

Home and Away

AUTHOR SUNIL NAIR MAY HAVE SETTLED HIS LIFE IN LONDON, BUT HE MADE HIS NATIVE MALAYSIA THE SETTING AND SUBJECT OF HIS DEBUT NOVEL, *WHEN ALL THE LIGHTS ARE STRIPPED AWAY*. HE MET WITH **SARAH REES** WHILE ON A TRIP BACK HOME TO TALK BOOKS, POPIAH, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF IGNORING STATISTICS.



Sunil Nair, the soft-spoken Malaysian author who sits before me, has an interesting theory on art. “I think artists of any sort need at least a decade to develop their skills properly,” he muses. It is easy to see why he would think that, as his debut novel was ten years in the writing.

His lengthy process was not due, however, to an agonising struggle with his craft like tortured authors of legend, but rather because real life was getting in the way. “I was working full-time as well,” he explains, “so I was just snatching minutes, which is not productive.”

Neither is there any drama to be had in his approach to the mammoth undertaking; this was no blind quest fuelled by tenacity to be published but rather an experiment in curiosity for this level-headed, London-based literature fan. “I had always written short stories but there was one that I particularly liked,” he says. “I thought it might work on a larger canvas, so I just gave it a go.”

THE ROAD TO PUBLICATION

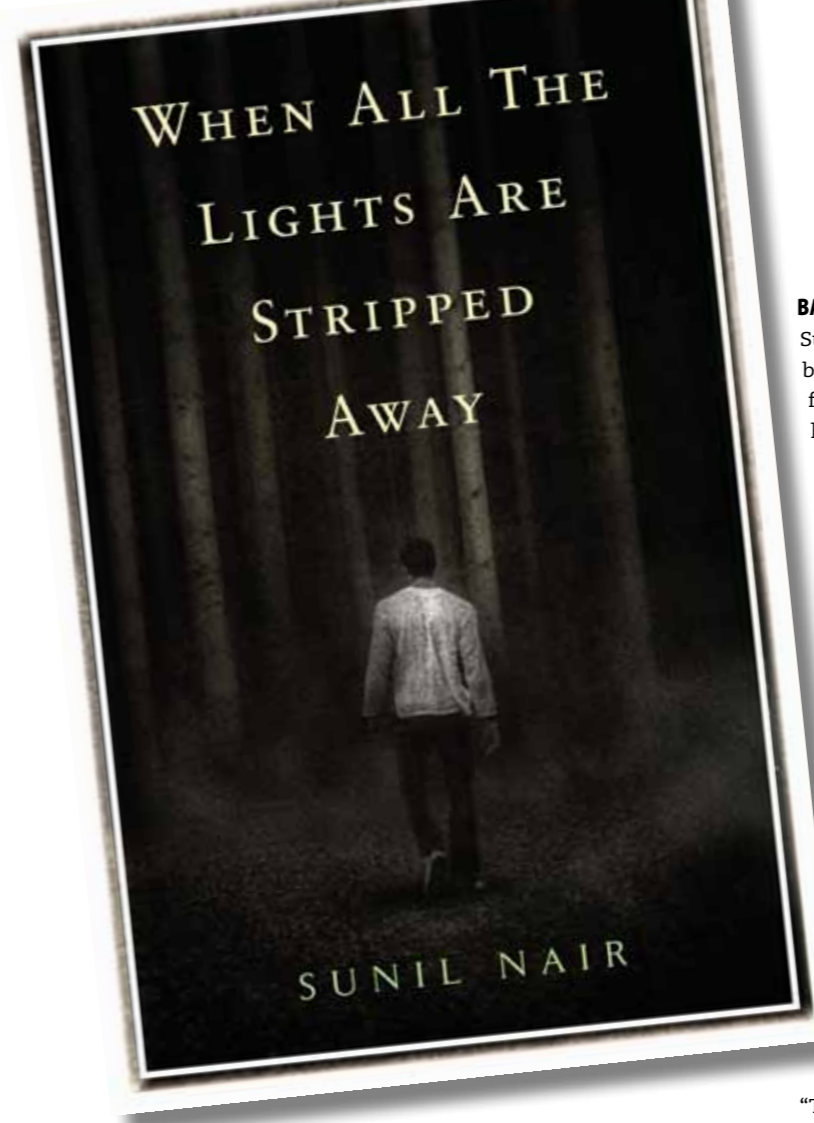
As the decade reached an end and the experiment became a book, however, Sunil became determined that his work would venture further than his laptop, and so embarked on the dispiriting experience of knocking on closed doors in a bid to get his manuscript in print. “I got 10-15 rejection letters before I got a yes,” he remembers, with a small smile, “but many were very encouraging. It was a ‘no, but’ rather than just ‘no,’ so I didn’t want to give up.”

