

Boys Finding First Love:

Soul-searching in *The Center of the World* and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea*

While attending the 2005 ALAN Workshop in Pittsburgh, I had the pleasure of hearing Laurie Halse Anderson share wise words regarding stories, light, and, interestingly enough, boys. As she spoke about the coming of age experiences of her son and his friends, she noted that the

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souls of young men may be likened to their feet. They are big and grow quickly but are crammed into shoe space that is increasingly too small. The interior lives of boys, the thoughts that occupy their minds and reflect their heart's true longings, are reflected in two recently published novels for young adult readers, *The Center of the World* ([Andreas Steinhöfel](#)) and *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* ([Shyam Selvadurai](#)). Both novels examine the experience of first love and the accompanying emotions and effects on the male protagonist and those closest to him, encouraging readers to wiggle their toes as they seek more space in the nurturing of their souls.

The Stories

Andreas Steinhöfel's *The Center of the World* tells the story of seventeen-year-old Phil, who lives with his twin sister, Dianne, and mother, Glass, in an old castle in a small German town. The father he has never met and knows little to nothing about remains in America. Glass' promiscuous sexual behavior makes the children targets of the neighborhood bullies' taunts and jeers and relegates them to the role of outsiders in the community. Phil is befriended by Kat, the daughter of the school headmaster, who is willful, proud, and possessive. When Phil falls in love with the new boy, Nicholas, Kat supports the relationship but soon finds herself falling for Nicholas' charms, too. In order to nurse and ultimately heal the wounds that result from the love triangle, Phil must decide what is most important to him, accept his own self-worth, and become a more active participant in his life. This novel is rich and multi-layered with several interwoven stories that take the reader backward and forward in time, weaving a complex story of love, betrayal, and family connection. As Phil reveals and reflects upon his relationships with those around him—his sister, his mother, his seafaring uncle, his adult friends, his lover, his enemies, even his absent father—we are pushed and pulled through time and given the opportunity to bear witness to his coming of age. Originally published in Hamburg, Germany in 1998, the novel rightfully earned the Buxtehuder Bulle Prize for Best Young Adult Novel in Germany and was short-listed for the German Children's Literature Award.

Shyam Selvadurai's *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* is set in Sri Lanka in 1980. Selvadurai describes the experiences of fourteen-year-old Amrith, an orphan living with his mother's childhood friend and her husband and two daughters, Mala and Selvi. It is between school terms, and Amrith dreads the long, lonely days that lie ahead. He plans to dedicate some of his time to learning lines and rehearsing for his school's production of *Othello*, in which he pines to play the role of Desdemona and earn the coveted prize awarded to the best actor in a female role, an award he managed to score the year before. Amrith is shocked to learn that he has a cousin close in age, the son of his mother's brother, a man who tormented his young sister and drove away his own wife. When this cousin, Niresh, arrives from Canada, he and Amrith become fast friends. Amrith is enthralled by his cousin's mischievous ways and finds himself sexually attracted to the boy, although the feeling is not mutual. When Amrith witnesses a growing romantic relationship between Mala and Niresh, he is enraged. Driven by his jealousy, he attempts to drown young Mala in the monsoon sea. Shocked by his own behavior, Amrith is forced to face his emotions and come to accept his identity, even if it means admitting the truth about his mother and living a life he never expected to lead. The novel reflects a story-within-a-story form, as the primary plot events parallel Amrith's dealings with the play performance, as well as the play itself. The love, rage, jealousy, and sexuality that run through *Othello* eventually emerge in Amrith's daily life.

Unique Settings, Common Experiences

Despite the unique geographical locales represented in these two novels, the protagonists undergo common experiences in their first encounters with romantic love. In both novels, the young men experience similar steps as they negotiate the trials and triumphs of first love, from the initial sense of longing to the fear of becoming vulnerable to the act of ultimate betrayal (as first love is often not the last).

