



WESTWOOD CREATIVE ARTISTS

Shyam Selvadurai

CINNAMON GARDENS

Trillium Award Finalist

FUNNY BOY

Smithbooks/Books in Canada First Novel Award Winner

Giller Prize Finalist

American Library Association Gay and Lesbian Book Award

Lambda Literary Award

Shyam Selvadurai was born in 1965 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He came to Canada with his family at the age of nineteen and now lives in Toronto. He studied creative writing and theatre at York University.

Funny Boy, his first novel, was published to immediate acclaim and was a national bestseller. It also won the W. H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award and, in the U.S., The Lambda Literary Award, and was named a Notable Book by the American Library Association. *Cinnamon Gardens*, his second novel, was shortlisted for the Trillium Award. It has been published in the U.S., the U.K., India, and numerous countries in Europe.

SHYAM SELVADURAI

Praise for *Cinnamon Gardens*

“*Cinnamon Gardens* is a considerable accomplishment...Selvadurai has the ability to create a naturalistically detailed fictional world.”

The Atlantic Monthly

“Richly rewarding...This is in many ways, an old-fashioned novel, brimming with old fashioned virtues. The characters and setting are established in a measured, finely judged manner, allowing us to feel at home with them. Selvadurai is good at female characters, and Annaluksmi’s Jane Austen-ish domestic life...is brought to life with glancing humour. Of greater physiological interest, however – and revealing Selvadurai’s true power as a novelist – is the other half of the story, his depiction of Balendran Navaratnam. The story of this tragic family is told with great acuity... What lingers in the mind is the way Selvadurai subtly portrays the father-son struggle... Not least of the novel’s old-fashioned virtues is the way he seems to conjure up a whole social panorama. With its vivid evocation of time and place, its wise characterisation, its involving emotional dramas, this is a novel that deserves, and will surely gain, a wide readership.”

Sunday Times, UK

“Selvadurai, the author of *Funny Boy*, is expert in capturing the nuances of this particularly precious time and place; there is real texture to these upper-class lives, and you can’t beat the atmosphere...”

The New York Times Book Review

“British publishers now flock to India in search of authors who can ladle magical realism and large doses of mythical lore...So it’s quite refreshing to see this novel from the subcontinent written in the tradition and style of the Great English Novel. There’s wit and irony in this elegantly written tale...fine character sketches which recall Austen...Selvadurai’s powers of description are commendable.”

India Today

“With the publication of the subtle and deeply humane *Cinnamon Gardens*, Shyam Selvadurai has established himself firmly as an important chronicler of the complexities of social and cultural difference...Selvadurai’s examination of difference is almost totally free of naïveté. *Cinnamon Gardens* is a successfully novel because the author manages to critique the foolishness behind the prejudices of his characters while acknowledging the great difficulties facing anyone who attempts to simply shrug off the demands of their culture...*Cinnamon Gardens* is a fine novel that is both delicately written and very, very wise. Selvadurai has definitely delivered on the promise of *Funny Boy*, and asserted himself as a gifted and sensitive writer.”

BOOKS in Canada

“Selvadurai succeeds in bringing in an Austenesque novel of manners – with its issues of marriage, gender and class – to Ceylon, while broadening the scope to explore themes of race, religion and sexuality in his sweeping tale of conformity and rebellion.”

Publishers Weekly

“Impressive...his gifts for compassionate characterization and clarity of statement augur well, and suggest that this very interesting new writer may be on the verge of producing major work.”

Kirkus Reviews

“For an examination of the oppressive effects of societal strictures and expectations, in this case upon women and homosexuals, Twenties Ceylon proves a most appropriate backdrop, and Selvadurai...manages well to convey the stifling effects of caste fashion, etiquette and belief. Colonial Ceylon also provides a good novelistic venue for the exposure and scrutiny of other forms of oppression: of the lower castes, the exposure and scrutiny of other forms of oppression: of the lower castes, the undereducated and the poor...Selvadurai has captured horrifyingly well the airlessness of a society in which only a few are truly able to breathe, and deeply.”

The Times, London

“Match-making aunts, illicit passions, cinematic scenery...his real forte is sly social comedy.”

The Guardian, London

“...is both wildly exotic and oodly modern. Wry references to love, always in terms of fever or illness, grace notes of description for a lock of hair or the fold of a sari, and elegant chapter headings taken from the *Tirukkural*, the famed work of Tamil philosophy, add to the ambiance generated by this beguiling novel.”

Booklist

“A multi-layered tale...a mature and sophisticated successor to his accomplished first novel. Selvadurai is a young novelist, but he’s from the old school, with a foundation of rich and involved stories to tell.”

The National Post

“Selvadurai is a sensitive narrator and his descriptions take us behind the façade of fragrant gardens and decorated drawing rooms to reveal conflict ridden families divided by passions and lives destroyed by class hatred. This is a distinctive voice and the author is a talent to be reckoned with.”

Telegraph, India

“A completely captivating novel in which the reader feels fully absorbed in the lives of the characters. The fascinating thing about the book is that one is effectively reading two stories simultaneously, which may sound confusing, but in fact works remarkable well...It is not only the characters, which are effective, but also the detailed descriptions of the gracious world of Ceylon in the 1920s, which really bring the story alive. Well

thought out and sensitive, *Cinnamon Gardens* is a book that will stay in your mind long after you shut the cover.”

First City, India; Rating **** (Very Good)

“Much of the comic irony in the novel comes from her efforts to thwart the elaborate plans of her mother Louisa and aunt Philomena – two characters who walk off the pages of Jane Austen to seamlessly assume their roles in *Cinnamon Gardens*...Shyam Selvadurai’s novel is an engaging and sympathetic portrait of the dilemma of those who wish to be different.”

Island, Sri Lanka

“...finely nuanced rhetorical style...treats more interestingly than other fiction by Sri Lankan writers the tropical nature that frames its events...this text delicately outlines the irony of the heavy European clothes and the desperate gentility of people in a warm, wet island.”

Biblio, India

“...characters in the story are all drawn with sensitivity and understanding.”

Statesman

“Selvadurai’s nuanced prose evokes the country’s dense climate and lush beauty. Readers will be seduced by descriptions of great mansions and elaborate gardens. *Cinnamon Gardens* succeed marvelously at conveying a sense of time and place.”

