

Winner of the 2005 Lambda Literary Award

Swimming  
in the  
Monsoon  
Sea

SHYAM SELVADURAI

**EDUCATOR'S GUIDE**



# Swimming in the Monsoon Sea

**SHYAM SELVADURAI** was born in 1965 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He came to Canada with his family at the age of nineteen. He has studied creative writing and theater, and has a B.F.A. from York University.

*Funny Boy*, his first novel, was published to immediate acclaim in 1994, was a national bestseller, and won the W. H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award and, in the U.S., the Lambda Literary Award, and was named a Notable Book by the American Library Association. *Cinnamon Gardens*, his second novel, was shortlisted for the Trillium Award. It has been published in the U.S., the U.K., India and numerous countries in Europe. Shyam Selvadurai lives in Toronto.

These questions were prepared by **KATHLEEN ODEAN**, a school librarian for more than 15 years, who now gives professional development workshops for educators about new books for children and teens. Kathleen chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Caldecott and Newbery Award Committees.

**Amrith comes to terms with his sexuality in this sweeping coming-of-age story set against the stormy backdrop of monsoon season in 1980s Sri Lanka.**

The setting is Sri Lanka, 1980, and it is the season of monsoons. Fourteen-year-old Amrith is caught up in the life of the cheerful, well-to-do household in which he is being raised by his vibrant Auntie Bundle and kindly Uncle Lucky. He tries not to think of his life “before,” when his doting mother was still alive. Amrith’s holiday plans seem unpromising: he wants to appear in his school’s production of *Othello*, and he is learning to type at Uncle Lucky’s tropical fish business. Then, like an unexpected monsoon, his cousin arrives from Canada, and Amrith’s ordered life is storm-tossed. He finds himself falling in love with the Canadian boy. *Othello*, with its powerful theme of disastrous jealousy, is the backdrop to the drama in which Amrith finds himself immersed.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CCSS.ELA- Literacy.RL.9-12.1, CCSS.ELA- Literacy.RL. 9-12.2, CCSS.ELA- Literacy.RL. 9-12.3, CCSS.ELA- Literacy.RL.9-10.5, CCSS.ELA- Literacy.RL.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA- Literacy.SL. 9-12.1.

