

## BOOK REVIEWS

Derek Frost, *Living and Loving in the Age of AIDS: A Memoir*

London: Watkins, 2021

288 pages, \$18.95, ISBN 9781786784964

Derek Frost's memoir, *Living and Loving in the Age of AIDS*, is an absorbing odyssey of celebration and success that emerges as a tale of personal transformation in the face of crisis. Frost relates his story with openness and honesty, using the present tense throughout to bring immediacy to his account. He describes 1970s London as a time of increasing freedom and open sexual expression, which was marked by incessant partying, professional advancement, and the discovery of lasting love.

An admitted "star fucker," the young Frost makes friends with numerous notables in the arts, including film director John Schlesinger and interior designer David Hicks, who takes him under his wing. He meets entrepreneur Jeremy Norman, who is referred to as "J," and a partnership quickly blossoms between them. J, who is as ambitious as Frost, opens two hugely successful gay nightclubs that pull the couple even further into a "high octane" lifestyle of partying, drugs, and international travel. While J continues to start new businesses, Frost establishes his own design company, which attracts clients that include prominent politicians and socialites. Jumping from their homes in London, the Isle of Wight, and Key West ("queer party central"), life seems to be a ceaseless cabaret of work and play. This suddenly changes when they hear talk about a "gay cancer."

A small quibble: Frost might have chosen to relate this episode at the start, before chronicling his freewheeling life, as this would have diminished a certain quality of braggadocio in the account of his youth.

They soon discover that the rumours are true, as many of their friends fall victim to the mysterious malady known as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). They reel from "the torrent of death" that descends on their community, as hundreds and then thousands die from the disease, like

soldiers in a terrible war. The vigorous young men of Fire Island that Tom Bianchi celebrates in his photographs quickly grow weak and skeletal, their lives cut short. Frost and J's privileged, devil-may-care existence is replaced by funerals and mourning.

David and J are still determined to savour life, and they are inspired by the rise of political activism within the gay community. Organizations like ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, whose motto was "Silence=Death") demand action from the U.S. government. The Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York tends to the community's mental and physical needs. Frost and J cannot remain silent and help establish a hospice, the London Lighthouse. Later, with J at the helm, Cruisaid funds improvements in U.K. hospital conditions as well as a dedicated clinic for AIDS patients.

In 1990, J grows sick. Alarmed, they take the test together and discover that J is HIV positive. Not surprisingly, Frost describes this as "a moment of profound change," as they retreat to their darkened bedroom and hold one another. They later seek refuge in the English countryside and Provence, where they adopt a more holistic lifestyle. Frost also turns to the solace of nature, the experience of which he describes in beautiful prose.

Clinical trials with AZT and an additional drug promise hope, and with the couple's contacts they are able to acquire this "cocktail" through a Paris-based doctor. Another triple combination appears even more promising, and J's CD4 blood count gradually rises. Advanced medical intervention and a determination to survive seem to be working. Others, too, are beating the odds.

In the meantime, Frost's concerns about his partner's condition take a toll on his own physical and mental health. Fearing a breakdown, he decides to see a therapist, who advises: "Wisdom teaches us to become more concerned with being rather than doing." He decides to close his design business at the peak of its success and turns to gardening, meditation, and yoga, which he practises with characteristically intense devotion.

Despite setbacks and challenges, J's health stabilizes, and the couple determine to rekindle their desire to give back to the queer community. They form Aids Ark to help people in countries where antiviral drugs are unaffordable. They also travel to Africa and Asia to distribute AIDS drugs, even illegally smuggling ARV drugs into South Africa. Frost is discouraged that they can't do more but is consoled by the gratitude of those they have helped and by the fact that their philanthropy is encouraging other organi-

zations to perform similar work.

They sell their homes in London and Key West to become “swallows, nomads.” Frost takes up photography and painting, turning again and again to nature. In 2014 they pass their trusteeship of Aids Ark to younger friends. In 2019 they travel to the U.S. and are deeply moved by the National AIDS Memorial Grove in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, which honours those who perished from the disease and reminds future generations of a terrible time when lives were so swiftly extinguished. It’s a period that Frost generously and lovingly chronicles for us, yet he also notes that the AIDS scourge has hardly ended. Indeed, roughly 1.7 million people become infected every year, bringing the global population of people with HIV to an estimated 38 million. And despite the tremendous advances made by the queer community, homosexuality is still illegal in 72 countries. Frost’s memoir is a reminder of the need to keep fighting and not lose hope, regardless of the obstacles we still face today.

