

Celebrating the diversity of the English language

[themorning.lk/celebrating-the-diversity-of-the-english-language](https://www.themorning.lk/celebrating-the-diversity-of-the-english-language)

News Admin

April 25, 2021



It all happens here

English Language Day with the Gratiaen Prize 2020 short-listed writers



We are celebrating English Language Day with a very special online event by the British Council Library. Join our session with the talented writers who have been short listed for the prestigious Gratiaen Prize 2020.

Open to all – registration is free and required
Date: Friday 23 April 2021
Time: 6.30 p.m.

[f /britishcouncilsrilanka](#) [Instagram /britishcouncilsrilanka](#) [Twitter @LKBritish](#) [www.britishcouncil.lk](#)

British Council marks UN English Language Day

The British Council celebrated United Nations (UN) English Language Day on 23 April with a special live discussion with shortlisted nominees for the 2020 Gratiaen Prize.

English Language Day at the UN is celebrated on 23 April, the date traditionally observed as both the birthday and date of death of William Shakespeare. The day is the result of a 2010 initiative by the Department of Global Communications, establishing language days for each of the organisation's six official languages: Arabic (18 December), Chinese (20 April), English (23 April), French (20 March), Russian (6 June), and Spanish (23 April). The purpose of the UN's Language Days is to celebrate multilingualism and cultural diversity as well as to promote equal use of all six official languages throughout the organisation.

The British Council's celebration of UN English Day saw the British Council in discussion with the shortlisted nominees for the 2020 Gratiaen Prize. The Gratiaen Prize is a prestigious award by the Gratiaen Trust that recognises and promotes creative writing, and supports creative writers in developing their craft. The five shortlisted nominees for

the Gratiaen Prize 2020 are Jehan Aloysius with his theatre script *Mind Games*, Lal Medawattegedara with his introspective novel *Restless Rust*, Ciara Mandulee Mendis with her collection of short stories *The Red Brick Wall*, Carmel Miranda with medical mystery thriller *Crossmatch*, and Ameen Hussein with her nonfiction narrative *Chasing Tall Tales and Mystics: Ibn Battuta in Sri Lanka*.

Jehan Aloysius

Aloysius, who counts more than 25 years of experience in Sri Lankan theatre, explained that his script *Mind Games* was something that had been in his mind for decades, and had to do with mental health, with his main character Joyce struggling with mental health issues, and dealing with some of the attitudes and stereotypes people hold towards her, both because of her gender and her mental health condition.

“I chose to set the play in Sri Lanka in the domestic space, and make it a microcosm of the Sri Lankan community,” Aloysius said, adding that he has revised and reworded the play several times over the years to reflect the Sri Lankan mindset, as it has grown and evolved when dealing with gender and mental health.

Speaking from a linguistic perspective, Aloysius shared that, given his experience working in both Sinhala and English theatre, his scripts mix the two and use Sri Lankan English, saying that working this way helps him produce better theatre, because it allows him to build more nuance and subtlety into the dialogue between two characters.

Lal Medawattegedara

Medawattegedara, who is a Senior Lecturer in English at the Open University of Sri Lanka, spoke about his as yet unpublished book *Restless Rust*, which was inspired by a half-submerged shipwreck and is an unstructured conglomeration of plots that plays with time and space.

“*Restless Rust* is a metaphor for rusted ideas and notions that the narrator doesn’t address,” Medawattegedara explained, sharing that like most introspective novels, *Restless Rust* is unstructured and irreverent.

As a lecturer in English, Medawattegedara explained that there is a big difference between writing literature and analysing it, at least for him. “When you write literature, you’re not really worried about the theory of it. You’re worried about a universe that you’ve created,” Medawattegedara said. “When teaching, you’re very conscious of the language used, structure, the author’s background, and so on. They’re two very different countries, two nations. And you need different visas to get in.”

Ciara Mandulee Mendis

Graduate student, *Lanka Woman* journalist, and Department of Cultural Affairs Assistant Director (Cultural Promotion) Mendis spoke about her collection of 10 short stories *The Red Brick Wall*, explaining that the title is a metaphor for exploring the similarities of

people who are separated by their differences, focusing on the linguistic and cultural differences that play a role in creating barriers. *The Red Brick Wall* collection of stories is an effort to tear down these barriers brick by brick.

