

Amidst virtual literary chatter and banter two debutantes and three veterans are shortlisted

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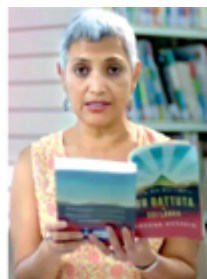
By Yomal Senerath-Yapa

Gratiaen Prize 2020

View(s): 202



Jehan Aloysius



Ameena Hussein



Carmel Miranda



Ciara Mandulee Mendis



Lal Medawattegedara

The shortlist announcement for the Gratiaen Prize for 2020 was made online this year, another concession to the restrictions posed by the pandemic. But with many fresh faces and lots of literary chatter and banter, the virtual event was a long way from the staid and little-trumpeted evenings of the early 1990s when our silver haired literati convened for a convivial if formal night.

The judges for this year are Mahendran Thiruvangan, senior lecturer in English at the University of Jaffna, author Ashok Ferrey and Victoria Walker, who is a former senior diplomat in the Australian foreign service.

The criteria harks back to what Michael Ondaatje had in mind when he established the prize in the memory of his mother Doris Gratiaen. Put simply in an Ondaatje quote that the Gratiaen Trust has long treasured: “Nothing is as exciting for us as to find our place, or our own stories, in a book. When that happens the self is doubled, we are no longer invisible.”

The judges thus were looking for writing that “mirrored Sri Lanka”- and Sri Lanka “in its broadest possible sense. The Sri Lanka we have in mind includes its various communities, cultures and traditions its heterogeneous geographies, its diverse histories, and the sociopolitical hierarchies that makes and unmakes Sri Lanka- a physical as well as a psychic site both within and outside the island.”

They have a mature and exciting haul in this time’s shortlist- two debutantes and three veterans we have enjoyed on stage as well as on the page.

Carmel Miranda’s *Crossmatch* is a whodunit where the ‘murder’ is an ostensible death in a hospital ICU, and the sleuth-narrator an introverted medical student. The novel was chosen partly for its “perceptive exploration of complex power structures set against the backdrop of Colombo’s medical community”.

Ciara Mandulee Mendis’s *The Red Brick Wall* is a collection of short stories on the politics of language and culture in a postcolonial society. Portraying the manner in which gender, education, economy, administration and language make an impact on people, especially during a pandemic, it presents the consequences of reducing human beings and the complexities of life into a single story.

Ameena Hussein, editor and former shortlisted author, decided to follow the footsteps of the Moroccan scholar Ibn Battuta- who left a legacy of records on medieval Ceylon. The resulting book, *Chasing Tall Tales and Mystics: Ibn Battuta in Sri Lanka*, meshing both his and her journeys was chosen by the judges for “its deep insight into Sri Lanka’s rich history, and its sage observations for contemporary Sri Lanka and what it means to be Sri Lankan.”

Jehan Aloysius, the playwright who brought us a hilarious ‘godey’ version of the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the magical St. Joseph’s Quadrangle, had been working on the script of his newly shortlisted *Mind Games* (he was shortlisted previously) ‘for half of his life’. The judges chose it for its gamut of “complex issues, including mental health

and domestic violence”. Says Jehan- “I firmly believe it’s important to break the silence and stigma of mental illness. I sincerely hope Mind Games can stimulate more open discussion on the subject.”

Lal Medawattegedara, the 2012 winner is in the shortlist with a new surreal novel based on a dialogue between an anxious, bookish father-to-be and an irreverent and over-confident foetus. The expectant mother, exhausted after a hard day’s work, asks her husband to relate a story to their unborn daughter. But, like the quintessential anti-hero in a folktale, he decides to change the motifs of the story, and what ensues is a complex tale of human vulnerability.

The winner of the Gratiaen Prize 2020 will be announced in early June.

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