

## ND 6.4 “We all relate to each other’s dystopias”: Shehan Karunatilaka and Sangeeta Ray (CH)

### Transcript

#### Chris Holmes

Hello, and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with *Public Books*, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm Chris Holmes, one of your hosts and a producer for this season of Novel Dialogue. Our devoted listeners know that we bring you conversations between the writers at the forefront of the evolving novel form and the critics who make legible the meaningfulness of those evolutions.

Today, we welcome Sangeeta Ray, who will be in conversation with Shehan Karunatilaka, whose most recent novel, *The Seven Moons of Maali Alemada*, won the Booker Prize for the best novel written in English. *The Seven Moons* is a historical novel that bends and twists genre and narrative into a wondrous and disorienting knot. It follows one man, Maali Alemada, a war photographer killed and dismembered, and now a ghost with seven moon's time allotted to give his life's work meaning. *Seven Moons* makes space for the cacophony of ghostly voices of those killed and disappeared in Sri Lanka's long civil war. Shehan's first novel, *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew*, was described by Michael Ondaatje as, quote, “a crazy ambidextrous delight,” and it won both the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and the Commonwealth Prize in 2012. *The Seven Moons* was originally published as *Chats with the Dead* in 2020 by Penguin India's Hamish Hamilton imprint, and then revised and edited before being published as a novel that won the Booker. In one of the more exceptional acceptance speeches given by a winner, Shehan hoped that his novel would be read in a future Sri Lanka where the world described in *Seven Moons* would be deemed a fantasy. Born in Sri Lanka in 1975, Shehan studied in New Zealand and has worked and lived in London, Amsterdam, and Singapore. He was a fellow at the Iowa Writers Workshop. He is also the author of a children's book titled, *Please Don't Put That in Your Mouth*, and most recently, Hachett India published a book of his short stories, *Birth Lottery and Other Surprises*.

It is my pleasure to also welcome Sangeeta Ray. Sangeeta is Professor of English and Comparative Literature and the Faculty Director of the Centre of Literary and Comparative Studies at the University of Maryland. She is primarily a literary scholar, engaged in questions of form and genre, postcolonial reading practices, and the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and politics. She has published two books, *Engendering Women, Women and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* with Duke, and *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: In other Words*, with Wiley Blackwell. She has co-edited the *Companion to Postcolonial Studies* and the three-volume *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*. Her book, *Form Fitted: Postcolonial Aesthetics, Ethics, Politics*, is forthcoming. She's currently working on another book on South Asian refugee literature in Bengali, English, Hindi, and in translation.

Welcome, Sangeeta and Shehan.

#### Sangeeta Ray

Thank you, Chris, for inviting me to be a part of this. And before I get started, I have just a thank you note. So I have to note that I read this novel with academics in North America, loosely associated with a new organization called The Association of Postcolonial Thought. Read a novel a month, give or take, and I've been doing this for about two years now. It is a dynamic group, and I'm grateful to them for the rich discussions and want to acknowledge them today. So many of my questions and observations here have been shaped by that discussion. I also wanted to acknowledge my ongoing conversation about Sri Lankan novels with Professor Kalyan Nadiminti, who teaches at Northwestern University, who is responsible for at least two of the questions I plan to ask, time permitted.

So welcome, Shehan Karunatilaka. It's such a pleasure to be here. And so before we get started, we would love to hear you read a brief section from the opening of the novel.

### **Shehan Karunatilaka**

Answers.

You wake up with the answer to the question that everyone asks. The answer is Yes, and the answer is Just Like Here But Worse. That's all the insight you'll ever get. So you might as well go back to sleep.

You were born without a heartbeat and kept alive in an incubator. And, even as a foetus out of water, you knew what the Buddha sat under trees to discover. It is better to not be reborn. Better to never bother. Should have followed your gut and croaked in the box you were born into. But you didn't.