The Toronto Star

“...a slow and well-crafted novel written keeping a large canvas in mind. The world of *Cinnamon Gardens* contains the best of Ceylonese society.”

The Asian Age

“An old-fashioned page-turner with a literary heart – the perfect book for the beachgoers who want melodrama that doesn’t ignore the mind.”

The Advocate

“An elegant novel...What stays with you is the struggle of two finely drawn characters: a spirited young woman and a melancholy gay man who try to escape the tyranny of parents and British mentors and achieve a lonely inner freedom. A.”

Entertainment Weekly

“A near-miraculous capturing of life and love (both gay and straight), family tensions, political upheaval, labour unrest and feminism in the Ceylon of the 1920s...”

Edmonton Journal

Praise for *Funny Boy*

“With deft humor and a keen eye, Selvadurai...captures his protagonist’s difficult passage into his own identity – of which his homosexuality is just one component. And it is with deep, wistful feeling that he ties that story to larger themes of family and country.”

Publisher’s Weekly

“Shyam Selvadurai writes as sensitively about the emotional intensity of adolescence as he does about the wonder of childhood. He also paints an affectionate picture of an imperfect family in a lost paradise, struggling to stay together in troubled times.”

The New York Times Book Review

“Selvadurai succeeds in melding the personal, the political and the emotional as few of his contemporaries have.”

Time

“Selvadurai movingly evokes his narrator’s soul, but in some ways his most remarkable accomplishment is his marvelous dynamic control, from the pianissimo of the deft, telling detail to the thundering fortissimo of the finale.”

The Atlantic Monthly

“On the surface a first-person coming-of-age narrative, *Funny Boy* consistently transcends the solipsism inherent in the genre, displaying instead an awesome range...it’s a pleasure to read – and recommend – this riveting and vital novel.”

Time Out New York

“...lives up to its double bill of guns and anger...This is a superb novel.”

The Independent Weekend, London

“...graceful and intelligent...”

The Observer, London

“Selvadurai has a genius for touching a nerve with a feather-like touch...a powerful and beautifully written novel...”

Literary Review, London

“...rich, fluent, and exciting; this is a remarkably mature and accomplished book.”

BOOKS in Canada

“He bears eloquent witness for all of us who have grown from secure childhood to clear-eyed uneasy adulthood.”

Quill & Quire

“Though rich in political subtext *Funny Boy* stands as literature in its own right. If you know something about Sri Lanka, you will enjoy it. If you don’t, chances are you will enjoy it just as much!”

New Internationalist, London

“A sweet evocation of a Sri Lankan childhood spent in the company of Nancy Drew mysteries, love comics and romantic aunts.”

The Independent, London

“...full of magic. *Funny Boy* is more than a colourful, insightful novel; the book is a simple, tender call for tolerance that must not fall on deaf ears.”

Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Switzerland

“...(one of) the most compelling new voices and themes in Canadian literature.”

The Globe and Mail

“He’s far enough from the mainstream to be a judicious observer, but close enough to the rough-and-tumble of society to bring passion to his work.”

The Toronto Star

“Compassionate and mature...blessed with both a deftness of touch and a seriousness of purpose. An auspicious debut.”

The Montreal Gazette

“...a glittering and wise novel. *Funny Boy* keeps repeating with quiet conviction that the human condition can, in spite of everything, be joyful. ‘You are not alone,’ it says to the reader. ‘I understand you. I was there, I remember’”

Alberto Manguel

“Shyam Selvadurai’s butterfly-delicate first novel is both a simple coming-of-age tale and an intricate study of cultural conflict...Sparsely written and suffused with winsome humour, this is a magical debut.”

The Independent on Sunday, London

“...a gem – quiet yet powerful, and a delight from start to finish.”

Gay Times, London

“He spins a subtle web that holds readers captive...”

Saskatoon Star Phoenix

“Lyrical, moving, and deeply perceptive. This isn’t the first coming-of-age story ever written, but I doubt there’s been one quite like it.”

Halifax Chronicle-Herald

Cinnamon Gardens
by Shyam Selvadurai
Anchor £9.99 pp389

Adam Lively

The dual plot has long been a favourite device of storytellers. The switching between two narratives sets up a rhythmic tension, and if there is some connection of family or social circle between them then a complex tapestry can be woven from the two strands. This tried and tested structure is the basis of Shyam Selvadurai's richly rewarding second novel. Cinnamon Gardens is a wealthy district of Colombo, occupied in the 1920s by the local Ceylonese elite who have prospered under British rule. It is a pivotal time in the island's history. The visiting Donoughmore Commission is taking evidence from political parties (Sinhalese, Tamil, and the increasingly militant labour unions) on the future shape of self-rule. After centuries of European domination, the country is taking its first steps towards decolonisation. Selvadurai's protagonists are Annalukshmi Kandiah, a modern-minded young woman who is thwarting her mother's marriage

Ceylonese spice

plans by pursuing a career as a schoolteacher, and her distant cousin Balendran, a successful businessman, and son of one of the most powerful men in the district, who has hidden his past homosexuality in a conventional domestic life.

Introducing Annalukshmi at the beginning, Selvadurai lays out the challenge they share in language that sets the reflective, elegant tone of the whole: "[S]he saw clearly the sea of her desires, but the raft fate had given her was so burdened with the mores of the world that she felt it would sink even in the shallowest of waters." The struggle of the individual spirit against the strictures of 19th-century literature. And this is, in many ways, an old-fashioned novel, brimming with old-fashioned virtues. The characters and setting are established in a measured, finely judged manner, allowing us to feel at home with them. Selvadurai is good at female characters, and Annalukshmi's Jane Austen-ish domestic life — anxious mother, bossy aunt, catty sisters, endless talk of prospective husbands — is brought to life with glancing humour.