First Love and Longing

Both Phil (*Center*) and Amrith (*Swimming*) are lonely. Phil longs for the father he has never met and, with the exception of his connection to Kat, feels

isolated both physically and emotionally from his peers, who scoff at his mother's outwardly sexual behavior. He has never been in love and considers this truth "one of the blank areas on the map of [his] soul" (86). Amrith longs for the mother he has lost and, although he lives with his aunt, uncle, and cousins, feels orphaned and without family. He suffers increasingly dark moods, feeling "that familiar inner blackness come in and sweep him out, like a current. He was helpless against its power—like being held underwater in the salty murkiness of a churned-up sea" (32).

With the possibility of romantic love, however, comes a sense of longing, a desire for connectedness that helps to dispel the sadness of unwanted solitude. For Phil, hope arrives in the guise of Nicholas, a young man with a wild reputation and black hair, white skin, and incredibly red lips. After being expelled from several other schools, Nicholas arrives as the new transfer student, possessing a mystique that results in admiration on behalf of his peers immediately upon admittance. Phil remembers seeing Nicholas four years earlier; he has held Nicholas' memory close in hopes of one day meeting the boy who made his heart skip a beat when they made eye contact near the church steps (96). And now, the dream has come to fruition. Phil is fascinated by Nicholas, watching him run during track practice (114), noticing his peculiar habit of collecting odd items from the ground and surreptitiously placing them in his pocket (126), and fantasizing about his long legs and slender hands (128).

For Amrith, an escape from his isolation results from new knowledge of the existence of his cousin, Niresh, the son of his mother's bullying brother. Niresh, an often irresponsible, regularly deceptive, and always charming young man, arrives with his father from Canada on business, and a meeting is arranged. When Amrith first enters the company of Niresh, he is mesmerized by his cousin's audacity in dealing with his tyrannical father (99, 105), his exaggerated stories

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of life in Canada (116), and the glamorous way he “leaned on the balustrade, drawing on his cigarette and exhaling between slightly parted lips, with the panache of those men in the cigarette ads that play before a film” (111). Niresh finds it difficult to concentrate upon much else, including learning his lines for the play.

First Love and the Vulnerable Condition

With the onset of romantic love comes a sense of belonging, an awareness that one’s existence is somehow connected to that of another. As his relationship with Nicholas develops both physically and

emotionally, Phil (*Center*) feels truly alive, elated. When the two young men converse for the first time after a happenstance meeting at the library, Phil describes his heart as “spraying sparks in all directions” (150). Amrith, too, gains a sense of connectedness as a result of his romantic love. Usually an outsider, Amrith feels included, a part of something important, when he is with Niresh. He is intensely protective of his cousin, refusing to share him with his female cousins and their friends, and becoming angry when they make plans that involve Niresh without Amrith’s approval (145, 155).

This sense of belonging and connection,

however, makes one vulnerable, as the potential for losing what we have come to value arouses fear. A romantic relationship demands revelation and exposure on behalf of those involved; sharing those intimate details of self evokes potential self-doubt, apprehension, and insecurity. Phil gives his body and soul over to Nicholas, allowing himself to be taken in by the “dark, magnetic smile” that can calm him, “lull

him into silence” (216). It is this silence, however, that perpetually troubles Phil and makes him vulnerable. He realizes, “The more I reveal myself to [Nicholas], the more I put myself at his mercy. The less he divulges about himself, the more closely he binds me to him” (329). Phil wants Nicholas to let down his guard and answer his many questions about his life, his family, his passions honestly and without fear. Yet, Nicholas refuses to participate in the exchange, using that magnetic smile to end the likelihood of achieving emotional intimacy. Although Nicholas gives him glimpses into his world, sharing his museum of collected items and the accompanying stories, for example, he refuses to let him in completely. When they meet, they sleep together, rarely kissing and never asking the one if he loves the other. Nicholas shuts Phil out—and Phil lets him (333).