Through her graduate research on the conceptual metaphors of Sri Lankan English, Mendis has found that all over the globe, different communities adapted the English language (regardless of how they'd been introduced to it) to their own sociolinguistic context – their native languages, their native histories, and their native sociopolitical landscapes. These adapted forms of English are called New Englishes or World Englishes.

In this context, Mendis said: “Sri Lankan English is our very own unique variety of English. It has its own unique English,” adding that, on a personal level, it is very important to her to use Sri Lankan English, because “it’s a very liberating experience. I can be very authentic and I can express my culturally constructed conceptualisation and worldview. I can relate a lot to it. This is why I prefer studying it and using it”.

Carmel Miranda

Anesthesiologist Carmel Miranda’s novel *Crossmatch* is unusual, because it is a mystery set in the medical field. Miranda chose the medical field to base her debut novel in because she, as a doctor, noticed a disconnect with how the medical field was portrayed in literature and film, especially by non-doctors. “It’s often very unrealistic,” Miranda said, adding: “And doctors are often made out to be a lot more glamorous than they are. I decided to convey a more realistic picture of what it’s like in the medical work, and get down to the unpleasant sights and revolting smells that go with the job.”

Crossmatch is told through the eyes of a doctor-in-training fresh out of medical school, to provide a fresh look at the industry, and also explore how doctors in training build the coping and defence mechanisms that come with being in the medical field.

From a literary point of view, Miranda shared that she drew inspiration from the work of mystery writers, like P.D. James, who take readers into the heads of their minds of their characters, giving the reader a glimpse of their thoughts.

With *Crossmatch* being her debut novel, Miranda encouraged other young authors to take the plunge and put their work out there, even though it might seem daunting. Addressing a guest who was reluctant to show her work to people, Miranda said: “At some point you have to go out and show it to someone who doesn’t know you that well, but who is interested in reading and writing. Take a printout of your book tomorrow and show it to someone.”

Ameena Hussein

Hussein, who is the Co-founder of her own publishing house, Perera-Hussein Publishing House, shared that the journey to *Chasing Tall Tales and Mystics: Ibn Battuta in Sri Lanka*, happened quite by chance when she heard the name of the famous medieval

Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta come up a few times at a South Asian writers' conference in 2013, followed by her husband showing her a photograph of a street sign in Puttalam named Ibn Battuta Street.

This made Hussein realise that if there were signs of a traveller in Puttalam from so long ago (Ibn Battuta visited Sri Lanka in the 1340s), there might also be signs of his travels elsewhere around Sri Lanka. Hussein decided to track his route and travel it herself, leading her on a fascinating journey that is documented in *Chasing Tall Tales and Mystics: Ibn Battuta in Sri Lanka*.

Ibn Battuta was a renowned 14th Century explorer, and one that almost all Sri Lankans learn about in passing as children in school. During his visit to Sri Lanka (he landed in Sri Lanka near Puttalam), he enjoyed the hospitality of the King of Jaffna at his Puttalam Palace and visited Adam's Peak, a holy site for Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and some Christians from all over. In her research, Hussein referred to Ibn Battuta's own literary account of his travels, the *Rihla*, as well as colonial writers and ancient records like the *Mahavamsa* and *Culavamsa* to piece together Battuta's journey through Sri Lanka.

As a publisher, Hussein shared that she got into publishing "purely out of passion for writing in English and the publishing industry". When publishing her first book in 1999, she had noticed a dearth of publishing houses in Sri Lanka running along the same lines as an international publishing house. Deciding to open a publishing house of her own some day, the vision became reality when she embarked on it a few years later, starting Perera-Hussein with her husband Sam Perera.

The power of the written word has always been mighty, and through celebrating English, the world's most popular language spoken by over two billion people, the British Council highlighted just how important it is to keep reading, and to embrace the different lexicons of English that develop, as we grow together globally. In Mendis' words: "Your mother tongue should not be looked at as a barrier. It should be looked at as an asset, because to know another language is to know a second soul. As Sri Lankans, we are very lucky that we live in a context with three languages."