—William Torphy

Hollay Ghadery, *Fuse*

Toronto: Guernica, 2021

150 pages, \$20, ISBN 9781771835923

Intersectionality is by no means an unknown or unexplored topic. The interlocking identities and oppressions that structure our collectively defined selves are now a central topic in classrooms, essays, and above all literature. So the premise of Hollay Ghadery’s *Fuse*, a memoir about the author’s navigation of her mixed-race heritage, might seem a bit pat upon first encounter. But the book’s emphasis on the intertwined nature of these identity categories and their relationship with anxiety, addiction, self-abuse, and understanding of one’s evolving self—evident in passages like “I told my therapist, ‘It’s just the way I am. The way I was born.’ / What I meant was: It’s no one’s fault in particular. / It’s a little of everything”—makes for a uniquely specific yet also expansive take on the concept.

The book ruminates on the author’s biracial identity, family conflicts, experiences at university, dating, and beginning a family of her own. But the presentation of these events is nowhere near chronological. Instead, *Fuse* has a loose and repetitive structure, with chapters frequently beginning in

medias res. More than halfway through the book, for example, “Jumptrack” begins, “It was 3am, and my older brother and I were cramming my clothes into garbage bags.” Themes and topics appear again and again, like multiple moons in a system of unpredictable orbits.

These recurring subjects often include experiences that aren’t written about as frequently as race or gender. The author’s brief experience working at an escort service subverts common ideas about class, education, and sex work, with her prospective employer stating, “It shows depth of character. Most of the girls here have some post-secondary education.” Around this time in the narrative Ghadery reflects on her father’s demands that she stop attending cheerleading tryouts, his claim that “women look beautiful when they are natural, without makeup,” and his final advice not to “take shit from anyone.” This passage is a kaleidoscope of contradictory attitudes towards women, and it’s an instance of the book being attuned to very specific experiences, patterns, and contradictions in a way that’s more nuanced than many treatments of intersectionality.

Ghadery has also populated the book with recurring oddities related to perception and imagination. In the scene at the escort service, she considers, “I wasn’t supposed to sleep with anyone before marriage, but I did. Yet I wasn’t a whore. I hated the word and all it implied. Its sound: the weighted start of the word, and the subjugation of its breathy end syllable.” This attention to language and sound is accompanied by a few bizarre tangents, during which the narrator’s energetic imagination seems to commandeer even the loosely organized progression of the book. At one point, as a nurse stares, jaw agape, Ghadery asks, “Can spontaneous combustion really happen?” She continues,

There were these reports written by doctors on what appeared to be spontaneous combustion, and almost all of the victims were women. They were women of the streets, if you know what I mean. They were heavy drinkers, and all a little on the chunkier side, like me, and they all carried most of their heft in the mid-sections, which is where the combustion seemed to happen. All that fat just ignited or something, and their torsos were almost completely consumed. You could smell the fat sizzling; that’s what the reports said.

“Naming Baby” is a short chapter and an interesting experimental inter-

lude; it describes Ghadery's decision to give her surname to her fourth child. Its reflections include rhetorically innovative passages like the following: "Because my name means power. Because of his first name, given after my uncle, who died at 58 of brain cancer. My uncle, as a child, ran through the house calling to his mother: *You're very nice, I love you.* (I love you, too.)" But it's also symptomatic of what seems to be a blind spot in the book's otherwise multivalent look at interlocking oppressions. Having a large family and being (seemingly) financially well off in adulthood is a big factor here, as someone who suffers from the same kinds of problems but doesn't have this safety net would likely have far more negative experiences.

