

FEAST OF REASON, FLOW OF SOUL Devika Brendon



The **Galle Literary Festival** takes place annually in mid-January in and around Galle, a splendid old fortified town on Sri Lanka's Southern Coast, just over an hour and a half's drive along the new highways from Colombo, the country's commercial capital. It lasts for about five days, and is pleasantly positioned in time between New Year and the Jaipur Literary Festival towards the end of January.

The GLF, as it is known in Sri Lanka, has had a colourful history: initially, its organisers were beset with criticism that it catered for the English-educated elite, and left local Sri Lankan writers unhonoured and unaffirmed. There was a focus on celebrity authors and a hit or miss impression made by some of the presenters. Some of the events such as literary lunches and dinners were well out of the price range of students and writers themselves.

But its energy is appealing, and its events are set in a wonderful town, whose everyday inhabitants have benefited from the incoming waves of tourists and visitors, many of them delighted to escape the winters of Europe, Canada and North America to holiday in a wonderful tropical island with a colonial history which to many outsiders seems interesting and alluring, a sort of 'value added' component. For local Sri Lankans, English is inevitably seen as an instrument of colonial oppression, and so the tensions between national and international literary experiences lie beneath the lovely surfaces of the experience, and make them charged, resonant and full of interest to the observer.

A few years ago, the Festival was rested, and its absence was felt. Sri Lanka in the meantime was recovering from a long Civil War and realising that part of reconciliation was recognising the need for inclusion of all three main language groups (Sinhala, Tamil and English) in the country under the banner of 'Sri Lankan literature', and the need to build a literary culture amongst the young and emerging writers of the country.

In 2016, Fairway Holdings, a construction company, undertook to revive and sponsor the Festival for five years. Its return was welcome, and accompanies a flourishing of other cultural and artistic events, many of which seem set to be annual occurrences.

In the second year of its revival, the Fairway Galle Literary Festival in 2017 was structured in such a way that it is fluid, focused and flowing. It felt like a bright stream of literature, conversation and joyousness, and it feels self-renewing. By this, I mean that even the non-attendance of Margaret Drabble and Dinah Jeffries did not give its expansiveness much pause. This festival's celebration of literature and creativity now has an exuberance and generates an atmosphere of goodwill which is independent of individual 'big names' or celebrity figures, and is more inclusive of a range of interests and levels of literary engagement than ever before.

The administrative team, with its volunteers in bright blue shirts, and its tough, courteous and patient young desk staff, has perfected the challenge of dealing with difficult customers: those wanting to change, refund or cash in their tickets, those wanting to attend events which they had only just discovered were on, those unaware of the complexities offered by the myriad options of events, and trying to sample everything, as if at a smorgasbord or a buffet, with all possibilities arrayed before them.

The town of Galle seemed somehow gentler, calmer, and more accessible this year. Perhaps it is because, knowing that there would be a great demand for accommodation during the four to five days of

the Festival, we booked our rooms several months in advance, right in the centre of town: walking distance to all the venues. This year, the organisers had included a map of the town, with all the venues located on it, which could be easily downloaded and printed before arrival.

The events were packed. Ranging from the public events at the Hall de Galle and the Maritime Museum, to the Literary Lunches and Dinners, at various old houses which have been converted into boutique hotels, where numbers are limited, it is a perfect fusion of financial jackpot and aesthetic sweet spot: every attendee can choose to see and hear an author talk about their work and literature in general either in a big venue, solo in 'Thinking Out Loud', or in conversation with another author in a 'Duet', or in a more private setting at a Literary Dinner or lunch, where there is an opportunity to meet each author personally. All these events are priced in gradation, so for ¹Rs. 1000 you can hear an author present their work and give insight into their ideas and working process, for around Rs. 3,500 you can attend a two-hour Workshop where an author communicates their skills and craftsmanship to creative writers, and for Rs. 6,500 to 8,000 you can dine with them.

Then there is the small-town structure of Galle, where the venues are within walking distance of each other, and the old Dutch buildings of honeycomb-coloured stone, and tiny paved streets make it easy to venture and roam. One of the loveliest aspects of Galle is that the Festival takes place in the heart of the fortified town, amidst the everyday lives of the local citizens, who are selling jewels and hand-made lace, going to school, receiving speeding tickets, going to work, having coffee and hot snacks in convenient architectural interstices amidst the droves of literary querants and questors. Men sit at corners in plastic bucket chairs apparently with plenty of time on their hands to give directions to confused, would-be intrepid travellers. I wondered briefly if they were being sponsored by the Heritage City, or performing their service out of good will and habit.

