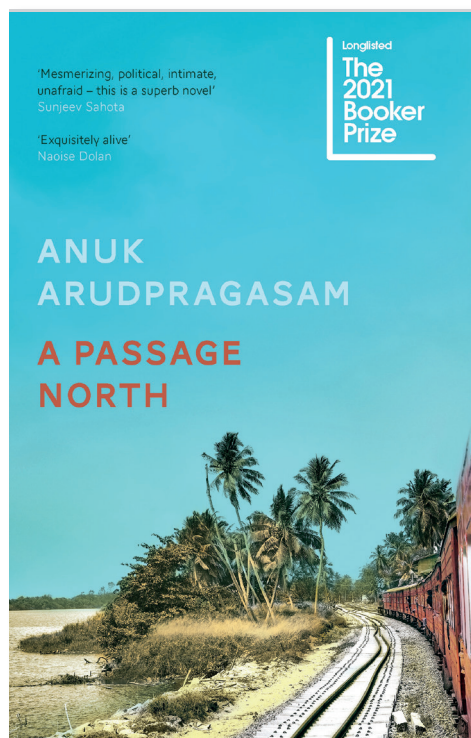


The
2021
Booker
Prize

From Judging Room to Living Room A Discussion Guide for Readers

Featuring discussion prompts from this year's judging panel



A Passage North Anuk Arudpragasam

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What the judges decided

'We had to find a place on the shortlist for *A Passage North*, in which Anuk Arudpragasam turns his poetic sensibility and profound, meticulous attentiveness to the business of living in the aftermath of trauma. The story unfurls like smoke as our narrator sifts through memories of a lost love affair while turning over in his mind the strange death of his grandmother's carer, a woman irrevocably damaged by the death of her young sons in the Sri Lankan civil war. In hypnotic, incantatory style, Arudpragasam considers how we can find our way in the present while also reckoning with the past.'

- Horatia Harrod

What the judges discussed: ideas to explore

- How do you think the premise of the opening pages, about living in the present moment, colours the book as a whole?
- How much a part of the book – directly or indirectly – is the Sri Lankan civil war?
- Did the absence of dialogue trouble you?
- What do you think the book says about powerlessness, in love or in politics?
- What did you learn about Sri Lanka in general, or about Tamil society in particular, while reading this?
- How did you feel at the end?

About the book

Anuk Arudpragasam's masterful novel is an attempt to come to terms with life in the wake of the devastation of Sri Lanka's 30-year civil war.

As Krishan makes the long journey by train from Colombo into the war-torn Northern Province to attend a family funeral, so begins an astonishing passage into the innermost reaches of a country. At once a powerful meditation on absence and longing, and an unsparing account of the legacy of Sri Lanka's 30-year civil war, this procession to a pyre 'at the end of the earth' lays bare the imprints of an island's past, the unattainable distances between who we are and what we seek.

About the author

Anuk Arudpragasam is an award-winning Sri Lankan Tamil novelist, who is shortlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize for his second novel, *A Passage North*.

His first, *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize. Arudpragasam studied philosophy in the United States, receiving a doctorate at Columbia University. He credits Descartes' *Meditations*, which he discovered as a teenager in a bookshop near his home in Colombo, Sri Lanka, for setting him off on that path. He is currently working on a new novel about mothers and daughters in the Tamil diaspora.

The author says...

'I'm from a Tamil family of means in Colombo and grew up far away from the war in the northeast, which is where my family is originally from. I didn't set out to write about war when I began writing fiction, but after witnessing the government's systematic destruction of Tamil society during the final phase of fighting, I have been unable, like many Tamils outside the war zone, to stop thinking about it.

'My first novel was an attempt, borne out of some desire to punish myself, to imagine and inhabit that violence as far as I could. I have tried to move away from depicting violence directly in my writing since then, and *A Passage North* is more about witnessing violence from afar than it is about experiencing it up close. What does it mean to witness such violence virtually, after the fact, and be totally powerless to act? What does it mean to feel that the world is coming to an end when nothing in one's physical environment registers any trace of that fact? These are some of the questions *A Passage North* tries to explore, and in that sense this book is closer to my own experience of the war.'

Further reading

- Anuk Arudpragasam, *The Story of a Brief Marriage*
- Romesh Guneseckera, *Reef*
- Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*
- Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*
- Thomas Bernhard, *Extinction*
- Robert Musil, *The Perfect Thing of Love*