

AT THE WATER'S EDGE

A. Sri-Jayantha
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Pradeep Jeganathan has certainly mastered the art of the short story. Each of the seven stories in this collection is a taut, well-crafted example of the genre. Each is a unique vignette which introduces you to a vivid cast of characters in a problematic chain of events. Jeganathan's style is to end each story without a complete resolution, but with the problem continuing to unfold. This is unsettling to the reader, but does keep one thinking about each story and its possible subsequent events.

The book's editor describes the stories as a life-world, lived and remembered, and indeed one can easily imagine that most of the stories have a distinct autobiographical element. All Sri Lankan Tamils, especially those who live or have spent time in Colombo, will recognize this 'life-world.' Jeganathan has grown up in, and now lives in, that city and has a fine sense of the personalities and relationships of those who inhabit that space.

The sure sense of character is true even for the two stories set overseas. American Tamils will get a particular kick out of the story which describes a senior member of the Tamil community in Boston who is visited for assistance because a student's brother is in jail in Sri Lanka. All of us will recognize the dynamics in this encounter and will laugh at the intimately drawn details which strike a little too close to home for total comfort.

The second overseas story will also be recognizable. An American student 'collects' young men from war-torn countries and prods into memories which are much too painful, without much deeper understanding.

Jeganathan is a social scientist by training and this is reflected in his stories. He has a finely calibrated sense of the dynamics of

power relations. The second story, which describes a hill country girl sent to the city as a maid, reflects this sensitivity vividly.

And we will all cry over the first story in this collection, which provides an archetype for the beginning of the war in Sri Lanka in the mid-1970s, in the dynamics of a Colombo schoolroom. Even though the Tamil boy has converted to Buddhism, his Tamilness is what is held against him. Rohana uses his attack on Krishna to try to take Krishna's earned place at the front of the class. The high society Anura ends up there instead, consolidating his friends' hold on status and power in the class.

The stories range over many issues, times and places, with even a story about a Sinhalese mother who returns home from a stint as a maid in the Gulf to end up in prostitution. There is a surprisingly little reference, however, about the main event in Sri Lanka of Jeganathan's generation - the war. The author Michael Ondaatje is also from Colombo and has a similar perspective. The war is somewhere 'out there,' a black cloud, but has no real relevance to him or the people he is interested. Only the Boston Tamil, originally from Jaffna, makes allusion to 'our struggle,' but the Colombo boy does not want to discuss this. The story about a soldier on a train from Batticaloa, who talks of fighting the Tigers before he kills a crippled beggar, is the closest reference to the war that is made. Is this Jeganathan's archetype of the war and its brutalization of the South? As a Southerner, perhaps this is the main consequence of the war that he perceives.

This small book of short stories joins a growing body of interesting, high quality literature in English about the contemporary Sri Lankan experience. ■

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Stories

by

Pradeep Jeganathan

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