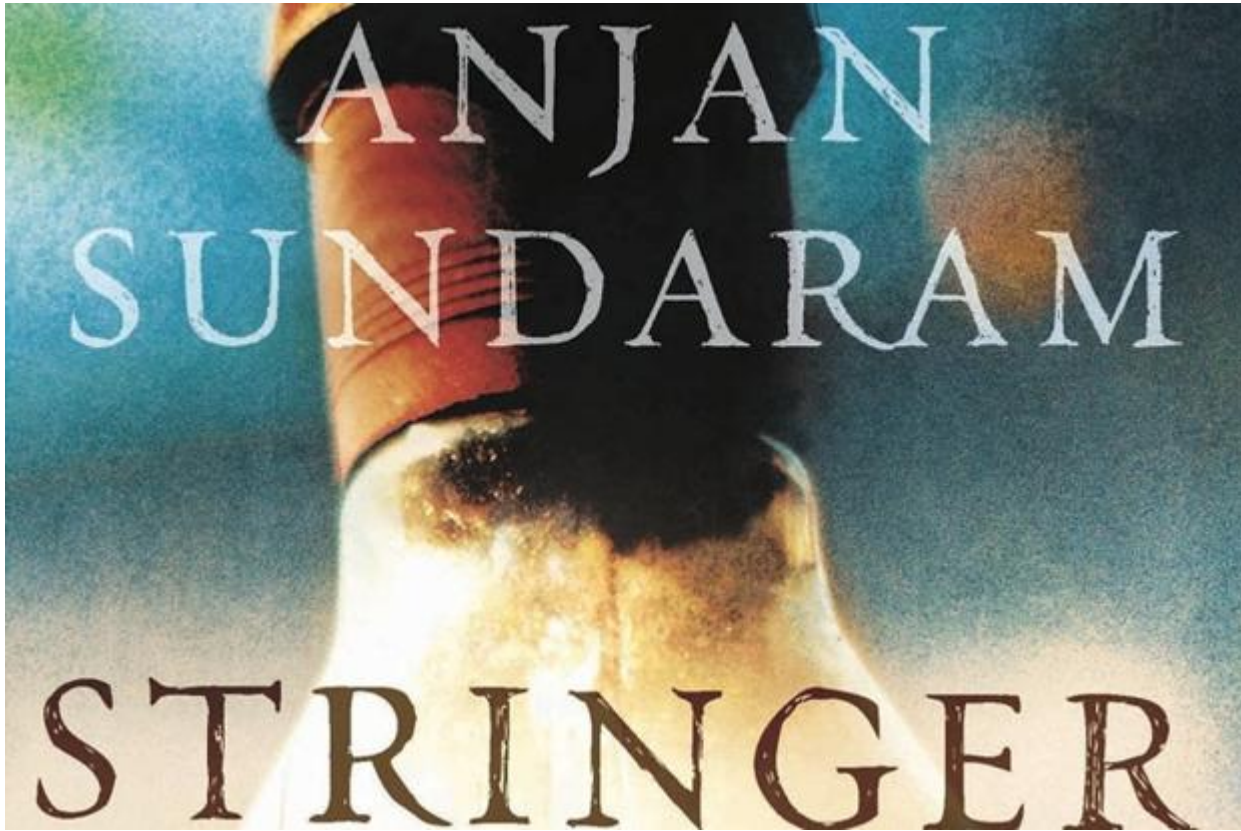


Stringer by Anjan Sundaram**Tristan McConnell**

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When in 2006 the first democratic elections in Democratic Republic of Congo's modern history made a battleground of the capital, Anjan Sundaram took shelter in a margarine factory and filed stories to his editors. "I had been one of the only journalists in the city, and they needed someone in the violence for news," Sundaram writes in *Stringer*, his memoir of 15 months in Congo.

Sundaram is an unlikely foreign reporter. A mathematics student at Yale with a job offer from Goldman Sachs, a life of wealth beckoned. Instead he headed to the Democratic Republic of Congo, a misnomer of a country, to become a stringer, a freelance correspondent at the bottom of the journalistic food chain.

His reasons were romantic. Sundaram had read an interview with the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski exhorting people to bear witness to Africa's wars. And so Sundaram went to find war in Congo, but first he had to survive Kinshasa. It is there that *Stringer* is at its best. Unlike those foreign reporters who cosset themselves in hotels, Sundaram stays with a family in a slum. The choice is practical — it's cheap — but it also affords him an unusual kinship with Kinshasa's people. He discovers the mutual reliance that is key to survival, while avoiding attempts by his hostess, Nana, to pair him off with relatives.

The expectation of disappointment is ever present. In French-speaking Congo,

Sundaram learns, the greeting is always “Ça va un peu,” never just “Ça va” and the demands of those around him are constant. They find their most violent form in the “Kata-Kata”, hordes of men who swarm through the slums to pillage.

Sundaram is a sensitive writer. He feels deeply and expresses himself richly. He is a guide without guile. The naivety that propelled him to Kinshasa propels the narrative too. It gets him robbed at gunpoint in a taxi but also finds him sitting in the gods of a football stadium getting stoned with a gang of street kids.

Leaving Kinshasa, Sundaram takes a boat up the Congo then travels to Bunia in the east, where he finds the war.

He is drawn closer to conflict yet the focus, unusually for a journalist, remains inward. Sundaram’s time in Bunia is filled with fear, illness and introspection. Other characters are introduced — a warlord, UN peacekeepers, Indian and Pakistani businessmen and a hard-drinking Lebanese — but the focus stays on the author.

We learn something about Congo but more about Sundaram. For an understanding of Congo you are better off with writers such as Michela Wrong, Adam Hochschild, Jason Stearns or David Van Reybrouck. What Sundaram provides is a powerful evocation of the foreign correspondent’s experience, that of the perennial outsider.

Stringer by Anjan Sundaram, Atlantic, 265pp, £12.99. To order for £11.69 including postage, see thetimes.co.uk/bookshop or call 0845 2712134

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Tristan McConnell

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