

A Graywolf Press Reading Group Guide

On Sal Mal Lane

A Novel

Ru Freeman



Discussion Questions

1. Throughout *On Sal Mal Lane*, Ru Freeman uses subtle foreshadowing to let you know the book's outcome will be unfortunate without giving anything definite away. Did you notice this tactic? If so, did you find it successful? What instances in the book can you pinpoint?
2. In conversation with Mrs. Silva, Old Mrs. Joseph says, "knowing is one thing, preventing is quite another" (page 183), which in a way speaks for the book's tragic course of events. Do you think that Devi's fate was inevitable or merely an accident? Or is it inevitable that accidents happen?
3. Harmony is a theme throughout the book, expressed through the neighborhood's union, the children's friendship, and Suren's gift for music. Where else can you detect harmony in the book? How does this speak to the book's larger message?
4. During one of his talks with Nihil, Mr. Niles says, "People do not go to war . . . they carry war inside them" (page 222). Elaborate on what you think this means. Do you agree or disagree?
5. *On Sal Mal Lane* has a third-person omniscient narration that is from the point of view of the street itself. Was this narration effective? Did you find it distant or intimate? How did it allow us to see the inner lives of characters?
6. History and culture are a large part of *On Sal Mal Lane*. How did Freeman interweave these details in her narrative? Did you come away from the book with a deeper understanding of Sri Lanka's multicultural identity?
7. Early in the book Nihil has an encounter with Sonna that changes him. Freeman writes: "What grace there is to give if only the givers knew that they had the privilege of bestowing it. What grace is often given without intention" (page 99). Do you think if Sonna and the Heraths hadn't had so many missed opportunities things would have been different? Could their friendship have saved him?
8. The Heraths and the Silvas have very different worldviews, opinions, and political beliefs. How is this reflected in their children? Is prejudice the inevitable result of such differences?

Cheryl Strayed, author of *Wild* and *Tiny Beautiful Things*,
interviews Ru Freeman about *On Sal Mal Lane*

Could you explain the name of the street, which is also the name of the book?

The street is named for the Sal Mal grove that cuts off the lane at its dead end, and for the trees that are found in all the gardens of the homes down that road. There is another significance to the Sal Mal tree—it is the tree under which the Gautama Buddha's mother gave birth to him, and the four Sal Mal trees surrounding his bed turned white when he passed away. It is also a flower said to be favored by the Hindu god Vishnu, and so it is rarely cut down. Further, the Sal Mal flower and its stamen and petals are shaped in a way that depicts people at prayer around the dome of a dagoba. It seemed fitting, somehow, to have this neighborhood nestled in the heart of a grove of such trees, such flowers.

Your novel is teeming with great characters, young, old, Sinhalese, Tamil. Do you have favorites among them?

My favorites are Sonna and Nihil. Sonna was, in fact, a very minor character in the first draft. He came and went very quickly, nothing very important happened to or because of him. Somehow, though, when I read aloud from this draft it became apparent that Sonna had a great deal of potential—within himself and as a character. He resisted being diminished in every revision; he just grew. Nihil was always the driving force behind this story, the inspiration for it, really. Together they embody what I am most drawn to contemplating: this drive we have to keep what we love safe, and the way in which we yearn for things we are rarely capacitated to deserve, earn, or keep.

At the heart of the novel is an unlikely friendship, between the young girl Devi and a neighbor, Raju, a misfit. What was the inspiration for their relationship?

Children. When I was first living in a very upscale suburb in New Jersey, I found that adults always assumed I was my light-skinned daughter's nanny. They never even spoke to me, constantly looking past me to each other. Their children, on the other hand, never made this mistake. They were paying attention to the relationship, to the way I interacted with her. Children anywhere are usually able to see beneath the exterior, to the human being. In Devi's case, she could see that Raju despite his mishapen body and social inarticulateness held only good intention in his heart.

The street, Sal Mal Lane, houses a really wide variety of people. Was your street like that in Sri Lanka? Is that typical of the country?

Yes, my street, also a dead-end though with guavas, not Sal Mal trees, was very much like this one. Most of the country except in the North where the Tigers (the LTTE), held sway, was—and is—thoroughly cross-pollinated. In those areas, through systematic slaughter of entire villages, the Tigers ensured that only Tamils, and only the poorest of Tamils (those unable to leave), continued to live in the North. Elsewhere we lived together, attended the same schools, so on. In some ways that was the true shame of what happened with the riots in July 1983, this way in which all of that had to go on but the insides of people—their hearts, their minds—were transformed. We went on to live together and yet be suspicious of each other. To interact and play and attend each others' religious festivities, births, deaths, marriages, and yet there came into being this reservation, something held back. That earlier time, before what happened, that is the true measure of peace and that is what the country is harkening toward again.

The children in the novel seem to have fairly free range. What advantages does that give you as a writer?

