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*Interviewing the Caribbean
Vol. 5, No. 1 :: Winter 2019

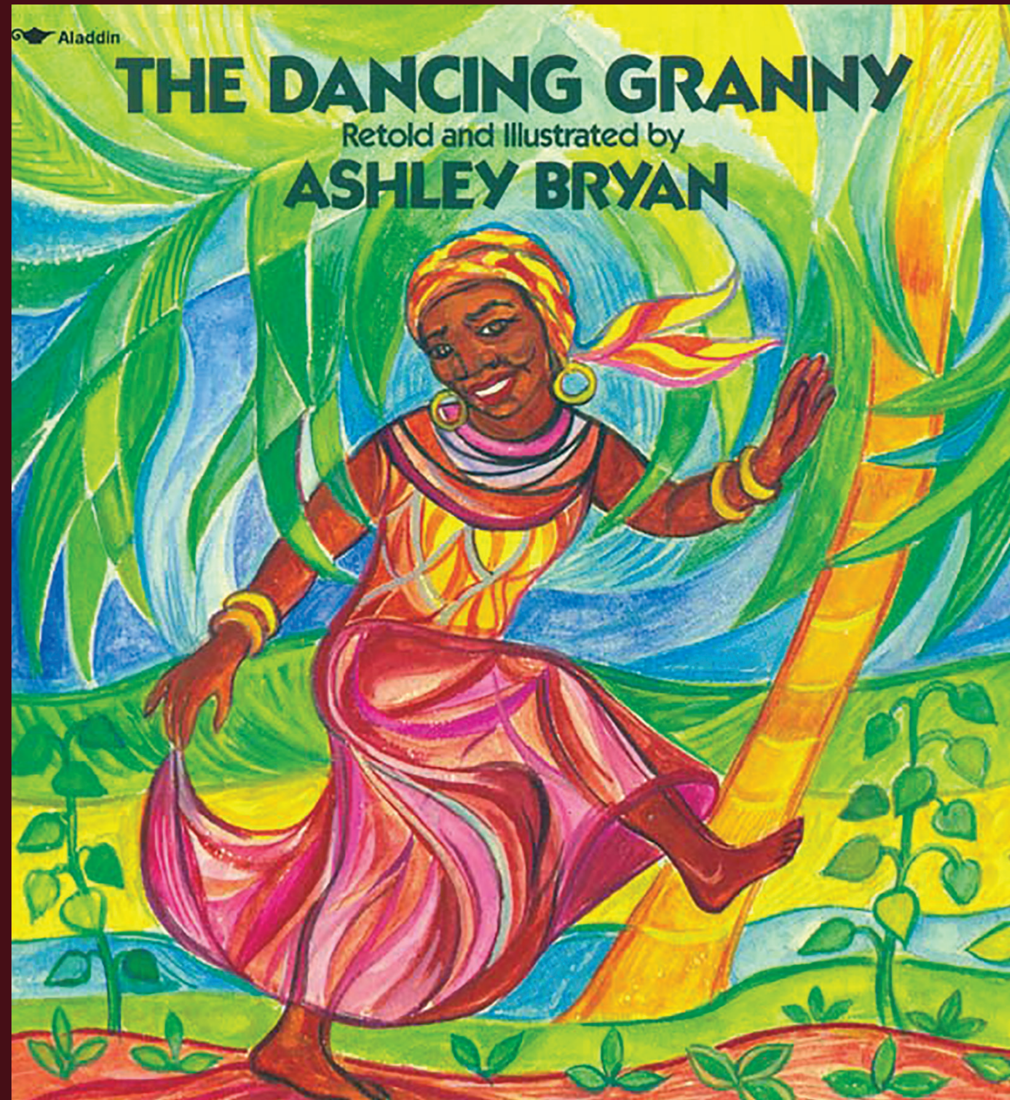
Caribbean Childhood: Traumas + Triumphs, pt.1

In this issue:

