

The Boy Who Speaks in Numbers

Posted on



Mike Masilamani

‘The numbers never add up in a war. It doesn’t matter which side is counting’

As Sri Lanka forges ahead with renewed hope after decades of war, Mike Masilamani takes a moment to look back at those dark days through the eyes of a little boy in ‘The Boy Who Speaks in Numbers’.

“The story centres around an unnamed boy, who is at home with numbers rather than words. A startled witness to the events that unfold around him, the boy seeks solace in the company of a constantly chattering-and prophetic-cow. This strange duo survives the war in unexpected and telling ways. Set in Sri Lanka, the scenes that unfold could equally happen elsewhere—in all places where human deaths are reduced to numbers and guns do not differentiate between adults and children.”

Mike Masilamani is a name that is closely associated with the advertising world having headed the family business, Masters Advertising, with his sister for nearly 30 years. Writing is a passion that runs in the family, sparked by his father, the late Cyril Masilamani and continued by his daughter, Kethaki a blogger Mike sees his take on fiction writing as a way

of continuing the rich tradition of story-telling that is a part of our Sri Lankan culture.

“There are so many stories in Sri Lanka just waiting to be told,” he said. “The reality we live in is often times more bizarre than fiction, and I thought it worthwhile to remind ourselves of how blasé we have become. What struck me in particular was how inured we had become to the numbers, be it the cost of a highway or the death toll in a bomb blast—but especially in a war.” As one of the characters in the book observes ‘the numbers never add up in a war. It doesn’t matter which side is counting’. However, our silence in the face of these numbers, creates another set of numbers—we become Zero Heroes, as the book points out.

The story set in the Island of Short Memories revolves around The Boy Who Speaks In Numbers, living in the Small Village of Fat Hopes with his best friend The Constantly Complaining Cow. After his village gets bombed, he spends a good part of his youth in a refugee camp called the Kettle Camp. The story also features a talking lizard. (He isn’t really a lizard; he just looks like one, only bigger—Maximus Lapsus Linguae).

As Mike points out, the story is not just about the horrors of war, but also makes the case that in war, we really are all on the same side— that we are all losers. A case in point is the Important Aunty who runs the Kettle Camp with an iron fist. As the narrator points out, she never misses a chance to remind the inmates of the Kettle Camp, how unfair she is.

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Yet in one of the more poignant chapters in the book, when she loses her son, after his bus gets bombed, it is clear ‘For all her importance she is no different from other mothers missing a child. Like them Aunty spends all her time hoping. She is hoping for a bus that never comes.’

The Boy Who Speaks in Numbers was first written as a short story for a children’s magazine, which Mike then expanded on, mainly to read to his children—Kethaki and Mandeep. “As the war got protracted, I think it was his innocence and naivette that made me reluctant to let go of the Boy. He didn’t understand all the ‘reasoning’ behind the war—he couldn’t see how anyone could justify the suffering and displacement that comes with a war. He became my spokesperson for the voiceless and nameless—the Innocent and Deceived People (IDPs), the book talks about.”

To quote Tara Books Editorial Director V Geetha, “The child protagonist in The Boy Who Speaks In Numbers, presented a startling shift in the perspective of the war. In the hectic politicking around a war, the horror of the war is often forgotten.”

In a bizarre twist, underlining Mikes’ point that the truth is often stranger than fiction, the story was turned into a play even before he had finished the story, by Mike’s good friend Tracy Holsinger of Mind Adventure Theatre Company. Then in 2011, the play was yet again brought to life albeit with some revisions, at the Hindu Metroplus Theatre Festival in Chennai where it caught the attention of Tara Books, known for their beautifully illustrated children’s stories. With striking and telling illustrations by Matthew Frame, who spent about a year trying to capture the feel and concept of the book, the book was recently launched in Colombo.

While conveying his gratitude to the many who helped him publish the book, he reveals that he is already working on a second project with Tara Books. Mike Masilamani thus continues to work on bringing inspiring and thought provoking stories to the reader willing to go beyond their comfort zone.

For those looking to purchase ‘The Boy Who Speaks in Numbers’, the book is available exclusively at all Barefoot outlets.