So you quit each game they made you play. Two weeks of chess, a month in Cub Scouts, three minutes in rugger. You left school with a hatred of teams and games and morons who valued them. You quit art class and insurance-selling and masters' degrees. Each a game that you couldn't be arsed playing. You dumped everyone who ever saw you naked. Abandoned every cause you ever fought for. And did many things you can't tell anyone about.

If you had a business card, this is what it would say.

Maali Almeida

Photographer. Gambler. Slut.

If you had a gravestone, it would say.

Malinda Albert Kabalana

1955–1990

But you have neither. And you have no more chips left at this table. And you now know what others do not. You have the answer to the following questions. Is there life after death? What's it like?

**CH**

Thank you, Shehan. That was wonderful. And I'm going to turn it over to Sangeeta to ask the first question.

**SR**

So Shehan, one of the things I was thinking about as I was reading your book is about the current boom in Sri Lankan fiction. And so one of the things we could think about is how Sri Lankan writing, Anglophone writing, could be said to have entered the international sphere at a crucial moment in the 1990s. Though of course, Michael Ondaatje's short memoir *Running in the Family* was published in 1982. And there were other novels such as those by Romesh Gunsekera, Yasmine Gooneratne, Shyam Selvadurai, A Sivanandan, among others.

But it has taken another two and a half decades for Sri Lankan Anglophone writing to arrive, so to speak, on the international scene with your work and Anuk Arudpragasam's novels and also a writer like V. S. Ganeshanathan. Do you want to speculate about this delayed arrival as it were, as opposed to say writing from other parts of South Asia? I know that Muhammad Hanif has blurbed *Chats with the Dead*, the first version of *Seven Moons* published in India, for example. So we can start with that or perhaps with your own admiration for *Midnight's Children* as a way to think about the relationship, similarities and differences, between Sri Lankan Anglophone writing and its Indian or Pakistani counterparts.

**SK**

Well, the question is about Sri Lankan Anglophone writing which began in the 1990s or began on an international scale with Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Gunsekera, Yasmine Gooneratne, Shyam Selvadurai. I'd add Carl Muller to that list as well. Yeah, you're right to say that the 1990s was a seminal period because I remember growing up in the 80s visiting bookshops. And there's a Sri Lankan section now. There wasn't a Sri Lankan shelf back then. You'd get a few Sri Lankan novels which looked self-published and a lot of them, they sounded like, they were trying to sound like Englishmen who lived 50 years ago, trying to, that affectation of E. M. Forster and Evelyn Waugh and maybe a bit of Wodehouse.

Yeah, it was quite a revelation for me when I encountered Carl Muller writing as Sri Lankan spoke and then read *Running in the Family* and *Reef* by Romesh Gunsekera and *Funny Boy* where you had like proper professional accomplished writers telling these stories and telling them skillfully.

I think really the seeds were planted with Michael Ondaatje when he won the Booker Prize for *The English Patient* and he set up The Gratiaen Trust which awarded a prize for the best writing in English across genre, plays, novels, short stories, poetry. But this produced, I would say, a revolution of writing in the city centres, in the English language especially, in Galle, Kandy and Colombo. And yeah, it was a motivating factor and I think there's about 70 or 80 novels or pieces of writing that get submitted and yeah, I'm sure not all of them are great but it has unearthed some real gems and some real great writers.

So I think that's just domestically what's been happening. Why it has, I don't think it's a new thing. I think there have been a lot of tremendous writers, not just within Sri Lanka you have Ameena Hussein, Ashok Ferrey, Andrew Fidel. But overseas you've got diasporic writing with Naomi Munaweera and [unclear] and yeah, I'm sure there's tons of names I'm missing out but Sri Lankan dystopia has always been in the news but it's been in the news recently and it's never far from the news. You always get these, there's always a catastrophe. The Easter attacks or allegations of war crimes during the end of the war, the people chasing the president out.

I think there is that fascination and I guess there's so much absurdity and comedy and tragedy in Sri Lanka that there's plenty to write about and I guess encouraging that local writers and expat writers, Sri Lankans are deciding to tell these stories.

