

## ***Funny Boy: Introduction***

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*Funny Boy* is a coming-of-age novel. First published by McClelland and Stewart in September 1994, the novel won the Lambda Literary Award for gay male fiction (1997) and the Books in Canada First Novel Award.

Set in Sri Lanka where Selvadurai grew up, *Funny Boy* is constructed in the form of six poignant stories about a boy coming of age within a wealthy Tamil family in Colombo. Between the ages of seven and fourteen, he explores his sexual identity and encounters the Sinhala-Tamil tensions leading up to the 1983 riots.

### **Synopsis**

Set in the mannered, lush world of upper middle-class Tamils in Sri Lanka, this deeply moving first novel, though not autobiographical, draws on Selvadurai's experience of being gay in Sri Lanka and growing up during the escalating violence between the Buddhist Sinhala majority and Hindu Tamil minority in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Arjie (Arjun) Chelvaratnam, at the age of seven, prefers dressing up in a sari and playing bride-ride with his girl cousins to cricket. When he is discovered by the adults engaging in this innocent fun, he is forced out of the world of girls. A lonely outsider, he attaches himself to various sympathetic adults, whose own trajectories and dilemmas reveal to Arjie the difficulties of following one's desires. As the novel progresses,

the civil violence and tensions mount bringing devastating consequences to Arjie's family and their sheltered world.

The journey from the luminous simplicity of childhood into the more intricately shaded world of adults—with its secrets, its injustices, and its capacity for violence—is a memorable one, as time and again the true longings of the human heart are held against the way things are.

The novel presents vivid sketches of family members, friends, school teachers, shown cooperating, arguing, loving, and living. The large Tamil family, and its arguments and discussions reflect a specific culture, while in many respects the problems are universal. Tensions mount as the riots come closer to home, and the whole family sleeps in their shoes so that they can quickly escape should the Sinhalese mob descend.

### **Reception**

The book has found strong positive reception both in scholarly reviews and in reviews by online reading communities. Some of the reviews are:

“Shyam Selvadurai writes as sensitively about the emotional intensity of adolescence as he does about the wonder of childhood. He also paints an affectionate picture of an imperfect family in a lost paradise, struggling to stay together in troubled times.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Shyam Selvadurai has brought back from his Sri Lankan childhood a glittering and wise novel. *Funny Boy* keeps repeating with quiet conviction that the human condition can, in spite of everything, be joyful. “*You are not alone*, it says to the reader, *I understand you. I was there. I remember.*”

—*Alberto Manguel*

“He spins a subtle web that holds readers captive...”

—*Saskatoon Star Phoenix*



"A powerful and beautifully written novel..."

—*Literary Review (UK)*

"Lyrical, moving, and deeply perceptive. This isn't the first coming-of-age story ever written, but I doubt there's been one quite like it."

—*Halifax Chronicle-Herald*

### **Background**

Sri Lanka, earlier known as Ceylon is an island state in the Indian Ocean, separated from the Indian subcontinent by the Palk Strait, linked by a series of long coral islands known as Adam's Bridge; low-lying areas in the North and the South, surrounding south-central uplands. It was visited by the Portuguese in 1505, taken by the Dutch in 1658, and occupied by the British in 1796. It became a British colony in 1802. Tamil labourers were brought in from South India during the colonial rule to work on coffee and tea plantations.

It was granted Dominion Status in 1948, and became the independent Republic of Sri Lanka in 1972. Acute political tension between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the Hindu Tamil minority, who wished to establish an independent state in the North and the East through the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). There was considerable increase in racial violence during the 1980s. A ceasefire was declared in 1983 and agreed upon by the government and the LTTE, but the conflict soon resumed. Another ceasefire came into force with the intervention of Norway but the political crisis still persists.

