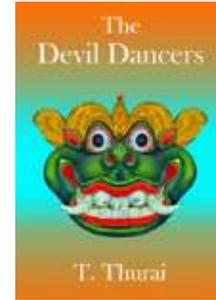




The Devil Dancers
T. Thurai
Hot Monkey Publishing



Ceylon in the mid-1950s was a pivotal time, with forces erupting that would challenge and change the country's direction, ultimately creating a 25-year civil war that would become a way of life for many. While *The Devil Dancers* is a historical novel about these events, it's replete with cultural and political observations grounded in fact, and will prove a rich read for any interested in complex, detailed historical accounts.

But the entire 25-year period of civil war isn't the focus: it's just the background, here. At the heart of *The Devil Dancers* are six main protagonists and a host of tertiary figures who move deftly in and out of each others' lives over a four-year period.

From a Prime Minister indebted to a powerful Buddhist abbot for his political position to a former monk and revolutionary's encounter with a woman who could help him forget his past, this novel is packed with insights into the violence and conflict that are imbedded in social and political change.

The involvement and evolution of romance, spirituality, and family dynamics in the fabric of a society that is unraveling makes *The Devil Dancers* a multi-faceted and complex read that will demand of readers the ability to appreciate both historical setting and the mingled and changing fortunes of peoples from very different social strata.

One might anticipate from all this that *The Devil Dancers* would be ponderous and difficult to read: not so! From the first paragraph readers (even those unfamiliar with Ceylon history and politics) will be drawn into the landscape and flavors of the country: "9 a.m. The sun is already at its height, the air humid and thick. In the street below, morning has erupted, an explosion of noise, colour and heat. Watched by a crowd of eager customers, a man on the pavement is cooking hoppers on a charcoal stove. The aroma of food wafts under the noses of passers-by, a humble reminder of life's pleasures. A pedlar lurches past, strings of clashing saucepans strapped to his back like fish scales. Shoppers haggle shrilly with traders; neighbours shout greetings from doorways; bicycle bells trill urgently as riders dodge pedestrians and animals. Like dragonflies, women in jewel-coloured saris dart through the crowd, hovering around market stalls before disappearing in a flash of blue or green."

Fictional characters interact freely with figures from historical record, the motivations and failings of a range of protagonists are included in descriptions filled with psychological and social insights, and T. Thurai's writing imparts information deftly in a manner that assumes no prior familiarity with Ceylonese culture or history: "There are plenty of other parasites in this country: people in positions of authority, who will resist change, who want power only for themselves. That is bad for Ceylon."

The theme of a nation being slowly reborn is carried through each protagonist, who finds himself or herself reborn in the transformative process of a nation inching towards new options.

Especially notable are moment-by-moment descriptions of two ethnic groups dividing the nation, which move from political to personal circles as the Tamils and Sinhalese destroy neighbors and former friends, creating barriers of violence and uncertainty through which new relationships and friendships navigate like ships gone awry. Individuals with no political connections find even family relationships move from uncertain to dangerous: "Using her stick as a scythe, Manju swipes at a tall arum lily, severing its head from the stem. She does not have the luxury of choosing between her children, indulging her whims as to which she finds acceptable and which not, abandoning one and favouring another. By her efforts alone, the family has stayed together. Until now."

How such deep wounds heal and how such deep rifts eventually result in the reunification of individuals, community and country lends to a powerful saga of love, violence, and perseverance, recommended for any lending library strong in historical fiction.