Arthur C. Clarke (1917–2008)

We have lost the greatest science fiction writer and a visionary of our times – Sir Arthur C. Clarke, the propounder of satellite communication. The sci-fi guru had remained an inspiration to all avid science-fiction writers. Clarke was battling debilitating post-polio syndrome for the past 48 years. The British-born author and science-fiction writer passed away at the grand age of 90 at his home in Sri Lanka. He was the Chancellor, International Space University since 1989 and Honorary Chancellor, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka since 1979. An expert scuba-diver, Clarke stayed in touch with the world from Sri Lanka through the use of computers and other communication accessories.

Clarke was born on 16 December 1917, in the seaside town of Minehead, Somerset, England. The son of a farmer father and a post office telegrapher mother, he was the eldest of four children. A bright student, Clarke studied on a scholarship at a secondary school in Taunton, a town nearby.

Clarke was interested in science from childhood. Several incidents in his childhood awakened his scientific imagination. His love for science fiction came into being when he bought the first copies of the pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* at a Woolworth's store. He would often stroll along the Somerset coastline amongst the rocks and pebbles thinking about science. He was most fascinated by a card with a picture of a dinosaur that his father gave him and the gift of a construction toy set. He had such a curious and imaginative mind that in his younger days he mapped the moon using a telescope, which he made with a cardboard and a few lenses.

Clarke lost his father at a young age of 13. *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, the then leading American science-fiction magazine made a great impact on Clarke's young adventurous mind. He loved to read the writings of H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, Olaf Stapledon, Lord Dunsany, and Herman Melville. Clarke began writing for his school magazines during his teenage years.

There was not sufficient money for Clarke to go for higher education, so he worked as a government auditor from 1936 to 1941. At the time, British Interplanetary Society, which comprised of some sci-fi enthusiasts, was formed. Clarke, still in school, joined this group. The group believed that space travel could be achieved in the near future. From 1941 to 1946, Clarke worked as a radar instructor and technician in the Royal Air Force. While in service, he published his first science-fiction stories. Interestingly, he sold a short story called *Rescue Party* to the same magazine now titled *Astounding Science Fiction*; one that had captured his imagination years ago while he was a teenager.

It was in the year 1945 that Clarke launched his career as a fiction writer when he wrote an article entitled 'Extra-terrestrial relays' for a UK journal *Wireless World*. In this article, Clarke predicted in detail a satellite communications system that would relay radio and television signals all over the world. His predictions were not received well by specialized readers at the time. However, twenty years later, the Early Bird synchronous satellites were actually launched. And today, the geostationary orbit at about 36,000 km above the equator is named after him – The Clarke Orbit.

Following World War II, Clarke secured B Sc degree in 1948 from King's College, London. He graduated with a first class honours degree in physics and mathematics. His first published novel that he wrote while he was studying in 1949 is entitled *Prelude to Space*. He joined as an assistant editor at *Physics Abstracts* for sometime. Clarke went on to become a prolific science-fiction writer.

In the 1950s, Clarke moved to Colombo, Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka, where he became interested in underwater sea exploration. Here he indulged in skin diving and photography. He married an American diving enthusiast, Marilyn Mayfield in 1953. They separated after a few months and were divorced in 1964. He penned his underwater adventures in several books, the first one being *The Coast of Coral* in 1956.

Most of the time, subjects of Clarke's imagination remained humans travelling in space, who made contact with aliens from outer space. He visualized extra-terrestrial intelligence and put it on paper. Amongst his works, novels as *Childhood's End* (1953), *Earthlight* (1955), *The City and the Stars* (1956), *A Fall of Moondust* (1961), *The Nine Billion Names of God* (1967), *Imperial Earth* (1975), *The Fountains of Paradise* (1979) and *The Songs of Distant Earth* (1986) are worth mentioning. Clarke also wrote a series of essays and gave lectures. These include 'Voices from the Sky' (1965), 'The view from Serendip' (1977) and 'Ascent to orbit: A scientific autobiography' (1984).

