

A parody of all stories

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PLUS

By Yomal Senerath-Yapa

In our series on the Gratiaen shortlisted writers we feature Lal Medawattegedara

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Lal Medawattegedara has been among the most maverick of writers to emerge from the island, so one is surprised to hear that he is a very “homely” guy, for whom the lockdown meant an idyllic spell- all snug and cosy reading, writing and cooking- rather like Badger in *The Wind in the Willows*.

Shortlisted for the Gratiaen prize for the third time for ‘Restless Rust’, Lal, the 2012 winner, has this time pulled all stops to produce a work avant-garde even for the creator of *Playing Pillow Politics* at MGK, the 2012 winning novel.

Restless Rust, his second novel and fourth book, is not so much a story as a parody of all stories.

It is a tale, says Lal in that endearingly dramatic way of his, “that mocks fiction and non-fiction and any text that attempts to tell a story”.

Though he maintains that everything in it is “fictitious and any resemblance to the living is purely coincidental”, the central character is a bookish academic who has the tendency to challenge and critique existing texts. His wife, who is pregnant, after a hard day’s work



Lal Medawattegedara: Deconstructing rationality and storytelling

asks him to tell a story to their unborn child. He is given strict instructions by his wife not to change the innocuous children's story, but does exactly that as soon as she nods off.

The story turns into a real-life one, with 'too much' reality in fact, and takes on issues like love, ethnic tension, ethnic cohabitation, cultural diversity, human vulnerability, failure, the importance of myth and the uselessness of rational thinking.

But essentially the novel is "a deconstruction of our rationality and storytelling", says Lal.

The 'restless rust' of the title is also a reference to Lal's own stock in trade as a writer. Restless rust are basically the unarticulated thoughts that are drowned in the deep ocean of the mind. "That rust becomes restless and that is where the father draws his inspiration from for his "real-real" story".

As Lal's readers have come to expect, bizarre beings potter (or drift) about in the novel. There is a folk god who has an intriguing birth story to rival that of our Reeri yakka or Gale Bandara, a woman who is in touch with a supernatural entity "through the medium of postal communication", an eccentric academic who contradicts himself and of course, the foetus, who talks back to her father and proves to be very irreverent and overconfident.

Coming eight years after *Playing Pillow Politics* at MGK, the novel was gathering shape for four years in Lal's head, and took two and a half years more to materialize on paper.

Inspiration came from a weird hotchpotch of things: "book reviews in the Sunday Times; folktales and myths from around the world; novels from Thailand; Eastern Philosophy; COVID-19 updates on Daily Mirror and headline stories of Lankadeepa."

While the lockdown helped him breathe life to this novel, it also helped him explore the neglected warrens of his inner life and spend more time with his elderly parents.

These probably helped fill the void of having no teaching to do. Writing and teaching balance a 'beautiful game' for him: creating literature on the one hand and 'having fun' interpreting it (and misinterpreting and reinterpreting) on the other.

Meanwhile, he's getting ready for his doctoral studies, but assures us there's another novel solidifying in his head- for those who can't have enough of all those people from the margins living their magical, surreal if sleazy lives whether in MGK (*Maha Geeni Kanda*) or the dodgy universe of *Restless Rust*.