

Best Reads in 2023

Vajra Chandrasekera

I have meant to read Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) my whole adult life but only picked it up while glued to the current horrific news about Israel's genocide in Palestine. On reading the book for the first time, I found perhaps unsurprisingly that I already knew it. Not Said's close readings of specific historical Orientalists, which were fascinating and mostly new to me, but in the book's broader arguments, which have long ago become such a core part of our shared intellectual heritage that if one reads at all, one has already grappled with *Orientalism* and orientalism alike. Said's book therefore remains not only a vital text, but in understanding culture at all—such as reading the international news, in 2023—as urgent as it was when first published.

Anna Kavan's *Ice* (1967) is the oldest of my selections and by far the strangest, and like the others a book I had meant to get to for some years before I actually did. The titular ice could refer to heroin, echoing Kavan's own struggles with addiction, but also to the apocalypse of ice the story describes. The book has been called science fiction but also slipstream, surreal, dreamlike—all the words that come up when a text confounds expectations. It is a story about war, mental illness, and the end of the world, and as such is as much, if not more so, a book of our moment as it was hers.

Siva Ahrooran's *The Innocent Victims* (2019) is a social novel in contemporary realist style, about a widow in post-war Jaffna navigating the complexities of remarriage and single parenthood while dealing with escalating workplace harassment. Like all of his books to date, this was written during his 17 years of imprisonment under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. He was released in May this year, acquitted of all charges after having already endured punishment, when a judge finally decided that a coerced false confession was inadmissible. The book can therefore also be read, as I read it, as entangled inextricably with the indelible image of Ahrooran being escorted by a policeman on stage to accept a State literary award before being sent back to prison. This is not allegory but a reminder, in speaking of victimhood and innocence, that the art is not separable from the artist.

Vajra Chandrasekera is from Colombo, Sri Lanka and is online at vajra.me. His debut novel The Saint of Bright Doors was a New York Times Notable Book of 2023, and his short fiction, anthologized in The Apex Book of World SF, The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction, and The Best Science Fiction of the Year among others, has been nominated for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award.

V. V. Ganeshanathan

Early in the year, I tore through *Letters to a Writer of Color*, edited by Deepa Anappara and Taymour Soomro. It's a fantastic volume, full of authors like Amitava Kumar, Tahmima Anam, Tiphonie Yanique, Kiese Laymon, Jamil Jan Kochai, and Ingrid Rojas Contreras writing about topics like humour, trauma, violence, showing and telling, and art and activism. The pieces are complex, surprising, humane, frank, and introspective; they made me feel part of a conversation I'd been longing for. Soomro's opening piece on origin stories and Anappara's conclusion, about the ideal conditions for writing, were two of my favourite contributions. I wish this book had been around when I was younger, but I'm so glad it's on my shelf now.

This fall, I returned to one of my favourite novels of all time, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, by Michael Chabon. *Kavalier & Clay*, which won the Pulitzer in 2001, is a baggy, delicious monster of a novel, clocking in at almost 700 pages. In the story of writer Sam and artist Joe, two Jewish cousins and friends who work together to create a classic comic book character, Chabon offers a canonical American tale, one that enfolds us in its long, artful, witty sentences while sparing us nothing about the political ugliness it depicts. The story starts in 1939, when American-born Sam and émigré Joe meet, and includes the brutality of World War II. It goes all the way to 1954, with a portrayal of the homophobia of the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Judiciary Committee, an actual factual committee that at that juncture in history devoted its considerable energies to determining whether comic books were corrupting children.

Finally, I want to mention *River Spirit* by Leila Aboulela. I've been a fan of Aboulela's for decades; this year I met her for the first time. I interviewed her for the Literary Hub podcast I co-host with Whitney Terrell, Fiction/Non/Fiction, which is about the intersection of literature and the news. It was fascinating to hear her talk about her first historical novel, a stunning and deeply imagined piece of work covering the period leading up to the British occupation of Sudan. Its broad sweep includes multiple perspectives. Later, I met her in person in Toronto, where we were on a panel together at a literary festival. To meet and read a writer I have long admired at the moment that her work is taking a new turn was a special pleasure.

V. V. Ganeshanathan is a novelist and journalist whose novel *Brotherless Night* is out now.

Adilah Ismail

Over the past few years, my reading has gravitated more towards nonfiction and a nonfiction book that stayed with me in 2023 was Toni Morrison's *The Source of Self-Regard*. I came to it at the end of the year when I was preparing to lead a workshop on social justice and writing. The book spans essays, speeches, and meditations over the course of her career and many of the pieces feel apt for today. A short piece, 'Racism and fascism' for instance, feels like it could be transplanted to multiple global contexts today. Morrison's essays and speeches thrum with sharp, incisive insights written in the way only Morrison can.