But this oversight (if it can be called that) goes hand-in-hand with the book's weird honesty. It's a characteristic that emerges in the admission that she was fired from a job as a bartender. An especially odd and striking instance of it comes near the end, when a cashier says Ghadery has "a very exotic look" and proceeds to ask, "What *are* you?" It's a standard depiction of the kind of racist exchange with which people of colour are all too familiar. Yet the chapter opens with a description of the cashier as having "a large birthmark running up from her chest to her neck. It looks like the North American continent turned upside down." Following her question, Ghadery describes her freckled skin and oddly maintained eyebrows and then tries to guess her age. It's strange that she foregrounds what might be uncomfortable bodily details. If it's in such poor taste to inquire about a stranger's ethnic background, why is it better to describe in vivid detail a chest-sized birthmark in the shape of an upside-down continent? Perhaps the distinction is being foregrounded intentionally, much as the book navigates other interlocking injustices in a way that goes beyond well-known and somewhat predictable ideas of intersectionality.

—Carl Watts, Huazhong University of Science and Technology

Carmen Rodríguez, *Atacama*

Halifax: Roseway, 2021

250 pages, \$22, ISBN 9781773634777

In *Atacama*, Chilean-Canadian writer/educator Carmen Rodríguez delivers a powder keg of a novel with a deep sociopolitical conscience. It is located somewhere at the juncture of Chilean class war in the first half of the twenti-

eth century and the revolutionary artistic movements that continue seeding resistance to militaristic capitalist repression.

“While *Atacama* is based on historical events, the original impetus for the novel came from my parents’ stories,” Rodríguez writes in an afterword. Her mother, who “loved to recite poetry” but seldom spoke of her childhood, saved “the one, all-important story that she had kept to herself for seventy years” for her deathbed. This was the tale of a once-in-a-century flood that, like the goddess Amarú awakening to the reality of her drought-forsaken people’s suffering, flooded the land with a rush of tears. In this case, however, the flood did not produce flowers and crops to breathe renewed life into the land and its inhabitants; rather, it released from their shallow graves the corpses of entire families murdered in the 1925 Tacna Massacre, which was orchestrated by her father, a Chilean military officer stationed in disputed Peruvian territory.

Rodríguez’s father, on the other hand, was a more eager storyteller, whose ear for adventure, humour, and vivid description disguised the horrors of childhood poverty in the mining and fishing industries of La Coruña and the coastal city of Iquique. It was in La Coruña that another massacre—of miners and their families—occurred at nearly the same time. Rodríguez learned of the latter event while researching the former one, mining both of her parents’ vibrant lore into an absolutely convincing historical fiction that weds the two events. She adds, however, that the novel’s protagonists, Manuel and Lucía, who take turns narrating all but the last couple of chapters, are “fictional characters, and their overriding stories are also fictional.”

Manuel, who in the first chapter witnesses the execution of his Communist union-leader father at La Coruña, finds his own place in the resistance by writing for leftist papers and presses from Republican Spain’s last stand outside of Barcelona and from Paris, where he assists diplomat/poet Pablo Neruda in resettling a portion of Francisco Franco’s refugees in Chile. “Along the way he had promised himself that his writing would be a tool, a weapon in the struggle for justice and an instrument of hope,” we read toward the novel’s end. “His writing would turn horror into beauty, shame into dignity, and deceit into truth.”

Lucía, in her own symmetrical fashion, becomes an accomplished dancer and choreographer, whose ballets transcend forms and genres, from classical to popular to non-linear modes of narrative. “She told relevant stories, important stories,” we read. “They may not have been pretty, but she made

them beautiful. She had the rare gift of turning darkness into light.”

Manuel’s gift as scene-setter comes across from the novel’s first episode amidst the “still” pre-dawn air and “acrid smell of saltpetre fields” as, minutes before his own brutal initiation to the stone crusher’s yard, he aims his slingshot at another unsuspecting prey: “I heard its hissing before I saw it—the buzzard chick I had been eyeing for days had finally decided to look at the world. It was standing on the jagged edge of rock that hid its nest, flapping its wings and cranking its neck.” Manuel takes aim and strikes. Then he grabs the still-warm body of the chick and runs home, where, wordlessly, “my mama grabbed it from my hands, dumped it in a pot, and poured a kettle of boiling water over it. When the water started to cool down, she would take the bird out, pluck it, and gut it. My mouth watered at the thought of the stew we’d eat later that day.” That night, after his father’s stirring speech to their fellow workers preparing to strike (“The future belongs to the working class, comrades!”), Manuel’s head pounded “[u]nder the Atacama sky” as he joined in singing the “Internationale” and promised to “fight under his leadership and alongside my comrades until final victory.”