You can't really talk about subcontinental writing without beginning with *Midnight's Children*. For, like for many South Asian writers it opened my eyes and really it got me writing. It got me thinking that maybe I was able to write because I didn't think I could write like Graham Greene or Hemingway or that I had permission to but what Salman Rushdie did with *Midnight's Children* is he, the novel spoke in a way, in a masala type of voice, the way we speak, the way we overwrite or over talk or use too many adjectives or use any metaphors or mess up the syntax or speak in that musical way and that was, and you know this is not Salman Rushdie's voice, if you hear him speak he's a very posh Englishman but he was able to, he had a great ear and was, obviously grew up on Indian pop culture.

And so I think that was, for me, we always knew Sri Lanka had great stories but to be able to tell it in these different voices so I adopted the voice of an old alcoholic journalist from my first book and a closet queen gambler photographer slut for the second book and with my short story collections I've also experimented with different voices and I think, yeah, I was inspired, I mean not just Salman Rushdie, I mean there were a lot of great Indian writers, that—the famous ones are not so famous ones, you have the Arundhati Roy's and the Arvind Adiga's but you know you have Cyrus Mistry and you know a few other maybe lesser well known Aruna Roy, you know, well celebrated but just different range of voices. But yeah, I particularly with the Pakistani writers, I had a lot of admiration, inspiration and awe of Mohammed Hanif, *Exploding Mangoes*, Mohsin Hamid, *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, Naqvi's Home Boy, I love that book and yeah, I've just got his new one.

And so I think, yeah, the region, even though we've had very different experiences, we all relate to each other's dystopias and also because you've got now a generation of writers who've grown up with Western pop culture as well as local pop culture and who've inherited these terrible situations or predicaments and many have travelled the world, studied abroad and bring that sensibility to it as well. And so yeah, I don't think it's a surprise that the subcontinent is rich in literature and that the world is catching up.

**SR**

Maybe we can just take, I can pick up on what you were saying about how the novel is actually set, you know, at a particular critical time in Sri Lanka, you know, it's about the 1983 genocide massacre—

**SK**

--'89

**SR**

-- all about, if you want to--

**SK**

'89

[overlapping]

**SR**

Sorry, '89, yes. And it was one of the worst sort of moments in the Sri Lankan Civil War, of which there are many. So when you talk about, when you have talked about *The Chinaman*, you know, you talk about how you provide a cheat sheet, you know, so that people who don't know anything about cricket can still read the novel and in *The Seven Moons* as well, you have these wonderful little cheat sheets in the beginning, you know, let me just break it down, all the various insurgent factions, you know, because of which there are so many.

But would you say, as you did about *Chinaman*, that someone who doesn't know anything about the Sri Lankan War, because it seems to me that knowing something about this long and horrible war seems somehow necessary to understand sort of, you know, some of the crucial moments in the novel, because, because, or to put it another way, the novel is thinly veiled, right, with the characters bearing close resemblances to some actual people, you know, whether it's, whether it's Richard de Zoysa, whether it's the character of Rani, and it's, it seems to me that the novel takes a kind of a special delight, right, in those associations. Using it, but then sort of, you know, with the character of Rani is like fantastic. And for those of us who read her daughter's memoir, for example, you know, it's sort of very different to say, to encounter that figure in the novel.

So what are such proximities, let's say, say about the role of fiction, especially historical fiction, that is deeply political?

**SK**

So I think both of them, if I'm looking at similarities, is they're both centered around crucial years. So the first book is about the 1996 World Cup. And, you know, I've recently, there is a project to do a documentary on that, on that story. And multiple narratives on the 1996 World Cup, and it's a great sports underdog story of Sri Lanka, a bunch of amateurs winning this Cup, but also, it's a lot of elements to it, because the war was raging, there was a ceasefire happening, there was the one Tamil in the team. And for me, this was my alternative narrative that there actually was a Tamil genius bowler who no one knew about, who might have been responsible for all the things that won the World Cup.

