



Reef

Romesh Gunesekera

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Reef is the elegant and moving story of Triton, a talented young chef so committed to pleasing his master's palate that he is oblivious to the political unrest threatening his Sri Lankan paradise. It is a personal story that parallels the larger movement of a country from a hopeful, young democracy to troubled island society. It is also a mature, poetic novel which the British press has compared to the works of James Joyce, Graham Greene, V.S. Naipaul, and Anton Chekhov. With his collection of short stories *Monkfish Moon* - a New York Times Notable Book of 1993 - Romesh Gunsekera quickly established himself as a leading literary voice. Reef earned universal praise from European critics and landed the young author on the short list for the 1994 Booker Prize, England's highest honor for fiction. Reef explores the entwined lives of Mr. Salgado, an aristocratic marine biologist and student of sea movements and the disappearing reef, and his houseboy, Triton, who learns to polish silver until it shines like molten sun; to mix a love cake with ten eggs, creamed butter, and fresh cashew nuts; to marinate tiger prawns; and to steam parrot fish. Through these characters and the forty years of political disintegration their country endures, Gunsekera tells the tragic, sometimes comic, story of a lost paradise and a young man coming to terms with his destiny.

Reef Details

Date : Published 1998 by Granta (first published 1994)

ISBN : 9781862070943

Author : Romesh Gunsekera

Format : Paperback

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Novels, Cultural, Asia

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Victoria says

This is such a simple, yet compelling and beautiful tale. It highlights man's greed and how it leads to destruction at the same time as showing how man needs to provide and nurture and learn and protect. Titan's devotion to learning about food and where it ends up taking him is incredible, I could taste the meals he put together and felt his disappointment when praise for them was not forthcoming. The house he worked in was so symbolic of all aspects of Sri Lankan life that it is almost impossible to go into in such a short review. Mr Salgado's return to a dangerous island to save the woman he once loved is almost an afterthought yet demonstrates man's capacity to give as well as destroy. There is such depth and richness to this book, I highly recommend you read it for yourself!

Leke Giwa says

A top notch writer; so many fine descriptions in this work eg 'we drove...whistling over a ribbon of tarmac...framing the landscape into a kaleidoscope of bluish jewels' 'adventurers...each with their flotilla of disturbed hope and manic wanderlust'. 'the shallow water seethed with creatures...whirling tails...sea snakes, sea slugs, tentacles sprouting and grasping...a jungle of writhing shapes' 'the debris of one mind floats to another. The same little polyp grows the idea in another head'. A distinguished wordsmith

Paul says

Loved this book; paradise lost destroyed by man's greed and inhumanity. But there is a love story running through it and a passion for food cooked with love and care. It begins in a tropical paradise and ends in grey and wet London; sounds the wrong way round to me!

Zanna says

It's not what we do every day but the thoughts we live with, gentleman amateur of science Mister Salgado says. Triton, his cook and disciple, contemplates in this story not the ecosystems of the reef and shore that fascinate the man he serves, but Mister Salgado himself, his moods and needs, his relationships, and above all the food to be prepared for him. At times I felt that Triton was Mister Salgado's heart, feeling more intensely than the man he watches vicarious excitement, jubilation, misery. He has his own life and ideas, devouring hundreds of books, but in this little book, he orbits his employer.

I was reminded of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, one strand of which is narrated by the protagonists' houseboy, and also V. S Naipaul's novella *In a Free State*, which, quite similar in

structure but totally different in mood, is told from the point of view of a servant. Is the servant-narrated tale doomed to be bourgeois? Like Ugwu in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Triton adores his employer. Mister Salgado's taciturn assistant Wijetunga reveals himself to be some sort of communist sympathiser in a very vague conversation that makes Triton shiver uncomfortably. Nobody reading this could possibly wish for any kind of revolution. No world could be happier than this, surely? So, it's a lightweight book, a crisp and shimmering snowflake of a story that opens a channel for empathy, not solidarity. Hence, I can't give 5 stars.