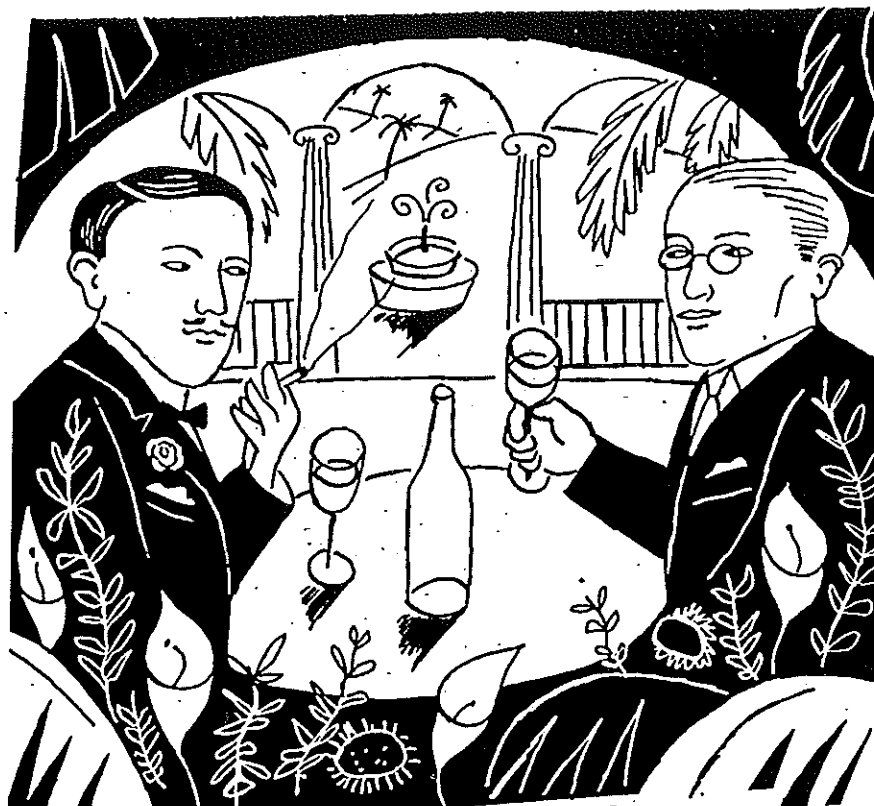
Of greater psychological interest, however — and revealing Selvadurai's true power as a novelist — is the other half of the story, his depiction of Balendran Navaratnam. Balendran is a divided man, in many ways a weak man, a man who many years before, while a student in London, denied his heart and chose the easy, conformist route. His story is more complex than simply the struggle against society's disapproval of the homosexual. The battle Balendran must fight is with his father who, more than two decades before, had banished Balendran's brother for wanting to marry a low-caste girl, and who will still brook no opposition to his will. The story of this tragic family is told with great acuity, and it would be unfair to give away how Balendran, the surviving son, finally asserts himself. What lingers in the mind is the way Selvadurai subtly portrays the father-son struggle as, in part, a battle within the individual, and highlights the way expressions of love and of power can become fatally intertwined: "His father squeezed

his shoulders and their pressure was the steadfastness Balendran needed. He felt himself coming into his own again."

The crisis in their relationship is brought on by the arrival in Ceylon of Richard, the Englishman with whom Balendran had an affair many years before. He has arrived as an observer of the Donoughmore Commission, and through this strand in the plot — as well as through the radical sympathies of Annalukshmi — Selvadurai deftly weaves in the politics of the period. Not least of the novel's old-fashioned virtues is the way he seems to conjure up a whole social panorama.

With its vivid evocation of time and place, its wise characterisation, its involving emotional dramas, this is a novel that deserves, and will surely gain, a wide readership. Selvadurai contrives to bring his two protagonists together at the end. But he resists an old-fashioned closure. The conclusion is curiously ambivalent and open. Beneath that old-fashioned veneer, there is a modern sensibility at work.

Order at Sunday Times Bookshop special price of £8.99 inc p&p on 0870 165 8585



EDEL RODRIGUEZ

Spice Island

The struggle of the spirit against oppression — of class, gender and sexual orientation — is at the heart of **CINNAMON GARDENS** (Hyperion, \$23.95), Shyam Selvadurai's second novel, set in 1920's Ceylon. Two intertwined stories are told: a renewal of an affair after 20 years between Balendran, a married family man and Ceylonese aristocrat, and Richard, an Englishman now living with a much younger lover, and the travails of Balendran's niece Annalukshmi, a schoolteacher who rails against her family's attempts to marry her to a series of dull, intellectually inferior would-be suitors. Both stories play themselves out in the politically heady days before caste-conscious Ceylon became Sri Lanka, when the homosexuality of a man of polite society was considered a "regrettably irreversible" disposition, and a woman who showed a sensual spirit and even a hint of freewheelingness (particularly on a bicycle) was considered "fast." Faultlessly elegant but familiar in its depiction of nostalgic regret and repressed desire, "Cinnamon Gardens" has a sepia-toned cover and an oddly sepia-toned style, yet it is also surprisingly light reading — it's unfettered by any attempt at highbrow heaviness. Selvadurai, the author of "Funny Boy," is expert in capturing the nuances of this particularly precious time and place; there is real texture to these upper-class lives, and you can't beat the atmosphere — hushed conversations, heated debates and private ruminations are held in luscious gardens and in grand drawing rooms. As you read, you can almost see the Merchant-Ivory adaptation playing itself out in your head.

DANIEL RIETZ

QUILL & QUIRE

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WRITER AT WORK

CINNAMON BOY

Shyam Selvadurai's new novel hails the small acts of courage that force a whole society to change

BY STEPHEN SMITH

“WHEN I SAT down at the computer again, I thought it would blow up in my face. It was really hard.” Shyam Selvadurai is speaking of pressure, the off-the-barometer kind that starts to press on novelists once they've come out of the literary blue to publish a first novel that readers and critics alike agree to be highly accomplished.

Selvadurai, of course, is just such a novelist: in 1994, while working in a Toronto bookstore, he made his debut with *Funny Boy*, a book that was praised as much for its clarity of tone and structure as for the assurance with which the story wove the personal—a boy's story of growing up gay in Sri Lanka—with the political—the friction of that country's longstanding rivalry between its Tamil and Sinhalese communities.

The book attracted rave reviews (“First-rate fiction, from a brilliant new writer whose next book cannot arrive here quickly enough,” one American reviewer wrote, and that was more or less the tone of things internationally). It won a SmithBooks/Books in Canada First Novel Award, a Lambda Literary Award for gay and lesbian literature, (See p. 39)



Shyam Selvadurai

SUSAN KING

Riding out the storm

Indies take the long view as Chapters' expansion redraws the retail map

BY JOHN LORINC

FOR SOMEONE about to get bookended by a pair of suburban superstores, veteran Winnipeg retailer Holly McNally is feeling very bullish about the climate for selling books. The indie superstore she opened in late 1996, next to a mall in central Winnipeg, is performing “exceptionally well,” and has exceeded initial expectations now that the kinks have been worked out.