It was international publisher Marshall and Cavendish that eventually gave the longed-for affirmative, and though Sunil is based in London, the publishers were eager to publish *When All the Lights are Stripped Away* in his native country and in Singapore before pushing the book into the American and British markets. “I hadn’t even told my family I was writing a book until that point. I didn’t see any point in telling them if it didn’t go anywhere,” he recalls, chuckling. “Once I explained that I was being published they were quite surprised.”

Publishing in Asia meant more visits home, and though his trips tend to involve rushing from interview to interview, he still finds time to catch up with his large family, and after our chat he is jetting off to Sabah to join his eleven siblings for the annual holiday.

EARLY LIFE

The fact his face lights up when talk turns to home life is proof that growing up as the second youngest of such a gang was an enjoyable rather than chaotic experience.



BACK HOME

Sunil is settled in London with no plans to return to Malaysia, but that is not to say that he doesn’t relish the opportunities for visiting. Like all good Malaysians, food is the big draw, and he revels in the chance to indulge in cheap, tasty local fare.

“London is a very expensive city,” he admits, “so it’s great when I am back here to go to a hawker centre and not spend more than RM5!” Despite his Indian roots, the food he craves most is popiah. “It’s all about the turnip,” he explains seriously, “and in London you can get popiah but the radish they use is imported, so it loses a lot of its moisture on the flight.”

Once he has got his fill of popiah and caught up with the family, Sunil will be back in London to plough on with his second novel – a literary comedy set in the British capital – which he hopes to have finished by the end of the year.

“It has certainly been quicker to write this second one,” he tells me thoughtfully. “You get more confident once you have been published.”

That said, his newfound confidence does not replace his gracious appreciation at being spotted amid the sea of manuscripts fighting for attention in the literary world. “The statistics are dreadful,” he says, grimacing. “I didn’t even look at them! I was very lucky.”

Whether luck or talent were the more important factor of the equation is for the reader to decide, but Malaysia should be proud that a local boy has brought his talent, and his debut novel, home.

“It was idyllic, really,” he says, painting me a vivid scene of hot afternoons spent racing through the nearby fruit orchards and playing in the beautiful surroundings of Muar, a coastal town 30 miles from Malacca, in which his home was located.

When he wasn’t racing around in the undergrowth, Sunil was huddled over a book, and though his older sisters had mostly flown the nest by the time he got to reading age, it was their influence that shaped his love for literature. “They left behind lots of books,” he recalls, “and I read everything I could find.”

The other female influence in his life was his mother, who was left to care for her son alone when his Indian-born father – a former plantation manager – died when Sunil was just 14. “My mother really valued education and encouraged me to succeed,” he says. “Most of [the family] went on to study to a high level.”

When the time came to select his focus for his own higher education studies, Sunil was pragmatic, following his mind rather than his heart. “I always liked writing,” he assures me, “it was always in the back of my mind, but I just knew how difficult it was to work in that field, so I pursued something else at university.”

Maths and Physics were his chosen areas, but it seems passion will out, and after a spell in Italy writing his thesis (and meeting his wife), he moved to London and got a job in academic publishing: a good combination of his academic credentials and his love for the written word.

When All the Lights are Stripped Away

When a letter arrives from his dying father, the life Anil has carefully constructed in the city shatters. He leaves his friends, his work as a cartoonist and a painter of movie posters, and even his pregnant girlfriend, to journey home to the town he fled three years earlier on his mother’s death.

In the short time left, he attempts to uncover his father’s ambitious political plans for him and who the enigmatic man really is. He stumbles upon his mother’s secret collection of paintings and is forced to re-evaluate her art and what she taught him as a boy. All these discoveries pull him back to the life he had wanted to leave behind.

Through vibrant characters and with precise, lyrical prose, the novel explores the universal themes of legacy and the complexity of inheritance against a backdrop of political conflict in contemporary Malaysia.

Published by Marshall Cavendish (www.marshallcavendish.com) and available in good bookshops nationwide.