Esther Phillips

Dillon Alleyne : Diane Browne : Rhonda Cobham-Sander
Paul Keens Douglas : Merle Hodge : Oonya Kampadoo
Yolanda T. Marshall : Berkley Wendell Semple + more

*Interviewing
the Caribbean



Ashley Bryan - *The Dancing Granny*

This issue is dedicated to

Gloria I. Joseph
March 10, 1929–August 16, 2019

Paule Marshall
April 9, 1929–August 12, 2019

Toni Morrison
February 18, 1931–August 5, 2019

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Dear readers,
We invite you to enjoy the content, and be mindful that throughout the Caribbean, and its Diaspora, many different languages–official and unofficial–are spoken. Because we believe in the diversity and multiplicity of languages, two 'accepted' standard spellings are used throughout–British and American. – IC Editorial

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EDITORS' LETTER

Caribbean Childhood: Traumas + Triumphs

This issue explores a diversity of childhood experiences, the stories we tell about them, and the ways in which such experiences and stories might resonate with Caribbean children today.

The Caribbean childhoods that we lived are no longer present for the vast majority of children in the region. Regardless of class, gender and location, Caribbean children today are more a part of the global landscape than children of our generations – meaning even the poorest among the poor are more intimately familiar with Global North life-styles than they are with Caribbean ways of life.

Our stories, like those of many Caribbean children, contain both traumas and triumphs.

Alongside those children who are loved and protected, many are victims and survivors of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as physical and sexual abuse, poverty, violence, homophobia and classism.

We want to see more children's/young adult books that address these challenging topics, as well as books about our culture and mythology, our love and ingenuity, and adventure and time travel stories set in our islands. The importance of our children seeing themselves in books is a recurring theme in this issue.

Other major themes include the region's need for more local qualified book reviewers and trained illustrators, as well as the importance of developing an online directory where information on the works and services of Caribbean children's/young adult writers and illustrators is easily accessible.

Despite these challenges, the landscape of Caribbean children's/young adult literature has experienced notable growth in the last few years. It has benefited from the vision of independent presses such as CaribbeanReads, Papillote Press, and Blue Banyan Books; from the pioneering curatorial work of *Anansesem Magazine*; as well as from the creation of several national and regional prizes for young adult literature.

It is quite fitting that this volume, which aims to highlight the work of children's/young adult writers and publishers, is the first of many volumes that will be published by the University of the West Indies Press. The recent acquisition of *IC* by UWI Press will put the journal at the centre of the region's literary sphere and provide contributors with a broad platform from which to engage in exchanges and conversations across the Caribbean.

We applaud our contributors for opening the door, and we encourage others to keep the door open and to flood the market with diverse stories for Caribbean children.

Co-editors:
Opal Palmer Adisa + Juleus Ghunta
Mona, Kingston, Jamaica

Andrea Haynes - Peart, *White Witch*, 2010

EDITORIAL TEAM

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Sharon E. Lake / Associate Editor - is an award-winning educator, linguist and human resource professional—fluent in English, French, and Spanish. She has been writing poems and short stories from childhood. Her stories and poems have been published in *Caribbean Reads, Where I See the Sun; Contemporary Poetry in Anguilla, and Interviewing the Caribbean.*

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Daisy Holder Lafond / Copy Editor - is a former newspaper editor, columnist and magazine publisher. Her essays and poems have appeared in various journals, including *The Caribbean Writer, Poui, Small Axe, Interviewing the Caribbean* and *Moko Magazine.* She is co-author of *All This is Love—A Collection of Virgin Islands Poetry, Art, and Prose.*

TRIBUTE

She Belonged to Us Too*

Toni Morrison, 1931–2019

— By Opal Palmer Adisa —

"Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another."

—Toni Morrison

Any writer over the age of forty who is worth her weight in salt knows of Toni Morrison's works, and probably will say one or more of Morrison's texts inspired her development as a writer.