And I just feel with Sri Lanka, we do now, recently, we had the Easter attacks in 2019. Again, a lot of laying of blame, a few investigations, a lot of different narratives, but no one clear narrative. And that's why I think maybe the fiction writer can come in and reimagine. Certainly true of '89. '89, there were three wars happening on this tiny island. And I just remember going to school. And so I wasn't aware at that time, I was a 14 year old. But, you know, seeing bodies on the side of the road burning in tires, and you didn't know, and you know, your parents will tell you to move your face away from the window, but you didn't know who it was. You didn't know, it could have been an army person killed by the terrorists, it could have been a terrorist or someone innocent suspect to it.

And so for me, making sense of these, these winning a World Cup and this terrible war, I was allowed to borrow, because the truth is very strange as well. There was enough there in the official story that I could use. But I'm not a journalist and might have been more troublesome and problematic to even start writing nonfiction, like for instance, the end of the war, 2009. There's a lot of controversy conflicting views of that and writing about that still could be quite contentious. And that's why, that's

why I went back to '89 and used, yeah, this crazy novel where there is talking animals and demons and all that. But yeah, the truth of it was the reality was far more gruesome than anything in the book.

And so yeah, it is a tightrope for me that I, and so yeah, in the, in *Chinaman*, a lot of the cricketers are, if you're a cricket fan, you would definitely recognize them and but mixed into that, you have this character and so the reader might think, well, is that someone real or is it based on someone? So I do enjoy doing that. And it's also safer rather than actually talking about real politicians and real terrorists, you can, yeah, fractionalize it or fictionalize it. Yes, I do. I do enjoy doing that. And I think it's also a way for me to hide as well. Yeah.

**CH**

Well, that's fascinating. I want to push a little bit on this idea of the tightrope and kind of pulling, pulling that tightrope between sort of elements of fiction and fact and think about how much postcolonial novels are often called upon to exist as history and as fiction and that audiences, particularly Western audiences, can look at those novels as extractable and can take historical things out of them and then make kind of grand claims about a about a history and a culture and a people. And I wonder how you think about *Seven Moons* as both standing in for missing histories for those voices of the of the dead, but also perhaps trying to texture and push back against the idea of it being an extractable history text.

**SK**

Yeah, well, I didn't anticipate that, like you don't anticipate a Booker Prize when you write it. And I get, one of the things that happens is at these readings; so till October, my fan base were middle aged men who were into cricket. That was my primary audience. Now, surprise, I've had, yeah, all sorts of demographics read the book, which is wonderful. But especially young people, the young people, you know, born in the 90s, 2000s, after this period. And a lot of them come to me, Sri Lankans, either living abroad or in Sri Lanka. And they say, well, yeah, we, our parents don't talk, we are aware that there was a war that went on in our childhood, but our parents don't talk about it, our teachers don't talk about it. And the newspapers don't seem to, we're not sure to trust what we read there.

And yeah, they say this novel has finally brought it to life. And I hasten, I caution them, I say, yeah, the real story is far more gruesome, you should go and read it. And even if you just go as far as Wikipedia, I mean, it's documented there, it's just very different narratives. And so, yeah, that is something. So I wouldn't say it should be a stand in for history. Hopefully, it's a portal that opens and it's a doorway that if you want to know about then. And I've experienced that as well. You may not know much about the Irish conflict, but then you read novels and then you decide to go to the history.

So I think fiction writers as non-essential and useless as we are, which we found out during the pandemic, I think this is something, especially in our dystopias. So we live in Southeast Asia with different types of dystopias. And that's why maybe my novels play well around the subcontinent, because I go to Nepal and they've had a very different history, but also they recognize corruption and nepotism and violence and all of that.

