

Manil Suri (© Jerry Bauer)

Manil Suri – The Death of Vishnu von Caroline Lasser

Mathematik und Literatur ergeben ein ungewöhnliches Paar. Vielleicht erinnert man sich, dass es von Felix Haussdorff eine Komödie Der Arzt seiner Ehre gibt, vielleicht ist man in einer den Rahmen der Mathematik großzügig definierenden Stimmung auch versucht, Robert Musil anzuführen, aber schließlich wird man dann Manil Suri nennen, dessen Debütroman The Death of Vishnu derzeit für Aufsehen sorgt.

Der Mathematiker Suri hat eine Professur an der Fakultät für Mathematik und Statistik der University of Maryland. Er arbeitet in der numerischen Analysis partieller Differentialgleichungen und ist seit 1999 Mitherausgeber des *SIAM Journal on Numerical Analysis*.

Der Schriftsteller Suri wurde im September letzten Jahres von *Time* auf die Liste der „people to watch“ gesetzt, als die amerikanischen Rechte an *The Death of Vishnu* für 350 000 US-Dollar versteigert, und die Übersetzungsrechte in 13 Länder verkauft wurden.

Die zahlreichen Kritiken betonen besonders zwei Eigenschaften des Romans: seine literarische Qualität, insbesondere den von Pulitzer-Preisträger Michael Cunningham geadelten ersten Satz, und seinen exotischen Handlungsort Indien, dessen authentische Beschreibung durch den in Bombay geborenen Suri den Nerv der Zeit treffe. (In einer Auslage der Münchener Buchhandlung Hugendubel hat man „Vishnus Tod“ neben Witzigmanns Curry-Buch plaziert ...)

Suris Lesung im Münchener Literaturhaus hatte 220 Besucher, denen nach einer routinierten Buchpräsentation die Möglichkeit zu Fragen eröffnet wurde. Sein Talent zur präzisen Antwort hat sich dort bestätigt

und kann von Ihnen an folgendem Interview überprüft werden, das hoffentlich die Fragen stellt, welche Sie vielleicht auf www.manilsuri.com, in der Ausgabe 34-1 der *SIAM News*¹ oder in der *New York Times* vom 28. Januar² vermisst haben.

‘He claims that writing has been a way for him to escape the horror of being a mathematician.’ (see www.manilsuri.com/biography.htm) – Would you please comment?

I also talk about ‘the horror of being a writer.’ I have a horror of labels, and am uneasy being cast into any group, since this results in the application of stereotypical images which might be associated with that group.

‘I actually did a reading to a group of mathematicians, toughest group you’ll find to read to.’ (see www.manilsuri.com/interview.htm) – Would you please comment also on this remark?

We’re always looking for inconsistencies. We’re not a group traditionally associated with relaxing enough to enjoy a piece of fiction. (As you can see, I’m not immune from applying stereotypes myself).

1 <http://www.siam.org/siamnews/01-01/suri.htm>

2 Solving for X, Interview with Manil Suri by Stacey D’Erasmus, *New York Times*, Book Review Desk, Sunday, January 28, 2001.

In the plenary discussion after your reading in Munich you said that you can't stop being a mathematician. What did you mean by that?

There are certain professions (working at a bank for instance) which people might do more to earn money, rather than the sense of identity it bestows on them. On the other hand, someone who does mathematical research *is* a mathematician – it's more than a job that puts bread on the table, it's something you actually *become*. Since it's so much part of one's identity, I don't think it's something you can ever excise from your personality.

What do you think of the present standards in writing math papers?

There are some excellent writers out there, whose mathematical prose simply glistens on the page. On the other hand, as an editor of the *SIAM Journal on Numerical Analysis*, and also as a consumer of mathematical papers, I can come across some papers where the authors' main objective seems to be to put down on paper the results and proofs they want to convey, without adequate thought given to how easily a reader might be able to digest things. On very rare occasions there might even a tendency of the form, 'If they can't understand it, they shouldn't be reading it', an attitude that I find indefensible.

What have been your math colleagues' reactions to your literary occupation?

It's been quite positive. A number of them have come to my readings. Two have confessed to secret passions of their own – which happen to be acting in both cases.

Which profession – the writers' or the mathematicians' – builds up more pressure to sell the product?

Obviously, the writers'. I don't think I've ever heard of a mathematician being given an advance for a paper that then has to be earned back.

How would you describe the difference between success in the mathematicians' and the writers' community?

Mainly in terms of the audience. A bestselling mathematical paper is one that might get fifty or a hundred readers worldwide. A writer wouldn't be considered a success unless he or she has reached an audience several orders larger.

Explaining your research to non-mathematicians, you stress applications in engineering. (see www.math.umbc.edu/~suri/research.html) – Why?

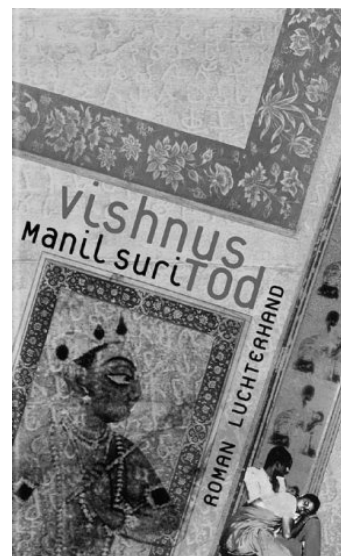
Being an applied mathematician, I feel I should justify my work in terms of its applications. In my case, the applications are mainly engineering-related.

Religion is a dominant theme in The Death of Vishnu. Have you ever been tempted by mathematical fields, like logic for example, which have a more transcendental flavour than numerical analysis?

Yes, I originally came to mathematics because I was won over by abstract algebra. As a graduate student, I did flirt with the field of logic, before going into numerical analysis. A lot of these choices have to do with the teachers one might encounter.

What is your favourite math book?

There are so many, but one that I would like to point readers to is *The Universal Computer* by Martin Davis. It gives a great account of the mathematics that lead up to the formation of computers as we know them today. It's supposedly written for laypersons, but I feel that mathematicians would probably get a lot more out of it.



Manil Suri, *The Death of Vishnu. A Novel*. W. W. Norton & Co., 2001. Deutsche Übersetzung: *Vishnus Tod. Roman*. Luchterhand 2001, DM 45,-.

Anschrift der Autorin

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