I was but a teenager when I read *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and on that first reading was not yet fully versed in American history and the tremendous struggle of African Americans to achieve equality and restore their dignity. But it was the 70s and the Black Power Movement was still strong and had spread its energy throughout the world, and my older brother introduced me to the works of Stokely Carmichael, Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, et al.

In 1971, when we immigrated to New York, and while completing high school, an African American teacher who detected my love for literature opened the world of Black writers to me, introducing me to Jamaica's own Claude McKay, to Langston Hughes as a seminal writer of the Harlem Renaissance, and to the new writer Toni Morrison, who she said had Jamaican connections, and who was "a writer to keep an eye on as I think she is saying something."

Well, Morrison's connection to Jamaica was through her marriage to Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect. Although the marriage ended after six years, Morrison, being a consummate historian and now a mother of two boys, would research the history of our island. I suspect her reading about Maroon Nanny and the long, rebellious spirit of Jamaica would inform some of her other works, specifically her most acclaimed *Beloved* (1987) and the character Sethe.

Toni Morrison spoke of the common practice of infanticide among enslaved women who refused to have their children subjected to the life of slavery. She would have read Lucille Mathurin Mair and other Caribbean and African-American women scholars who wrote about this practice. Morrison's works explore thorny areas, and her writing forces readers to look at those dark moments in our history and development. But, mostly, I would say, her work is about survival, riding the waves of the storm, being tossed hither and tither by the waves, being pulled under but fighting your way up and out, and gulping for breath.

Toni Morrison's novels and essays will continue to inform my work and my teaching. Her young adolescent novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is as relevant today in Jamaican society as it was when published in the 1970s. It explores self-hatred as a result of colonialism and white supremacy. The protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, a pre-teen girl who has been stained by poverty and sexually abused, believes she is ugly. Pecola believes she can only be pretty if she has blue eyes like white girls. This is similar to the pervasive connotations of whiteness with beauty and acceptance that many young Jamaicans now harbour, and which lead them to bleach their skins. What Toni Morrison wants all our children to know and believe in the fullness of their hearts is that "you are your best thing."

Photo / Illustrations: Steve Jones

The themes that Toni Morrison explored throughout her works – her vision for the triumph of Black people, her excavation of the pains that have lacerated and kept us imprisoned, and her flight to freedom through an understanding and connection with our ancestors and our nascent spirit - are characteristics that will make her work continue to be relevant.

Born Chloe Ardelia Wofford on February 18, 1931, Toni Morrison died on the eve of Jamaica's Independence Day on August 5, 2019, leaving us a treasure trove of novels and essays that should be required reading. She believed in the importance of community, and in working to make it a strong base of support. She was a staunch advocate for freedom for black people in all its dimensions. She always asserted that "the function of freedom is to free someone else."

Toni Morrison's work has much to teach us about how to walk a new walk by healing the scars and keloids of our enslavement and colonial experience, so all of us can truly experience and live our independence through love and building cohesive, safe communities.

Iconic Caribbean Writer of the People**

Paule Marshall, 1929–2019

— By Opal Palmer Adisa —

"*My very first lessons in the art of telling stories took place in the kitchen. My mother and three or four of her friends told stories with effortless art and technique. They were natural-born storytellers in the oral tradition.*"

— Paule Marshall

Paule Marshall is the greatest contemporary feminist writer of the Caribbean. A peer of Toni Morrison, her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, a classic and the foremost work of its kind to examine the life of first generation immigrants from Barbados in New York, was published in 1959, twenty-nine years before Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. All of Marshall's work is either set on an island or explores the duality of Caribbean and American identity and the rootedness of home.

Given Paule Marshall's age, it is only natural that her primary inspiration for writing would come from the oral tradition of her Caribbean mother and her friends. But Paule Marshall has to be situated within a larger cultural context. She was born and came of age during the Harlem Renaissance, perhaps still considered one of the greatest literary periods for black arts. She knew and toured with Langston Hughes. She might have met the Jamaican Claude McKay, even Zora Neale Hurston. Although living in Brooklyn, she was not isolated. She deliberately ventured beyond the West Indian community in which her mother tried to confine her.