Manuel’s father’s noble oratory is juxtaposed with Lucía’s father’s orgy of racist and classist boasts, which she overhears on the train from Tacna to Iquique. Because it is impossible for her to bring him to justice, given the power of his myth as a heroic defender of the fatherland, her best revenge lies in the brilliant choreographies that she already begins to dream as she listens to her Peruvian domestic’s bedtime stories—stories that become ballets, which, like her own testimony in a state trial that fails to convict, nevertheless publicly shame and humiliate him. As Lucía narrates,

In no time at all, the hummingbird would turn into a ballerina in a scarlet tutu and matching pointe shoes, flapping a pair of shimmering wings as she glissaded and pirouetted her way across a stage. Amarú’s llama head—a huge and elaborate headpiece held up by four dancers—would emerge from a flood of blue light. Mmmm . . . what about Amarú’s body? It was gigantic, so four dancers wouldn’t do. Okay. The four dancers holding the magnificent llama head with the flaming snout and crystal eyes would be inside her head, so they wouldn’t be seen. Amarú’s body then would be made up of dozens of dancers in iridescent costumes. Every dancer would represent one scale of Amarú’s skin. All the scale-dancers would stick together and move as if they

were one body slithering across the stage . . .

It is fitting that, after Augusto Pinochet's violent overthrow of Salvador Allende's peaceably elected Socialist democracy, Lucía ends up in Vancouver, where she reinvents herself in collaboration with the Indigenous peoples and exiled communities of the Americas and elsewhere. For all readers who hope that the current promise of constitutional rebirth in Chile might yet inspire universal efforts sufficient to overcome our truly existential crises today, *Atacama* cannot come more highly recommended.

—Brett Alan Sanders

Felicia Mihali, *Pineapple Kisses in Iqaluit*

Toronto: Guernica, 2021

300 pages, \$25, ISBN 9781771835886

With a whimsical title like *Pineapple Kisses in Iqaluit*, the reader imagines that Montreal-based Felicia Mihali's second English-language novel will be a humourous fish-out-of-water tale about a young teacher moving to the North and finding love. Instead, the kisses are from a gruff man who has just eaten overpriced canned pineapples. And we are not even certain whether the narrator, Irina, likes him. Much in the North, we learn, is about endurance rather than indulgence, and perhaps the same goes for love.

Such are the curious contradictions in this enigmatic novel. The text follows Irina, a Montreal-born daughter of Hungarian and Romanian parents who, following a personal tragedy, happens upon a posting for a French teaching job in Nunavut's capital city. The novel is a follow-up to Mihali's 2012 *The Darling of Kandahar*, in which college-aged Irina graces the cover of a popular national magazine. When a Canadian soldier serving in Afghanistan sees the photograph posted in his barracks, he writes to the magazine and requests her contact information. National papers pick up the story, and the young lovers are thrust into the spotlight and a long-distance courtship. *Darling* traces this relationship, interweaving immigrant histories and tales of Montreal.

*Pineapple Kisses* finds Irina later in life, at 34, feeling suddenly adrift, alone, and bored of her gloomy students. Irina must then become an "escapee," seeking excitement. As for many southerners, the North often rep-



resents an exotic and exciting frontier for adventurers, but she is quick to correct the reader of that assumption: “Unlike Martin Frobisher, the first white man to officially set foot on Baffin Island, I knew from the beginning what I would find in Iqaluit. When you are a lonely person, solitude follows you everywhere.” Frustration, gloom, sombreness, loneliness: these are the words that cast a pallor on all of Irina’s attempts at happiness. And the North’s long winter nights do not help.

One of the first people she meets there delivers a well-worn warning about the North: “People can go crazy living too long in the dark. . . . They do foolish things.” It is a test put out to new arrivals, few of which are strong enough to make it. The narrator then quietly responds: “The Inuit have been here a long time.” Irina’s logical rebuttal tells us what kind of woman she is: worldly, no-nonsense, and not given to fear or superstition. She guards herself.