Amrith (*Swimming*) holds tightly to the ghosts of his past and is, for a time, unwilling to become vulnerable in his interactions with Niresh. Although Amrith wants to learn all that he can about his cousin, even if it means negotiating the web of lies that so easily spring from Niresh’s mouth, he, himself, holds back in his sharing. He would rather live vicariously through Niresh’s experiences, true or false, than face the reality of his own circumstances. When Niresh queries Amrith about his mother, Amrith refuses to speak, and an uncomfortable rift develops between the boys (119, 132-33). Amrith has spent so much of his life suppressing memories of his mother in hopes of protecting himself from the pain they evoke that he refuses to lower the veil of secrecy, even for Niresh; he withholds an essential part of himself. When he ultimately decides to share what he knows of his mother, he is liberated from the “heavy burden of silence” he has carried for eight years (254). Revelation allows for vulnerability that, in turn, yields freedom.

First Love, Betrayal, and Loss

First love is rarely final love. Perhaps the separation results from age or an unwillingness to commit or family influence or any of a multitude of other factors. Despite Phil’s (*Center*) commitment to Nicholas, he is, under the surface, aware that their relationship is not all that he had hoped it might be. He is completely enamored by Nicholas’ charm and often describes him as magical and perfect (217). Yet, he knows, too, that

love can be delusional; we can fool ourselves into believing that something is there when it is not—or that, with time and care, it might be within our power to make it exist. After he and Nicholas make love, Phil admits that the act is more physical than emotional. He wants more, thinking, “Nothing seems more fleeting to me, nothing could fill me with more fear here and now than the body next to me withdrawn into sleep. I want to be the air that Nicholas breathes, to be his blood, his heartbeat, everything without which he can’t exist” (245). When he awakes and reaches out to Nicholas, however, his hand touches cold sheets.

When Kat and Nicholas begin to spend more time together, Phil can’t help but feel pangs of jealousy. He notices that Nicholas’ occasional kisses and touching have become even rarer but rationalizes away his concern, citing his own envy toward Kat and the “uninhibited direct way she has with people” (365), a trait he admires in her and fails to see in himself. He assures himself that Nicholas loves him deeply, as evidenced by the fact that he has revealed his secret museum to him but not to Kat. His sense of betrayal, then, is even more striking when he comes upon Kat and Nicholas having sex in that very place. He is betrayed by the two people he trusts most; he has lost his love—and his faith in love.

Amrith (*Swimming*), too, experiences a betrayal that ends his first love experience. Although Amrith feels sexually attracted to his cousin, the feeling is not mutual, and is, in fact, never discussed between the two boys. When Niresh begins to display his attraction for Amrith’s female cousin, Mala, Amrith first feels ignored (195). Not yet recognizing the scope of his feelings for Niresh (and what that means about his sexuality), he simply feels jealous of the attention Niresh is paying to Mala instead of him. He likens Mala’s laughter to “a gate clanging shut, leaving Amrith on the outside” (204). Amrith tires of being an outsider and plans to reassert his will in the drama by confronting Mala, calling her a slut (215), disowning her and her family (216), and, ultimately, attempting to drown her upon a visit to the beach (226ff), only to be stopped by Niresh. It is at this point that he realizes that he loves Niresh “in the way a boy loves a girl, or a girl loves a boy” (234). Amrith feels betrayed not only by Mala, but by himself. He has lost his love—and his innocence.

The Aftermath: Feeling the Effects of First Love

First love might not last, but perhaps that is not necessarily a tragedy. In dealing with matters of the heart, both protagonists gain a more complex view of the self, life, and love.

Valuing the Self

As a result of their first love experiences, the young men portrayed in these two tales realize that they are worth fighting for; they matter. Phil (*Center*) learns that, in relationships, one must preserve a sense of self, an identity beyond that which is created in the formation of a couple. In his relationship with Nicholas, Phil denies himself the right to ask hard questions, those that would force Nicholas to reveal a deeper part of himself, out of fear of losing him. When Phil realizes that Nicholas fears their relationship might be discovered by those in town, for example, he lacks the courage to speak his mind. To do so, he would “have to be able to suppress the quiver in [his] voice and calm [his] racing heart” and be “consumed with fear [Nicholas] might go off and leave [him]” (380).

