

The Boy Who Knew Too Little

Book Review: *Sam's Story* by Elmo Jayawardena

The problem, as well as the advantage, with a first-person narrator who isn't conventionally intelligent is that his vocabulary is essentially limited. He is unable to express complex ideas succinctly -- instead, he is forced to lead you, anecdote by painful anecdote, shorn of chronology or method, toward a decidedly unclinical conclusion. In the process you become part of the narrator's inner journey, and what you discover at the end of it may be far more sincere and open-ended than a cleverer man's considered opinion.

Sam, the naive Sinhalese protagonist of Elmo Jayawardena's gentle bildungsroman, *Sam's Story*, has a very such tendency to let his thoughts ramble. He reminisces fondly about his life as a factotum at the River House, the residence of a wealthy Burgher family in Colombo and the simple joys that came with it. At a liesurely pace, he describes his employers, their household, their children who visited once a year from their studies abroad, the family pets, his worrisome Tamil colleagues and the many demands of his job. Mixed in with his perambulations of this upmarket setting are older memories of his rustic native village, of his mother and siblings and their desperate struggle with poverty, and his own untroubled existence as the uneducated, jobless, witless eldest son of the family.

Jayawardena's book eschews the traditional method of subdividing his narrative using chapters, choosing to tell the story of Sam instead through a series of short vignettes, as if the narrator were conversing with you rather than writing a memoir. This approach, combined with the simplicity of its prose and a steady stream of Suppandi-ish insights, lends the book an easy charm and accessibility that often borders on the irritating. And it would stop at being a simple tale about a simple boy, if it weren't for the book's volatile setting: Sri Lanka of 2001, a country ripped asunder by the dogs of war.

It goes without saying that the tensions of a conflicted land are bound to spill over into the minds of its subjects, however far removed they may be from the actual physical violence. As Sam realizes over the course of the book, even the blissfully ignorant cannot be spared by calamity. The war provides his otherwise jumbled thoughts an inescapable context. When first acquainted with Sam's philosophies on life, one is shocked, most of all, at the banality of the boy's racism. He "hates" his room-mate, a Tamil named Leandro, because "he is of the other kind". The depth of his understanding doesn't seem to exceed the convenient fiction, initially, that the Tamils are the aggressors and that his own people are merely defending themselves. But then we are introduced to Sam's brothers, who are both forcefully enlisted in the national army, one of whom is killed "guarding some unknown road that went to some unheard-of place." In the end, it is when the war makes its way

into the River House itself that Sam grows to fully appreciate the larger picture: that when someone who loves you and provides for you is killed, it ultimately doesn't matter who did the killing. All that matters is the peace that you have forever lost.

To his credit, Jayawardena never lets the frame of war disrupt his primary purpose of animating Sam's character. The threat of violence stays in the far backdrop, rearing its head only now and then, if only to lend colour to the hero's thoughts. He also tries hard not to allow Sam's limited intellect to become an excuse to talk down to the reader. The biggest achievement of *Sam's Story*, however, is the proof that a complex story needn't be driven by loud metaphors, convoluted plot-lines or the piling on of a million characters -- that good literature can come from the patient and sympathetic handling of even the most artless protagonist.

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