

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

# ESCAPE

THE SRI LANKAN READING LIST:  
A GUIDE TO THE ISLAND'S BEST  
MODERN FICTION IN ENGLISH



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The Sri Lankan Reading List:  
A Guide to the Island's Best  
Modern Fiction in English

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& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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FOR

FELICIA

HEAD-SETTER & GODDESS

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

LEWIS CARROLL  
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND  
1871



ONE  
CHOICE,  
CHOICES

Stretched between the pleasure gardens of the bishops of London and the \$300 million Fulham Football Club, once owned by the disgraced sexual predator Mohamed Al Fayed, Alphabet City is West London's new Knightsbridge.

From south to north, its streets are laid out with an intimidating, if inexact, alphabetical order. Its "exquisite array of Victorian and Edwardian homes," claims its principal estate agent, "infuse the neighbourhood with a timeless architectural appeal."

One house in one street stands out, the J. K. Rowling of the area, confident, plush, sophisticated, discriminating; and flush with Sauvignon Blanc. For in D for "Doneraile Street," is where one of London's most agreeable book group meets. Membership is by invitation only and its invitations are as infrequent as dry days in Wales.

There are more famous book groups - Daunts, for example or the Literary Lounge Book Club. But none so naughtily notorious as this.

Blissfully undemocratic, it seethes behind silk curtains and French shutters; its gardens giving out to imported fig trees and olives; its tables glittering with canapes of citrus-cured seabass on blinis.

But for months it has been the centre of reckless disagreements and tormented tiffs - for its members struggled with that eternal book club question: which book to read next.

Their discussions, like Middle Eastern peace negotiations, were marred by insurmountable differences - until, that is, they hit upon a winning solution, proposed by a member who had just returned from holiday in Kandy.



Stick with novels from Sri Lanka, she said.

And so, somewhat unexpectedly, they did. Harmony upon harmony has followed, it seems, like the notes of a celestial harp.

And so it could for you too – for this guide offers a similar and blameless escape route to pleasure. It presents a list of books that is long enough to keep you going for a good long time. A year at least. Time enough to give up the day job; and move your grocery shopping to online deliveries only.

The unexpected books included in this guide will take you into all the most comforting and familiar of genres. But it will then upturn them with the most unexpected of settings, perspectives, voices, and approaches as if you've found a trove of mille-feuille in a Dunkin' Doughnuts Drive Through.

Surprise, delight, glee – that is barely the half of it. For the books assembled here are as much a travelogue for the body as for the mind; a history of recent world as well as a picture of worlds to come – or even worlds that are framed forever in the most necessary of Forevers, like psychedelic carnivals or enchanted forests.

Needed they most certainly are. The merest glance tells you that the mainstream literary world has slipped into an odd torpor. As literary agents in London and New York whip their submissions into shape; and tease them through the hoops, auctions, and cheque books of commissioning editors at Frankfurt, you may be forgiven for thinking that reading contemporary fiction is similar to eating a custard cream biscuit. It's nice enough. But it's as predictable as a dollop of AI creative writing.

Sri Lanka presents the opportunity to slip out of this literary listlessness. Through, why, you may disputatiously ask; why Sri Lanka? Why not another other of the world's 200 odd countries? Surely you can formulate a reading list for any country in the world.

Or can you? Few other countries are currently creating such a wealth of world class literature as is Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's contemporary writers have burst like firecrackers over world fiction. Try just a few; and you will see.

But which few? Of its multitude of authors and books, which ones should you start with?

This guide brings together many of the best – all, in one sense or another, Sri Lankan.

Most were born on the island; others left, often part of the diaspora created by civil war and corruption. But whether now in Canada and Australia, the UK, or New Zealand, each has written a novel only a Sri Lankan could, bringing humour, a unique sensibility and a sharp, ironic eye to the themes that preoccupy every great novel - from war, sex, fashion, addiction and love to loss, pets, the jungle, fame, fortune, bankruptcy.

And, of course, family; for in Sri Lanka, as almost nowhere else, the family really does come - inconveniently, beautifully, reassuringly, alarmingly - first.

TWO

THE NEAR PAST

The story starts relatively late, for although many inspired novels were written in the first half of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1960s that a trenchant new sensibility began to shape and flavour Sri Lanka's fiction.

A band of new writers emerged for whom little was out of bounds - from the incipient civil war, belief, ethnicity, and feminism to gender, and, of course, the perennial themes of the island: family, love, the jungle, loss, and living.

Take Carl Muller and his famous trilogy – which is to Sri Lankan literature what John Galsworthy's "Forsyte Saga" is to England or "The Godfather" is to New York.

A saga writer first and best, he is rightly celebrated for the three books he published from 1993 onwards about the Burghers of Sri Lanka as told through "The Jam Fruit Tree," "Yakada Yaka" and "Once Upon a Tender Time." His trilogy unpacks a time when the world was golden, a kinder halcyon life that the later civil war would render almost unbelievable.