My guest house had a rooftop room, reached by five flights of steep steps -reminiscent of Sri Pada, and best ascended shoeless. The room had tiny windows on every side, overlooking the rooftops of Pedlar Street. Opening them in the morning, I could hear the birdsongs, and the Tuk Tuks, the town waking up, light airplanes droning in the sky above the sea which is just outside the realm of vision, glimpsed through the faded orange, clay-tiled sloping roofs. The araliya (frangipani) trees were in lustrous gold and white full bloom just two metres from the Verdigris-stained window handles, and their stunning fragrance rushed in, without knocking, as soon as the windows were opened, and the breezes commenced their orchestrated sequences.

The wonderful Soul Sounds choral group sang a vibrant programme one night at the Fairway Pavilion, full-voiced and bejewelled in gorgeous green sarees, and blue and white billowing silk caftans: a medley of traditional Sri Lankan folk songs, and some powerful gospel songs and popular hits. They gave opportunity to several of their members to sing solos, and take the lead in singing different songs, and were clearly enjoying themselves hugely. Their blasts of vocal joyfulness and vitality were lyrically accompanied by the artistic drawings in real time projected onto a screen by the artist Reinhard Kleist, whose rapid pen sketches projected onto a large screen on the stage reflected the themes of the songs most fluidly.

The Chamber Music Society performed a classical repertoire in the Dutch Reformed Church on the last night of the Festival. No need to attend any dinner after that - the music itself filled our every need for sensory attunement, and accentuation. Books glossy and glorious were being bought like boxes of chocolates and sweets, and lucky winners find tokens for a free book under their chairs in the halls. The Lit Cafe had colourful lanterns hanging from the trees and comfortable sofa chairs, and there was pro bono tea provision going on all around us, adding to the carnival atmosphere. People drove fun cars - jalopies and charabancs - sports cars with removable roofs from Colombo to Galle especially for the days away from the work schedule.

¹ Sri Lankan Rupees

Last year, there were regional associated Festivals in Kandy, the ancient hill capital, and in Jaffna, capital of the North. This year, there was an entire Sinhala Day programme on Saturday at The Maritime Museum, and a Children's Programme at which children could learn to love reading by meeting authors, engaging with books in a fun atmosphere, and collaborating in fun activities that will associate reading with pleasure for them from a young age.

The Literary Festival is not only a thing, it has become THE thing with which to begin the calendar year. The setting, in the old seaside heritage town, the relaxed and cheerful atmosphere, the accessibility and the variety of events, the buzzing and squawking three wheelers, the discussion of writing and the civilised arts, focuses us on joy and created beauty in the year ahead.

It is appropriate that Fairway Holdings, the main financial underwriter of the Festival, is a building and construction company. Their business presence is far more evident this year, with prominent advertisements mounted around the central venues, highlighting their buildings and apartments, and even a scale model of their high-rise plans for Colombo located at the entrance to the Fairway Pavilion, where the winner/s of the Fairway Literary Award were announced. This year, a young self-published author won the big prize for the first novel in a mythic fantasy trilogy.

Creation is at its heart a constructive activity, both in words and pictures, and in stone. The Galle Literary Festival is a celebration of that spirit of constructiveness. In 2017 it seems joyfully here to stay. Australians, let us now rejoice! Come one, come all and see what there is to be seen!

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Dr Devika Brendon is an academic, teacher, editor, reviewer and creative writer. Her poetry and short stories have been published in academic and literary journals and anthologies in Sri Lanka, Australia, India and Italy. She is a recipient of the Sydney Union Poetry Prize and The Henry Lawson Memorial Prize for Poetry. Her PhD dissertation was a study on Jonathan Swift's epistolary style in personal and public life. Devika founded the English Only teaching academy in 2001, and teaches language and literature to students studying O-Level and A-Level syllabus in Australia and in Sri Lanka. Devika has also studied Law.

SIGN UP FOR THE 2018 FAIRWAY GALLE LITERARY FESTIVAL!

Taking place from January 24th – 28th.



The Fairway Galle Literary Festival returns to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Galle Fort, Sri Lanka, to mark the festival's 9th year from 24th – 28th January, 2018 ...

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