

A writer must read

sundayobserver.lk/2020/08/16/youth-observer/writer-must-read

August 15, 2020

16 August, 2020



Lal Medawattegedera is a Gratiaen Award winning writer, a senior lecturer at the Open University of Nawala and a bookworm. He published two collections of short stories and a novel, *Playing Pillow Politics* at MGK which won the Gratiaen Award in 2012.

Today he joins the Youth Observer to discuss his favourite book, his opinions on the literary arena, and share his reading habits.

Excerpts from the interview:

Q: What is your favourite book?

A: I read a lot of good books, so it is hard to select one book as my favourite. But for your interview I selected Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*.

Q: Why do you like it?

A: For two things. First, it had been banned in Russia for a long time, because of its harsh criticism over Josef Stalin's regime. You know we all like to read banned books. Second is that it criticises the regime without naming the regime or any ruler. It is an allegorical novel. You don't know it is about Russia, when you read it. You just think this is a cancer ward. You see patients and medical officers in the ward and how gruesome the treatments

are. But as the reading progresses, you gradually begin to realise that this is not only a cancer ward, this is more than that. It is an entire country, the ruling regime. The entire nation compresses into one cancer ward. That's the main reason I like the book.

Q: How did you find the book?

A: It was from a Sarasavi bookshop at Nugegoda. I generally go to bookshops and when I went to that bookshop about three years ago, I was captivated by its title. So, I bought the book. Now it has been translated into Sinhala.

Q: Do you prefer Russian books to any other literature?

A: I like Russian literature for its realism. They don't keep ending according to their clocks, they leave it hanging like in real life. And their characters are fascinating too. They try to give a very realistic portrayal of people and society. Especially, I like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Leo Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Michael Bulgakov, Nikolai Gogol, Nikolai Leskov.

Q: Do you like Latin American literature?

A: I like South American literature such as Mexican, Peruvian, Chilean and Colombian literature because they mostly mix magic and reality. And they pay much attention to romantic love. When you read *Love in the time of the Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, you could find explicit, abundant romantic love. Sometimes, it is reckless. But when you read South American or United States' literature it is very rough, features a lot of hardships and very depressing, but it's the life that makes them like that. I like Thai literature too. It demonstrates some kind of beauty and sorrow that engulf their life. So, each literature has shown unique characteristics. Russian literature has lot of eccentricities that you might not find in any other place.

Q: In comparison to world literature, how would you rank Sri Lankan literature?

A: When we talk about Sinhala literature, it is vast, modern and very open. It gives you a different world. When you read Sinhala newspapers and political dialogues, and delve into Sinhala literature and its criticism, you could find it is so matured. And also they are very much connected to common people's concerns. I think the Yahapalanaya critique first began with Sinhala literature, and not with the media.

They started the criticism in literature and eventually the Government changed. English literature in Sri Lanka is still growing. They are exploring themes which might not be available to the Sinhala reading public. Tamil literature is also depicting the common people's conscience and their frustrations.

Q: Who are your favourite Sinhala writers?

A: From the classics I like Piyadasa Sirisena, W.A. Silva, Martin Wickramasinghe, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, K. Jayathilake, Simon Nawagatthegama. Of the modern writers I particularly like Sunethra Rajakarunanayake, particularly her novel, *Kavi Kandura*. I also like *Kuwanna* written by Priyanka Amarathunga.

Q: How do you select a book?

A: It is always the title. Look at the titles such as ‘Cancer Ward’, ‘Heart of a Dog’, ‘Death of an Ending’. They are captivating. But it is not only for the title that I select a book. After seeing a captivating title I take the book and read the blurb on the back cover. Then, I look at the publisher, because some publishers such as Faber and Faber, and Picador publish very brilliant books. Then I read first one, two pages. If all these are to my satisfaction I buy the book.

Q: How did you enter the world of books?

A: From the age of nine I have been writing. I have collected books and I read books every day. I began with Sinhala books and then moved onto English books. Later, I came back to Sinhala books. To talk about my family, my father was a store manager in a private company and mother was working for the government sector, so we had books in my home. But I am the one who lapped books up, made a business of it and is mad about them.

Q: How did you learn to write in English?

A: Initially, it was at my school, which is D.S. Senanayake College. We were never encouraged to write fiction, we generally wrote essays.. You know there was a subject called aranchi in our school days. We all had to carry a book called aranchi to school, right up to Grade five. In this book, we had to write something interesting which happened to us every day and the teacher would check it. So, I wrote about some events a there, and I remember my teacher thought my writing was about things which actually happened and praised me a lot and gave me books to read.

Q: Did you use libraries?

A: Yes, of course. I used the school library, the Colombo Public Library, the British Council Library and the American Centre. Then I worked as a journalist at the Island newspaper and then learned the art of narratives. During my time at the Island newspaper, I learnt a lot about people, their life and how they function. Later on, I joined advertising. There, I learnt the art of economic writing or telling a large story in a few words. That’s where I got my English writing expertise.

Q: What do you think about the present readership in society?

A: I don’t think the readership has decreased. Go to the BMICH book fair, you can see so many people coming there. If people don’t read, there couldn’t have been seventeen editions of a novel. I saw people in London read in buses. Our people read in train. So, nothing has changed. Today, you can see many books being launched and literary events are also taking place. If books are not sold, you cannot survive as a writer.

Q: How about the reading during the Corona curfew time?

A: At any given time I read about seven books a week. During the Corona period I read a lot of books. Sometimes, I stop my writing for a while and read books. I would advise writers to read a lot. Not just novels, read everything. If you don't read you will be restricted as a writer. If you are a reader you should not limit yourself to one kind of literature. You have to read translations too. Sinhala or English literature only, is not the whole world.

