

★ **The Water Diviner and Other Stories****Ruvanee Pietersz Vilhauer**

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In Ruvanee Pietersz Vilhauer's *The Water Diviner and Other Stories*, Sri Lankans recognize and reckon with each other and their shared history at home and abroad, discovering what connects and divides them. Full of richly drawn characters and empathetic inquiry, these stories capture the multiplicity of human experiences and examine collective sociocultural issues from the bottom up.

Culture permeates characters' consciousness. In "Beauty Queens," once-close cousins meet again after years and immigration have divided them, with adulthood bringing one of them new awareness of—and language for—the deep pain of colorism. "The Lepidopterist" examines the maturation, and ultimate success, of a neuro-divergent Sri Lankan woman growing up in the United States. "Hopper Day" and "Here in This America" trace socioeconomic and caste movement due to immigration. Whether it's the complexity of connection or the unexpectedly strong bonds of shared experience, there's a sense that there's little real difference between what sets people apart and what brings them together.

Vilhauer is especially deft at fleshing out the stories' protagonists. Often, their sex, gender, and physicality aren't immediately demonstrated. These details develop organically through social interactions and settings. There's the additional pleasure of cultural cuing: the same signifiers that might indicate sex or gender for a Sri Lankan audience are not immediately apparent to westerners. Rather than making the protagonists seem disembodied, this treatment creates a delicious empathy. The characters' experiences are the only way into a story.

The Water Diviner and Other Stories investigates many aspects of Sri Lankan culture, including the long-term effects of colonialism, ethnic and religious differences, caste and class systems, colorism, racism, immigration, and more. A deep humanity drives each story, with the quest for answers always undertaken by inhabiting another's skin.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (November/December 2018)

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