Tamil Tigers, a separatist guerrilla movement in Sri Lanka, emerged from the youth movements of the early 1970s, protesting against the second-class status of Sri Lanka's minority Tamils, who represent 18% of the predominantly Sinhalese population. By the mid-1980s, the 'Tigers' had several well-trained and well-equipped armies of liberation, with training and staging bases in Tamil Nadu in South India.

They demanded *Tamil Eelam*, an independent homeland in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Most powerful of them were the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), led by Vellupillai Prabhakaran, having gained by 1986 control of the northern Jaffna peninsula. Their relations with the Indian Government deteriorated from 1987, when Rajiv Gandhi's peace accord with President Jayewardene brought the Indian army into Sri Lanka. Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber on May 21, 1991 at Seriperumbdur in Tamil Nadu. After a 26-year military campaign, the Sri Lankan army defeated the Tamil Tigers on May 18, 2009, bringing the civil war to an end.

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## **1. Pigs Can't Fly**

The first part of the novel begins with spend-the-days, in which the grandchildren congregate in Ammachi and Appachi's home. Arjie and his female cousins, as usual, play their game of bride-ride, which is interrupted when their cousin Tanuja (Her Fatness) refuses to indulge Arjie's desire to be bride. The adults ultimately discover their game, and one uncle tells Arjie's father, "You have a funny one here." Arjie is no longer allowed to play with the girls. When he questions his mother, she responds with "because the sky is high and pigs can't fly, that's why".

## **2. Radha Aunty**

The second chapter focusses on the return of Radha Aunty from America. Radha Aunty and Arjie develop a special relationship, and both become involved in a performance of *The King and I*. Although she receives an engagement offer from Rajan Nagendra, she is reluctant and develops a friendship with Anil Jayasinghe, a Sinhalese who is also involved in the play. The extended family warns Radha and encourages her to put an end to the relationship. Radha Aunty goes to Jaffna to forget about Anil.

On her return journey, she and other Tamils are attacked on the train. Eventually, she becomes engaged to Rajan. It is



through the friendship between his aunt and Anil that Arjie begins to understand the concept of ethnicity and the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict.

### **3. See No Evil, Hear No Evil**

In the third story, while Arjie's father is in Europe, Daryl Uncle returns to Sri Lanka from Australia to investigate allegations of government torture. Arjie is cognizant of a long history between Amma and Daryl Uncle, but is unsure of the cause of the tensions until he has an eventual realization of their affair.

When Arjie becomes very ill, Amma decides to take Arjie from Colombo to the countryside to recover. Much to Arjie's surprise, Daryl Uncle visits Arjie and his mother throughout their stay in the hill country. Following his recovery, Arjie and Amma return to Colombo, Daryl Uncle goes to Jaffna. When there is news that violence has broken out in Jaffna, Amma becomes worried about Daryl. Eventually, they receive word that Daryl's body was found on the beach, supposedly from drowning, but they suspect that he was killed first. Although Amma tries to pursue the matter further, a civil rights lawyer tells her that there is nothing they can do, given the state of the country, and that "one must be like the three wise monkeys: See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." Arjie quickly becomes a man, he steps up as man of the house while his father is away and supports the family during the time of tragedy.

### **4. Small Choices**

In a plot shift, Appa's school friend's son Jegan comes to the family looking for a job and also lives with the Chelvaratnam family at their home. Jegan was previously associated with the Tamil Tigers, but insists that he has severed all connections with the organization. Jegan also strikes up a friendship with

Arjie and for the first time, his homosexual tendencies surface. Arjie admires "how well built he was, the way his thighs pressed against his trousers".

The Tamil-Sinhalese tensions build up throughout the story, and Jegan is accused of being involved in a plot to assassinate a Tamil politician who the Tamil Tigers label as a traitor. After Jegan's room at the hotel is vandalized, Appa decides it is best to fire Jegan and he leaves with hints that he may retrace back to his violent past.