That cramped McNally Robinson location in a downtown mall is currently under renovation and will reopen in July as a 7,000 square-foot store with a coffee bar. A computerized customer loyalty program is about to be launched. And this October, McNally Robinson will open a superstore in Saskatoon, making this mini-chain the first established Canadian independent to expand across a provincial border. The store will be run by Wayne and Carry Dueck. (See p. 25)

CBA PREVIEW



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got on the inaugural Giller Prize shortlist, and found itself deemed a Notable Book by the American Library Association.

In Canada, the first print run sold out before its publication date, then kept on going after that. In Sri Lanka, it was merely read by everyone, from the president on down, creating a forum in which discussion of homosexuality could find a way into the social discourse for the first time.

And it merely caused Selvadurai, who's now 32, to fear his computer. "The pressure," he says now, "was not made any easier by people always talking about, well, the pressure of writing a second novel."

Could he do it again? Interviewers often seemed to expect him to know. He was just about ready to go into

hiding when, at the dinner for the 1994 Giller Prize, he talked to jury member Alice Munro.

"She asked me, 'Oh, are you having difficulties with your second book?' And I said, 'Oh, yeah.' She said: 'I'll let you in on a little secret: it's no better for me now than it was on my second book, it never gets easier.' She said you just always want to do better than the last one, and that's always a pressure. So that helped."

Now — until the next time — Selvadurai appears to have come through the second-book pressures. While McClelland & Stewart won't publish his new novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*, until September, and while he can't, of course, foretell how it will be received, he's arrived at a kind of peace.

It's a spring Saturday at the Toronto apartment he shares with his partner. Cats are asleep in the living room and, under the fierce gaze of a framed print of Frida Kahlo in self-portrait, Selvadurai is pouring the tea he's just made and smiling his serene smile.

"You know," he says, "having said all that, something is different finishing this second novel. It feels...I really feel like a writer now. With *Funny Boy* I knew I was a writer, but I didn't know if I was fly-by-night or not."

Funny Boy was set in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, in the seven years leading up to the bloodying riots that erupted in 1983 between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the minority (Hindu) Tamils. It was following those very same communal riots that Selvadurai's parents — his father Tamil, his mother Sinhalese — decided that there was no future for the family amid the strife and brought the family to Canada.

"It was hard for us to leave Sri Lanka, hard to leave the place that has always been, in our hearts, home," Selvadurai, who was 19 when he emigrated, told an interviewer in 1994.

At the same time, he recognized that, to him as a writer, the distance was also a gift. "Like a lot of immigrant writers I find that a homeward pull inhabits my creative mind, that it is the capturing of the world I left behind that haunts my imagination. Yet, without the isolation from

that world, without the act of migration, I wonder if *Funny Boy* would have ever been written."

In *Cinnamon Gardens*, Selvadurai seeks to capture a world that he never actually knew. The novel is also set in Colombo — Cinnamon Gardens is an affluent suburb — but this time the year is 1927, and it's the capital of pre-independence Ceylon. It's also a time, as one character notes, in which "everything is changing." A high-level delegation, the Donoughmore Commission, has arrived from London to decide on how the island will be governed, so the country is tottering on the rim of its future. At the same time the longstanding social order is starting to shift as, for example, women chafe at the old, hidebound structures of things.

For an epigraph with which to open the novel, Selvadurai borrows a passage from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

As it was with *Funny Boy*, Selvadurai's stage in the new novel is the wider world, but his story — or stories — are the unhistoric acts, the unvisited tombs. He follows two central

characters: Annalukshmi, a young teacher who sees herself as belonging to "the modern world," even while she lives day-to-day in the repressively traditional world of her parents' generation; and Balendran, who struggles with his identity and his homosexuality against the strictures of family, marriage, and tradition.

"What originally sparked the story," Selvadurai says, "were the stories my grandmother used to tell me about her sister, who lived in Malaysia. She was a remarkable woman in every way. She was married, pretty much against her will, to a husband who gambled, so she more or less took over the estate from him and ran it herself. She was very shrewd. She drove a car and she rode a horse — this at a time when a woman really couldn't walk to the bottom of her street unchaperoned. That was the story I had."

Then, in 1994, around the time of *Funny Boy*'s publication, Selvadurai went back to Sri Lanka and spent some time in Colombo's archives. The more he read about the 1920s, the more fascinated he found himself. "The majority of the book was going to be set in Malaysia, Sri Lanka was only going to be about a third of it. But it just changed, it grew into something else. It makes sense that it did, because Malaysia is not really...I don't love it, it doesn't really have any great significance to me, not in the way Colombo does."

"And I got very interested in the history of the late '20s. The labour movement, the women's movement, the Donoughmore Commission — those are the beginnings of modern Sri Lanka."

That realization was crucial, he says, because as much as he was interested in writing a histor-

ical novel, he was also intent on producing a book that comments on Sri Lanka today.

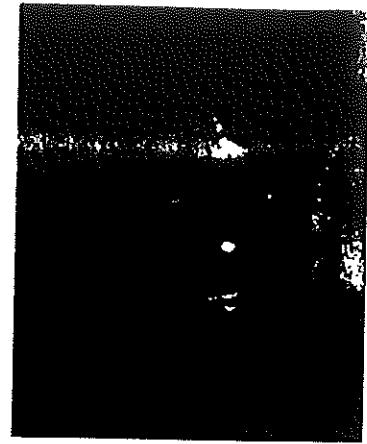
"It's not a novel that's merely set in that period — it's a parable for today. So far, when I've sat down to write, I have in mind a Sri Lankan reader. The Sri Lankan English-speaking upper-middle class — it's their sacred cows I'm attacking. It's them I'm addressing."

"In the 1920s," he says, "people were saying, okay, Ceylon is a multicultural society, a mosaic, and we can't use a British system, a Whitehall system here. Even the British were saying this. The Donoughmore Commission, from outside, was saying this. They said, we have to come up with a different system. And they did. It's the refusal to understand the complexity of a society that causes it to fall apart. Today in Sri Lanka, people know this is a fact, but they're unable to resolve things, they're unable to find a political system that reflects this."

Last year, when Selvadurai was working on the second draft of *Cinnamon Gardens*, he and his partner went to live in Colombo. Before that, he says, he understood, perhaps in a mostly inarticulate way, how the second book connected to the first.

