

Romesh Guneseekara

Poet and fiction writer Romesh Guneseekera was born in Sri Lanka in 1954. He spent his early childhood in Colombo, in an educated English-speaking middle class world, in the hangover of British colonial values and attitudes. As a child, he was taught Sinhala and English and became fluent in both languages. At 12 or 13 years old, Guneseekera's parents moved to the Philippines where his father established the Asian development bank. Here, Guneseekera completed his schooling and became an avid reader, unusually for his peer group, he was fond of popular English and American adventure novels. At fifteen years old, he began writing poetry to amuse himself and his friends. He wrote in the style of the 1940s and 50s 'Beat Generation'.

At seventeen, Guneseekera was sent to England to study for his 'A' levels. He went on to read English and Philosophy at Liverpool University and won the Rathborne Prize in Philosophy in 1976. As a teenager, Guneseekera knew he wanted to write and thought he might become a journalist, although he secretly wanted to write a book. In the mid-nineties, in an interview with Salil Tripathi in Asia Inc. Magazine, Guneseekera said, *"When adults around me had a good time, they often read poetry, laughed, talked about music. They didn't talk about town planning. I thought this is the high point; there must be something good about books. So, I assumed we'd all want to write. Only later, I found that the world doesn't give a damn about it"*.

After graduating, Guneseekera worked in various jobs. He said, *"I thought that's what writers did. I was very influenced by American writers, (Jack) Kerouac and the Beat Generation, and later ones too. I thought that was how you had to behave..."* Then he tried to get a job in publishing, *"...because I thought that was how you got to be a writer. Wrong again..."*. He went on to write poems and short stories or read on radio. As Guneseekera says in the Asia Inc. interview, *"I thought you had to start with stories and work up to a longer book. My third mistake..."*. While he held a full-time job for ten years as an apprentice in publishing, he submitted articles and poetry to small magazines. In 1988, he won first prize in the Peterloo Open Poetry Competition. Later, when Guneseekera began working at the British Council headquarters in London, he set time aside in the evenings and in his afternoons off, to record his ideas for characters and storylines for novels and short stories.

In this way, Guneseekera's first collection of short stories, and his first novel took shape. Granta Books published his collection of short stories, 'Monkfish Moon', in 1992. The nine stories focus on the turmoils of individual lives in Sri Lanka and Britain, which have been indelibly marked by the country's political and ethnic tensions since its independence in 1948. 'Monkfish Moon' brought Guneseekera public and critical acclaim, and was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year in 1993.

For the first 20 years of his writing career in the UK, Guneseekera did not write about his homeland, Sri Lanka. However, since the publication of 'Monkfish Moon', his stories have been set against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's history, politics, ethnic tensions, cultural traditions and its physical environment. The connection with Sri Lanka deepens as the author explores the lives and encounters of individuals travelling to Sri Lanka from Britain or those born there and living in London. These tales depict a country scarred by civil war, but

also celebrates the country's natural physical beauty, its beaches and flowers, food and gardens. In an article for The Times Literary Supplement in 1998, Shirley Chew, Professor of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Leeds, wrote that the *"...ethnic and class conflicts which have threatened to rend Sri Lanka apart in the past few decades, are a central concern in Guneseekara's fiction. Another concern, since he writes from England where he lives and works, is the dilemma many migrants experience, caught between nostalgia for the homeland left behind, and desire for the shadowy country of the imagination, which lies always out of reach"*. Culturally, Guneseekera himself does not think of himself as purely British and says that, as a writer, belonging has to do with the people you are with, not places.

Guneseekera believes that the reader can appreciate his stories with or without background knowledge of the history and culture of Sri Lanka. He has said, *"...I do know that people who are readers also have a background and also have a physical reality and they have a set of experiences and they bring all of those to a book when they come, and therefore people who, for example, know nothing about the location, the setting of a story or a book, say, Sri Lanka, what they get out of it is going to be very different. What they get out of it is perhaps a discovery of something unfamiliar, but there is a sense of discovery they get, but if they already know the place, they get something else. They also get a sense of discovery, but it's a sense of discovery of the familiar, perhaps"*. (From an interview by Hans-Georg Erney, 'Romesh Guneseekera', 1997)

Guneseekera's fiction owes much to the author's detailed research of his subjects. For example, the behaviour of coral reefs, and the nature of work undertaken by a marine biologist who is one of the main characters in his novel 'Reef'. In an interview with Sarah M Hall, he says, *"I do...research out of interest. Sometimes I do have to find out something because I need it for a story - I need to know it works...When I started writing Reef I remember I knew very little, and I read everything I could about reefs in the process of writing. In Heaven's Edge, I did know when I started out that it was going to have somebody who was a pilot...so that was a great excuse to try to learn to fly, so I did"*. In conducting research for his fiction, Guneseekera says that this part of the process of writing a story is a way of learning something about the world and about himself. Since 'Monkfish Moon', Guneseekera's publications have included three novels. 'Reef' (1994), which was short listed for the Booker Prize in 1994 and was winner of the Premio Mondello Five Continents Asia prize in Italy, 'The Sandglass' (1998), which won the BBC Asia Award for Literature, and his most recent novel 'Heaven's Edge' was published in 2002.

As a poet, Guneseekera has also contributed to over fifteen children's and adult poetry anthologies since the 1980s. He has also written for magazines and journals including Time, Far East Economic Review, The Pen, Wasafiri, The Guardian and The London Review of Books. Guneseekera's prose and fiction have been translated into French, Italian, Portuguese, German, Spanish, Dutch, Norwegian, Czech, Hebrew, and Chinese.

Romesh Guneseekera travels widely to lecture at universities and has most recently been a writer-in-residence in Copenhagen, Singapore and Hong Kong. He currently lives in London with his wife and two daughters.