### 5. The Best School of All

Appa decides to transfer Arjie to Victoria Academy, a school, he says, "will force you to become a man". Arjie catches the eyes of a boy named Shehan as well his notorious school principal. Diggy hints that Shehan is gay and urges Arjie to stay away from him. Arjie notices in himself a growing attraction towards Shehan as the two spend more time together.

The principal, nicknamed "Black Tie", ropes in Arjie to recite two poems at an upcoming school function. The function and specific poems are especially important to "Black Tie" as they are his final plea to prevent the government from reorganizing the school. Arjie gets nervous reciting the poems and forgets his lines, and the principal beats Arjie and Shehan for failing to help him memorize the poems.

One day, Shehan kisses Arjie on the lips and he recoils, but it is after the kiss Arjie begins to comprehend his own sexuality. "I know knew that kiss was somehow connected to what we had in common, and Shehan had known this all along," he says. Later, Arjie and Shehan have their first sexual encounter together in his parents' garage.

Afterwards, Arjie feels ashamed of himself and believes he has failed his family and their trust. During the school



function Arjie purposely jumbles up his poem after he witnesses Shehan emotionally break down from Black Tie's beatings. The two reunite and Arjie begins to come to terms with his sexuality, recognizing that "I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn't understand, into which they couldn't follow me."

### **6. Riot Journal : An Epilogue**

In the final chapter of the novel, rioters start to burn down the Tamil houses and establishments in Colombo. The family escapes to a neighbour's house and goes into hiding after a mob comes to burn down their house. After their own hotel is attacked and Ammachi and Appachi are killed, Appa decides it is time for the family to leave the country. After making love to Shehan for the last time, Arjie leaves Colombo and moves to Canada with his family.

### **IMPORTANT CHARACTERS**

**Arjie:** Arjie (née Arjun) is the protagonist of the novel which follows his journey of coming to terms with his sexuality as a homosexual boy growing up in Sri Lanka.

**Tanuja (Her Fatness):** Arjie's cousin, she dresses up as the groom during their game of bride-ride.

**Sonali:** Arjie's sister.

**Diggy:** Arjie's brother.

**Amma:** Arjie's mother. She is Arjie's first exposure to femininity as he enjoys watching her get ready for special occasions.

**Appa:** Arjie's father.

**Appachi and Ammachi:** Arjie's grandparents.

**Radha Aunty:** Arjie's aunt who comes to live with his family. Arjie and Radha Aunty have a special bond.



**Anil Jayasinghe:** Radha Aunty's romantic interest. He causes turmoil in the family due to Sinhalese-Tamil conflict.

**Daryl Uncle:** Daryl Brohier, a Burgher, is a friend of Amma and her previous lover, who returns from Australia to investigate government corruption.

**Q.C. Appadurai or Q.C. Uncle:** A former civil rights lawyer, a friend of Amma's father, he knows of the affair between Amma and Daryl Uncle and how she wanted to marry him.

**Mahagodage Somaratne:** Daryl Uncle's servant who is picked up by the police on suspicion.

**Baduratne Mudalali:** The rival of Arjie's father in the hotel business.

**Sena Uncle:** Arjie's father's partner in the hotel business.

**Chithra Aunty:** Sena Uncle's wife.

**Mr. Samarakoon:** The manager of the hotel owned by Sena Uncle and Arjie's father.

**Miss De Silva:** Guest Relations Officer at the hotel.

**Jegan Parameswaran:** The son of a school-friend of Appa, he comes to work for Appa. He was a former Tamil Tiger, although he only admits to being a part of the Gandhiyam movement.

**Shehan Soyza:** Arjie's love interest, whom he meets at Victoria Academy.

**The Black Tie (Mr. Abeysinghe):** Very strict principal of Victoria Academy, he makes Arjie memorize two poems to recite in front of the entire school. Black Tie violently beats his students if they violate any of the Academy's rules.

**Lokubandara:** Vice-Principal of Victoria Academy, a "political appointee" at loggerheads with Black Tie.