They are both, he knew, about racial conflict, be it Tamil/Sinhalese or Ceylonese/English. They were both obviously interested in what it means to be homosexual. Both focused on Sri Lankan politics and history. But it was only in Colombo that he began to see the importance of those unhistoric acts of George Eliot's to his work both past and present.

"I think this book," he says, "is what it is be-



Selvadurai attacking sacred cows

cause I was there last year. You see when you're living in the West, you don't really understand the enormous courage it takes somebody like Balendran to live the life he lives. They don't win battles, or court cases, or anything like that.

"I think *Cinnamon Gardens* is about personal courage and liberation. But I couldn't really understand that courage until I was in Sri Lanka with my partner, trying to live as a gay couple in a society like that. The enormous cost, the enormous energy, the day-to-day fear, the problems — and the joys. I think I may have intellectualized all that before, but to live it... I think that's what made my characters come alive."

Stephen Smith is a contributing editor to Q&Q.

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RATHBORN BOOKS

Booklist
May 19, 1999
Chicago, IL

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J.B.

Selvadurai, Shyam. *Cinnamon Gardens*. July 1999. 400p.
Hyperion; dist. by Little, Brown, \$23.95 (0-7868-6473-7).

The evocative title comes from the name of a suburb of Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), in 1927. This world, of Tamil Christians and Hindus, of heated discussions over self-rule and suffrage, of class divisions and control, and of the place of women, is both wildly exotic and oddly modern. Selvadurai has written an almost Victorian novel, with the lives of his characters intertwined and interrelated, rich with the heat and scent of British colonial overlay on an ancient society. He has tied together the bloodlines and relations of the two main characters: Annalukshmi, who at 22 has qualified as a teacher despite the strong objections of her well-placed family, and her uncle Balendran, who suffers under his father's heavy and powerful hand and who struggles with the love that dare not speak its name. When Balendran's first love, a man named Richard whom he has not seen in 20 years, arrives from England to study Ceylon's political situation, a delicate and bittersweet reunion rings a chord of romance and longing that echoes throughout the story. Meanwhile, Annalukshmi takes strength from her studies, her reading, and her growing insights into the choices made by her school headmistress and her mother, sisters, and friends, to extricate herself from the compromises of marriage. Uncle's and niece's paths cross naturally in the telling of their tales. Wry references to love, always in terms of fever or illness, grace notes of description for a lock of hair or the fold of a sari, and elegant chapter headings taken from the *Tirukkural*, the famed work of Tamil philosophy, add to the ambience generated by this beguiling novel. —GraceAnne A. DeCandido



The worlds within them



SUSAN KING

Shyam Selvadurai

★ CINNAMON GARDENS, Shyam Selvadurai; \$29.99 cloth 0-7710-7955-9, 400 pp., 5 1/4 x 8 1/4, McClelland & Stewart, Oct. Reviewed from bound galleys

Is there a greater compliment a reader can pay a novel (and by extension, the novelist) than to say, "I was sorry when life interfered and I had to put it down, and I couldn't wait to get back to it?" Clearly, this is not a register of critical acumen, but rather of something as brutish and unthinking as pleasure.

Cinnamon Gardens is a hugely pleasurable novel. It draws its strength from those old-fashioned, momentum gathering narrative imperatives of plot, character, and setting. These take on a particular buoyancy in a novel that unfolds, as this one does, in a traditional society at a pivotal historical moment when its underpinnings are being rattled loose.

Cinnamon Gardens (the name comes from a fashionable district of Colombo) is a historical novel, set in the tropically lush and socially complex Ceylon of the 1920s. The country's

FICTION

deeply entrenched horizontal and vertical divisions are being further scored by labour unrest, by calls for universal franchise, by the first glimmers of something like feminism. A young, well-born school teacher named An-nalukshmi struggles to understand who and what she might become in a world where all the old certainties are being stripped away. Similarly her uncle, Balendran, a man in midlife, finds himself at odds with the very social and familial strictures that have sustained him in his place of privilege.

Cinnamon Gardens is a novel about the risks and rewards of independence. Whether the relationship at issue is political or personal, whether it is father and son, mother and daughter, husband and wife, Tamil and Sinhalese, one caste and another, colonizers and the colonized, the task handed to these memorable characters is to mediate between individual wants and requirements and the con-forming pressures of the tribe. It is also wonderfully atmospheric, a fascinating and compelling portrait of a time and a place. By and large, Selvadurai has managed to sidestep the historical novelist's bugaboo of lapsing into lecture mode. Now and again, the seams come apart so that we can see all the careful research with which *Cinnamon Gardens* has been stuffed, but this is a minor quibble. He is a gifted storyteller, and this is a graceful, absorbing, and intelligent novel. — by Bill Richardson, a Vancouver writer.



ANNE MARCOW

Neil Bissoondath

Some of the themes at the heart of Bissoondath's 1994 bestseller, *Selling Illusions*, a controversial critique of multiculturalism and identity politics in this country, find their way into this novel, albeit peripherally. Bissoondath makes sure they take a backseat to the themes of personal betrayal and secret histories that preoccupy the novel's cast. Everyone in the novel resists stereotyping; in fact, everyone has many more facets to them than they initially appear to — like Yasmin's Uncle Cyril who is inaccurately seen as a buffoon by his family members. Cyril's story, like the others in the book, becomes broader and deeper as it unfolds.

"Storytelling is not a luxury to humanity," the American novelist Robert Stone has said, "it's almost as necessary as bread." This is a sentiment with which Bissoondath would agree. In the end, *The Worlds Within Her* is a novel about storytelling — about the infinite variety of secrets and possibilities we all carry within us. — by Joel Yanofsky, a Montreal book reviewer and the author of Jacob's Ladder.

THE WORLDS WITHIN HER, Neil Bissoondath; \$32.95 cloth 0-676-97122-9, 448 pp., 6 x 9, Knopf Canada, Oct. Reviewed from bound galleys

In *The Worlds Within Her* Neil Bissoondath picks up where he left off in his previous fiction — chronicling the small, crucial emotional turning points in ordinary lives. When we first meet Bissoondath's protagonist Yasmin, a TV anchorperson and first generation immigrant to Canada, she is on her way back to the Caribbean island where she was born. She's bringing her mother's ashes with her.