She attended Hunter College, which was considered a haven for the arts and a place where women were nurtured. She would have known Audre Lorde, her junior by five years and another great Caribbean activist and writer. She would have known or heard of our own Marcus Garvey, considered an intellectual of the Harlem Renaissance. His organisation, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, was the largest of that era, with membership by West Indians and African Americans from every state in the USA, and throughout the Caribbean as well as Latin America and Europe. It is within this larger historical context that the theme and content of Paule Marshall's work have to be examined, as these people and these times profoundly shaped the writer she became.

Perhaps because Paule Marshall's focus always centred on the liberation of West Indian people and on reconnecting them to their roots, her work did not achieve the critical and international recognition it justly deserved. For example, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Paule Marshall's tour de force, has Avey Johnson, literally jumping ship, a cruise, and ending up in Carriacou. There, she is reunited with her ancestral past through the Big Drums that initiate her in the Juba dance, bringing her full circle to a past that she had been painstakingly trying to erase, ensconced as she had become in the very wealthy life she and her deceased husband had achieved. *Praisesong* is as Caribbean as you can get, evoking the inextricable link between memory, history, place and our identity. I deem *Praisesong for the Widow* the best novel written in the 80s, yet it only garnered The Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award.

Soft spoken, elegant and never rushed, Paule Marshall was very much a Caribbean woman. She was clear about her enterprise – what she was doing and who she was writing these stories for. An important part of her audience was the next generation; as she states so aptly, they needed to know that "[a] person can run for years but sooner or later he has to take a stand in the place which, for better or worse, he calls home, and do what he can to change things there." When Selina Boyce, the protagonist of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, takes off and tosses her silver West Indian bangle at the end of the novel, she is both affirming her autonomy and saying that she is going to seek not her parents' Barbados but the island of heritage that she must know through her own eyes in order to be her own person.

> **"Paule Marshall's focus always centred on the liberation of West Indian people and on reconnecting them to their roots..."**

Brown Girl, Brownstones is the first novel by a Caribbean writer that I taught when I began as a lecturer at San Francisco State University in the 1980s. A decade later, I met Paule Marshall when she was a resident writer at the University of California where I was then teaching. I asked about her name. She openly confessed that she was told she would never get published as Valenza Pauline Burke, her birth name; she needed a name that sounded more masculine and white.

Given that Marshall was only a year older than Morrison, I think it is fair to surmise that they both knew that given the overt, white patriarchal supremacy that reigned in the publishing world, their public identities needed to be somewhat ambiguous to help them get in through the doors.

In 1992, then 63 years old, Marshall was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. Marshall penned several novels, including *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), *Daughters* (1991), and *The Fisher King* (2001). She also authored five short story collections and her final gift to us, her memoir *Triangular Road* (2009).

Her Own Army

Gloria I. Joseph, 1929–2019

— By Opal Palmer Adisa —

"Being an activist is to bring about change; action is necessary, not prayer or meditation."
— Gloria I. Joseph

She marched into my office, sat on the chair opposite mine, and asked "Why haven't you come to visit me yet?" Before I could explain, she forged ahead: "Anyway, I'm writing a book and I understand you are a good editor. I need you to help me with it." This was February 2010; I had been on the island of St Croix as a visiting Professor and Editor of *The Caribbean Writer* for just over a month. As promised, the following week I visited Gloria, and this became a weekly ritual. Each time I visited, I brought a salad or sandwiches. She knew I loved plantain chips and her famous bush tea — a mixture of lemon grass, basil and other herbs — so she always had those ready for me. Gloria I Joseph was one of the fiercest women I have ever known. She always spoke her mind; she was relentless, creative, funny, opinionated and loyal as a friend.

Our friendship developed as a result of working closely together as Gloria agonised about putting together her tribute to Audre Lorde, her ex-partner. She wanted to get it right. I knew and had taught Audre Lorde's work and had met her once. Gloria and I spent endless hours discussing her life with Audre, their many travels, Audre's various treatments for cancer, her moving to St Croix, and their overall affinity and abiding commitment to one another.