A much darker world is inhabited by Michael Ondaatje, whose novel "The English Patient" catapulted him to global recognition. In 2000 "Anil's Ghost" came out, one of his most impressive works, a mystery set in Sri Lanka and riven with love and fear, identity, and antiquity.

But "sometimes," wrote Cassandra King, the Queen of Southern storytelling, "we laugh to keep from crying." And Romesh Gunesekera does just this with his novel "Reef," a slow burn tale of a young chef so committed to pleasing a seafood-obsessed master, that he is oblivious to the unravelling of his own country.

But for something less cathartically seismic there is Yasmine Gooneratne. Normally, to be an academic teaching English literature is a necessary condition to disqualify you from ever writing good novels.

But not Gooneratne, whose novel "The Sweet and Simple Kind," is one of the greatest friendship novels you will encounter. Set in the newly independent nation, this coming-of-age tale of two cousins, Tsunami, and Latha, intertwines with language and religion, politics and privilege, humour, and passion. It will keep you up all night long. It was published the same year another author, Nihal De Silva, died, victim of a land mine explosion at the Wilpattu National Park. One of the country's most talented thriller writers, his war story, "The Road from Elephant Pass" won a place in all readers for its story the LTTE Tamil woman and her Sinhalese army officer.

THREE

AS IF BY  
MAGIC

And then, as if by magic, the island's writers moved on, articulating a measured, and confident certainty, writing across any genre, in whatever way they chose, whatsoever. It was as if Elsa's lion cubs in Forever Free had picked up pens and got to work. And with their new creative liberty came the most compelling insights into the sensibilities of the people they envisaged, singular, stubborn, intense, shrewd, casual – and, most of all, belonging, despite all tribulations, homemade or imported.

Chief among these new writers was Shyam Selvadurai. Born to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father, exiled to Canada, gay, funny, astute, ironic, his lovingly observed books plunge you into dramas that grab you by the throat and don't let go. The magical cross-dressing kind in "Funny Boy;" or, best of all, the matriarch, the wily kumara hari with "an insatiable longing for land, houses, money and control" in "The Hungry Ghosts."

On the other side of the world from Canada another emigree Sri Lankan writer was also at work - Michelle de Kretser.

Writing from Australia, her second novel most brilliantly shows what it means to be Sri Lankan, "The Hamilton Case" tells the story of a famous beauty "gone native" in the jungle, a girl who once danced with the Prince of Wales.

Many of these authors were nurtured by the world's smallest and most perfectly formed publishing company - Perera Hussein Publishers, a literary enterprise squeezed into a family mansion, the last in a street of once glorious Edwardian mansions; an incubus of the best of Asia's independent publishing and an inspiration for indies anywhere.

Run by Ameena Hussein and her husband, Sam Perera, most, if not quite all, the best Sri Lankan writers in print today owe to them a debt of gratitude for mentorship, advocacy, and often first publication too. Ameena, an author in her own right, is most famously known for "The Moon in the Water," a tremendous drama of love and maybe even forgiveness, about a women called back to Sri Lanka by a killing only to uncover still more terrible secrets.

Secrets – and laughter are what mark out one of the island's most prolific writers, the astonishing Askok Ferry, whose powers of compassion and identification, let alone of the ridiculous, are irresistible. His path to literary lion hood was convoluted. Born in Colombo, raised in East Africa, schooled at a British Benedictine monastery, and despatched to study pure mathematics at Oxford, he became a property developer in Margaret Thatcher's London.

Of his many novels, two especially stand out. 'I was born ugly. That's what my mother always said.' So, begins "The Ceaseless Chatter of Demons," the story of young multiethnic Sri Lankan living in a big family house on the mountain belonging to his father in Kandy, whilst in "The Professional", a maths graduate and an illegal immigrant lives out an increasingly eccentric life on a building site before becoming a love god.



FOUR

OUT OF THE  
VORTEX

But inevitably the growing catastrophe of the island's civil war, the suffering, corruption, bravery, cruelty and longing it provoked, and the mighty diaspora it caused, drew an indelible line across its fiction.

Like the air you breath, the war was everywhere. You could no more ignore it than you could avoid the hundreds of checkpoints erected across the country's roads. And still life went on, as ever it did, as ever it should.

One writer to emerge from this vortex was Roma Tearne, exiled to London with her Sinhalese mother and Tamil father in 1964. "'Once you have been tortured,'" she wrote, "you can never belong in this world. There is no place that ever be your home. "

Forty-three years later, she was shortlisted for the Costa Book Awards first Novel prize with her first novel, "Mosquito." Since then, she has had little chance to look back, with novel after novel wining prizes, sales, and compelling reviews, the great of which is "Bone China "a story of escape as the once great de Silva family lose their capacious tea estates and look to desperately into the future.

One novel not to miss is Ru Freeman's "On Sal Mal Lane," set in 1979 Sri Lanka down a quiet street that will soon erupt in violence.

