



## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE GALLE LITERARY FESTIVAL 2010

*'A magical festival in an extraordinary setting. Anyone who cares about Sri Lanka will want to support this visionary undertaking' - Michelle de Kretser*

The Galle Literary Festival 2010 opened with a free main hall session at which a group of writers discussed the stories they had chosen to tell about Sri Lanka, and why. The session took its title from a reflective episode in Gillian Slovo's memoir where she describes being yelled at by fellow drivers on her return to South Africa after a long absence, uncertain of the road rules. Michelle de Kretser, Ru Freeman, Lal Medawattegedera, David Blacker and Gillian Slovo gave their own answers to the question **'Who do you think you are?!**

"When I leave the house, I put on my city face" was Diran Adebayo's answer in a discussion with fiction-writer Rana Dasgupta and biographer Claire Tomalin on the multifaceted **Lives of Cities** that have featured in their work. 'With every book I illustrate I become a new person' said Sybil Wettasinghe after five decades of making books for children in Sri Lanka. In her session **The Child in Her**, Sybil Wettasinghe described her own childhood growing up near Galle. Louise Doughty's **Travellers' Tales** brought to the Festival stories of her own ancestors and the trials still faced by the Roma in Europe today.

The transformation of reality into art was explored by Gillian Slovo in **Guantanamo** speaking about the verbatim play she worked to compile, interviewing the families of four young British Muslim boys incarcerated in the Guantanamo Bay Detention Centre. In **Exploding the Mango** Mohammed Hanif described to graphic novelist Sarnath Banerjee his 'kind of failed journalist's revenge' in humourously fictionalising the events around the plane crash that killed Pakistani President Zia ul Haq. While historian Antony Beevor surveyed the grand arc of popular mythologies arising out of post-war Britain and America, **Playing Fast and Loose with History**, Gillian Slovo shared a personal account of growing up in the South Africa of Apartheid, the daughter of parents who gave their lives to the struggle against it. 'Am I optimistic? I like to be optimistic. I don't know how realistic that is,' she said.

Writers discussed their experiences of writing **Endings** to their books and conjuring up **Strange Heroes** to write about. ‘I ended up with two antagonists’ admitted Shehan Karunatilaka describing his award winning novel in manuscript about an ageing alcoholic sports journalist writing an account of ‘Sri Lanka’s greatest cricketer never to achieve stardom’. In looking again at **Fables and Fairy Tales**, Rana Dasgupta pointed out that some characters, however, we can take for granted: ‘In fairytales when there’s a prince and princess we know they’re going to fall in love. You don’t have to explain that this guy grew up in this particular kind of household and that’s why he is particularly attracted to princesses’.

*‘A platform for serious artists to feature their work’ – Ravibandu Vidyapathi*

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*‘A kaleidoscope of different experiences.’ - Ian Rankin*

The first Festival day ended with **Kite flying at sunset** for families on the ramparts of Galle Fort, after a language lesson in Sinhala, Tamil and English, through a new trilingual picture book *Keerthihan’s Kite*. From the ramparts, festival-goers and Fort residents walked back to the Fort’s central Law Court Square for **a special performance by the Ravibandu Vidyapathi Drum Ensemble**, bringing the Festival evening to life. The Festival continued its showcasing of extraordinary Sri Lankan performance artists premiering new work by **The Chamber Music Society of Colombo in the restored Grootekerk** on Saturday night and by **The Chitrasena Dance Company in another open air show** in the Law Court Square on Sunday. Over 1500 people attended this final free performance, travelling into the Fort from all around Galle.

The Festival pushed beyond the literary arts in salon sessions on architecture and landscaping. In **Rooms of Their Own** architect Channa Daswatte described the peculiar task an architect faces when after designing houses to other people’s tastes and identities he sets out to imagine his own. In **The Bicentennial Garden**, Siril Wijesundara, Director of Sri Lanka’s celebrated Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, told the story of a garden that has been 200 years in the growing.

The Festival’s signature gourmet events explored new ground with a **Lunch in the Paddyfields** at Kurulubedde, downstream from Galle. At a **poetic tea party** festival goers gathered round to hear Jackie Kay read a poem ‘Serendip’ she’d written about Sri Lanka, safe and dry in the Dutch House while a freak rain shower poured down on the hill above the town. On the sea-front terrace of the Jetwing Lighthouse **Rana Dasgupta read by candlelight** while at dinner in the courtyard of a private home **Antony Beevor and Artemis Cooper told stories from Paris after the liberation**.

*‘I had an absolutely awesome time at Galle...The beaches! The Fort! The food!’  
- Amit Varma*

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*'Galle is a jewel of a festival, small enough to charm and big enough to excite the mind.'* - Jackie Kay

A lively **Children's Festival** raged through the weekend at the birthplace of Martin Wickramasinghe, one of Sri Lanka's most celebrated writers. The children explored the folk museum on the site to decide what implements they would most need to survive on an uninhabited island. They then set off by boat to Madol Duwa on Koggala Lake, the island takes its name from Martin Wickramasinghe's book about two boys' adventure on a deserted island. They hunted for treasure trove of books in the grounds the Museum and tried a different sort of searching with Mac Barnett's tales of kid detectives.

A series of **workshops** ran through the weekend for festival-goers to try out their own literary skills, whether they were **young adults writing fiction** with Lal Medawattegedera or fully grown ones **making comic books** with Sarnath Banerjee. A small group of **new comers to the theatre** spent three days with writer and director Ruwanthie de Chickera, writing and finally performing their own play written over the Festival weekend. Another group gathered round Ian Rankin at the bar to hear his **tips on crime writing** while they nursed their favourite detectives' favourite drinks.

The Festival in 2010 featured the work of **exciting small independent publishing houses**. Kaveri Lalchand brought the house down with her account of **Blaft Publications'** adventures with Indian pulp fiction, one of the sensations of this year's Festival. Sandhya Rao, of **Tulika Books**, the pioneering multi-lingual Indian children's publishing house, spoke to Festival goers about writing for children while in another session Mac Barnett told the story of **McSweeney's**, publishing new writing in daring forms. He described McSweeney's publications to date - sometimes in a box, sometimes with a pocket for a comb - and described their latest project burying emeralds across America.

On the final Monday morning, Festival goers had **a chance to learn about Galle from its long-term residents**. They joined a personal walking tour with a resident who had grown up in the Fort and whose family had lived within its walls for over 100 years and learnt to cook speciality Galle foods in a home in the Fort.

But the Festival had one more day to go after its crowds dispersed. A year-long programme promoting creative reading and writing in rural and urban schools in the region culminated in **a day of dedicated events for schoolchildren from Galle**. While one group of students set off on a historical scavenger hunt in the Fort, another made stories out of a rain of letters in the garden of the Hall de Galle. Mac Barnett got a group of students drawing bottles of Sprite to learn the tricks of storytelling while Sandhya Rao brought to life a myth of creation from a small village in Maharashtra.

*'I have attended literary festivals on five different continents and Galle is simply the best.'* - Antony Beevor