1. Discuss the epigraph from James Baldwin before and after you've read the novel. Who is James Baldwin? How does the quotation relate to Amrith's life and dilemmas?
2. Describe Amrith's family background and how he came to live with Aunt Bundle and her family. Why does he tell Aunt Bundle that he doesn't remember anything about his mother? What was his mother like, and what was her life like, according to Amrith's memories? What information does Amrith have about his father? When and why does Amrith tell Niresh about his parents?
3. At first, Amrith doesn't understand references to homosexuality, such as rumors about Lucien Lindamulagé's secretaries or the teasing about Cassio kissing Iago. Once Amrith does understand, why is it so difficult for him to acknowledge that he's sexually attracted to males? Relate your answer to the time and place in which he lives. To what extent does he come to accept his sexuality?
4. What kind of person is Aunt Bundle? Describe her personality and her work. What was her relationship to Amrith's mother? Why does Aunt Bundle blame herself for Amrith's mother's death? What are some of Amrith's mixed feelings about Aunt Bundle? Discuss why he says at one point, "I hate her." (p. 92)
5. Talk about how Amrith interacts with Uncle Lucky. Why does Amrith like him? Recount the story of Uncle Lucky's father and his lawsuit against his brother. Why does the story matter to Uncle Lucky? Why does Amrith enjoy his time in Uncle Lucky's office? Who is Miss Rani? Why does Amrith eventually think that the appearance of Miss Rani offered a "gift" from the past to Uncle Lucky? (p. 246)
6. What is Amrith's relationship with Mala like when the book opens? How do they treat each other? How and why does their relationship change once Niresh starts getting interested in Mala? Tie the plot of *Othello* in with Amrith's jealousy. In what ways is Selvi different from Mala? How well do Selvi and Amrith get along?
7. Why does playing the role of Desdemona in *Othello* matter so much to Amrith? Why does he end up losing the role? How did excelling at the role of Juliet change his status at school? Describe Madam and why the students admire her. Explain her understanding of Amrith and his moods.
8. How did it occur that Niresh came to visit Colombo? What are Amrith's first impressions of him? Why do you think Niresh tells jokes and plays pranks? Why does he lie about his life in Canada? What is it really like? What's his father like? Describe how Niresh changes as he and Amrith become friends, and Amrith's family welcomes him into their home.
9. Discuss the theme of feeling like an outsider. For example, Niresh tells Amrith, "I don't belong anywhere," meaning he doesn't fit in either in Canada or Sri Lanka. (p. 172) Why does he say that? Why does Amrith also feel like an outsider, at one point describing himself as "a supernumerary, watching a drama unfold in which he had no speaking part?" (p. 214)
10. What is Sanasuma and why is it important to Amrith? Explain its connection to why Amrith's uncle came from Canada. Why do Aunt Wilhelmina and her friends say that Amrith's uncle had been "bamboozled?" (p. 260) How is Aunt Wilhelmina's gift to Amrith "a real link to his past?" (p. 271)
11. Talk about the title and how it's reflected in the narrative and the imagery. How does figurative language about the monsoon tie in with Amrith's emotions? Discuss the descriptions on pp. 32-33. Describe the scene in the sea where Amrith almost drowns Mala, and what he's feeling at that point.
12. Find some examples in the narrative of foreshadowing, such as a reference to "the awful and mysterious circumstances" surrounding the deaths of Amrith's parents (p.31), and the references to Aunt Bundle's sense of guilt. What's the purpose of foreshadowing? How does it affect you as the reader?
13. Amrith recalls that a year after his mother died, Uncle Lucky explained, "The past was very important as, from time to time, we could call on it to help us. And if we did not know the past, then we could not call on it." (p. 5) Why does Amrith feel shackled "by the taint of an awful past?" (p. 39) When does he call on the past for help?

# ACTIVITIES

## Have You Prayed Tonight, Desdemona?

Amrith forgets his lines at rehearsal for *Othello*, Act 5 Scene 2. To envision the scene, watch this two-minute clip from a Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production. In a small group, discuss the scene and how it might be acted by teenage boys. Talk about Amrith's comment to Madam that Desdemona "should be furious and fight him" (p. 221) and apply it to the RSC portrayal of Desdemona. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ealQ2Rv35ng>

CCSS.ELA- Literacy.RL.9-12.1, CCSS.ELA- Literacy.SL.9-12.1.

## On the Air

Working in pairs, research a topic related to Sri Lanka to share with the class. It could be history, architecture, food, or a similar area. Use the research to craft an interview in which one student asks the other questions like an on-the-air interview. Add useful media such as images, video, music, or even food. Record the interview to share or present it live to the class.

CCSS.ELA- Literacy.W.9-12.7, CCSS.ELA- Literacy.SL.9-12.1.

## Imagine the Place

*Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is rich with descriptions of places, including buildings. Reread some of the descriptions and then write your own description of a place in your life, modeling it on the book. Appeal to the senses such as sight, sound, smell, and feel. Choose adjectives and imagery that brings the setting to life.

CCSS.ELA- Literacy.W.9-12.3.

## What Next?

Amrith has most of his life ahead of him when the story closes. What would you include in a sequel to *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*? Write one or two pages that describe the major elements for a sequel. Which characters would reappear? Would the setting be the same or different? In what ways would Amrith change in the course of a second novel about him?

CCSS.ELA- Literacy.W.9-12.3.

## LGBTQ Rights

Amrith comes to understand that Lucien Lindamulagé is gay, which is illegal in Sri Lanka in 1980. Today many countries still limit the rights of LGBTQ+ people; some countries have laws that severely punish them. Research this topic and make a list of at least five pieces of information you consider important. Meet in small groups to share the information and discuss the topic, including why such hostility is so widespread now and was in the past.

CCSS.ELA- Literacy.W.9-12.7, CCSS.ELA- Literacy.SL.9-12.1.