"This is," wrote an uncommonly shrewd critic, "a civil war about a garden wall, a cricket game, a bicycle ride, music lessons, the shopkeeper that won't sell to you anymore and a teenager choosing between the house of one friend or another's to burn. It distils one of the last century's most complicated wars into what it really was on the ground--the everyday reality of that timeless threat, the neighbour turned killer."

But threats and horrors also come clad in the costume of a gothic comedy in which nothing is as it seems. "If a liar tells you he is lying, is he telling the truth?" The question, put out by Shehan Karunatilaka in his first novel *Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew* sets the moral landscape for most of his fiction.

This Sri Lankan writer has turned the genre of fiction itself upside down, most notably with his Booker prizewinning *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, in which a dead war photographer, gambler and closet queen, seeks to settle scores. Few novels written in the past 50 years equal this one, a book that is as much a performance as a story.

A year before Karunatilaka won the Booker, a writer, and something of a polar opposite, was shortlisted for the same prize - Anuk Arudpragasam.

Reading his novels is a like being a fly on the wall, privy to intimacies jammed with family, love, dispossession, and long tropical nights in far off places. His first novel, *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, is as good a place to start as any - a young man caught up in the last bloody stages of the LTTE retreat.

As the new century took hold, Sri Lanka's writers were by now hailing as much from Colombo as Toronto, London, Sydney, or America. Three, especially.

Prose you may want to eat," is a typical judgment made by critics of Nayomi Munaweera, author of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*."

Equally addictive is Amanda Jayatissa, a rocket across the literary landscape whose novel *Island Switch*, brings the Gothic (if ever more was needed) to Sri Lankan folklore, to tell the story of the daughter of a

demon-priest.

S. J. Sindu, born in Trincomalee and now living in America, took this one marvellous huge stage further with the plot of the 2021 novel, "Blue Skinned Gods." A futuristic marvel of magic realism, it tells the tale of a boy born with blue skin.

This then is the prescription to cure all forms of literary languor; a new novel on average every fortnight or so.

Within a year the most bookish of your thwarted impulses and desires will be maxed out, allowing you to turn in the year to come to all those writers not yet covered in this guide: Vajra Chandrasekera's *The Saint of Bright Doors*; V. V. Ganeshanathan's *Brotherless Night*; *The Devil Dancers* by T. Thurai; *The Slow Sad Suicide of Rohan Wijeratne* by Yudhanjaya Wijeratne; *Homesick* by Roshi Fernando; Akil Kumarasamy's *Meet Us by the Roaring Sea* or Shankari Chandran's *Song of the Son God*, to mention just seven others.

But more than any of this, the mere reading of such writers shunts into the rustiest and most absolute of sidings all that vexing commoditised fiction that dominates most bookshops today.

FIVE

THE SHOPPING  
LIST

1.

Carl Muller  
"The Jam Fruit Tree"

2.

Michael Ondaatje  
"The English Patient"

3.

Romesh Gunsekera  
"Reef"

4.

Yasmine Gooneratne  
"The Sweet and Simple Kind"

5.

Nihal De Silva  
"The Road from Elephant Pass"

6.

Shyam Selvadurai  
"Funny Boy"  
"The Hungry Ghosts"

7.

Michelle de Kretser  
"The Hamilton Case"

8.

Ameena Hussein  
"The Moon in the Water".

9.

Askok Ferry  
"The Ceaseless Chatter of Demons"  
"The Professional"

10.

Roma Tearne  
"Mosquito"  
"Bone China"

11.

Ru Freeman  
"On Sal Mal Lane".

12.

Shehan Karunatilaka  
"Chinaman: The Legend of Pradeep Mathew"  
"The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida"

13.

Anuk Arudpragasam  
"The Story of a Brief Marriage"

14.

Nayomi Munaweera  
"Island of a Thousand Mirrors"

15.

Amanda Jayatissa: "Island Switch"

16.

S. J. Sindu  
"Blue Skinned Gods"

17.

Vajra Chandrasekera  
"The Saint of Bright Doors"

18.

V. V. Ganeshanathan  
"Brotherless Night"

19.

T. Thurai

"The Devil Dancers"

20.

Yudhanjaya Wijeratne

"The Slow Sad Suicide of Rohan Wijeratne"

21.

Roshi Fernando

"Homesick"

22.

Akil Kumarasamy

"Meet Us by the Roaring Sea".

23.

Shankari Chandran

"Song of the Son God"



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## A HISTORY LIKE NO OTHER

Contrary & creative, Sri Lanka built a tropical Versailles as the West constructed in wattle & daub. When the Cold War ebbed, its own began. The Ceylon Press History Of Sri Lanka Podcast unpicks its serpentine history.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at [theceylonpress.com](http://theceylonpress.com). The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

# ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

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It also houses and funds The Ceylon Press whose books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at [theceylonpress.com](http://theceylonpress.com).

## A GIFT FOR READERS

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