The sensuous pleasures of cerebral activity (he is Fanon's colonized intellectual) absorb Mister Salgado's attention a little less as he falls in love with Miss Nili. Triton falls in love with her too of course, but only insofar as he is Mister Salgado's heart; he cannot separate from the other man to become jealous, to desire his own relationship with Miss Nili, he only wants their love to succeed, and to that end woos both of them with ever more sumptuous food.

In this floating dreamworld, politics is an increasingly ugly rumble in the background, but Gunasekara isn't subsuming it here; its parallel, I think, is the quietly dying reef, an ecological disaster going on unremarked, and the land-hungry sea. Sooner or later the country will explode into violence, Mister Salgado in his books, his love, his social life, the cosy cocoon of his mind, can stay untouched by it only so long. A journalist comes to ask him how the rising sea level is affecting life in coastal villages, a subject he knows nothing about. The question disturbs him, but he responds with a kind of extravagant denial: "Maybe the sea is rising, but maybe it's because Armstrong kicked the moon..."

Triton's voice is light and lovely, his descriptions are gorgeous, a sensuous pleasure to read. As a food-lover I relished the care and detail given to describing cooking and preparing, but as a vegan I was often disgusted as well! This admixed delight and disgust is perhaps not unintended. Mister Salgado chastises Triton as a youth for killing a bird, Triton tells Mister Salgado the story of the Thousand Bloody Little Fingers. Disgust, anger at violence, is evoked on purpose. In Triton's mind chicken fat and milk floating in water mirrors talk about astrology, a milky way taking a destined shape. I disagree with this reading. The seemingly inevitable violence to come is signalled in the bodily fluids of farmed animals, yet no killing, suggested in the stars or not, is unavoidable – people choose to exploit, torment and murder others, and have the power to do otherwise. Triton, without power, without community, can only observe from his shelter. He is lucky, and the story ends happily (this isn't a spoiler because the tale opens with its ending – it's told as memory) because the personal, the emotional, is always paramount. What terrible things happen, elsewhere, we muse, standing above the strandline. But deeper reflection comes to us there; as Triton muses, the sea is all one.

Gerhard says

The novel opens on the island of Ceylon. It is 1962 and in ten years' time the country's name will change to Sri Lanka. Triton is an 11-year old boy who accidentally sets fire to a thatched roof in his school compound. He is taken by his uncle to the house of the young bachelor Sanjan Salgado where he is to be employed as a lowly houseboy under the tyrannical rule of Joseph the head servant. Mr Salgado is a marine biologist with an obsessive interest in all things related to the ocean that encircles the island paradise -- in particular the nature, formation and fragility of the coral reef. Triton is inexperienced, unused to the alien ways of city life, and in awe of his enigmatic master. His simple duties consist of serving Mr Salgado's morning tea, and sweeping the veranda and the outside steps with an unwieldy broom twice as large as he is. But Triton is nothing if not resourceful. Soon he starts taking an interest in the old cook Lucy's kitchen activities, and before long she initiates him into the art of chopping onions. This is the beginning of Triton's life-long passion for the preparing and serving of sumptuous food. Later he turns the tables on Joseph, resulting in the

obnoxious servant being fired by Mr Salgado. When Lucy retires to her jungle town, Triton starts coming into his own as a human being with a right to exist in a particular time and place, living only to serve his revered Mr Salgado to the best of his capabilities.

When the master befriends the beguiling hotel worker Nili, it soon becomes apparent that an intimate relationship is on the cards for the couple. Triton takes note of the developments with a keen observing eye. He certainly approves of the happiness experienced by Sanjan and Nili; but his constant awareness of Nili's mysterious feminine qualities, turning the hitherto easy going all-male household on its head (not to mention his growing need to be acknowledged and praised by her), release conflicting emotions in him. With time the three of them come to form a contained enclave of their own, frequently augmented by a blend of local and foreign friends and acquaintances descending on the Salgado house for holiday celebrations, poker parties and amiable speculation on the affairs of the day -- and the consuming of Triton's renowned gastronomical feasts and ice-cold beer. But in a country where uneasy political situations and ever-evolving civic unrest form an ominous part of the fiber of day-to-day living, the world these characters inhabit is as delicate as Mr Salgado's beloved coral reef and as prone to irrevocable change.