But one thing I've noted with interest in recent times now, Chinese science fiction. It's I've discovered that Chinese science fiction writers, you know, Kevin Liu and Ted Chiang who are celebrated, but you know, within China, quite a rich tradition that's starting. And I think the obvious explanation is if you want to talk about the dystopia that they live in, you can't write realistic novels. Like I know [unclear]-

style realistic novels may be difficult. So therefore they're going to fantasy and science fiction in order as Trojan horses, using genre as a Trojan horse, in which to deliver these political statements, which I think does apply to our part of the world as well. And—

## **SR**

Returning back again to the novel specifically, you know, as a literary scholar, I'm always interested in questions of voice and narrative. So in this novel, as you described, when you described it, you know, “you”, you have the awakening of the “you” narrator, it's a second person, “you” narrator, and then that is overcome by the cacophony of voices, you know, the ghosts telling all their stories. So in a sense, both the “you” and the cacophony of voices or the collective, if you will, of the ghost seems necessary, given that the novel's recounting of events is actually a restaging, the constant restaging of the events.

Would you like to talk a little bit about that relationship between the narrator, the cacophony of voices, and then the whispers, you know, the whispers that fill the ears. I absolutely love the fact that you have to have your ears checked. So you can actually hear properly. But the idea of whispering tied to innuendo, gossip, you know, but also whispering is what helps direct, jockey, you know, to the box. So I don't know if you wanted to sort of elaborate a little bit specifically on the narrative voices that you use in the, and especially about the “you” narrator, the second person.

## **SK**

It's, I wish I knew a more organized way to write novels, but it all comes in bits and pieces. So I knew, okay, we're chatting to the dead, and it's going to have a murder mystery to it. But I had to come up with logical rules for the afterlife and what ghosts do and what they look like. And the first thing was, what do this, how does a disembodied voice tell a story? Because usually you describe your narrator physically, but opening chapter, the guy's body is being cut into pieces and chucked into a lake. So how does the voice of the novel sound?

And I think it's a crucial question, whatever you're writing, whether you're writing a short story or a feature article. I find until I have the voice of the thing, I don't have anything, I might have research, plots, ideas until I have the voice, which is usually like, yeah, five hours before the deadline, then then the thing comes into play. So with this, I tried writing it in the first person and the third person, but the second person, it was just a response to the question, what if like, if you, if something survives the death of your body, it's probably the voice in your head. Now what does the voice in your head sound like? Mine is in the second person. It's like someone else telling me, yeah, you should have answered that last question this way, why did you talk about this? And I don't know how everyone else's heads, but the idea that someone else is telling you and then.

I think, I mean, without spoiling too much, it kind of, they touch on it in the book as well, who is the you narrating the story? And are you the person who originates your thoughts or are you the thing listening to your thoughts? And meditation is very much mindfulness, which is in vogue, is about, yeah, your thoughts are being generated, you respond or don't respond to it. And Maali himself, questions, who is this voice in my head? Is there a spirit sitting on my shoulder, whispering bad ideas into my ear? And we've all had that experience, right, where you say something or you do something, and later you look back and say, what was I thinking? What made me do that? And it was a thought that originated in my head, where did it come from? Did it come from me?

And so I had, I mean, all that philosophy came later. The beginning I just tried, I just thought, voice in your head, it's in the you and I just started writing and the pages started flowing. But yeah, I've often been curious about who the you is. I mean, this is the biggest philosophical question that religions have tried to tackle and, yeah, even strange novels, the who, where do your thoughts come from.

**SR**

It works beautifully.

**CH**

Yeah, it does. It works incredibly beautifully. It's been about a year since the Booker win. And I wonder with that time passing, whether you've considered the relationship between *Seven Moons* and the deepening catalogue of the other Booker winners. Do you see any strands that run through the prize that connect you to other novels throughout the, you know, the short history, but the full and rich history of the Booker?

**SK**

Yeah, I haven't done that yet. I'm still living in this bubble and, you know, still pinching yourself. And I don't want to sit and look at Margaret Atwood and Salman Rushdie and George Saunders and then draw a line to myself. It's only my second novel. And I think that kind of thinking makes you go crazy. But it is true that, and I was chatting to Marlon James on a podcast and we were dissent, we both agreed that nine of us would have won a Booker prize 20, 30 years ago in the, and now it, so it is luck as well, you know, chance and electricity. If I was born, like I say, a generation ago, might have been difficult.