Once Phil learns of the sexual interlude between Kat and Nicholas, he realizes that, in the attempt to maintain his connection to Nicholas, he should not have to sacrifice who he is to the point of losing the ability to recognize himself. He might have to let Nicholas go. Rather than continue to serve as one of Nicholas’ sexual exploits, a pawn in a game that brings him no emotional intimacy as reward for his willingness to play, Phil chooses to walk away. He is worth more. He sheds his earlier self, the one that chose to hold his tongue, and demands instead that Nicholas’ express his inner self. When Nicholas attempts to use his sexual power over him to avoid dealing with the truth, Phil resists, imagining “mutilated corpses, the mangled blood-red debris in some war zone” in lieu of his lips (407). He is beginning to formulate his answer to his mother’s question, “Whom do you love more, yourself or him?” (412).

Amrith (*Swimming*), too, learns of his self worth as an outcome of his first love. For him, this means admitting, and ultimately accepting, his sexual identity despite the personal and cultural complications. When Amrith first understands his feelings toward Niresh and his resulting sexual identity, he

feels “deep horror” (234) and refuses to share his new knowledge with anyone. As a result, he finds himself distanced from everyone, “as if he were in a pit of darkness and there, above, the world carried on with itself in the sunlight” (240). He is embarrassed. Even when Niresh seeks to make amends, he does not know “how to get past his own shame and reach out to his cousin” (244). He remembers the disparaging descriptors assigned to Lucien Lindamulagé, an architect and family friend known for his relationships with his young, male secretaries, and wonders whether these now apply to him. He feels alone and afraid to share his fears with anyone; “he felt the burden of his silence choking him” (266). It is only when he gives voice to his new identity that he is able to begin to reconcile himself to it. In the graveyard next to his mother’s tomb, he whispers, “I am . . . different” (267). Through this act, he names his reality. In this first step,

he felt the burden of his secret ease a little. It was all he could do for now. He would have to learn to live with this knowledge of himself. He would have to teach himself to be his best friend, his own confidant and guide. The hope he held out to himself was that, one day, there would be somebody else he could share this secret with. (267)

Amrith has lost his innocence but, with experience, acquired greater awareness and emotional maturity.

Choosing Life

As an outcome of first love, both protagonists reap a richer understanding of life, recognizing that, although our existence may be inspired by chance, we have choices. We might be born to an absent father or of a mother unable to meet our needs. We might be attracted to unacceptable or uninterested mates. We might live in worlds that don’t feel like home. Regardless, we have choices as to how we deal with our circumstances. Phil (*Center*) chooses not only to honor himself by walking away from Nicholas; he chooses to also honor his past by seeking that part of his soul that remains unknown. He pursues the wider view of the world for which he has been longing and chooses to accompany Gable, his seafaring uncle, to America in pursuit of his father. Rather than close the door on the memories that have haunted him for years, he chooses to embrace them. He enters a room that frightens him the most as a means to get to “a bigger, more beautiful” part of the house (389) and accepts

the truth that all people, at some point, reach “a crossroad in their life, with paths going off in different directions, and they have to decide which one they will follow” (399). Phil chooses “the feeling of life in motion” (462).

Amrith, too, learns to accept that “the great difficulty is to say Yes to life” (James Baldwin in frontispiece). For years, he refuses to accept his mother’s death, visiting her grave only when forced by his aunt and refusing to mark the anniversary of her death. He suffers repeated nightmares that feature his mother’s chair, empty of her presence. Upon learning the truth of his sexuality, however, Amrith’s dream takes another form; “he found his mother seated in her chair. She smiled at him and shook her head, as if to say, ‘Now what were you so worried about, son?’” (266). She has not abandoned him, so he chooses not to abandon her. He visits his mother’s grave, tearing out the overgrowth, scrubbing away the accumulated bird droppings, and vowing never to let her memory be forgotten again (266-67). With the acceptance of her death comes a more fulfilled life.

