

SAMANTH SUBRAMANIAN

THIS  
DIVIDED  
ISLAND

LIFE, DEATH, AND THE SRI LANKAN WAR



Journalist Samanth Subramanian tackles the longest war of the 20th century. (Perhaps -- sadly it's up for debate depending on how one categorizes various conflicts). But there's no debate that Sri Lanka's deadly internecine turmoil of 30+ years was especially virulent. It dragged on for decades and ended with the slaughter of men, women and children (mostly Tamil) that has been decried as a war crime. Submramanian doesn't dive into an historical background or seem to address the broad sweep of the action. Instead, in what amounts to a travelogue of sorts, he goes to Sri Lanka and talks to anyone who will speak with him -- Tamil and Sinhalese, Buddhist and Hindu and Muslim, the bereft and the triumphant, the clear-eyed and the self-deluded. The prose is disarmingly casual and after a while I decided to dive into Wikipedia to make sure I was grounded in the basic facts of Sri Lanka and the war. To my surprise, much of what it covered was already familiar to me: without seeming to do so, Subramanian had deftly given me the context I needed. It's a remarkable, empathetic work of reporting. It's easy to say a pox on both houses: the Tamils had legitimate complaints but their rebellion/violence soon devolved into monstrous acts, while the Sinhalese have proven pitiless in victory. But the great gift here is not in giving all sides a (morally complicated) voice. It's in bringing to life the tangled misery of so many people, from government officials to wives of rebels who still defend the indefensible like child soldiers to orphans and those who may be widowed or orphaned but just don't know. One family was torn into so many pieces it's remarkable: a son sent away to avoid the Sinhalese Army, a daughter fighting for Tamil rights but executed by a rival Tamil group when she wouldn't join them, another daughter marrying a journalist who reported critically on the government and then paid a price for his boldness, another son dragooned into violence by the Sinhalese and on and on. Who do you blame in such tortured alliances? I won't soon forget a haunting passage where the author and others entered one battered area: a woman asked him to write down the name and particulars of a missing relative. A villager overheard this and asked them to do the same and soon they are surrounded by desperate people yearning to give the particulars of their missing father/son/mother/daughter/brother/sister/neighbor. Never mind that the author isn't really in a position to help. They just want to be heard. Other vivid characters remain: a stolid mechanic who takes days of patient waiting to open up, a pair of artificial legs waiting mournfully against a wall for the return of their presumably dead owner and on and on. Looming over it all is the inescapable sense that Sri Lanka's woes are far from over. -- Michael Giltz