Another book that marked the year for me, especially with the rise of AI and the subsequent conversations it sparked, was Ellen Ullman's *Life in Code*. Ellen Ullman was a computer programmer in San Francisco in the late 1970s and was part of an almost exclusively male group that shaped the internet's ascent. *Life in Code* would draw anyone interested in technology, ethics, and capitalism but is repelled by Silicon Valley techspeak slathered in buoyant marketing and corporate jargon. Ullman's essays are lyrical and philosophical, and she throws in personal stories and tech-criticism into the mix, giving us insights into the tech worlds that have sculpted and continue to sculpt our lives in unimaginable ways. Some essays are stronger than others, but overall, an enjoyable read.

With fiction, I fell down a very enjoyable Claire Keegan-shaped reading hole this year after her Booker nomination. Keegan's books are short, contain succinct prose, and she wields language deftly, without a

single stray, superfluous word. You are reminded that sometimes less is definitely more. I enjoyed *Small things like this*, *Antarctica*, and *So late in the day*, but I kept thinking about *Foster*. A taut novella, I devoured *Foster* within an hour and it stayed with me long after I read it. Keegan has a brilliant eye for setting scenes and dialogue, leaving the reader with a strong sense of the Irish landscape. *Foster* is a bittersweet, simple, sparse story with a poignant, feel-good ending, and perhaps we could all do with a few feel-good endings this year.

Adilah Ismail is a writer and communications practitioner based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She writes a newsletter at: <https://alifeofsaturdays.substack.com/>

Vivimarie VanderPoorten

The poetry I most enjoyed in 2023 was Kusal Dhananjaya Kuruvita's *Asparshaneeyan wetha (To Untouchables)* (Santhava, 2021). Over the last three years, I had read some of the extraordinary poems he had posted on social media. I was so moved by their depth, insights, and feeling for language, that I translated some into English in an effort to both share and increase my appreciation of his work. So, imagine my delight when I discovered a whole book of his poems – 79 of them in fact!

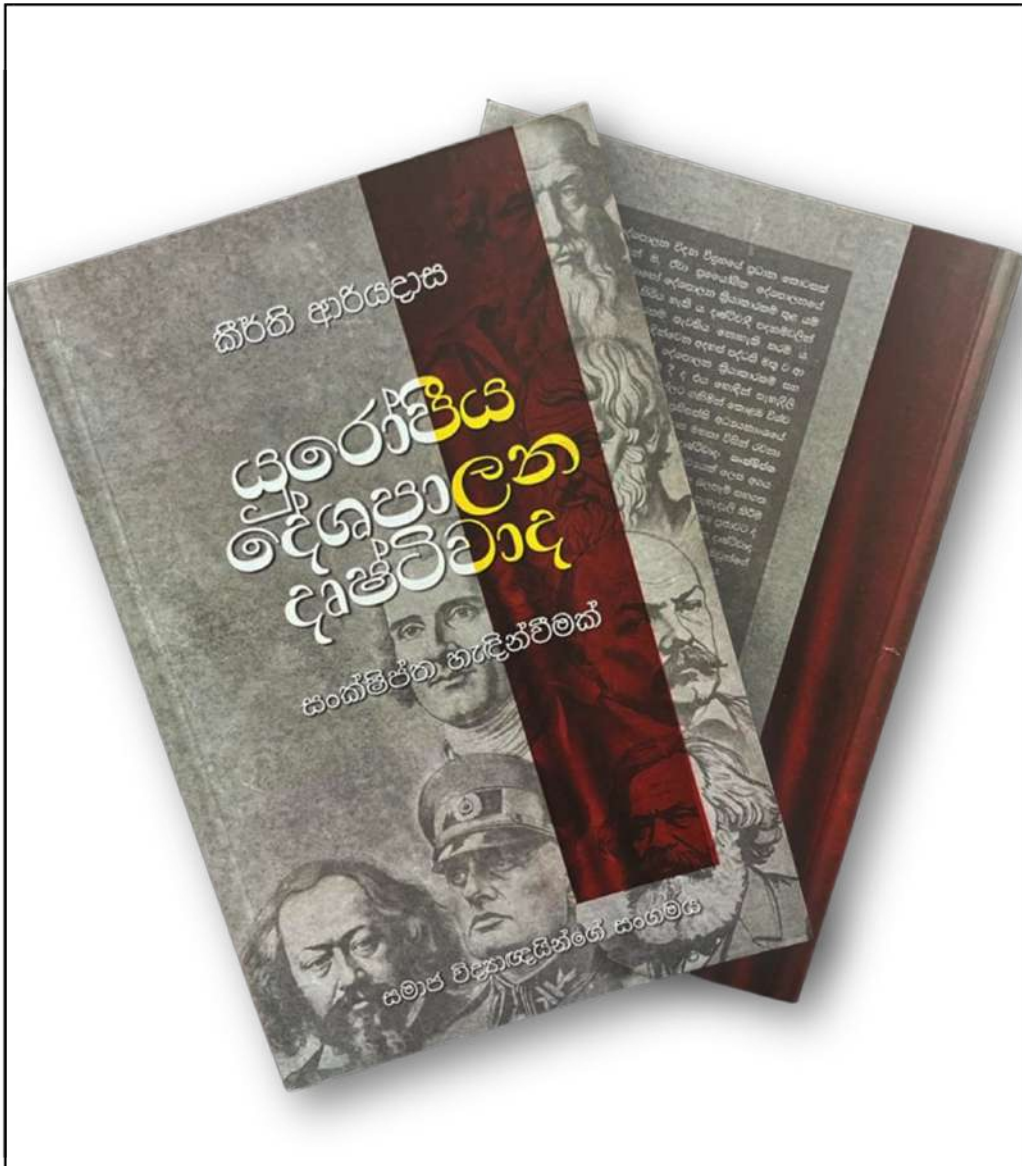
Kuruvita's poems, potent and political, are peopled largely by the non-elite and the powerless. Save for a few love poems, witty and heartbreaking, most of his collection presents powerful images and explore the many facets of exploitation. This is reflected at every level: from the last hen in the poultry truck who gets a city tour, to the park that can only be beautified if the blades of grass are decapitated; from the necktie that turns into a dog's collar literally tightening around the neck of an employee while his boss is not around, to the dumpster that believes its owner is its benefactor and the municipal worker who empties it, its plunderer.