So what I also see, I mean, you can see fairly obvious strands as well, because you know, Booker prize or any of these big prizes, the long list is a real gift because you are usually, I mean, I'm not, I've seen these Booker prize kind of obsessives who read like the entire short, long list before the, I hear, I could never do that. But I always pick and choose from the long list. And it's not necessarily the one that won. Sometimes you fall in love with a book that may not have gone to the next level.

So having absorbed this, I can tell you the fairly obvious strand is that, yeah, when George Saunders won for a talking ghost book in whenever it was, 2017, that was a crucial moment because I was struggling with my talking ghost book. And yeah, for a moment, I was quite discouraged. I was like, well, they're not going to consider two talking ghost novels. But then I read *Lincoln in the Bardo*, which is of course, a masterpiece and very different to the kind of thing I was trying to write. So I got inspired by that.

But Southeast Asia seems to have historically done well, especially in recent years, it's been quite well represented. We're always looking at, again, very different styles of book, like if you compare Anuk Arudpragasam to Arvind Adiga, you know, very different voices and all that. So I do, I don't know, I don't think, I mean, that's Sangeeta's job to look at strands that connect, I think, or we just—

**SR**

I mean, there is, if you think about it that *Midnight's Children* wins the Booker of Booker, and then your novel wins Booker. I mean, there is, even in the long version, there is a kind of way in which one can track these particular kinds of novels, right? I mean, there is a kind, you know, not every single novel, but it seems to me when it comes to Southeast, South Asia, there is this particular kind of book that



comes to the surface, you know, excellent historical fiction, genre-bending, great voice, great narrative voice. I mean, when I first read *Midnight's Children*, I had never read anything like that before from South Asia, and I was like blown away, like I was blown away by this novel.

We have a few more minutes, I think, and I'm going to sort of, I'm going to ask like two questions, and they are kind of connected, and they take us to, it kind of maybe gives away a little bit, but by now everybody interested should have read the novel anyway, so too bad if this gives it away.

**SK**

It's a spoiler alert, yeah.

**SR**

It's a spoiler, so the novel, you know, it's, as I said, it's riotous, it's bawdy, it's fun, it's grim, you know, but the novel is ultimately deeply, deeply pessimistic, you know, because for example, the photographs don't have the effect that Maali so wants. The camera does not work in the in-between, you know, there's mud in the aperture, the lens is cracked, and but Maali carries it, or the ghost of Maali carries it around like a prosthetic, you know, so it's sort of, it's sort of interesting. So, and the photographs, if you think about how sort of history, history photographs and now video footage play such a key role, right, in uncovering the atrocities of war and torture, and the novel is headed towards that, but it doesn't take us there, right, it doesn't.

And so is it, and then so what stands out then is bureaucracy. I love the Kafkaesque bureaucracy in the novel, both in the world, in Sri Lanka, but also in the afterlife. I love the fact that the bureaucracy takes over the filling out of forms and that ultimately Maali, in the light, when he returns, he's a bureaucrat, right, he's, you know, when he drinks, so. And yet even as a bureaucrat, when he jumps through the light again, we know he's going to forget.

So what do we do with this idea of sort of failure, the lack of futurity, and I mean, this is already a big question, but I'll ask the other part of the question as well now so that they're connected is the novel is also about desire, about sexual desire, about, you know, about homosexual gay desire, you know, and ultimately the death of Maali is not a political death. It's a death caused by a homophobic father. You have the specter of AIDS that Stanley is so worried about. How does all of this, this lack, and of course the idea of AIDS gestures, you know, in the 1989 would have gesture to a lack of futurity, no longer, but it does.

How do we reconcile this deeply political novel and why, how the murder is, sort of supersedes the political terror? Ultimately, he gets killed because he's gay, and because the father doesn't want DD, you know, to be queer, like--

**SK**

We've got to black things out. These are big spoilers.

**SR**

What's the matter? We are academics. We have to ask about this. I love, I actually kind of love that. I have to say.