I am lost in admiration of Romesh Gunsekera's breath-taking prose. He is capable of the most sensuous descriptions concerning the preparation of food that I have ever come across. The passage detailing the creation of a love cake with ten eggs, creamed butter, honey and fresh cashew nuts is a miracle of evocative writing -- likewise his precise rendition of the careful consideration needed to ensure the perfect turkey bake. Gunsekera imbues his pages with the bite of chilies; the rich complexities of curry; the tartness of lime juice; and the subtle sweetness of coconut, and make one long for the taste of the succulent chicken curries and the exotic steamed parrot fish prepared by Triton. But the author is equally capable of a flint-sharp description of a visit to a morning fish market where blood and gore flow unchecked and fishermen calmly butcher a manta ray and a shark (and even an unfortunate dolphin) in uncompromising images.

On the strength of this elegiac debut by Romesh Gunsekera (shortlisted for the 1994 Booker Prize), I will be hunting down his subsequent novels and short story collections for a further taste of his unique talent. This is my book of the year so far, and I doubt that it will be eclipsed any time soon.

Colleen says

Love it! The best storytellers and stories seem to come from Sri Lanka.

Shafika A. Ghani says

Firstly, when I read this book, I think of my fiction class mentor, who is this book's author, speaking to me. And it helps because I knew him as a person who sees humour and whackiness in ordinary things. Reef's strength is in its compelling yet simple language and the chemistry between the characters of Ranjan Salgado and Triton, Ranjan and Nila, Triton and Joseph.

I thought that the part about Joseph running away from home could be developed into something more. The initial introduction of Joseph as the sinister lurking being of the house had been a potential for something more. I was a tad disappointed that he was made to easily disappear and Triton felt too simply, pleased at this.

My favourite take-aways from this book would be the references to Sri Lankan/Indian cooking and the ocean to explain the human condition. I thought this was the best part of the book.

"Are all oceans connected to one another?" I remembered Triton asking Salgado.

True enough, the book's ending about the separation of Salgado and Nila came to a conclusion with him deciding to find her again. The bit about how earth, people, wounds, salt were related to water. How Nila and Salgado are geographically separated but the fact that it is what 'we think we are' that always defines who we really are in the end. And so Salgado will cross the ocean to find her because he had always been Nila's lover.

Caroline says

This is beautiful, sensual writing. I heard Romesh Gunsekera on the BBC's World Book Club and was tremendously impressed by his unassuming wisdom and ability to share his knowledge about fine writing.

The novel skillfully adapts its tone to the protagonist's aging from about 10 to 16 or so, I would guess. The scenes shift back and forth from brutality, early on for the boy, to love, joy, delight, and violence again. There is no explanation for any of it, except the basic decency that is the foundation of the relationship between the boy and the man he works for, to set against the horrific violence referred to briefly at the end of the novel as Sri Lanka sinks into civil war. The reader is left with the conclusion that one cannot really affect very much, but one can enrich his own and others lives through caring for them.

Natalia Pì says

I can't give this book more than three stars because of how unevenly I liked the first and the second half of the book. It's a very slow-paced story, and it mostly takes place indoors, watching the interactions between the narrator, Triton and his "master", Mr. Salgado. This is why the first part of the book feels very slow, and it is hard to tell what is happening in the world outside: the story is set in Sri Lanka, starting in the 1960s, but the events of the time are mostly only alluded to.

When finally reality breaks into the two main characters' lives, that's when the novella got more interesting for me. In the last 15, 20 pages of the book especially, there are beautifully crafted, meaningful sentences about life and the human experience that saved the book a bit for me. So make sure you keep at it, even if it's hard... That will also explain how a country boy like the narrator can speak in such nice language.

Fabian says

The type of novel that affects you in the gut. O yea. Seriously. All the dishes our protagonist prepares for his master seem scrumptious, the tongue salivates profusely with this much food porn! & the locale! Sri Lanka! Ever been there? Neither have I. But this book is exquisite in its crisp prose, its wholesome, universal tone. It's a story as ancient as the replenishing-then-destroying corals of the bright reef. I feel like I finally got back

on track with this one, reading my favorite type of novel. The one which proves to have truly earned its myriad positive critical reviews.

