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The Road From Elephant Pass

Nihal de Silva

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The Road From Elephant Pass won the 2003 Gratiaen Prize for creative writing in English “for its moving story, for its constant feel of real life, for its consistency of narrative momentum, for its descriptive power, for its dramatic use of dialogue to define social context, capture character psychology, and trace the development of a relationship, for its convincing demonstration that resolution of conflict and reconciliation of differences are feasible through mutual experience and regard, and last though not least, for its eminently civilized handling of the last degree of intimacy between a man and a woman.”

The Road From Elephant Pass Details

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From Reader Review The Road From Elephant Pass for online ebook

Kaveen Rodrigo says

Excuse the crudity of this review; Just got back into reading. Bought this book from a second-hand book shop, enjoyed every page the author keeps the reader stuck to the book, can't believe I read it this quick. The author takes us on journey with enough of details that allows to imagine every scene vividly. One has to appreciate the imagination of the author. Way the author conveys the relationships between the characters throughout the book is just great. Highly recommend everyone this great piece work by Nihal De Silva, may he rest in peace. Basic plot of the book is Sri Lankan army captain Wasantha is given orders to escort Velaithan a woman who claims to possess practical information to stop the war, and the book goes through their journey back to Colombo in the harsh environment and facing challenging obstacles.

Raisa says

The Road from Elephant Pass won the Graetian Prize in 2003. Which doesn't necessarily mean that it's amazing, just perhaps slightly better than its Sri Lankan counterparts (please don't come after me with pointy sticks).

Anyway, I first saw the film directed by Chandran Rutnam and starring Ashan Dias and Suranga Ranawaka on a bumpy bus from Kandy. It intrigued me enough to want to get hold of the book, but everyone I asked how it was would go 'ehhh... it's OK.'

Luckily, I found an old copy lying around at home. So this story deals with the war, and also, somewhat fancifully, with reconciliation.

Captain Wasantha Rathnayake is stationed in the North when he is commanded to bring in an LTTE cadre (Kamala Velaithan) who has surrendered and is willing to provide valuable information. He goes to pick her up by a checkpoint, and then disaster strikes when the massive camp near Elephant Pass is attacked. The two then go on a risky route cross-country in a bid to arrive in Colombo and relay Kamala's information to the military bigwigs there.

I enjoyed this book more than I was expecting. Having said that, I wasn't always a fan of the writing style. But the subject matter was very interesting. First of all, it takes the reader on a looping journey through Jaffna and Wilpattu National Park, pursued by all manner of enemies- areas which weren't easily accessible to the general public during the war. De Silva also approaches the subject of reconciliation, as the Sinhalese Army officer begins to warm to the cadre Velaithan, who is tough but intelligent.

It was an interesting way to look at the two very different viewpoints of the Sinhalese and Tamils; the tipping point which each saw as the reason to hate and fear the other, even if the issues discussed aren't exactly new and have in fact been debated to death in every national newspaper and quite a few other novels as well. It also challenges the status quo many people from both sides blindly accepted (in fact, continues to accept).

Anyway, this is pretty much a must-read if you want to brush up on local authors. It's a good read as well.

Sarah says

this book was very hard to read because hindsight being 20-20 and all. It was very painful because having been to Sri Lanka, being familiar with the area, knowing about the struggle, it was a book that was very close to my heart. Knowing that the author had a keen love of wildlife and nature, and knowing of his love of Wilpattu National Park, you can really see it in the book. He kind of reminded me of Tom Thomson and Algonquin Park, so many similarities. How their art reflected their love of nature, and how this love eventually was responsible in some way for their demise. The fact that the author was killed by a bomb blast in the park, is a very bitter pill to swallow. The book depicts the park as being full of natural dangers, namely animals, and yet in real life, it is the conflict that he writes about that in the end kills him. Very very sad. The book, taken by itself, well I'm biased, write a book about Sri Lanka and I'm bound to love it, the book is all about the natural beauty of Sri Lanka, which despite the tsunami and the war, the country is still magnificent. Boy meets girl, boy loves girl, boy dies, sad. Books about Sri Lanka always seem to have that bittersweetness about them, I have no idea why (war and poverty probably, combined with immense beauty) but the fact that this book was written before the end of the war (another very sad event, given Kamala's belief that they would never give up) puts the book in that context that we kind of know how the story will play out before we get to the end. Well worth reading, and when I go to Sri Lanka again, I will go to the park and try and see it through the eyes of the author.

Dishan Rajapaksha says

Another great piece of writing by Nihal De Silva, story flows interestingly followed by curiosity. Use of local variations of English is appreciable. Sometimes I felt that the story sets itself far from the believability but it's not something to think much about, after all this is a fiction. Use of this book as a part of reconciliation process between Sinhalese and Tamils makes this much more than just another book.

Barun Ghimire says

Got this book for me on my last trip to Colombo and what a read it has turned out to be. A thrilling story of hate, conflict, life, death, survival, relationship, love and much more. A story with a plot from 26th March - 29th April 2000 offers us such a humane side of a conflict and how love and honor prevail. The book flows so well and unpredictably thrilling. I just did not want to read chapter 30 because I did not want to know or perhaps I was too scared about how the story ends. To those who feel the story beyond plain narration, it's a must read.

