

The magic of 100 Words: From Iowa to ST

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When one is abroad, a question that one often asks oneself is "What shall I take home from here?"

In the summer of 1997, in the corn-field-filled state of Iowa in the USA, where I had gone to attend a three-month International Writing Course under the sponsorship of the American Center, this is what I was asking myself.

One thing I had got involved in was to be in the advisory board of a magazine called "100 Words" sold for \$ 3, where each page contained a little text, poetry or prose, on the theme. The work entailed ticking a text that I liked from a selection. It was a new experience, seeing such short texts replete with multiple meanings and the ability to move you. It was a new experience to write in such a way too.

This, I thought, this I have to take home. It was an idea too beautiful to leave behind.

Where to begin? We did not have the resources that the United States had to bring out an elegant and arty journal once a month. Yet if human beings know how to do one thing well, it is adaptation, or we would have been wiped off the earth as a species. What came out, as regular as the sun, in printed form in this country? Newspapers.

I had already been involved in the

Sunday Times as a journalist, and when I spoke to the Features Editor Renuka Sadanandan, she was willing to give space to it. At the beginning writer friends like Anne Ranasinghe, Punyakante Wijenaik, Alfreda de Silva, Carl Muller contributed to the monthly 100 word page in the Sunday Times, and helped to set a standard. Poetess Anne Ranasinghe was generous with her advice. With all their help, a page was created where writing was looked at as craft as well as ideas.

From its inception —the page was linked to the 100 Word magazine in Iowa in that it was sent up to be considered among the other contributions from around the world. There were a number of Sri Lankan writers published, right till the very end of the 100 Word magazine a few years later.

Our 100 Word page, however, is still going strong fifteen years on. I've been there from its inception except for two years when I wasn't in the country and poetess Ramya Jirasinghe did an excellent job of keeping it going. Throughout its journey, I've learnt much too. I know and understand the sensitivity some writers feel about being edited; I've seen some give up after not being published a couple of times; I've seen unknown names submit startlingly good writing; seen writers evolve and become better; been surprised by ideas, touched by the sentiment expressed — and always, always been joyful to know that a page dedicated for those for whom writing is sacred, still exists.

KalaKorner

Guinness Book of Records for releasing the largest number of new books in Sinhala within a year for 18 consecutive years (the figure for 1996 was 350). It also covered the release of 'Sri Lanka: A Personal Odyssey' by celebrated photographer Nihal Fernando.

The response to the column was encouraging. Talented local artistes, Sinhala books and CDs with quality Sinhala songs, Sinhala films and dramas worth seeing were all featured, including the veterans, Premasiri Khemadasa and Nanda Malini and many more artistes, too numerous to list here.

The only occasion I really felt bad was when I mixed up two names.

When Fitzroy de Mel died, I mentioned it was Felix Premawardena who had passed away. As soon as the paper was out, Manel Jayasena called me. I was very upset. I immediately rang up Felix, whom I knew quite well, but he was not at home. I left my number and he rang me back. The voice at the other end started laughing loudly. When I apologised profusely, Felix said 'Forget about it'. I felt relieved. We made the correction the following week. I was so happy that there are human beings amongst us who take life in their stride.

Just as much as I enjoy writing the 'Kala Korner', I hope readers will continue to appreciate it.