

Funny Boy is about a kid who loved to watch his mother put on her sari.

Books



Not a Shyam Boy

WHEN I LAST encountered Shyam Selvadurai, he was a skinny, precocious teenager in our native country, Sri Lanka. Confidently bossing adult actors around, he was directing his own adaptation of the Disney musical *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* for the local English-language theater. Fifteen years later Selvadurai, now a handsome, dark, curly-haired, 31-year-old author, chats in a New York café on the eve of the American publication of his first novel, *Funny Boy* (William Morrow),

his insightful and moving book, already a best-seller in Canada and selling well in Britain, unfolds through the eyes of a young boy growing up in Sri Lanka in the late 1970s.

Since that time, the Indian Ocean nation has been torn apart by a savage ethnic civil war, fought between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamil minority, and Selvadurai deftly weaves reverberations of the conflict into the fabric of *Funny Boy*. "You've got the sense of society descending into complete chaos," says the author, who fled with his family to Canada after their lives were threatened by Sinhalese mobs rioting in the streets of Colombo, the capital city, in 1983.

LEG UP First try for Selvadurai.

In the course of *Funny Boy*—which Selvadurai says began as a story about a kid who loved to watch his mother put on her sari—the boy, Arjie, discovers that he is doubly marked as an outsider in his society. His greatest childhood pleasure, concocting intricate pretend wedding ceremonies for his female cousins in which he dresses up in a bridal sari, and, later, his sexual attraction to another boy label him "funny"; his ethnicity provokes neighbors, acquaintances, and strangers to an enmity that will eventually drive him and his family from their home.

Funny Boy is fiction, but Selvadurai refracts elements of his autobiography through it—for instance, the boy's high school, where Arjie first encounters gay sex, is modeled on the one Selvadurai actually attended. Homosexuality is still officially illegal (though rarely prosecuted) in Sri Lanka, and there is no gay identity outside of the small westernized urban community he comes from. Selvadurai says he "knew inside" that he was gay before he left Colombo at age 18, but it was only after moving to Toronto that "he found a context" in which to come out. *Funny Boy's* international profile—including an edition on sale in South Asia—has meant coming out publicly in Sri Lanka for the author. "I couldn't avoid what the book was saying. I had to write it," says Selvadurai. "I'm a very private person, and now I find my private life is public."

Today Selvadurai still lives in Toronto, where he is working on a new novel set in 1920s Sri Lanka, while simultaneously preparing a film script for *Funny Boy*, slated to be directed for Britain's Channel Four by Gurinder Chadha, whose *Bhaji on the Beach* was an art house hit here. When Selvadurai gets stalled on either project he finds inspiration in the kitchen, preparing elaborate Sri Lankan meals. "I love standing and chopping things—my mind just wanders, and suddenly I have the solutions to various problems."—GERARD RAYMOND