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*The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* by Shehan Karunatilaka

Meeting date: Saturday, July 29th, 2023

Time: 2 p.m.

Discussion Questions

1. *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is narrated entirely in the second person. Why might the author have chosen to write the novel in this manner? Does it enhance the reading experience?
2. The novel is set in 1990, against a backdrop of the real-life civil war that took place in Sri Lanka. At one point the protagonist writes a cheat sheet for an American journalist on the different factions in the war, which he signs off: Don’t try and look for the good guys, ‘cause there ain’t none. (p.22) Is Maali being reductive here? Do you think this is reflective of real life in Sri Lanka?
3. Seven Moons has been described as a cross-genre novel, merging magical realism with a ghost story, a whodunnit, and a state-of-the-nation piece of work. Discuss how Shehan Karunatilaka has allowed these genres to intersect and whether you think it is successful.
4. Maali’s character is complex. At the beginning of the novel we’re told: If you had a business card, this is what it would say. Maali Almeida. Photographer. Gambler. Slut. (p. 1). Yet despite his flaws, the Booker judges described him as ‘wonderful company’ and ‘cheerfully unapologetic about what others might see as his failings’. What is it about Maali’s character that makes him so likeable?
5. Karunatilaka has told the Booker Prize that ‘I spent most of my youth trying to write like Ondaatje, Rushdie and García Marquez… But the genius I have robbed from the most is of course Uncle Kurt [Vonnegut]’. To what extent are the influences of these writers visible in Seven Moons?
6. Despite being gay, Maali has an unusual relationship with a woman, Jaki. Jaki didn’t mind that you disappeared from parties, Jaki didn’t mind if you talked to boys, though she hated you talking to girls. And Jaki didn’t care if you didn’t touch her. (p. 58). What was the purpose of their relationship? Were there benefits for each, or was it one-sided?
7. ‘Why is Sri Lanka Number One in suicides?’ asks the girl peering through thick glasses. ‘Are we that much sadder or violent than the rest of the world?’ ‘Who the fuck cares?’ says the hunched figure, as a lady in pigtails does her high jump over the edge. ‘It’s because we have just the right amount of education to understand that the world is cruel,’ says the schoolgirl. ‘And just enough corruption and inequality to feel powerless against it.’ (p.285) What might this excerpt from the text say about social conditions within Sri Lanka during the civil war, and why was the suicide rate in the country so high?
8. You were never claustrophobic despite all that time spent in bunkers and narrow beds and lifelong closets. But, like any reasonable person, you’d like the option of running away, especially when there is plenty to run from. (p. 140) Discuss what is meant by this quote, and how it relates to the way Maali was forced to live his life.
9. The book oscillates between real-life and an ‘in-between’ underworld, an afterlife that is as bureaucratic as the world above - laden with rules. Discuss why the author has subverted the idea that for many a better afterlife exists.
10. Seven Moons is laced with off-beat humor; the author adds levity to heavier moments. In an interview with The Booker Prize, he said, of Sri Lankans, ‘We specialize in gallows humor and make jokes in the face of our crises.’ Has the author succeeded in bringing the humor of his nation to life?
11. Maali Almeida’s final mission is to hold the tyrants at the heart of the Sri Lankan civil war accountable for their atrocities. Do you think he is successful? Is his parting body of work enough to instruct change?