

# A WRITERS *Choice*

*Sunil Nair is on to a good start as an upcoming author with his first book just published by Marshall Cavendish.*

By **JASPREET RANDHAWA**

**Malaysia born author Sunil Nair was in Singapore** recently to launch his book 'When all the lights are stripped away'. Sunil who resides in London with his Italian wife was born in Muar in 1965, the tenth of a family of eleven children.

As the son of a rubber plantation employee, Sunil grew up the hard scrabble way. His father died of cancer when he was only 14 and his mother took over the mantle of educating her children, a job she ably undertook considering Sunil ended up becoming a lawyer and several of his siblings are doctors.

Sunil wrote many sketches and short stories over the years, none that he ever considered good enough to publish. But one showed some promise about ten years ago. Some elements of the story come from his experience in Muar but very little in the book is purely autobiographical.

At a private book reading session organised by the editor of the book Tara Dhar, India Se spoke to the author about the book and his writing. Here are some highlights from the interview.

**INDIA SE:** How would you describe your book to our readers?

**SUNIL NAIR:** The crux of the book is the relationship between the father and son. The son has left his home after his mother died and ventures into the capital city at the age of 18, where he tries to build a life that is completely separate from what he left behind. The novel begins when a letter arrives from his dying father asking him to come home. The book continues exploring the relationships between the son and his father and also the son and his mother. It plays between the differences very strongly.

**IS:** Is the book is based in Malaysia because that is where you hail from?

**SN:** For most writers their first novels often contain many elements of where they were raised. When Anil leaves home he is eighteen and when he comes back to see his dying father he is 21. They are very formative years and I left Malaysia when I was eighteen so in a sense its true I wanted to keep some elements of life in Malaysia before I left for the United States at the age of eighteen.

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**IS:** You studied Maths and Science at university which aren't related to literature at all. How did you get into literature?

**SN:** I read a lot when I was younger. My sisters had a lot of books at home. The reading continued very heavily at university. They encourage you to read as much as possible from original sources and then take as many classes. I took many humanities and social science classes. And then I started getting involved in heavier literature. I took German for two years so I could start reading German literature. Then I read and studied about Russian literature but I didn't speak Russian. Those were my first steps into the world of literature.

**IS:** Did you ever do a creative writing course?

**SN:** Yes I did, but in University of Chicago every time you take a



humanities course, the writing training is intense. In a humanities or social science class you write a 10 page paper every week. The teachers comment as much on style of writing as they do content. So they would tear your paper apart and say "No that is not the way to write", "Start from scratch". That helped me a lot. That was more non-fiction writing, it's more descriptive article style writing.

**IS: What was your inspiration for this book?**

**SN:** I think every serious reader always wants to try their hand at writing. I really do believe that and the cliché that everyone has a novel in them. I had the feeling of expressing myself in various media through painting and through writing.

**IS: What is your writing process?**

**SN:** I wrote by hand and then typed it into a computer. Most of my writing was done in the morning between the hours of 4.30AM and 7.30AM. I am a morning person and found that the best time to write.

**IS: Why did you choose to include a nude art scene considering the story is set in conservative Malaysia?**

**SN:** The character of the mother to Anil is very emotional and tactile in terms of painting. The mother gives him the art of painting. So there's something in your hand when you paint. There are certain elements that appear in painting and sculpture in western tradition because they haven't been tied down by cultural norms. I wanted someone in isolation and the character of the mother is learning how to paint almost in isolation with some help from a teacher. It starts off earlier in the book where the mother herself decides to take off her clothes to pose for the painter. That was a sense of exploration in a tactile, physical way.

**IS: Would you consider moving back to Malaysia?**

**SN:** Not now, but maybe when I'm older.

Sunil has started on his second novel. It is set in London and is a literary comedy. ■