The story of Yasmin's troubled life is told through a complex layer of flashbacks and flashforwards. But the main action takes place in the Caribbean (on an unnamed island that is probably not unlike Bissoondath's own native Trinidad) and it concerns Yasmin's reluctant encounter with her past — with a secretive mother, a father who was assassinated for his political activities, and the remaining family members who have their own version of the truth and of the past.

Juxtaposed against this latticework of memories and misunderstandings, there is the more straightforward and chronological story related by Yasmin's mother, Shakti. Bissoondath alternates between Shakti's engaging first person point of view and the more impersonal third person point of view employed in the rest of the novel, and it's the contrasts and contradictions between the mother's and the daughter's versions of family history that give *The Worlds Within Her* its richness and texture.

Colombo in Convulsion

Cinnamon Gardens
Shyam Selvadurai
McClelland & Stewart
389 pages, \$29.99 cloth
ISBN 0-7710-7955-9

by Jack Ilingworth

WITH THE PUBLICATION of the subtle and deeply humane *Cinnamon Gardens*, Shyam Selvadurai has established himself firmly as an important chronicler of the complexities of social and cultural difference. His tremendously successful first novel, *Funny Boy* (1994), is a coming-of-age story about a homosexual child growing up in Sri Lanka amidst the violent racial tensions of the 1970s and 1980s. *Cinnamon Gardens* is a considerably more ambitious book that seeks out the roots of the tensions that dominate *Funny Boy*.

Selvadurai sets his new novel in the Ceylon (Sri Lanka) of the 1920s. The British are making tentative steps toward decolonization and the island's inhabitants are just beginning to face the many problems that will come with self-government. Ceylonese society is deeply divided: longstanding tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils are

out of each other's lives, learning a great deal from one another as time progresses. Balendran's story is the stronger and driving narrative: it bashes against the boundaries of Ceylonese society in a dramatic exploration of both individual and cultural difference. Annalukshmi's story is more episodic and less directed, which is not necessarily a bad thing. A range of supporting characters and subplots rounds out the novel by providing a useful series of alternatives to the main action.

Selvadurai's examination of difference is almost totally free of naiveté. *Cinnamon Gardens*

resurfacing: the introduction of Western political ideology has given birth to new conflicts; labour unions and universal suffrage are becoming prominent issues; and the primarily conservative members of the upper classes are fervently lobbying the British in an attempt to prevent social change.

Selvadurai has chosen to weave the stories of two ordinary citizens, as opposed to a well-known historical figure, into this political situation. Balendran Navaratnam and his niece, Annalukshmi Kandiah, belong to branches of a wealthy and influential Tamil family that lives in Cinnamon Gardens, a prestigious suburb of Colombo. Balendran is the steward of his formidable father's holdings, which include a temple and a prosperous agricultural estate. He is a liberal, and is deeply sympathetic to the new movements brewing on the island. His father, known simply as the Mudaliyar, in contrast, is a fervent conservative and dominating patriarch. They nevertheless manage to maintain a cordial and occasionally loving relationship for as long as Balendran remains unquestioningly obedient and generally well-behaved.

Problems arise when Richard Howland arrives from England. He is a journalist covering the Donoughmore Commission hearings (which is examining issues of suffrage, self-government, and

independence). Richard and Balendran had shared a flat when Balendran was attending university in Britain, and had been fiercely devoted lovers until the Mudaliyar was informed of their relationship, and rather violently forced a separation. The Mudaliyar is the first to learn of Richard's impending arrival in Ceylon. Believing him to be a member of the Commission, the Mudaliyar asks Balendran to try to influence Richard's impressions of Ceylonese society. After an awkward reconciliation, Balendran and Richard resume their affair, which leads to all sorts of difficulties as Balendran struggles to balance his familial duties with his love for Richard and his own sense of morality.

Next door is Annalukshmi, the daughter of a much less prominent branch of the family. The eldest of three girls, she is very much the new woman: educated, independent, and occasionally scandalous. She works as a schoolteacher and has no desire to give up her job, which worries her family. As a woman, Annalukshmi cannot legally get married and remain employed. And, since she is the oldest daughter, this puts her family in a difficult situation: Ceylonese society dictates that she must get married before her sisters. Her father, Murugasu, is estranged from the rest of the family and runs a plantation in Malaya. Annalukshmi's troubles begin when Murugasu notifies her mother that he has selected a husband for Annalukshmi and will brook no disagreement.

The two plots are skillfully interwoven. As relations, Balendran and Annalukshmi wander in and

is a successful novel because the author manages to critique the foolishness behind the prejudices of his characters while acknowledging the great difficulties facing anyone who attempts simply to shrug off the demands of their culture. His characters are constantly being confronted with choices, and none of them is simple. The reader is not permitted to claim any moral highground, to pick out a virtuous hero and a shiftless villain. This is the real value of the book: it acknowledges difficulties and does not shrink from the fact that sometimes cultural repression is, in the immediate vision, insurmountable.

Selvadurai almost invisibly links the small, unknown individual with faceless society, and portrays a nation on the verge of a great change without seeming overly political or pedantic.

Cinnamon Gardens is a fine novel that is both delicately written and very, very wise. Selvadurai has definitely delivered on the promise of *Funny Boy*, and asserted himself as a gifted and sensitive writer.

Jack Ilingworth studies literature, writes poetry, and edits and publishes ça met égal

Selvadurai puts his 'funny-boy' shoulder to the wheel

IN PERSON

Sri Lankan-born novelist Shyam Selvadurai, who now lives in Toronto, has set his follow-up to his Giller Prize-nominated debut amid the hidden history of his native land. It's part of his lifelong tilt against convention.

ELIZABETH RENZETTI
Publishing Reporter, Toronto

At a recent antiquarian book fair in Toronto, a copy of Shyam Selvadurai's first novel, *Funny Boy*, was selling for \$45. That's precisely \$27.01 more than it cost when it was published, and shortlisted for the Giller Prize, four years ago.

A nice markup, though it might have helped that it was a signed copy of the book, carrying the inscription "To Jennifer." Upon being told of this double-edged sword of fame — obviously people want his early novel, even if Jennifer doesn't — Selvadurai looks a little bemused.

"Oh," he says. "That's really peculiar, isn't it? I wonder what happened to my own first edition. It's probably in tatters."