Defining Love

Phil and Amrith emerge from their first loves a bit battered and bruised but with a more complex understanding of love in hand. Phil (*Center*) bears witness to several romantic relationships and, as a result, gains knowledge and insight into romantic love. When his mother, Glass, allows herself to remain with Michael, an attorney who treats Glass tenderly and wisely, Phil learns that he should not give up on love. Although Glass chose earlier in life to sleep with her husband’s brother, leave her husband, and take up with a long list of men to punish herself for her first indiscretion, even she can feel an emotion so strong that it changes her long-standing behavior. Through Tereza and Pascal, lesbian lovers and family friends, Phil learns the value and hardship of honesty. Pascal refuses to lie to Tereza. She tells her what she needs but doesn’t want to hear but always provides the support that the truth sometimes requires. Phil’s twin sister, Dianne, teaches him that love can be selfish. Phil learns that, twice each week for over three years, she has been visiting a boy in the hospital. He is in a coma due to a bicycling accident that occurred while he was on his way to meet her. She finds it “easy to love him,” as he is unable to “defend himself” (448);

she uses his presence to appease her own conscience.

From his sea-faring uncle, Gable, Phil learns the most important lesson of all—“love is a word only to be written in bloodred ink” (465). Gable is unable to bear life on land and loses his wife as a result. Before they part ways, however, she accidentally gives him a token to remember her by, a small scar on his arm, the result of a vegetable knife swiped during a passionate argument. To remind himself of the love he has lost, Gable annually takes a knife to the scar to ensure it lasts. Phil realizes,

love causes deep wounds, but in its own particular way it also heals scars, provided you have faith in love and give it time to do so. I won't touch my scars. I'm bound to get fresh wounds, even before the old ones have healed, and I will inflict wounds on other people. Every one of us carries a knife. (465)

When Amrith opens himself to love for the first time, he learns that love demands forgiveness—of other and self. His refusal to accept his mother's death results, in part, from his anger at her decision to let him go. Amrith remembers the day when Auntie Bundle came to take him away, leaving his mother behind to attempt to help his alcoholic father. Although his mother hesitates for a moment, holding tightly to her son, she ultimately listens to Auntie Bundle's plea, “Don't weaken now. What you are doing is only out of love for Amrith” (252), and lets him go. Amrith feels abandoned, unable to see, as a child, the sacrifice his mother is making for him. He denies her memory and refuses to allow others to know just how much he does indeed remember. He feels “a curious bitter pleasure” in denying Auntie Bundle, in particular, his memories (13). He claims to hate Bundle and her decision to wear mourning clothes eight years after the death of his mother, her sympathetic looks, her questions about his memories. He is angered by Bundle's interference, saying, “maybe if she had let things be, at least his mother would be alive” (248). Amrith's anger is compounded by his own feelings of self-loathing. He remembers the last day he and his mother shared, waiting in anticipation of leaving the home together to start a new life with Auntie Bundle and learning the truth that his mother would remain behind. Once he is put in the

car, his mother places her hand on the car window, hoping her son will reciprocate. He chooses to defy her gesture, instead mouthing repeatedly the words, “I hate you.” Ultimately, he forgives his mother, his aunt, and himself when he revives the memories of his mother by visiting her grave and telling Auntie Bundle of his desire to plant her favorite flower, the rose, in remembrance (272).

Love Lost and Lost Lovers

The most intriguing commonality inherent in these two tales is that, while the protagonists themselves feel confused and confounded by love, those they love are lost, too. Nicholas (*Center*) is just as frightened as Phil. He doesn't fully understand the dysfunctional relationship of his parents, his own sexuality, or how to allow people to get close to him. As Phil comes to understand, Nicholas is “the collector of lost things now lost himself, a teller of stories without a story of his own” (464). Niresh (*Swimming*), too, is afraid. He feels, for example, as though he doesn't belong in any land; he is a foreigner in Canada and Sri Lanka. The lies he crafts to give himself the illusion of a better life suggest his desire for escape (242-43). Unlike Phil and Amrith, Nicholas and Niresh have, as Laurie Halse Anderson might say, shoes that run a size bigger. They are better able to disguise their insecurities. In doing so, however, they run the risk of never filling those shoes. While it might be difficult for Phil and Amrith to face their fears and take a mirror to their inner selves, they are more likely to find a more perfect fit, a space just suited to hold their burgeoning souls.

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