Always the question from Gloria was what to share and what to leave out. As we ploughed through the different manuscripts, Gloria was always conscious about inclusion, wanting to make sure she didn't omit any relevant persons who had known and had a relationship with Audre. We had extensive discussions about the various circles that Audre traversed and who had to be included, who I had to seek out and contact, especially activists in California and elsewhere that I knew.

As a result, the manuscript underwent many major changes and turned out to be a four-year project. *The Wind Is Spirit: The Life, Love and Legacy of Audre Lorde* is vastly different from the initial inception. Gloria and I were often confused, trying to make sense of the different manuscript drafts on the floor, on the desks, on the computer, and all over the place in her office. Gloria had to see everything printed before she approved it. In addition to the editing and writing she had boxes of photos of Lorde; we weeded through some of these, but I had to ask her to find someone else to help her with that aspect of the book. Gloria was faithful to Audre's memory, and sometimes during the long but fun process of working on the book, we would walk to the side of the house where some of her cremated remains had been sprinkled and just stand in silence, calling on Lorde's spirit to guide us.

Gloria was thorough and indomitable, and when someone said something she did not agree with and didn't believe was worth arguing over, she would respond with a snide laughter. Her stance on being an activist was unwavering, and she kept abreast of both local and global politics. She had a strong position on everything, and that's what I loved about her — she was never lukewarm. Gloria loved flowers and was a gardener, so she always had fresh cut flowers from her yard in her office. Once I asked her why, and she said she couldn't work without having fresh flowers.

Gloria I. Joseph… always spoke her mind; she was relentless, creative, funny, opinionated and loyal as a friend.

Gloria had great friendships all over the world and was very good at keeping in touch. She was particularly close to Sonia Sanchez, who was also a friend of mine and someone who had been my inspiration from my teen years. When I shared this with Gloria, she insisted that we had to bring Sonia to St Croix as she hadn't been for a long while. Gloria worked persistently to make this happen, and Sonia Sanchez presented a lecture and reading at the University of the Virgin Islands while I was still a Visiting Professor there. Gloria was a woman who didn't just talk; she lived the walk, and as a friend she would go to great lengths to support others in their endeavours.

We sometimes disagreed, but we never argued. Gloria was older than my mother, but she was my friend; she never felt old to me. We gossiped about people, talked about each other's families; she had a sister who shared some traits with my older sister; she worried about her brother, me my nephew; we regaled about travels and we spent countless hours lamenting about the crises of the world. Also, we strategised about incomplete projects and how to get them done. Gloria asked me to edit the conversation between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin that she had engineered when she was at Amherst, and which I insisted should be published. We tried to negotiate deals and approached it from so many angles, but Baldwin's executor refused. Gloria was sourly disappointed. After that she gave me Audre's unpublished and incomplete novel and told me to finish it; I still have not done that work. I begged Gloria to write her own autobiography, but she would smile and say "after I completed these projects."

After *Wind is Spirit* was published I attended her readings in New York at Bernard and The Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture. She was so happy, like a school girl being honoured. She had finally fulfilled her promise to Audre Lorde.

Opal Palmer Adisa, University Director of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies, (IGDS-RCO), The UWI, is also a literary critic and author of twenty volumes.

* Originally published in *The Gleaner,* August 11, 2019
** Originally published in *The Gleaner,* August 25, 2019

Esther Phillips:

The Literary Aspect of Our Culture Deserves Special Recognition

An Interview with Opal Palmer Adisa

Photo / Illustration: Steve Jones / Esther Phillips

Opal Palmer Adisa: You are into your second year as Poet Laureate. Congratulations again on being the first for Barbados. Do share with readers what this honour means to you, and what it means for the country to have a Poet Laureate. What projects are you undertaking in this capacity?

