Moon*) I try to see how people behave and what makes them tick.

I like the way that you describe the contrasts inherent in life in Sri Lanka – the classy bars with sandbags, the designer clothes in the polluted atmosphere. Are these based on your personal experience of Sri Lanka?

It is the way it was at the time the story is set. I happened to be there then. Sadly it seems it might be like that again soon. Places, like people, are complex and I try to make the fiction as true as possible. Too often we are shown people and places in a simplified way; experience is flattened when mediated by news and advertising. A place (or a person) is given one characteristic, one identity. So war in one place, shopping in another. Victims in one place, readers in another. There is more to the world than that, and I think fiction helps us appreciate that.

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