Dashie says

I got a rather, muddled-up copy of this novel from the dying remains of the library of the British Council in Kandy a couple of months before the movie came out.

I hadn't read any books written by my compatriots until then, probably because of the natural distrust you develop against your own kind.

But I stand corrected! Nihal De Silva, now dead and gone, spun a wonderful tale of intrigue and adventure coupled with a haunting romance between a Sinhalese soldier boy and a Tamil terrorist girl.

I am apparently, a Sinhalese. Not that it matters to me, I don't think of myself as one and whenever I do, it is with regret. The Sinhalese-Tamil gap is probably the worst divide in my world. For me, it is bigger and uglier than the "black-white" race tensions in the Americas.

The Sinhalese people around me tend to talk about the Tamils as if they are a whole different species. It angers them when a Tamil person rises above them, the notion of a Sinhalese working under a Tamil is met with horror and talks of how deep that particular Sinhalese has fallen. Tamils are supposed to have a separate colour, smell and believe me, I have tried sniffing my best friend who is Tamil and in school in the UK but he normally smells of aftershave and maybe a hint of man-sweat!

Having been brought up by educated parents and sent to an International School, I have escaped the ideals of the Sinhalese people. I have plenty of friends who are Tamil and Muslim and I hug them and hang out with them not for a moment thinking of them as anything but my friends. But the sad truth is that the ethnic divide is alive and well in the country.

Nihal De Silva has somehow managed to transcend this dark, disgusting barrier that prevents my country from reaching the pinnacle laid out for it. The Sinhalese Captain is from a Southern village; and people in the South are hardliners when it comes to ethnicity. The Tamil girl is wary of him, because he's the enemy, yes, but also because he is Sinhalese.

While I think of myself as Sri Lankan, there are probably a thousand others who think of themselves as Tamil or Sinhalese first. During the colonial times, this animosity was cultivated by the occupiers, using our own weakness against us.

The ending to this fascinating tale is not a happy one, and I doubt it could have been, given the situation. But it makes me wonder, if we keep creating fiction that bridges this horrifying gap in our nation, maybe our hearts too, in time, will learn to heal and a story about a Tamil girl and a Sinhalese boy could finish with a happy ending.

Vasika Udurawane says

I read this text as an A/L text and well, watched the movie too. I'm rather sorry that we had to torment ourselves with it and I'm seriously beginning to doubt Chandram Ratnam's efforts as a filmmaker. I don't really know about his body of work anyway, being a Colombo kid so I'm not in a position to judge. As for the author, all I've read except for this was "The Ginirella Conspiracy", which I enjoyed somewhat more than this particular book.

As for the movie, well I have one thing to say. It colored my view of Sri Lankan cinema for me...that being said, sorry for jumping in so rudely but I do agree with some of the things the rest of us here say and think. The writer has had a fair bit of experience in the wild as a naturalist and an avid explorer and it shows throughout the book, which kind of bogs it down at times. We could hardly get over Wasantha's little internal dialogues, which were interesting but sadly broke the pace of the story a few times. However it's quite a winning read in terms of it being a travelogue and survival guide with the impressive descriptions of the wildness of northern Sri Lanka and the constant bettering of the quality of the food in the primary protagonist's eyes! This gastronomic tour starts with a bit of dry rations and evil-smelling onion fry and ends well with a lovely bit of steaming rice and curry. I did admire the captain towards the middle and the end when he became obsessed with protecting Kamala from those deserters.

And it's quite understandable that the author would include touches of Sinhala and Tamil in retrospect. It feels as if he's writing for an international audience, but it's not really excusable.

I don't recommend this as a read to everyone, but to those who'd like to know about wartime Sri Lanka, it's a must-see.

Amalie says

An Army Officer's routine assignment to pick up a woman informant near Jaffna turns into a nightmare when the LTTE launches a massive attack on the peninsula and the camp at Elephant Pass. Then the two adversaries are forced to escape together through the rebel held Wanni and later, cross the abandoned Wilpattu National Park on foot. The constant external dangers and their enforced dependence on each other, gradually erodes their enmity and distrust. But when they finally reach Colombo, Wasantha is confronted with a shocking revelation...

Comparing with the previous novel, 'The Far Spent Day', I liked this one better. The characterization was far more better in projecting Captain Wasantha and Kamala, a female LTTE cadre, a seeming informer. Nihal de Silva handles the problem of terrorism in a manner of a true novelist by presenting opposed views through these two main characters by showing the ground realities of the war.

However a problem I had was him using Sinhala and translating certain dialogues to show that those characters are speaking Sinhala, I always find the whole thing absurd and time wasting and as in 'The Far Spent Day' I wasn't crazy about his language and didn't liked the internal monologues. I also found that the protagonist, Captain Wasantha is bit of a male chauvinist, and I wonder why he was portrayed like that since the only other character is a female who happens to be an enemy. I couldn't understand what the author was looking to achieve through it. Still, I'm giving 4 stars for this one.