This sensitive collection, faithful to its title, is truly a tribute to its subaltern characters and deserves to reach beyond a Sinhala-knowing readership. The poems serve as a means of affirming one's humanity within a societal framework where personal attributes, choices, economic status, and overall identity are constantly diminished or confiscated by those in positions of power.

It is not just art: it is an act of creative resistance. The short poems are especially vivid and written with quicksilver wit, conjuring up images like those in Banksy's street art. I would love to see some of these subversive poems in *To Untouchables* morph into city graffiti. A kind of poetic street art to constantly remind

us of the seemingly casual violence of exploitation; to generate ideas and questions about power, courage, integrity, compassion, altruism, but also the darkness that is all around us which we often refuse to see.

Vivimarie VanderPoorten is Senior Lecturer in English in the Department of Language Studies at the Open University of Sri Lanka. Her first collection of poetry Nothing Prepares You (Zeus, 2007) won the 2007 Gratiaen Prize for creative writing and the 2009 SAARC Poetry Award.



Keerthi Ariyadasa's concise introduction to *European Political Ideologies* (in Sinhala) is available at SSA, No. 380/86, Sarana Road, Colombo 07.

Call for Articles

From People's Councils to Participatory and Deliberative Democracy in Sri Lanka

'*Balayata diyawannawen eliyata!*' or 'taking power out of Diyawannawa' was one of the rallying cries of the *aragalaya*, *porattam*, struggle that we witnessed from April to August 2022 in Sri Lanka. This idea subsequently found expression in the demand for People's Councils that can include citizens in political decision making processes as a way to hold elected and non-elected officials to account, and as a means of reforming our political system and deepening democracy. There have been many debates and discussions on the idea since then, with a spectrum of opinions expressed on the concept, the structure of such councils, as well as their viability. Today this call assumes more salience and urgency in the context of the violent repression of the *aragalaya* and the continuing repression of peaceful protests related to the *aragalaya* as well as other protests around the country including in the North and East. These protests are themselves evidence of the absence of a forum/s in which concerns of citizens can be articulated, heard, debated, discussed, and addressed in a peaceful manner. In this context, *Polity* invites submissions that can make a contribution to this conversation, while contextualising the idea of People's Councils within the much longer tradition and older scholarship, debates, discussions, and experiments around participatory and deliberative forms of democracy in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

The idea of citizen participation in democratic governance is one that can be traced to the Greek *polis*. The more recent debates around participatory democracy can be traced to the 1960s, where the imperative emerged in the context of a crisis of faith and legitimacy between citizens and the State, deep disillusionments with institutions of governance because of corruption, lack of transparency, and lack of responsiveness to the needs and demands of people. These debates have since manifested in a dizzying array of institutional mechanisms such as *gram panchayats* in India and participatory budgeting in Brazil. Sri Lanka is not without experiments in participatory decision making processes, particularly in development related projects. Consider farmer organisations relating to the Gal Oya Irrigation and Resettlement Project and the Mahaweli Development Project; the Local Authorities Participatory Development Plans drawn up by *pradeshiya sabhas*; and owner-driven housing reconstruction projects in the North and East. We believe there is much we can learn from a robust engagement with the scholarship as well as the institutional experiments on the issue.

Suggested sub themes include, but are not limited to, exploring the following questions:

- What are the institutional forms through which democratic politics can be deepened and made more participatory?
- What sorts of issues are best dealt with through such institutional mechanisms? What has worked and what has not?
- Are there preconditions that are necessary for such experiments to work? If so, what are they?
- How do advocates in Sri Lanka conceptualise People's Council?
- How does one ensure that hierarchies of power and domination based on class, caste, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc., that characterise our institutions are not reproduced in People's Councils? What kind of mechanism can privilege the participation of the most marginalised and vulnerable in our communities?
- What comparative experiences of participatory democracy can we draw on?

Send your pitches and drafts to the Editors at polity@ssalanka.org

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2023

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