In his essays on science and society, Clarke has made some interesting comments. According to him, any development that concerns biology, especially human biology, may create debates, for instance, over abortion, euthanasia and evolution. Clarke predicted that the technology required would produce as a by-product, weapons as terrible that people would find even ballistic missiles as primitive. He agreed with Carl Sagan's principle that extraordinary claims require extraordinary proofs in connection with UFOs and alien visitors, but he remained interested, and yet skeptical.

In 1968, Clarke in collaboration with Stanley Kubrick, motion-picture director, made a commendable science fiction film '2001: A Space Odyssey' based on his short story; 'The Sentinel', which he wrote in 1951, and which was made into a novel in the year 1968. '2010: Odyssey Two', a sequel to this was made into a film and released in 1984. This was followed by the novel *2061: Odyssey Three* in 1987 and *3001: The Final Odyssey* in 1996. *Rendezvous With Rama*, a novel that Clarke wrote in 1973, is also being made into a film. He recently reviewed the manuscript of his latest novel *The Last Theorem*. Clarke has around 100 books

to his credit. Some of his works have been translated into several languages.

Clarke's prediction regarding man reaching the moon by the year 2000 came true when the *Apollo* missions took shape in the 1960s. He worked with Walter Cronkite and Wally Schirra to cover *Apollo* 12 and 15 space missions on CBC. His work was made into a thirteen-part TV series 'Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World' in 1981 and 'Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers' in 1984.

The three laws which Clarke published in his non-fiction works, *Profiles of the Future* in 1962, have become his legacies. These include his observations on science, science fiction and society. The first law states that 'when a distinguished but elderly scientist says that something is possible, he is right but when he says that something is impossible, he may be wrong'. The second law mentions that 'the only way of discovering the limits of what is possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible'. Lastly, Clarke believed that 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'.

Clarke's work on satellites fetched him many honours, which included the Vikram Sarabhai Professorship of the Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad. His writings in science fiction brought Clarke several awards and honours. Clarke was awarded the UNESCO Kalinga Prize for popularization of science in 1962 at New Delhi. According to Nalaka Gunawardene[1], a journalist from Sri Lanka who worked with Clarke for 20 years, in his acceptance speech, Clarke mentioned about the two evils that afflict Asia – fanaticism and superstition. Both these bring in physical, mental and spiritual poverty. Science is the only thing that can supply weapons to overcome these two evils and help build nations a good life.

Clarke received the Nebula Award of the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1972, 1974 and 1979, and the Hugo Award of the World Science Fiction Convention in 1974 and 1980. He became the honorary fellow of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics in 1976 and the Grand Master of the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1986. Clarke made it to the CBE Queen's Honours List in 1989. The science fiction writer of the 20th century was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II-KBE in 1998.

Clarke crusaded against pseudo science, anti-social beliefs, superstitions and even astrology. In spite of foretelling the future, Clarke maintained that no one can predict the future and yet most technological achievements were preceded by people's writing and imagination. He was proud of the fact that astronauts became astronauts after reading his books. His Ego chamber, a room in his house has several photographs and memorabilia and his pictures with astronauts such as Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space and Neil Armstrong, the first man who walked on the moon.

According to Nalaka Gunawardene, Clarke in his last public address in February 2008, at the global launch of the International Year of Planet Earth at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, mentioned that public understanding of science and engagement of science are both necessary to influence policy and improve lives. On his birthday in December last year, Clarke publicly announced that he wished to be remembered as a writer, one who entertained readers and stretched their imagination.

1. Gunawardene, N., Arthur Clarke: Sciences' critical cheerleader: SciDev Net, dated 3 April 2008.
2. *Britannica Micropaedia 3*, 1994, pp. 352–353.
3. Editorial, *Nature*, 2008, **452**, 387.
4. Clarke, Arthur C., *Science*, 1998, **280**, 1532–1533.

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