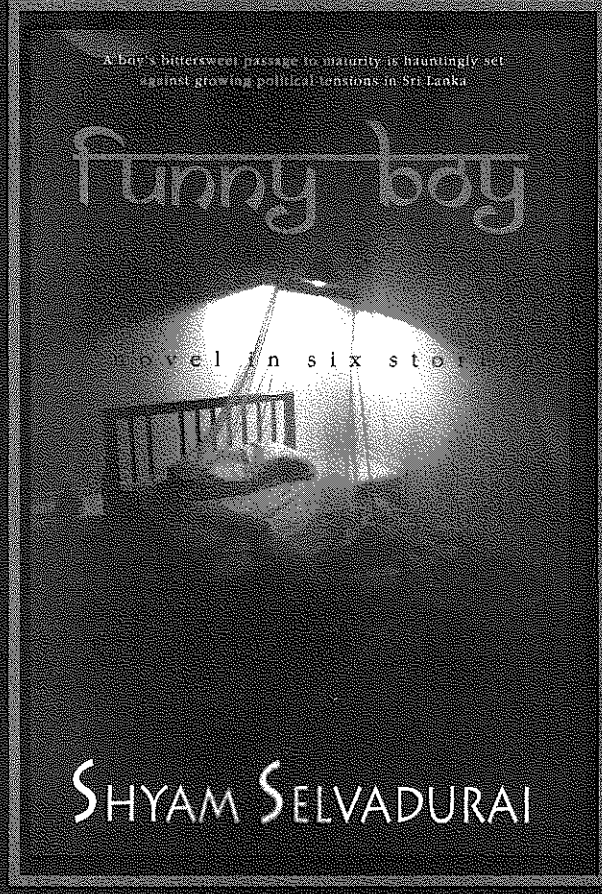


SHYAM SELVADURAI

In May 1995, Shyam Selvadurai received the *Books In Canada/Smith Books First Novel Prize* for his novel, *Funny Boy*, published in 1994. Printed here are excerpts from his acceptance speech.



I have been out of the country for the last four months and it was nice to know that in my absence *Funny Boy* took on a new impetus, thanks to this award. The award has also helped to increase *Funny Boy's* visibility at a time in our country when the message of the book has become more important due to this new "landing fee" of \$975—what is commonly being called the new Canadian Head Tax—recently imposed by the federal government on future immigrants and refugees.

As you know, *Funny Boy* is about the violence in Sri Lanka that leads to a Tamil family losing everything—its house, its livelihood, and its psychic well-being. Yet the book has a bittersweet ending, the sweetness being that the family is granted a reprieve—the family members are to come to Canada and start life again. True, they will be poor and lonely, but they will get another opportunity.

Well, if I were to set *Funny Boy* in 1995, I would have to end the book differently. I would have to say that the family members do not get to come to Canada. They do not get a second chance at life. Forced to remain in Sri Lanka, they would probably spend their lives in refugee camps. The father would find it difficult to find work because of the racism against Tamils. Arjie, the narrator of *Funny Boy*, might end up the victim of a midnight raid, during which the police round up young Tamil boys, take them off to prison, and torture them. In other words, the ending would be simply bitter.

My family was lucky in that we did get a chance to start again. But I calculated how much it would have cost us if we were to apply for immigration now, and it works out to 150,000 rupees—half a year's salary for a doctor. I'm not sure that even we, an upper middle class family, could have afforded to come here. So what will now be the plight of disadvantaged immigrants and especially refugees, who have lost everything?

I have always thought of being Canadian as a status conferred. I am sorry to have returned to this country to find that rather than a status conferred, it has become, in the words of the government, "a right that should be paid for." It is now a commodity to be sold; as some one in the government said, it is "only the cost of a colour TV."