The job ad promised that she would be teaching in the most northern Francophone school in the world, and with that Irina joins an insular community within a remote place. “Francophones,” she explains, “still associated this northern region with imperial dominance, the British explorers looking for the Northern Passage.” As with *Darling*, Mihali is a master of weaving histories into the narrative of her story. An offhand observation made by Irina (“The atmosphere of shortage and parsimony had a morbid appeal for me. So many people had died of starvation in this place!”) leads to a many-pages-long tale of the *Erebus* and *Terror*, which were part of Sir John Franklin’s fateful Arctic expedition in the 1840s, and the many attempts to retrieve or retrace the party’s route. The retelling betrays the author’s own training in postcolonial studies, focusing on both subverting official narratives of British or Canadian state dominance over the land and emphasizing Inuit history, knowledge, and continued inhabitancy. She writes: “While the rest of the world considered Franklin to be a great explorer, the Inuit believed he was a lousy navigator.” Irina is a keen observer and is as attuned to the perils of exoticizing traditional cultures as she is to the mistakes of generations past, who preferred to fall on their swords rather than pay attention to the ways in which Inuit survived on the land.

Survival also becomes a theme in her own life, as she starts to see herself not as a carefree woman who can wander wherever she pleases but rather as a single woman, a newcomer, whose address is easily known, whose patterns through the city are clear, and who has no way to protect herself.

In one scene, she buries herself under a blanket on her couch, waiting for someone pounding on her door to go away. Is it the result of an innocent misunderstanding or something more sinister? And what about Constable Liam O'Connor, the uncle of Eli Ivalu, her most confounding student? In fact, Irina becomes almost obsessed with Eli, focusing on her clothing (inadequate for the weather), her expectations (outrageous), and her attitude (headstrong). Liam's efforts to contact Irina are full of mixed messages: is it an interrogation, a parent-teacher-style intervention, or perhaps a romantic come-on? The physicality and atmosphere of their meetings are intense: "I could not stay any longer in his car. . . . The constable grabbed my hand and put his face close to mine." As Irina spends more and more time in his company, the reader recalls the warning that people can turn fools in the long polar night.

*Pineapple Kisses* manages to suspend its tension across the length of the story, rarely letting the reader settle into a breath without worrying, in some way, for Irina. But she is not the type of protagonist to invite pity, for she, like Eli, the pupil about whom she thinks so much, is inquisitive, justice-minded, headstrong, and not *in it* to make friends.

—Dana C. Mount

Shehan Karunatilaka, *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*

New York: W. W. Norton, 2022

400 pages, \$24.95, ISBN 9781324064824

Commenting on Shehan Karunatilaka's novel *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, which won the Booker Prize in 2022, the judges note the "hilarious audacity of the novel's narrative techniques." While any hilarity is overshadowed by the grim events of Sri Lanka's civil wars, the narrative techniques are more striking than disturbing. Most noteworthy is the use of second-person narration, the "you" that is addressed by the narrative self. The splitting of "you" between subject and object befits the novel's shifts between life ("Down There") and afterlife ("In Between"), as Maali interrogates his life as a photographer, gambler, and slut. In the end, "you no longer wondered who the 'you' was, and who the person saying the 'you' was. Because both were you, and you were neither." Double or nothing for the gambler in hearts, spades, clubs, and diamonds, who shuffles the deck: "You felt your

self split into the you and the I, and then into the many yous and the infinite Is." Narrative fission is but one of the tricks up the writer's sleeve. A week in the life and death of Maali Almeida is a multidimensional experience with black humour accompanying the currents of magic realism.

Although "First Moon" begins with "Answers," it is really about the ultimate questions surrounding the meaning of life, art, politics, sex, death, etc. "You wake up with the answer to the question that everyone asks." Dark comedy derives from an unreliable narrator who meddles with omniscience: "The omniscient narrator adding a voiceover to your day." Voiceover and overseeing are two more narrative techniques the author employs in his art of allusiveness to flesh out his characters and ghost stories. If the novel begins with "Answers," it ends with "Questions," in a reversal of revelations about "you": "I met shadow creatures who live in mirrors and watch you watching yourself." In the process of self-reflection and self-revelation, "you meet some odd characters" by the final page. The novel ends: "And that when you got there, you will have forgotten all of the above." Maali remembers through pain, or, as Cormac McCarthy writes in the epigraph to "Third Moon": "You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget." Each chapter's epigraph remembers its intertextual point of departure.