Selvadurai is hovering over a plate of string hoppers, an intricate pasta-like Sri Lankan dish, adorned with savoury blobs of curry. He and his family came to Canada from Sri Lanka in 1984, driven out by ethnic violence and rioting, and he comes to restaurants like this one in downtown Toronto for his fix of homeland cooking.

"Nobody makes string hoppers any more," he says, wistfully. "It's too labour-intensive. String hoppers belong to a different era, when women didn't work and everyone had domestic help."

That period in Sri Lanka's history, when labour and nationalist unrest bubbled under a calm public face, is the setting for Selvadurai's new novel, *Cinnamon Gardens*. The neighbourhood of the title, which still exists, was a privileged enclave in the capital of Colombo, where an anglophile elite suppressed any talk of dissent, whether it came from women or workers.

Selvadurai, educated at a private school, had never heard about the suffragette or labour movements

that had rocked his native land in the 1920s. As he says, picking up a handful of string hoppers, "It shocked me that I had studied Sri Lankan history in school but we had never studied this."

The country's secret history is paralleled by the novel's characters, each of whom lives one life in the open and one, so to speak, in the closet. As in *Funny Boy*, one of the main characters in *Cinnamon Gardens* spends the novel coming to terms with his homosexuality. Selvadurai, who's 33, small and elegantly made, calls himself the first "to come out publicly in Sri Lanka as a gay person."

This has not, understandably, been a comfortable thing. Selvadurai says his liberal parents — themselves a mixed Tamil-Sinhalese couple — were fine with his coming out, and in fact had more trouble coming to terms with his career choice.

But he wasn't quite sure how it would work out when he and his Canadian partner went to Colombo to research the novel. He explains what it was like, one day, to make a trip to the store: "You walk up the road and you find a lot of men hanging around, as young unemployed men hanging around are always looking for trouble. You go to the top of the road," he says, clenching his fists, "with this kind of fear. What else can I call it? It's fear."

At the store, which he had visited often during his stay in Colombo, Selvadurai thought he heard the shopkeeper say, "Is that all madam wants?" He was taken aback for a moment and thought, "Did he know we were gay? Now is he going to turn against us?" He realized, however, that he had misheard the shopkeeper.

Still, it proved an invaluable lesson for writing his novel, which is all about "putting your shoulder



Selvadurai: chronicling the secret history of his country through the secret lives of his characters.

PETER TOM/The Globe and Mail

the ethnic rioting in Colombo, an experience that forms the backdrop for much of *Funny Boy*. Selvadurai felt numb. Four years of studying theatre at Toronto's then-very-white York University didn't do much to alleviate his alienation. "It was extremely suffocating," he says, "extremely out of touch with my reality."

He found his connection, eventually, through writing. Selvadurai and his partner have just bought a house in the somewhat more lively Toronto neighbourhood of Park-

dale. But when it comes to his novels, it is another home that fills his imagination. "When I sit down to write, the people I have in mind are Sri Lankans. When I think of whose sacred cows I'm pulling down, it's Sri Lankans'. The plea of *Cinnamon Gardens* is a plea for tolerance."

Shyam Selvadurai will be interviewed today by Naomi Klein at the International Festival of Authors at Toronto's Harbourfront, at the Lakeside Terrace at 2 p.m.

Pappadums at the Sky Dome

Ameen Merchant speaks with Shyam Selvadurai

SHYAM SELVADURAI was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1965. After attending the Royal College and completing his university entrance requirements, he emigrated to Canada with his family following the 1983 riots in Colombo. He studied Fine Arts and Creative Writing at York University in Toronto, where he resides today.

His critically acclaimed novel, *Funny Boy*, recounts a Sri Lankan boy's coming of age during the turbulent 1975-1983 period, and it won the 1994 Smithbooks/Books in Canada First Novel Award, and the Lambda Literary Award for Best Gay Men's Fiction. His latest novel is *Cinnamon Gardens*.

I spoke with Selvadurai by telephone from Vancouver.

AM: *Cinnamon Gardens* has a tone and structure which reminds one of the Victorian novel. I was wondering if you chose such a framework with an intent to parody?

SS: I think it is an attempt to appreciate more than parody. I don't think I am parodying the form, although the novel does have a Victorian feel to it. The '20s in the West may have been an age of jazz and all that, but in Sri Lanka it was a very mannered period...

AM: So you will say that it is not unlike a Jane Austen novel, only set in colonial Ceylon?

SS: Exactly.

AM: I am interested in the beginnings of this new work. How did it come about?

SS: The original seed was a story my grandmother told about my grandaunt, whom I'd never met, who married and settled in Malaysia. It became clear through the stories I was told that she was a woman ahead of her time in many ways. Not a feminist by any means. Rather, a woman who was moved by pragmatic concerns, even selfish ones. The character of Annalukshmi is an example of those early glimmers of feminism in Sri Lanka. My early research into that period turned out to be fascinating—particularly around the time of the Donoughmore Commission which opened the debate on the definition of nationalism. And there were so many progressive ideas... Franchise for women, the Union movement, the formation of the Congress. And yet, ironically, it becomes clear that all those definitions of Sri Lankan nationalism depicted in the book have failed.

AM: Would it be apt then to describe *Cinnamon Gardens* as a post-colonial novel?

SS: I think it is a post post-colonial novel in that it revisits the past to understand how and where these definitions of the post-colonial state

went wrong. It is also an attempt perhaps to suggest what post-coloniality should be.

AM: But the novel participates equally in the discourse of nostalgia...

SS: Yes, there is nostalgia. But there is no sense of loss. At least for me there is none. I really don't miss Sri Lanka in that way. And even in Canada, I am not really a part of the Sri Lankan community, as I don't attend the song, dance, and food events they put on to keep in touch with their culture. My community in Canada is the one outside what is generally seen as the Sri Lankan community here.

AM: And that would include?

SS: Segments of the gay community in Toronto, friends from Montreal Serai and Desh Pardesh, and progressive people in Sri Lanka, both gay and straight.

AM: How do you handle the hypocrisy and homophobia of South Asians—including the so-called "progressives"?

SS: Well, I don't think you can change the Mudaliyars of this world, or for that matter the Jerry Falwells or anyone with a right wing agenda. These are hopeless cases and I have no intention of wasting my energies on them. But there are also people who are committed to social change, people who want to understand and redress social injustices, and these are the people I am interested in talking to. And, surprisingly, there are many out there who are willing to listen.