**SK**

So there's a hint, there's hints all the way through, right, beginning a character, the characters, "most political murders have nothing to do with politics." There's that throw-away line at the beginning. And I'm sure it is pessimistic, like, I thought it was a happy ending as far as I was concerned, but because simply this now, yeah, now, and also I don't, I don't plot in terms of like, I don't, I only know three chapters ahead at most when I'm writing it. So I, it was a surprise to me when I found out who the murderer was. And it was a surprise to me when I found out how the thing would play out.

But yeah, the question of the photographs. You realize, okay, he thinks these photographs are going to change the world and stop the war and everything. But, and he, he mentions a naked napalm girl in the My Lai massacres, I mean, yeah, 1971, but even that photograph didn't stop the Vietnam war, it carried on for another five years before. And also money, if anyone's reading it knows that he didn't stop any wars, that war went on for another 19 years.

And so therefore, when I was navigating how to resolve this, I realized, yeah, the happy ending is not, he doesn't stop wars. And so there's that moment in the, in the gallery, where these, because these photographs don't get seen. And we were still grappling with this war with very few photographs, and it's going to fade from memory. And so he has that moment where all that's left on the wall are the beautiful photographs of Sri Lanka, which seem to have survived. And so there's that moment where he just appreciates that, that photographs can't stop wars, novels can't stop wars, you know.

Tolstoy wrote a better novel than any of us could ever think of, *War and Peace*. It's a fantastic novel. It didn't keep Russia out of wars for the next century, right? And neither did, you know, take your pick, *Catch-22*. So I think it would have been pat, if I just manufactured an ending there. And that but that realization and the realization, also look I mean, the identity of the murderer side, the way he treated the people who he loved, especially his, his boyfriend, it feels quite, quite self-centered and treated him quite poorly. But then he arrives at a state where in the final act, he does something and he was, he's a self centered, unlikeable guy all through the novel all through his life, where he does something for the people who he mistreated, the people who loved him. And he does something selfless.

And so for that me, that was all motioning towards the happy ending because he realizes that these things will continue. And he also but he does something selfless for the people who he loves. And also he meets that wonderful the hero of the novel, the dead leopard. And the dead leopard for me is embodies all the wisdom of everything in the book. And if you read those, so that ending was, you know, I didn't come to it lightly, but I did feel that it ends on a notion of hope. The notion that he decides to jump in, into the light is also he was like, why, why be born again? It's the point. And so so this is him realizing that yeah, it is a horrible, cynical world where wars continue and powerful people get away with murder, but it's still worth jumping back in.

And I think so that little bit of hope for me was, at least it was it seemed authentic and convincing, because that's what we do in these dystopias. We, you know, it doesn't have the Hollywood ending where the one little guy brings down the system, but instead we learn to live with it and make peace with it. And, you know.

**SR**

I loved the ending. Don't get me wrong, I thought the ending was perfect. And that's the way the novel should have ended. But I'm still sort of haunted, both Kalyan and I have been talking about this. So what is the role of queer desire? Is there a role in the novel for queer desire, the slut, as you called it, but is queer desire, you know, is it, it's, does it, is it tied somehow to the queer desire tied because he tries to commit suicide at the age of 14 when he finds out that he might that gay, he's shunned by his father, the mother is an absent figure, heterosexual desire is cut off, like Jack, he could be in love, but you know, it doesn't work out, she ends up with Radhika. So I'm just wondering, and forgets all about him, but what is the role of queer desire, if any, why queer desire at that moment? Is there?

**SK**

So look, I would have considered much carefully if I was attempting this novel today. I started writing in 2013, and he was modeled on Richard de Zoysa, who and Maali Almeida, in the process of writing, became quite different from Richard de Zoysa in terms of his CV and his makeup, but the only detail that remained was the Richard was a closet gay man, and so was, so was Maali.

And I didn't, yeah, I didn't set out to write an LGBTQ novel, you know, it's, it's ludicrous for me to even attempt that, but I, he was a, he was a character who happened to be gay, and I couldn't, I can't even imagine, and of course, it then turned out to be important to the plot, I didn't know that when I embarked on it, that, but it made sense to me because he was a man of many secrets, and in '89, and we're talking about '89, because I did, I spoke to, you know, friends of mine who are gay, and much younger guys who are part of the Grindr generation, and so they are experienced, and, you know, it was useful to a point.

