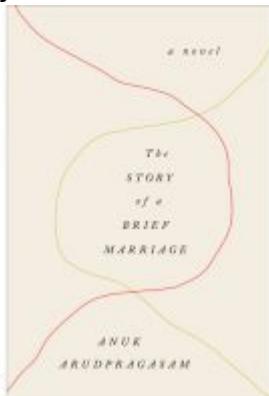


The Story of a Brief Marriage by Anuk Arudpragasam

written by Sarah Hoenicke | August 12, 2016



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208 pages – [Flatiron](#) / [Amazon](#)

In his debut novel, *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, Anuk Arudpragasam has taken one day and stretched it to cover two hundred pages. The plot points of the book could easily be summed up in one sentence: A young man, traumatized by life in a war zone, goes slowly through the daily motions of life until he accepts a marriage proposal, which returns to him a sense of his future. But it takes precisely the amount of space used by Arudpragasam to endear us to his characters—Dinesh and Ganga—and to endow the novel with the emotional impact he intends.

Originally from Colombo, Sri Lanka, Arudpragasam is currently a Ph.D. student in Columbia University's Department of Philosophy. Though this novel is set during the Sri Lankan civil war, which raged from 1983 to 2009, and all of the events in the book are shaped by the war, this is not a fast-moving, historically propelled story. Written in long sentences, much of the prose describes extended, uninterrupted periods of introspection. By meditating on the body and its functions, Arudpragasam deftly brings to life the trauma incurred by war, and the healing made possible through even the most basic human interactions and rituals.

Dinesh is a young man who has grown up during the war. He is encamped on the east coast of the country, along with many other displaced Sri Lankans. They have been pushed to the edge of the island by the fighting in the west, north, and south. Not only does Dinesh exist in continuous fear of the abrupt end of his life, he must also be on constant alert for soldiers who would forcibly recruit him into the fighting. When we meet him, he has lost his family, and is living alone in the camp. The book opens as he helps to amputate the arm of a young boy, who has already lost a leg in the daily raids.

The novel is carried by Dinesh's periods of thoughtful deliberation, which precede every action he takes. War protracts his experiences. With his life reduced to concern over immediately relevant courses of action, there is no room for anything else. He ruminates about where, when, and how to shit for nearly ten pages. He thinks about the role of conversation: "Conversation was like an unspooling of invisible fiber that was shot into the air as a stream of sound, that entered the bodies of other people through their ears, that went from those humans to others, and from them to yet more. Thoughts, feelings, and conjectures, stories, jokes, and slander were nothing but thinly spun threads that tied the insides of people together long after the speaking had ended, so that societies were nothing more than humans held together in this way." He contemplates the act of eating, and the things people carried before the war started and after. At least four times he ponders the different kinds of silence. By the time Dinesh is offered a proposal of marriage by the father of a girl he's never met, we know him well.

Arudpragasam doesn't emphasize the politics of the war or the geographical setting, though they form the background of the novel. By not doing so, his story becomes universal in a way it couldn't otherwise be. The Center on Foreign Relations ranks the current civil wars in progress around the globe based on their "impact on U.S. interest." What Arudpragasam does with this story is make clear what the loss of one life really means, in context. Humanity is a common condition of being—there are over seven billion of us—but numbers can turn mass death into something manageable, when it should be anything but. Here we are given a complex meditation on life within war—a narrative that holds the power to anchor us in the reality of suffering. This book has the potential to create change in the way people respond to news of conflict. Once it's personal, it's hard to remain inactive. This is fiction at its best.

There are few named characters in the book—an authorial choice, conscious or otherwise, that allows for clarity. When dealing with such a small frame of time—barely more than 24 hours—being introduced to any more characters would have lent the book a crowded feeling and taken from the story most of its emotional impact.

Arudpragasam follows the injunction to "show not tell" so well that when he strays from it and explains something to the reader that she has already comprehended it feels a bit like handholding. A good example of this is Arudpragasam's use of metaphors, many of which employ nature imagery and directly follow an experience of Dinesh's. These uniformly do a fine job, unexplained, in furthering the reader's understanding. But often Arudpragasam *does* explain. When Dinesh hears a strange cry during the middle of his first night with Ganga, his new wife, he goes to investigate. It turns out that the cry is coming from a wounded bird, which Dinesh decides not to put out of its misery. This is at the point in the story when Dinesh is feeling particularly hopeful about life, about having a future, and is thinking a lot about the value of continuing to live, though life is painful. Though it's already clear that the bird is an analogy to Dinesh's experience, Arudpragasam unnecessarily explains Dinesh's intentions after he decides not to kill the

bird: "He wanted it to think of its life even if it was suffering, for it to be alone in the presence of itself in ways that might have eluded it before."

Attempting, perhaps too ardently, to be clear is a small and forgivable weakness. This is a stunning debut. With no lulls, the story carries itself, and compels us to think hard about the real costs of violent conflict. To have accomplished this in his first book is really very remarkable. Much should be expected of Anuk Arudpragasam—it's clear he has much to add to the literary world.