

'Playing Pillow Politics at MGK' launched

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Lal Medawattagedara's debut novel won 2012

Gratien Prize *By David Ebert* Acclaimed author Lal Medawattagedara released his much-anticipated 2012 Gratien Prize winning debut novel 'Playing Pillow Politics at MGK' on 30 December at the Lakshman Kaidrgamar



Institute in Colombo. The launch event was attended by a host of Colombo's literati and consisted of a welcome note by Peshala Devendra of Akna Publishers, the book's publishers, and a Keynote Address by Principal of The Study and literary reviewer Jill Macdonald. **Constant state of change** Macdonald in her address stated that the book serves to remind us all that humanity is constantly in a state of change, and that the lives of the book's cast of interesting and eclectic characters, that one would more likely encounter in a Hollywood movie, do remind us of the fragility of our own expectations, hopes and beliefs. The book touches upon the issues of religion, belief and superstition and suggests that sceptics do play a very large and vital role in empowering a community. It also explores the relationship between fate and character, using the lives of the inhabitants that live on the hillsides of MGK, who in their day to day lives encounter all this and more mixed in with heartbreak, loss, happiness and acceptance.

'Naïve novelist' In Lal's own words he considers himself a naïve novelist and adds that it wasn't an easy task to work on a fully-fledged novel. However his naiveté I believe exists only in the depths of his own modest self assessment. The book, which I haven't been able to put down yet in between my usual daily work schedule, demonstrates the author's ability to create characters from the soul outwards, with no hint of the naiveté whatsoever that he admits to. Every character you will come across along the steps going up Maha Geeni Kanda individually, through their own little unwitting existences, contribute as would an individual pull of a needle, to the weaving together of a rich tapestry of a story. One that decries and laments the very change that keeps the world moving, all the while erasing and replacing as it does the traditions, beliefs and in most cases hopes and dreams of the people it affects. **Right balance** We all know that characters are what make or break a story and what Lal has accomplished here is to maintain the right balance of that with a plot that does not overpower the richness of the characters themselves. Of course a good plot will always keep one charging through the pages, eager to find out what happens next, but in Playing Pillow Politics at MGK I found myself engrossed in individuals such as the tough talking, sceptical and at some times pessimistic matriarch Tandoori Nanda who hides a heart of pure gold behind her tough exterior and rural persona. But the main character in the novel is 'The God Child,' a paraplegic child who suffers with severe nervous disorders from birth and remains challenged only physically. Mentally, he is superior in more ways than one and

completely uninhibited in his ability to understand and give comfort or approval using only his 'yells' to communicate. I will not go further into his more detailed characteristics, as I feel I would be doing anyone who plans to read this book the injustice of revealing something that I would rather they themselves discover. I believe you would all thank me for it later. **Strength to overcome and move on** The story takes us through a gradual process of change and modernisation. How it overpowers the unprepared and how suddenly in the space of three years, whole communities can change. Some for the better and some not so much. However, what I believe Lal tries to get us to understand is the unending strength to overcome and move on of Sri Lanka's proletariat. Yes. Sri Lanka's proletariat. The unnamed people such as Toyota Nanda in the book, who is a character that we all see manning the many municipal car parks handing out tickets and collecting the cash out in the hot dusty streets. The people we encounter living their lives with smiles and cheerfulness that hide their own insecurities, fears and dreams of a better life. In short, ones we will never fully understand or attempt to empathise with. **Lesson for us all** This is the reason I dispute Lal's own admission of naiveté. Someone who has the ability to understand them all can teach us all a lesson in the respect and understanding of a people far different from our own, and *Playing Pillow Politics* at MGK does just that. I can't wait to finish it and await his next one. In conclusion, if Macdonald's description of the book's characters in her keynote address as being 'Hollywoodesque' is anything to go by, then I also can't wait to see what kind of a movie script Lal would come up with if he ever does. I think it would be brilliant. *Pix by Samantha Perera*





COMMENTS