But when I spoke to men who lived during that era, yeah, you couldn't, I mean, I'd suspect not just in Colombo, most parts of the world couldn't, you couldn't be out of the closet, and even in liberal English-speaking Colombo society. And also he had this appetite, I realized it plays into the stereotypes of the promiscuous gay, but it made sense to me that, because I had to also explain why was this English speaking middle-class kid going to these very dangerous places and dealing with these very dodgy characters, and I think the idea was like he, he did have that shame which, you know, LGBTQ people internalized and did growing up in those eras, and he felt in the war zone is where he could do something that, found something that he was good at. He was never good at anything, but he found something he could get that photograph, but also he could express himself sexually.

And that was, so in all high day, and so that's why I looked at, but also, you know, his relationship is quite complex. Yeah, that has been heard at me as a criticism from the more conservative readers in Sri Lanka that, yeah, you're creating a novel where everyone's gay and everyone's, ends up with, but the point is, these characters existed at that time, they may not have been talked about or written about, but they existed. And I, for me, I was more interested in that and how they navigate societal expectations.

**SR**

I think it actually works with the larger, thematic question of secrets and revelations, you know, that the book is about, like, you know, like nobody knows which faction, nobody knows killed who, nobody knows what. And so, so this, this, this idea of this character, you know, full of secrets, not, you know, as well in the sense of shame of, you know, that also haunts so many of the characters, you know, not just

him in the novel, it sort of made some, made sense to me. So I don't see it as a criticism at all of the novel. I kind of enjoyed that, that extra element of desire.

And also in terms of photographs, with these beautiful photographs, not just of the pastoral Sri Lanka, but also wonderful gay, wonderful photographs of him taking beautiful pictures of his lovers. You know, that's also, you know, part of the photographs. So it makes sense that photographs is what he excels at. So why wouldn't he take photographs of his lovers, like he would take photographs of his. So I think that works, no. But I'll leave the last question for Chris.

**CH**

Well, I'm going to close us out as we do with every episode, we have a signature question for the season. This season's question is, what is your weirdest source of writing inspiration?

**SK**

I mean, I don't know if it's weird, I did spend a few nights in the cemeteries and cemeteries are a very, any city that I'm doing a lot of traveling in the coming few weeks, I will visit cemeteries because one, they're usually full of trees and nice places for walks, but also you have these lives laid out in front of you. And so I did the Borella Cemetery, which gets a lot of mentions in *Seven Moons*. I spent a lot of afternoons just wandering around, just looking at the gravestones and reading the names. And then the cemetery keeper asked me, do you believe in ghosts? I said, well, I haven't seen one, but I certainly fear them. And he says, yeah, you should because they exist. Come here at 11 o'clock. And I'll show you. I didn't go at 11 o'clock. But thank you.

We know how that story ends as well. Novelist research, you know, in a ghostly cemetery. Yeah, so I won't say it's weird because it's fairly obvious if you're writing a ghost story, you hang around cemeteries, but I found it inspirational for different reasons, just to read all these characters.

**CH**

You share that with an international Booker, winner Mariana Enríquez, who talks about her love cemeteries and their inspiration. So you're in good company.

**SK**

Okay.

**SR**

You must have gone to all the great cemeteries in Paris. I feel like that's, whenever I'm in Paris, not only are the cemeteries full of great writers, but it's like, it's just a wonderful place to be in the Parisian cemeteries. But thank you again, Shehan. This was a wonderful conversation. Lovely.

**CH**

Yeah, thank you to you both for wonderful questions and for your time taken to talk about this novel, which both Sangeeta and I love very much.

**SR**

Yes, so much, yes, thank you.

**CH**

I'm going to close us out. As always, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, Public Books for its partnership, and Duke University for its continued support. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern, Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer, and Rebecca Otto is our social media maven.

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