(12.1.17) Reading this in an empty matchbox studio apartment in the middle of murderville... I have fond memories of this one!

Stephanie says

Such a peculiar novel. The narrator, Triton, becomes Mister Salgado's houseboy when he is 11, in 1962. He describes his time in that household roughly until the civil war began in the early 80s--I think. It is often hard to know what is going on politically because Triton seems to barely leave the house. His world is so insular that he doesn't much know or care what is going on that isn't related to Mister Salgado's daily habits. This can be striking; his first visit to the ocean is described with amazement. It is also pedestrian, because his situation resembles that of many a housewife. Mostly, nothing happens. Or rather, there is no recognizable narrative arc. Early on, Triton wishes that the employee above him in the household would leave, and a few pages later he does. Triton cooks a turkey for Thanksgiving for some visiting Americans, and he knows how to cook well so it is a success. He sees his employer's girlfriend naked, and there are no repercussions. I never felt like I had a strong grasp of her character or Mister Salgado's. The adulatory reviews for this novel seem to have to do with the restraint and elegance of Gunasekera's prose, and the foreignness of the setting, but no, Details magazine, it is not "epic" (cover blurb). Triton is nostalgic for this time, yet he also recognizes that he was naive and not truly mature or free. Here is a sample passage that encapsulates the attitude toward the past: "The oriole came back... . It was small, and yet its voice could fill the whole garden; its yellow plumage like a lick of paint. It sang deadpan. No anguish. No fear of the eagle that would swoop down on it one day and rip its yellow feathers. In blissful ignorance it is completely beautiful; unruffled until its last moment, until it is too late." Reef is a song to this lost ignorance.

Asun says

"It's not what we do every day but the thoughts we live with."

I think what I loved the most about this book was its beautiful and captivating prose - taking the reader to the Sri Lanka of the 70's and 80's and seeing it all through the eyes of a young boy who inevitably has to grow up.

Steve says

A story set in Sri Lanka in the 1960's and 70's told through the eyes of Triton, an 11-year-old who has finished his schooling and gone to work as a houseboy for Mister Salgado, a successful academic and 'intellectual'. The book opens in Sri Lanka in 1962, 'the year of the bungled coup' and continues through the 1960's and 70's as revolutionary fever builds up in the country. The reef to which Salgado is notionally and limply attached to and its impending destruction is an allegory for the impact of political change happening in the country at the time, and the tragedy (in the writer's eyes) unfolding of a rather brutal destruction of way of life held dear. A passionate but ultimately wasted love affair woven through tells the same story. 'The

urge to build, to transform nature, to make something out of nothing is universal. But to conserve, to protect, to care for the past is something we have to learn.' Which of course is true, so....

A nice soft book to read, with a low simmering undercurrent adding some spice. Enjoyable, but for me the sambol was ultimately a little bland, too many questions left out there

Jim Fonseca says

An engaging story of servant and master in Sri Lanka. Triton, the servant, calls his master "The Mister." He devotes his life to him, so much so that it is almost (but not) a homoerotic relationship.

The Mister does little besides exist and piddle around. He writes and throws an occasional party and then falls in love. There is not a whole lot of plot otherwise. After the failed love affair, master and servant leave for England.

We are also treated to some delightful gastroporn as the servant lovingly prepares meals. Don't we all wish we had a devoted servant like Triton? In fact, he has far more initiative and common sense than the Mister. I'm reminded of a line thrown off by Berta, the housekeeper to Charlie, in the American TV sitcom 'Two and a Half Men:' "In an ideal world, you'd be washing my shorts."

This is a good read with a lot of local color of post-colonial Sri Lanka, although it's hard to put a date on it. A strong flavor of Merchant and Ivory and "Masterpiece Theater."

(Revised 1/30/2017)

Photo from SlideShare, "Sri Lanka old photo collection"

Nilu says

The first book I read of Romesh Gunasekara.

I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed every page. In some instances I could almost taste the love cake and the freshly fried patties. "Nili nona" and Mr. Salgado would've been people I knew or seen in the society pages of a Sunday Newspaper.
