

Perfect iSland

Sanjay Perera

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Perfect iSland is an experimental novel about the effects of political turmoil and personal tragedy on two ordinary Singaporeans.

A couple struggles to stay together as a dictatorship threatens their country in Sanjay Perera's novel *Perfect iSland*.

Ben and Toni are looking forward to their upcoming nuptials, but before they're married, Toni, a political activist, plans to use the upcoming election to try to bring democracy to Singapore. The Party, Singapore's ruling party, has its own plans for solidifying its iron grip: with help from a supernatural power, they quash all opposition and establish a dictatorship. As his country and his relationship crumble around him, Ben decides whether to run away or to stay and fight for what he knows is right.

The narrative switches between storytelling techniques, including prose, letters, and a script format. Some segments relate what really happened to the characters, while others are speculative contributions from the unnamed editor. Still others are from Ben's unfinished novel; these represent a blend of facts with supernatural elements and are intriguing, especially with regard to how reality affects Ben's writing. However, it is unclear how much of what happens is real, and how much of it springs from characters' imaginations.

The novel covers ample territory, combining political satire, commentary on modern living, and elements of a romantic tragedy. Each angle has interesting elements, like the dissonant cheerfulness that overtakes the population once their worst fears come to pass and Ben's struggle to avoid alcohol in a more and more stressful environment. Ben's dream, through which surreal imagery captures and comments on the similarities between dictatorships throughout history, stands out, as do the graphic but memorable scenes that arise most during the story's supernatural sequences. However, the story is pulled in so many directions that its whole is incongruous.

Early on, the story is prone to shifting attention from the main characters in order to give a broad view of life in Singapore and the effects of its oppressive government. This slows the pace and buries the plot. Lengthy, repetitive speeches and expositional passages also stunt characters' developments, while major revelations are summarized after the fact. Interesting character traits are introduced but underdeveloped.

Run-on sentences, misplaced commas, and overly long paragraphs diminish the excitement of action scenes. The dialogue is too stylized; the impact is heavy-handed. The tone changes in disruptive ways, and it's not always clear whether characters' reactions are appropriate.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (December 11, 2019)

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