

PRESS RELEASE

The Suicide Club book launch gets lift off

Biggest book launch ever held in Sri Lanka on November 23rd 2010

Publisher Juliet Coombe takes you traveling the latest book to come out of Sri Serendipity Publishing. The Suicide Club by Herman Guneratne takes you back to an era when the tea planting business was still one of the most romantic and special industries in the world and shows you why the tea country is still such a fascinating place to travel to.

From the morning muster to the gin and tonics to dining with Lord Mountbatten to secret World War 11 operations from within Ceylon, The Suicide Club wraps an enticing tale around the misty hills and perennial bungalows, to promiscuous pluckers to wooing women to duping watchmen, it adds a lot of colour to the good old days. But the book carries a more important moral lesson. It shows you that through honesty, humility and hard work, anything is possible. It's a true riches to rags to riches story of a self made man who overcomes the circumstances of fate and triumphs over life with nothing but the strength of his back and the sweat of his brow.

The Suicide Club in those days was where the elite in the country came to gamble. Fortunes were made and lost, families destroyed, all in the roll of a dice. But winning or losing was done in a respectable manner. Membership of the club was highly desirable at the time, and it was only the carefully selected top families who gained membership. It is the inside stories with all the nuances, failures, foibles of those who served the tea plantations that make this such a page-turner. Herman says, "The story has never been told before and as intended, if it successfully transports the reader to the romance, the disappointments and the humiliations that we had to suffer in an era gone by, then I will be happy." The tales of The Suicide Club form an integral part of the story where fortunes were won and lost on the roll of the dice and add some lustre to a reckless day and age. The splendid chequer board headquarters of The Suicide Club was at Nalagiri, Matara and although the legendary dice throwers are no more, the magnificent property remains an iconic reminder of an era when life itself was a gamble.

The Suicide Club by Herman Gunaratne is considered by both local and international reviewers as the most exciting book to be launched this year, vividly tracing back through the past 40 years of his life, both on paper and on foot. He takes readers on a journey through the British plantation Raj during its heyday and what has become of it all in these post-colonial times. Having written about them, he's revisited each and every estate he worked on throughout his long years climbing up from creeper to planter to running some of Sri Lanka's biggest tea estates. Along with him on his nostalgic and at times precarious voyage which almost saw his four wheel drive go over the edge of one of the winding mountains paths whilst shooting the

book. Danger and excitement is all part of Herman's charm and love of the world's most romantic industry, which took the team of designers, photographer and writer to hilltop-bungalows and lush green tea spots where Sri Serendipity Publishing captured both the history of the area and its links to Herman's life.

The pictures shown throughout the book illustrate every aspect of what happened during these years and how these places shaped him, and this unique style is what gives the book such a personal feel. "You must take me to every plantation you worked on" she insisted and Herman's response was "I thought I could slip through this tackle, busy as I am running my own plantation Hadunugoda and the delightfully stunning 'fortress in the sky' Mirissa Hills. It was not to be. She mounted the pressure, as she believes you have to see a story as much as edit it. Eventually I relented and we embarked on a journey to the hill country along with her baby Amzar, says Herman recalling setting out to where it all began."

The Suicide Club based on his grandfather's crazy life motto you have to risk all, to gain anything, picks up at the point where all those years ago, Herman decided he wanted to work in the British run tea plantations. From starting as a 'failure' to working at the bottom of the workforce to now, owning his own tea plantation and buying back much of what his grandfather gambled away. The stories told in the book are all true and give us a never before shown insider's view into the lives of planters and their lifestyles. The issues they faced daily managing large numbers of people in often very remote and challenging areas of the country. In Herman's case it is how a man successfully brought up two children as an only parent, what he learnt from the Tamil people and in particular one woman, the great love of his life a beautiful French girl called Huguette. The Trout fisherman, the tormenting dinners, the black magic and witchcraft, resorts to merely hold jobs, all form a part of the story of The Suicide Club. The flirtations with British girls, the dalliance with lesbians and lunches with the King Emperor Lord Louis Mountbatten are related from the ringside and yet you feel you are there experiencing every minute of his exciting and at times very challenging life.

"As we travelled from plantation to plantation Herman kept being asked 'what memories are re-kindled in you on these visits?' I would have preferred not to answer these questions and I never go back, only march ever forwards. I have never re-visited a plantation that I worked on ever before. They bring back joyous and sometimes sad memories. I have never believed in living in the past and I would rather not think about the good times or the bad. The past as far as I was concerned was behind me. I only look to the future. Too many people in our land live in the past." But it is thanks to these revisits that Herman was able to see what state Sri Lanka's most potent industry is in now. "I completely disapprove of this beggarly concept of converting plantation bungalows into guest houses. The manager's bungalow is the symbol of authority. It was large, grand and usually sat on top of a hill commanding a view of the whole estate. If the manager does not occupy the bungalow that was meant for him, he no longer is the King who governs the estate. Sri Lankans like in most matters seem to have got it wrong. What the

plantation loses from this conversion to guesthouses is unquantifiable. The gain in the form of accommodation rentals is merely a pittance and the icon export a gigantic loss. These bungalows that were once full of laughter from dinners and illicit drinking at night while master's were away, are now just renovated and converted without any consideration for their historical value."

Throughout the process of creating the book, from writing it, to shooting the pictures, Herman went back to every plantation he ever worked in before he began his own one that now sells the most expensive and exclusive white tea in the world. He notes that the estates now are far removed from what he so vividly describes in the book. What of the Plantation Raj, you may wonder. "The picture I saw was grim. Tea crops have declined dramatically. Huge well-equipped factories have been shut down. Privatisation of the plantations has been a failure and if this trend continues this most enduring legacy that has been bequeathed to us by the colonial powers will be no more". Apart from the workings of the plantation, Herman goes into a more popular Sri Lankan topic; politics. The later chapters of *The Suicide Club*, the focus shifts to post-colonial politics and the influence the plantations had and how they affected so many political events at the time. Most of these stories are being told for the first time and are sure to show the reader a previously unseen side of some of today's prominent political figures. Herman explains, "This was never intended to be a personal story. It belongs to all of us who lived and worked on the plantations of colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka. I am just the narrator."

The launch: The launch of the book is on Tuesday 23rd of November at the Maradana warehouses will be the most unusual event ever held in Colombo. Bringing that moment in time, that era, back to life for just a few hours at the Warehouse Project in Maradana turned into a black and white 1940s setting. Known for Sri Serendipity Publishing House extravagant, dazzling and unforgettable book launches, the team say "it's going to be a book launch like you've never seen before". When the publisher who launched 'Generation T' in such a grand manner at the Casa Colombo at few months back, tells you this, you just know it's going to be out of this world.

The book is priced at Rs750 and can be bought from Barefoot, Odel or any leading bookshop. For more details or to pre-order call the publisher, Juliet Coombe on Tel: 0776838659 or email her with a book order or for more information at julietcoombe@yahoo.com.au website www.sriserendipity.com.