Shane says

A great geographical tour of the northern part of war torn Sri Lanka. Silva paints the land and its denizens brilliantly. I found the relationship between the male and female leads to be a bit stilted and the translation from Sinhala to English a bit repetitive - but certainly Silva's courage, for which he later lost his life in the same region due to a land mine explosion, is clear. I am not sure any other writer would want to venture where he dared to go.

Hafsa Kider says

This book made me realize more about the three decades of war we had in our country. It was touching and beautifully written, and to this day made me wonder about the ending.

Dilipickle says

If he just shut up about the birds and re-thought the end, this book could've been quite something.

Princess Hana says

what caught me was the climax of the romance of wasantha n valeithan who begin the journey as incipient lovers. one would not believe that there's romance in this novel on account of the antagonistic attitude both returns equally at the very beginning only to witness the awesome intimacy gradually brew between the two parties who seemed poles apart towards the end of the novel <>. how wasantha becomes the rightful heir to kamala's body with the determined killing of sexual enemies one by one at the critical juncture where kamala became a victim of deserters who was going to use her merely for their sexual gratification is simply adorable.

it's quite interesting how nihal de silva unfolds humanism in conflict situation. he has been able to prove that peace is a possible target through this wonderful escapade because sinhalese and tamils have many common grounds within themselves regardless of the ethnicity to get along with each other. the lengthy descriptions on birds, though tedious they are (except for wild life enthusiasts unlike myself :P), consequently bring in unity in the text, provide evidences for such common stances

Frank Ashe says

Very slow to start, but was a good yarn by half way through.

Kaveen Rodrigo says

Excuse the crudity of this review; Just got back into reading. Bought this book from a second hand book shop, enjoyed every page the author keeps the reader stuck to the book, can't believe I read it this quick.

The author takes us on journey with enough of details that allows to imagine every scene vividly.

One has to appreciate the imagination of the author. Way the author conveys the relationships between the characters throughout the book is just great.

Highly recommend everyone this great piece work by Nihal De Silva, may he rest in peace.

Edoardo Albert says

This is a book about civil war and reaching across the bloodlines of that war; it's a book about making a desperate journey through jungle; it's a book about birds and animals and plants; it's a book about Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka, the teardrop shed by the Indian subcontinent, is a land that was drenched in tears for the 25 years

of the war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Estimates suggest that over 150,000 people, military and civilian, were killed during the war. The war was essentially fought over the Tigers' demand for a separate Tamil state - Eelam - within Sri Lanka, and the Sri Lanka government's refusal to countenance such an idea.

My father is Sri Lankan. Unusually, his mother was Sinhala (the majority and predominantly Buddhist part of the population) and his father was Tamil (the minority Hindu section of the country, who mainly live in the north and east of the country). Even back when my grandparents were married (and this was a long time ago, around 1916), such marriages were rare and faced much hostility. My grandmother's parents, who were high-caste Sinhala, largely cut-off contact with their daughter after her marriage: my father only met his grandparents once.

Under British colonial rule, these tensions were subsumed but when Ceylon gained independence on 4 February 1948, the Sinhala majority moved towards asserting their political control of the country, most notably by making Sinhala the state language. Since Tamil is not just a different language but uses a different script, this effectively threw many Tamils out of work.

Tamil separatist organisations began to spring up, of which the most important was the one organized by Velupillai Prabhakaran that became the LTTE. As attacks mounted, from both sides, the political tension worsened until full-scale civil war broke out in 1983. The war continued for 25 years, with the Tigers for much of that time controlling huge tracts of Sri Lanka in a parallel administration. A ruthlessly efficient organisation, the Tigers were the first group to develop the use of suicide bombers, and using them assassinated two heads of state: Rajiv Gandhi of India and Ranasinghe Premadasa, president of Sri Lanka.

This book was written in 2000, when it seemed the war would never end. The author, Nihal de Silva, examines the justifications and reasons for the war through his two main characters: a captain in the Sri Lankan army and a female cadre of the Tigers. The captain, Wasantha, is detailed with the job of conveying Kamala, a Tiger cadre turned informer, to Colombo so she can pass on vital information. But when the Tigers attack, the mis-matched pair are forced to go to ground, and then attempt to make their way south on foot, marching through the no-man's land of Wilpattu National Park.

The depiction of the arid scrub of the north, a land pockmarked by the reservoirs dug by the ancient kings of Sri Lanka to irrigate the land, is excellent and the author's knowledge of the flora and fauna shines through. The description of rural Sri Lanka, as the couple make their way through dirt-poor villages and abandoned tracks, is among the best I've read. And while Wasantha and Kamala head south, hunted by predators both human and animal, the author skillfully presents both sides of the conflict through their interaction.

The ending, when it comes, is tense, and shocking. It's the ending appropriate to a land still at war without apparent end. But, in the end, there was an end. The Sri Lankan army, reorganised and rejuvenated, drove the Tigers into smaller and smaller pockets of territory and eventually destroyed the leadership, but at the price of many civilian lives.

Nihal de Silva did not live to see the war's ending. He was killed by a landmine while visiting his beloved Wilpattu National Park, the scene of so much of this work. *The Road From Elephant Pass* is his memorial, and it's an eloquent one.
