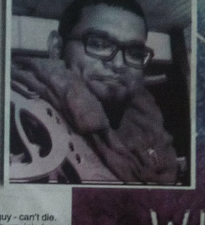
Tia Goonaratna

Icarus Weeps No More



THE SLOW SAD SUICIDE OF ROHAN WIJERATNE

YUDHANJAYA WIJERATNE

udhanjaya Wijeratne, a science fiction writer, who's also a junior Big Data Researcher at LIRNEasia, just published his new novel the Slow Sad Suicide of Rohan Wijeratne, after years of triggering social media uproars on his blog. Icarusweept as well just judging by the outpours of everyone around him. The book, which is on one man's journey to put an end to all his misery, is available on Amazon, Kobo, Barnes and Noble, Google Play, and iBooks.

So you don't believe me about how he could have everyone around him, here's his story in the mouth of the babes: (babe being Yudhanjaya)... which is quite a short story itself.

I've always been that guy in the class who totally drives his teachers insane and still ends up owning the exams. Seriously. Teachers ate a smart mouth.I initially wanted to be an astronaut. But when I was very young I sat down and did the math. Even if you fit most of the physical requirements, being born in Sri Lanka with a small eye defect means waving goodbye to the Space Shuttle on TV, and that's as far as that goes.

So there's this narrative where you grow old-ish, really sets in, and that did, in a way. I've been my own hand at quite a few things. Fresh out of school I picked up programming and had a stint in web development, won a couple of awards, started a company with four of my friends, and then worked on a very story-based science fiction game set in a far future where the United Nations had lost control. That failed, but it led me to set up an indie game news network of sorts called Indiegraph - I sold that off - and eventually transitioned to me being a tech journalist and editor for Readme.lk. Which was much the only worthwhile voice in English tech when we started out.

In between I've worked in retail, edited and published print magazines, and of course, written Icarusweept, the political blog that people read me for. About 200,000 different people read that thing every year, mostly from Sri Lanka, but also from lots of other countries. I've been an avid competitive gamer - definitely not the best in the local eSports scene, but I have a good balance of competition and fun as well. I'm told I'm charismatic.

Now, the common theme of all of this stuff was that I've always been a writer. Two years ago, I left Readme to join WSO2, I had the time to really sit and think through this, and figure out what I want from life. I want to travel, analyse stuff and write - and the pay is much better under the bridge. Once I sent that stuff together I started pushing each of the categories. So in the past few years I've piped around the world quite a bit, gotten to see all strange temples, studied Greek and mythology, cryptography, astrophysics and science at some of the world's best minds. The beauty of online education, of course, is that you generally had some very interesting friends and people in my life. Personality? Well I'm on who you talk to. I'm known here and there for commentary, and a lot of that is full of fire and fury, so to speak, and most of the time I would put me down as being what they'd call a paper - brash, reasonably arrogant, and always churning new stuff - and not in the way; I spend a great chunk of my week writing. I like Rick and Morty. I like cats.

I also dislikes are extremely religious people - that is, to the point where they can't get through without throwing some holy book in each direction. I also dislike vegetables. Seriously, I don't trust vegetables.

What inspired you to take the step?

Icarusweept was a space for rants. It was a space for political and cultural argument. And it was a space where people thinking and provide a voice for things that should have been said, especially when the media were too spineless to say it. Pretty much every week I hammered out a write up about something or the other, and I built up a following that sometimes hung on out of sheer curiosity to see what I'd take a pot-shot at next.

Newspapers copied my stuff... I met people who told me they were citing my blog in their thesis.

The thing is, I changed. Wordpress tells me I've published 302 posts, and that I have another 70 in drafts. It tells me that 179,248 people read my blog in 2015 –Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's last year in power, the year when I published that Port City expose. I realised that's a lot of time and a lot of effort that I don't want to spend on politicians. There's too many things in this country to be angry at and I can't go around doing this just for the amusement of some people on my feed. Figured I'd going to take my weekends and throw them at something more creative and positive. I'd rather pursue happiness than politics.

Tell us a bit about your new short story.

The short story is about a suicidal alcoholic from Colombo who signs up to be shot into a black hole. It's hard science fiction.

There's two elements to this. One was the suicide angle. This is set slightly in the future, and Rohan Wijeratne - that's our guy - can't die. Nanites in his bloodstream stitch up injuries. He's effectively immortal. All thanks to his insurance company, which doesn't want to pay up for a guy who keeps trying to off himself. It's a story about depression and suicide and a bit about how shallow Colombo society can be. The second is the black hole itself. There's a quirky type of black holes that spin so fast that they flatten out into a ring shape instead of a point. Technically, it's possible to go into the ring. Mathematically. What the story does is mash these two together. And surprisingly, it made it to the Amazon top 10 charts on the day of release, and I think a couple of days ago it hit #1 in the sci-fi and fantasy short reads - those are very competitive bestseller lists, updated every hour, and it's still in the top ten. That's the first time a Sri Lankan story has made it to the Amazon bestseller lists, and I was very excited about that.

I wrote it for three reasons, really. The first is my girlfriend - I'd promised her a story and I owed her one. The second is that I was fascinated with black holes and I had enough Halmilla that it seemed right to have black holes and tuktuks and prawn toast in the same story. The third is I'd been writing a novel for two years, and I wanted to try a different style of writing, as a breather, but I was too far down that original project to do what I did here.

Which parts of yourself do you see in the story?

Quite a bit. But that would be telling.

If given the chance, would you take the trip as Rohan?

No, Rohan's bipolar, impulsive and crazy. If I wanted to off myself that way I'd choose to go to Mars. Or some planet that would be kind enough to let me die with a bottle and a good book nearby.

What do you think happens once you enter the black hole?

Depends entirely on the black hole. Standard singularity? You get stretched, your atoms ripped apart, and then crushed back together into an infinite mass. Nobody knows how you would feel, but we're all certain gravitational tides would rip you apart long before you got anywhere really close.

A Kerr black hole? Mathematically, as the story illustrates - I've kept the science as accurate as possible - you could bypass the singularity and emerge in the opposite of a black hole - a white fountain, which spews out matter. And the greatest white fountain would, of course, be the Big Bang - the birth of a new universe.

So Rohan, when God says 'let there be light', is actually emerging - in his dying moments - into a new universe being born. He's part of it.

What else can we expect in the near future?

More novellas, definitely.

I've been working on a novel called Numbercastle for about two years now. It's a story about a Silicon Valley company that uses Big Data to quantify the social worth of every single human being.

It's about how an extraordinary man called Julius Common, who, in running that company, creates a world that's under this algorithmic bootheel of sorts.

It's set between 2030 and 2060 and explores things, especially in tech, that I believe will happen in our lifetimes.

Right now I'm putting together the stuff needed to get this out there. I attended to self-publish this as well, but there are some very interesting publishers who seem interested and I'm in the process of talking to them and seeing if this works with their portfolios.

It's dystopian science fiction, and Sri Lanka is not a country known for science fiction. Going ahead, I'd like to change that. Enough politics and war stories. I think I'll go dream of spaceships instead.