

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, June 16, 2016: Yapa not summer beach reading.” Casper Star Tribune, June 18: “Disturbing commentary on democracy.”

Some 27 years ago, desiring to become a fiction writer, I applied to a program at University of California at Davis. I had met some of its writers/professors at readings and book signings and thought we were a good match; hence, I was pleased when the university's Department of English welcomed me into its graduate program.

It was disaster with capital D. The tenured writers were openly hostile to newbie writers, the department shenanigans an outright obstacle to learning. Maybe someday you'll hear that story; for now, suffice to say, with the support of the Dean of Graduate Studies I managed to complete an MA in English but was forever disabused of fiction writing, even fiction reading, though Sunil Yapa would be a recent exception.

Last year, Princeton's website published research that confirmed what some of us have long suspected: Average citizens, even mass-based interest groups, have little or no independent influence on our country's politics. Even where a plurality exists across party lines, the median public interest holds no sway in policy making.

“Despite the trappings and tradition of a representative democracy, the truth is, those are just theatrics,” writes one commentator. He cites the Iraq War, the 2008 criminally-caused economy crash, the rise of the Kochs, the most obstructive Congress in history, Citizen's United. “Even without the rigors of research,” these fuel the urgency of the issue.

If Bayer gets its way and buys Monsanto, writes another commentator, that “merger from hell” will make the new corporation the biggest seed and pesticide company in the world, with almost total control of our food supply. At the center of Bayer and Monsanto's corporate agribusiness model is “the indiscriminate, widespread use of chemicals linked to the massive global bee die-off” and “a new era of sterile crops soaked in dangerous pesticides.”

These issues are acted out in Sunil Yapa's 2016, “Your Heart Is a Muscle the Size of a Fist.” Though billed as a novel, the book is social commentary dressed as fiction.

The dustcover describes Yapa as the biracial son of a Sri Lankan father and a mother from Montana. His introductory sketch of Victor, a nineteen-year-old globetrotter peddling weed at a protest rally, could be a younger version of the author himself. We meet him again in the closing pages, a victim of police beatings à la Rodney King. In between, Yapa's Sri Lanka seeks entry into the World Trade Organization, the WTO.

It's November 1999 in Seattle, where police prepare for a visit from then-president Bill Clinton to a meeting of world economic leaders from 135 countries, including a Sri Lankan delegate with his WTO mission. Fifty thousand demonstrators have locked themselves together with chains and PVC pipe. They protest the jobs lost to American manufacturing; they bullhorn about workers in the fields of California who wash their babies in ditchwater, work horrible hours and get paid next to nothing; they attest to rain-forest decimation for plantations of banana trees and oil palms, workers soaked in pesticides; they point accusing fingers at the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the WTO.

In a bus full of protesters on the way to jail, the dissenters speak to the Sri Lankan of United Auto Workers, of unfair American corn subsidies that decimated the Mexican economy, of habitat destruction in developing nations.

“They talked calmly, knowledgeably about the WTO, about Monsanto, about pharmaceutical companies who wanted to stop the manufacturing of generic AIDS drugs in Africa which were saving millions of lives . . . [and] . . . Third World debt. Did you know, they said, Nigerians pay more every year on the interest on their debt than they do on education and health?”

Monsanto, they point out, is marketing itself as an agricultural company, selling seed that makes plants

which don't reproduce seeds; consequently, third-world farmers must buy new seed from Monsanto every year.

The Sri Lankan minister, though reminded that his island's export thus far has been "our daughters. We send our daughters to the Middle East where they work as maids," has the duty to "believe in the system." When he makes it to the meeting, however, he is told he'll be conferring with an aide rather than with President Clinton. He'll be forced to stipulate away "all your state enterprises . . . your water and electricity and communication. . . There will be no entry into the WTO for Sri Lanka, nor any free trade agreement with the U.S., unless you enact some serious reforms . . . your grossly overfunded health and education will have to go."

Apart from political commentary that highlights a democracy being subsumed by global power, Yapa's most disturbing passages contain detailed descriptions of police brutality, even as protesters remain convinced they will persuade by peaceable means. The writing is visceral, its images horrifying. Sunil Yapa is no summer-beach reading.