The Booker judges also describe the novel as one "that dissolves boundaries not just of different genres." Magic realism dissolves boundaries and calls for the reader's willing suspension of disbelief. The state of flux and flow and incorporate William Shakespeare, Pablo Picasso, Kurt Vonnegut, Arthur C. Clarke, and others who deal with the supernatural. With its floating ghouls and purgatorial signifiers, the "In Between" is as arbitrary as the "Down There." Shape-shifting and boundary-breaking are essential: "The heave of humanity is never picturesque. This heave throngs towards you and heaves you away from the counter." This triple repetition of heave is a reminder of its etymological connection to heavy (referring to the novel's weighty subject matter) and heaven (another blurred boundary between polarities).

The novel also begins with the two gods of "chance and electricity." Chance plays out in Maali's gambling and in random acts of violence, while electricity is a less obvious god. Maali prays "to the magic of electricity." "All the most powerful forces are invisible. Love, electricity, wind." We see forms of love and float with Maali from place to place on an invisible wind.

The Dead Leopard at the end of the novel says, “the only God worth knowing is electricity.” If Zeus is the god of lightning, then electricity updates Greek myths; indeed, the dead spirits in the novel serve as postmodern gods interacting with those Sri Lankans who are still alive. Elements of classical epics combine with Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to infuse *The Seven Moons* with a literary continuum. A ghost story with gallows humour that is a means of coping with Sri Lanka’s brutal history, the novel is transgeneric as well as transnational. One section, “Canada Norway Third World Relief” features Elsa Mathangi, who volunteers for this global charity. CNTR is pronounced “Centre,” a fact that not only emphasizes her North American cadence but also points to the novel’s decentring of identities, genders, and genres. The walls of CNTR are filled with photographs from 1983 and expressionistic paintings of Sri Lankan landscapes: “Dripping with brushstrokes, smears and flamboyant colours, they are signed illegibly by an exploited amateur,” much like and unlike Maali’s photographs.

Like its protagonist, *The Seven Moons* is an unstable text. In 2015 an early draft, titled *Devil Dance*, was shortlisted for the Gratiaen Prize—an annual prize created by Michael Ondaatje that recognizes the best literary work by a resident of Sri Lanka. In 2020 a revised version was also published in India under the title *Chats with the Dead*. Small wonder that ear checks are required for these chats. Missing from the new paperback edition is a full-page illustration of a Nikon camera, Maali’s way of viewing the Lankan roulette. Across the lens is a hairline representing the fractured worlds and underworlds of this fiction. The photographer learns that “the brightness of The Light will force you to open your eyes wider.” The colourful mask on the cover relates to the cruel character known as The Mask but also to the primitive masks of modernism, postmodernism, and hidden meanings.

The first of several “chats” scattered throughout the text, “Chat with Dead Atheist (1986),” highlights the dialectic between familiar and philosophical, physical and metaphysical perspectives. The dead atheist is an old man with a hook for a nose and marbles for eyes: “His head is not between his shoulders as heads prefer to be. It is held with both hands in front of his stomach like a rigger ball.” Dismembered and displaced, like other characters, the atheist instructs Maali in the ways of the “In Between” (the liminal afterlife) and “Down There” (life in Sri Lanka). He considers Maali a liar, accompanies him in their magic realist travels aboard the winds of Sri Lanka, watches him watch another dead floating figure, and swivels his head like a

periscope above muddy Beira Lake. From periscope to damaged Nikon camera, Karunatilaka creates a panopticon of kaleidoscopic chats and snapshots that counter the shootings during war. Despite being an unreliable narrator, Maali witnesses everything and tells truths. It is up to the reader to cleanse the mud from the broken camera and restore multilayered horizontal and vertical sightlines.

Ranee presides over the bureaucratic, Kafkaesque “In Between” and instructs Maali to go for an “Ear Check” at “Level Forty-Two.” When he does so, he discovers a sign that says “CLOSED.” Near the top of the afterlife’s hierarchy Mahakali floats along the roof, while a Crow Man grants permission for the dead to whisper to the living. Maali is accompanied throughout his posthumous adventures by Sena, who plots revenge against corrupt politicians. Magical chats, photographs, and lunar eclipses bring dead and living characters to life. Buoyed by the currents and countercurrents of magic realism and war, Maali’s photographic memories endure; hero and antihero, a Sri Lankan Ulysses voyages between Olympus and the underworld to discover who murdered him. The stakes in fiction were high, and the Booker paid off.

—Michael Greenstein