Well, it enabled me to follow them to places where they were not supposed to be! Devi, for instance, crossing the big roads that she is prohibited from crossing, the children rehearsing their band in a neighbor's house, these were really interesting for me, as a writer, to accompany these children that way. As a child I did grow up in that way. We went wherever we wanted except at night. Somehow at night all the rules changed—I suppose it is the same here, too, with curfews and such. But in general there was a real fluidity to the conduct of our days, where we entertained ourselves as siblings and with friends, often doing precisely what we were not supposed to do. I climbed the roof with my brothers, stole fruits from our neighbors (because it was always better tasting when stolen than when freely given), and walked down the terrible big roads to buy hard red sweets with which to color my lips and pretend I was wearing lip gloss.

You write so well about childhood, and about friendships between adults and children. Was that easy material for you to write?

I don't know if it is because I was raised in a culture that thrives because of its inter-generational interdependence, but I have always been drawn to old people. Here in the United States, my life has been illuminated by friendship—both fleeting and deep—with older Americans. I like stories, and older people have them in spades; they can tell me about places and times into which I can imagine myself as a storyteller. On the other hand, I also see everybody as a child. I sometimes catch myself staring at somebody—some man loading groceries

in crates for delivery into the back of a truck in Chinatown, NYC, and I see that man as a child whose childhood was suddenly ambushed by adulthood. In everybody there remains that child, utterly bemused by what has happened to them, and yet soldiering on regardless, putting one foot in front of the other, trying to live up to this and that thing that is expected of them (usually by children), trying to forget a righteous path through life. There is something so utterly poignant about all this. It isn't easy material so much as it is life.

The children play cricket and French cricket in the book. What's the difference between the two?

Ha! (that's one). Cricket is played between two teams where the eleven players on one side bowl to and field while two players on the opposite side bat and score runs between the stumps and bails placed on either side of a twenty-two-yard-long pitch. French cricket is played anywhere between any number of people and can be scored individually or as a team, with one person at the crease holding a short plank of wood; the feet are placed together and the batsman cannot move except to hit the ball and then, by passing the plank around their body, scoring runs. In terms of intensity, French cricket is to cricket what a pick-up game in the 'hood is to the NBA.

There's a stellar passage concerning a piano being moved from one house to the other during the troubles—apparently this too happened in your childhood?

There was a family across the street from us whose piano had to be moved because it was their source of livelihood—just the one daughter who taught piano. When it became apparent that there would be gangs roaming the streets and sure to return in the night, and after several Tamil families, including that one, had been spirited away into our homes, there arose this question of how to hide a piano. It couldn't come to our house because we already had one, and it was decided that it would go up the street to the house of a family named Mendis. Everybody gathered to move that piano—it isn't easy to move one even for professional movers, and the damage done to that in the desperate fumbblings of laypeople . . . and still, there was this sense of solidarity and hope that was wrapped around getting that one musical instrument shifted from one home, through their garden, out of their gate, up the street, down the driveway and up several stairs into a place of safety. All the men and most of the children pushing and carrying and pausing in between. All but the Tamil families who had to stay indoors, hidden and silent and trusting people whom they had lost every reason to trust.

There's great joy and ebullience in many of the scenes, and examples of great compassion between the characters. And yet throughout, dark clouds are gathering, and tragedy, when it strikes, is very real.

I think of this book not so much as optimistic, but as being a gesture toward what is good. As a nation we were all left bereft in the wake of these riots no matter who perpetrated what, who demonstrated compassion, who was violated. We lost a sense of ourselves, as a collective, being a people whose moral arc bends toward justice, peace, harmony. And though a family like mine may have been able to say that we were good people, we also knew that there weren't enough good people to have made it possible for nothing bad to have happened "on our watch," and it is impossible not to be tainted by that. Acknowledging that these terrible events took place, setting it down as it happened—not as we want to relate these stories for political expediency—is vital to recovering that equilibrium that we once had as a nation. And so—as has happened with some of the Tamil people who have read it—this book has the capacity to lead us both toward accepting what has been while remembering what once was and there is a great deal of hope in that process, for reconciliation and peace.

A lot of people have heard about the Sri Lankan civil war, but don't really know that much about it. What caused it? How did it affect you and your family?

To go into the history of what caused these three decades would be to unpack a history beginning from the mythical stories of Hanuman and Ravana and Sita and Rama and on through the invasion of the Cholas, and centuries of colonization by Europeans, the advent of the British being the absolute worst of it, and racial politics exploited by all sides of the equation. So I will simply say that this war, like all wars (including the wars against Chile and Cuba and Iraq and Iran and Palestine and on), was caused by the powerful and waged against the innocent. It affected my family like it affected everybody. Ramshackle checkpoints became highly militarized ones; we became increasingly suspicious of everybody around us: we avoided crowded places, though, really, there aren't such places in a city like Colombo; and we began to think like suicide bombers—would I get into a packed bus? would I pick rush hour? During some of those years, my school, attended by many of the daughters of the upper strata, was located between the American Center, the Russian consulate, the Japanese embassy, and the office of the Prime Minister. There was this sense that if a suicide bomber wanted to blow themselves up, they couldn't pick a better target. And yet you go to school anyway, you see buses pulled off and some person-by-person search going on, vehicles being searched or surrounded by armed personnel, and you try not to dwell too much on these things, you try to go on.