AM: So coming out was not particularly traumatic for you?

SS: Not really. I have a very supportive family. But it is so much easier to be gay and out nowadays. There are so many young people, just eighteen or nineteen, who are out to the world and have no problems with their identity. At least, that is what I see in Toronto and other cities in Canada.

AM: Yes, but class and economic power also have a significant bearing on who is accepted as gay/lesbian and who is not. I understand your partner, Andrew, accompanied you to Sri Lanka for a year when you were working on *Cinnamon Gardens*. What was that like?

SS: It was fine. I am out to everyone there so it was not a surprise or anything like that. There was also no chance of being snubbed as my own



Shyam Selvadurai

family is so supportive of both of us. So snubbing us would have been an indirect affront to my parents, and nobody there was going to do that. People were considerate. For instance, people wouldn't dare to ask me out without inviting Andrew along. And then after a few months there I found it interesting that my relatives would ask Andrew for news on a common friend in Toronto and he would give them a detailed answer... Now that's a familiar thing to do, you see. So there were those signs of inclusion.

AM: How often do you go back to Sri Lanka?

SS: I go back almost every year. I was there for a whole year working on *Cinnamon Gardens*. I find that being in Sri Lanka for a period of time, for me, puts many things in perspective.

AM: Are you happy about the response to *Cinnamon Gardens*?

SS: It's doing well, although I wouldn't be able to say how well in terms of sales figures. I haven't seen any yet. But it has had good, bad, and mixed reviews. That's a good reception.

AM: How would you define Canadian literature, the way it is today?

SS: Landed Immigrant Literature? I mean, look at the diversity in Canadian writing today. There are Canadian writers from so many different places and cultures.

AM: And yet there is a critique—specifically from Canadian writers/critics of colour—that this diversity is merely a gesture of tokenism, just a veneer of literary multiculturalism...

SS: I am not sure of such a critique. Nevertheless, it is an interesting one. If this were really tokenism then how do you explain the presence of Rohinton Mistry, Anita Rau Badami, and M.G. Vassanji—all Canadians originally from India? Or Neil Bissoondath and Shani Mootoo, both from Trinidad? So tokenism is really hard to prove, and hence such a critique is difficult to sustain.

AM: But it is also true that the publishing industry is as market-driven as any.

SS: Well, no one wants to publish a book that no one will read. And, of course, they also want to make a profit. But still the fact is that many new literary voices are being heard today in Canada more than they were ever in the past. In just ten years there has been such a change in the Canadian literary scene. And there are so many big publishing

houses that are publishing and promoting an impressive list of non-white writers.

AM: It is evident that you have been influenced by many great Victorian novelists. Are there any writers outside the English canon that have inspired you?

SS: I am influenced more by books than writers. There are many books that have affected me deeply, that have pushed me in my own writing. Anita Desai's *Clear Light Of Day* is one such novel. I was also moved by Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*. So there are influential books, even after the writers have moved on to other styles and subjects.

AM: Is there an attempt to rewrite the Aziz-Fielding relationship of Forster's *A Passage to India* through the gay affair in *Cinnamon Gardens*?

SS: You know, it's funny, but I never finished reading *A Passage to India*. I loved *Howard's End*, but *A Passage to India* I found to be rather boring. I found it to be quite dated.

AM: Thank you.

Ameen Merchant is a cultural critic specializing in South Asian/diasporic popular culture. He lives in Vancouver.

The Heaven that is home

Cinnamon Gardens

By Shyam Selvadurai

400 pp.

McClelland & Stewart, \$29.99

REVIEWED BY NORM REYNOLDS

It's been said that writers are outsiders, observers of life more than they are participants in it. Shyam Selvadurai more than qualifies. He's Sri Lankan, and he left his country after the 1983 riots in Colombo. He's also gay, so he knows about life outside the context of mainstream sexuality.

Either one of these perspectives in the hands of a talented novelist might have produced worthy work. Selvadurai has used both to excellent advantage.

to produce a multi-layered tale in *Cinnamon Gardens*, a mature and sophisticated successor to his accomplished first novel, *Funny Boy*.

"You have spent your whole life living by codes everyone lays down but nobody follows," says Arul to his brother, Balendran, one of the novel's two protagonists.

This is the conflict central to the novel. Balendran has tried to live by the rules by marrying well and following the dictates of his stern and bullish father, the Mudaliyar Navaratnam.

Yet his past with a male lover in England returns to haunt him, and he is forced to confront hypocrites within himself, and those around him. Similarly, Balendran's niece, Annalukshmi, is a young teacher constantly at odds with a culture that expects her to acquiesce to an arranged marriage, as well as other stifling social norms.

Selvadurai repeats this theme satisfyingly amongst his supporting characters as well, some of whom learn to live within the culture, and others who must break free of it.

Selvadurai is a young novelist, but he's from

the old school, with a foundation of rich and involved stories to tell. He keeps the reader anxious to find out if and how Balendran and Annalukshmi will overcome or learn to be at peace with the cultural constraints that confine them. But in a novel that is made up of men and women from varying social and religious backgrounds, the sameness of characters' voices — across caste, nationality, and gender — is the book's one false note. Otherwise, Selvadurai is in full command.

Some descriptions are especially succinct. Arul, Balendran's brother, is described as a person who "could take over a room, a conversation, a holiday."

Perhaps most memorable is the villain of the piece, Balendran's father, whose arrogance and hypocrisy colour the entire story. His comeuppance, and it's not my place to reveal it here, is one of the most satisfying plot lines in the book.

It's a challenge for any novelist to set his story in a time other than his own, and Selvadurai

rai appears to have more than done his homework in this regard.

Although I can't account for its absolute historical accuracy, the political climate at the time of the Donoughmore Commission hearings is evoked by the author with a convincing air of authenticity, and Selvadurai surrounds the reader in the sights and even the smells of his culture, always a tough job to do well.

Words such as thambili, uppumma, pooja, sannu yakuma, Koviars, Parayars, and Pallars, immerse the reader in specifics of the food and drink, and the religious and social customs of erstwhile Ceylon in prose that remains simple and elegant to savour.

Selvadurai says he used to listen to Gloria Gaynor in the breaks rewriting *Cinnamon Gardens*.

Whatever works. It's just another cultural contrast from an author who knows how to utilize such disparity to great effect.

Writer and critic Norm Reynolds lives in Toronto.

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finding religion?

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