

Taking it seriously: a writer's responsibility

Guy Gunaratne

Responsibilities should tether the heart as well as the head. Thankfully, ultimate responsibility lies toward my family, my two little children. I have a responsibility to make sure that anything I write, as a novel or play, does the job of working emotionally in the world; but I also have to make sure that none of this detracts from being present to those around me. That's as true, I think, for a writer as it is a citizen or a father.

The novel is such an elastic form that it allows for a degree of disobedience. I love the form for its openness, so when I'm alone in a room, especially during the early phases of a new book, I feel beholden to nobody else. Part of the initial energy is animated by a sense of indeterminacy. I feel free and unbothered. I have felt myself feel positively tethered, however, when writing for the theatre. Its collaborative, communal aspect requires writing that serves other people, and that demands participation.

It's in theatre, then, that part of a writer's responsibility might be labelled a civic one. It sounds all too grandiose as I write, but however unfashionable, the theatre does demand of a writer, I think, a specific kind of direct address. When I think about this, I know I don't intend for everything I write to speak to some national discourse – vexed identity, borders, migration, foreign wars, and so on – not because these things don't concern me (they do, and always have), but because I think it's more important that these issues should animate me as a citizen, rather than just as a writer.

In using that fragile, smeared little word 'citizen', I always hear a hesitation that resonates in my immigrant heritage. As a writer, however, I can't help but feel the UK is the only place I could have gained an embodied sense of my own hybridity. It's that hybridity that runs within my writing, lifting from my heritage a commitment to dissent. It's a complicated perspective. I reserve proper affection for fellow Londoners, for instance, and yet, as a British citizen, I also share responsibility for what is perpetrated in my name. Hopefully that obligation, that sense of responsibility, which always feels urgent and necessary, produces work that complicates, rather than espouses or decries.

Broadly speaking, I recall answering a question about the degree to which I think of my readership when writing. My responsibility to any reader, I think, when it comes to novels, at least, is to ignore them entirely until the work is finished. It's the only way to preserve an impulse for discovery. I think of my isolation in writing

more as a promise than a limitation. I like to believe it helps to disappear, so that I can work on something that is hopefully worth the wait.

I also have, I think, a certain responsibility to approach my work with a level of sincerity. I'd much rather fail sincerely at something substantial, than lightly step around the kind of subject matter other people have estimated as being more appropriate for me. I think I say this because it still feels like a gift to be able to write for a living. So, I think perhaps a writer's responsibility depends on how seriously a writer takes their gift.

Guy Gunaratne

Guy Gunaratne is a British novelist and playwright. Winner of the Dylan Thomas Prize, the Jhalak Prize, and longlisted for the Booker, Goldsmith's and the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction, Guy Gunaratne served as Fellow Commoner in Creative Arts at Trinity College, Cambridge and is the current editor of *The Review* by WritersMosaic and Jhalak Foundation.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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