How have other Sri Lankan writers responded to the war? Has a lot been written about it?

Yes. Jean Arasanayagam in her collection *All is Burning*, Shyam Selvadurai in *Funny Boy*, for instance, have both written about this time. I am partial to these particular books because whether I agree or not with what has been written, they are written by people who were living through these realities on the ground, not peering at it from a great distance. And by that distance I don't necessarily mean physical distance. I mean the distance of heart. I believe that when you write about complex and rending conflicts like the one in Sri Lanka, and certainly when you are sort of spokesperson for a place—as you are in a country like this where few people know what is happening in this country let alone what is happening in a country ten thousand miles away—you have to come to it with a great love for the people of that country or you fail in the task. You cannot come to it with judgment, some pre-conceived notion of the ground realities. So, for instance, Naomi Benaron's *Running the Rift* (about the Rwandan genocide) or Lorraine Adam's *Harbor* (about the plight of Algerian immigrants in an America girded by the misguided strategies of Homeland Security and the PATRIOT Act) are great examples of writers whose hearts are with the people they are writing about, whose hearts ache for them and whose words are not about figuring out right and wrong but laying bare human frailty and human potential for good.

Sri Lanka is many miles away from the United States, but do you see any common threads between the history of your country and the history of ours?

Much of what happened in the wake of 9/11 is similar to what happened in the wake of the massacre of those thirteen soldiers and the riots of 1983, the suspicion and profiling that followed after the towers fell. There was a lot of misinformation and rumors about entire ethnic groups, battles waged over meaningless things—the Ground Zero “mosque” that was really a community center, for instance—rather than really looking at our common ground. Instead of affirming what was good about community and citizenship, there was a massive move toward fear there and here. The larger lesson, as it were, I think is that wars can and do end, no matter how intractable they seem; certainly something that may give Americans hope as they take stock of so many decades of war (albeit mostly waged on foreign soil). It is possible.

You moved to the United States from Sri Lanka in 1990: was that a big adjustment for you? What were some of the most striking cultural differences?

So many things from the way people talked about their parents being some kind of burden, to the lack of a cultural sensibility around the value of education and reading, but mostly money and food. Sri Lankans don't argue over food or

money. At college, I was often struck by the fact that only the people who paid for a pizza would be allowed to eat it. It seemed so utterly crass to me to eat while someone in your company was not supposed to eat because they hadn't paid for it. I came to acknowledge (but still not understand nor quite forgive, I must confess), that in a culture where college age kids are spending money they've really had to work for, it might make them more conscious of making that money last somehow, and have a certain lack of regard for those who were freeloaders. But still. That initial shock has plagued me to this day. I prefer to pay for all food at all times because I never want to expose myself to feeling that someone is not going to pay for me, or is going to discuss payment, particularly men . . . I'm cringing even as I say this. I can actually count the number of times I've allowed a man who isn't my husband to pay for my food: twice. Both book people, by the way, a writer, a bookseller.

If you could import one aspect of Sri Lanka to America, what would it be?

Our dependence on the collective in every aspect of life. We really do rely on each other, on our own friends but also friends of friends, to see us through difficulties. Perhaps this is most apparent in times of bereavement; if the parent of a student at a college passes away, the entire class boards buses to go to the funeral even if they have had no interaction with the student. It is a way of demonstrating to the neighbors and extended family the regard they have for the son or daughter of the person who has died. Recently, the father of a high school student who lives down our road passed away and it was very strange for me to see that there weren't hundreds of students coming by to attend a wake (or sit shiva in this case). I think that involvement, however inconvenient, is what makes us feel grounded as human beings, this sense that whatever happens is happening to more than just ourselves, that our lives and our deaths are witnessed and celebrated and mourned by people we don't even know.

And if you could import one aspect of America to Sri Lanka, what would it be?

The peaceful transition of power between one president and another; particularly lovely to behold when the elections have been free and fair, where disenfranchisement and voter suppression and all that kind of stuff has not taken place or has been limited as far as possible. We don't have that spectacle back home, where an outgoing president (for a long time prime minister) exits with grace and a new one comes in. Whatever the political differences, whatever the actual sentiments of each of these people, there is something wonderful about being able to acknowledge the passage of time, the passing of a torch, to spend a moment there before turning full force to the agenda of a new administration.

This interview originally appeared on Amazon.com's books blog, Omnivoracious.