

IN PRINT

REEF, the first novel written by Romesh Gunsekera, born in Sri Lanka, was on the short list for this year's Booker prize. It is quite a coincidence that last year's Booker prize was shared by Michael Ondaatje, another Sri Lankan who is now settled in Canada.

Romesh Gunsekera's collection of short stories, *Monkfish Moon*, was published two years to much acclaim.

REEF (published by Granta Books, London, in association with Penguin Books) is a story told by Triton, houseboy and then cook to Mr. Salgado, a marine biologist, about his own growth into manhood. It also reflects obliquely the descent into brutal chaos that Sri Lanka has experienced in the last three decades.

We reproduce below a passage from the book that is illustrative of its qualities .

"One evening Mister Salgado came into the kitchen. He peered around like a stranger. 'I was trying to remember the Anguli-maala story?' He said looking at my hands.

"The sermon?"

"What went wrong? Was the prince mad or what?" Mister Salgado couldn't tell Pork from Chicken any more. He was still in a daze.

Anguli-maala is the story of Prince Ahimsaka the harmless. A bright young man who was devoted to his studies in a world full of envy. It was a bad time. All the other Princes hated him. They told vicious stories about him, they spread ugly rumours. They told his teachers that he was having an affair with the headmaster's wife. The maddened headmaster decided to punish him by casting him into a hell of his own making. The Prince was told that he must go out into the world and collect a thousand bleeding little fingers in a garland, in order to complete his studies. Today I suppose it might have been a thousand penises, but we little boys were told that it was fingers. The Prince reluctantly set off to do the bidding of his teacher and attain the promised wisdom by killing or maiming every man he came across; cutting off each little finger and

threading a length of white cotton through the mutilated piece of flesh. Sometimes he just cut off the hand then dismember the body, taking the finger. Through his loyalty to his teachers this once good Prince became a mass murderer and grew to love the daily blood-letting. 'I am unable to sleep, I don't feel content until I have chopped ten little fingers, he would say like a commandant to the ever-hungry cronies who gathered around him. "I need the smell of fresh blood to breathe." Then, when he had a mind hundred and ninety-nine fingers strung in a garland around his neck, he found the first fingers rotting and dropping like shrivelled hands of purple bananas. The stench was nauseating. The remaining fingers shrank and tightened around his throat. Sometimes he would dream of eating these fingers and wake up vomiting. He had to kill more and more, but could never reach his goal. Each time he threaded a new bleeding finger, ten old ones fell apart. But he did not stop. He said he had to do it for the good of the world, to become a wise and righteous king and sit on a golden throne. Down on the beach, the bodies of men and boys who had disappeared from their homes, who had been slaughtered by him and thrown in the sea, were washed in by the tide. Every morning they reappeared by the dozen: bloated and disfigured, rolling in the surf. The fishermen in the villages became undertakers. They burned heaps of the dead in bigger-mounds than the fish they caught. Sometimes he would bury the corpses in mass graves, but the sea would unearth them, and the putrid flesh would be displayed on the sand, glistening, while crows picked at the pieces. Occasionally a body would be recognized there would be Whispers, relayed from mouth to mouth along the sea-paths up on to the highway and then along the treetops to all the villages up and down the coast. But there was no outcry. Only husband incomprehension, terror or complicity. The earth and the sand, the sun and the wind, the sea and dirty blue sky would temporarily hide the past, like the future, from the eyes of the killing and maiming went on, faster and faster. This was punishment for whom? I used to wonder but I never asked; I could not make a sound under the nursery spell of the tale".

C.A.

Advice to Orators

In speech its best-though not the only way-
Indeed the best, it's true, can be the worst-
Though often I...as I had meant to say:
Qualify later; state the premise first.

Vikram Seth.