Esther Phillips: It is a signal honour to be elected first Poet Laureate of Barbados. For me this is a kind of culmination of the long years I have been writing poetry and my commitment to the art form. I think this national honour is an acknowledgement on the part of the Government that the literary aspect of our culture deserves special recognition. We tend to foreground music and dance, not paying enough attention to the literary arts which are equally, if not more so, an authentic record of our history, cultural shifts and changes, and certainly of our intellectual and creative gifts.

Your first publication was a chapbook, **La Montee** ***(1983), but you had been writing long before then. What is the central theme of that collection?***

Yes, I did have my first poems published in the *Bim* magazine. On my bookshelf recently, I actually came across *An Index to Bim 1942-1972*, compiled by Reinhard W. Sander. The General Editor was Esmond D. Ramesar. One of my early poems is referenced there. This Index is a treasure since it lists all the names of the renowned Caribbean writers that now comprise our canon.

The late Bruce St John was editor of my Chapbook, *La Montee*, and as I read it again, I would say that I have pretty much continued those same themes in the other books I've published: the question of identity; relationships–love and otherwise; the attempt to understand my historical and social environment. My last collection, *Leaving Atlantis*, was very different. Poet and critic Jennifer Rahim recently wrote what I thought was an excellent and insightful review of the collection, whose main focus was novelist and Caribbean intellectual, George Lamming. I see that collection as my strongest work so far. I suppose the poetry couldn't help but reflect the depth and complexity of the issues I found myself confronting in writing those poems. Those poems tested my poetic skills at every level.

In an interview you credit your mother playing the piano and you playing tambourine in church as helping to establish your poetic foundation in terms of the use of rhythm and meter. But I sense that where you grew up in Barbados – the landscape – also informed your language. What role did home and place play in your development as a poet?

Home was the country: Greens, St George, to be specific. And that meant that I was surrounded by Nature in a way that I wish I could recapture. I think I have a better appreciation now of what it was I really had then: the gifts of a daily life that were rich in sound and colour and taste. Growing up meant trees: mango, shaddock, golden apple trees that I could climb and sit in, eating the fruit and dreaming of anything my imagination could conceive. It meant sugar canes on either side of the road, with a sea of arrows you could see in the distance. Then there was the crop season, when school children felt it their right to suck the cane on the way home from school. Childhood meant grass piece, and gully and cart roads that were short cuts or just places for play and adventure. I can still remember how the earth smelled after it rained; the smell of sage and other wildflowers on a hot sunny day. I remember the taste of tamarind and guavas and ackees and sweet lime. We ate whatever we thought was edible. Only God Himself kept us from poisoning ourselves. Growing up in the country, as I look back, was a glorious experience. The free gifts of unsullied and abundant nature that taught me love of the landscape, its colours and creatures—so many butterflies and honeybees and varied species of birds. When I met with the Romantics later in school, they had nothing to teach me. Their geography may have been different, but my own landscape had already awakened my instincts. I had already grasped what it was to be captivated by the wonders of the natural beauty around me.

Reflecting back to when you were a girl of 8 through 12, what did you enjoy doing? Did you already have an inkling that you would write, become a poet?

I loved books. One of my chores was to sweep the house. I don't remember this, but my mother tells me of one incident when she caught me with a book spread open on the floor so I could sweep and read at the same time. I loved the way books made the world open out. There were no electronics then; everything depended on the imagination. I think that was a blessing in so many ways. I think I wrote stories first, and my urge to write creatively does not surprise me. I believe I grew naturally into one of the things I was called to do on this earth.

You have been a co-editor of Bim, the long-standing prestigious literary magazine, and you have been credited in founding the first Bim LitFest in 2012. What have been some of the joys and challenges in executing these roles? What can we look forward to in 2020, the third Bim LitFest? What distinguishes this festival from other literary festivals throughout the Caribbean?

I have felt particularly privileged to be editor of this iconic literary journal now in its seventy-seventh year. The magazine still commands respect and interest regionally and internationally at a literary as well as academic level. I'm constantly inspired by the number of writers who still send submissions. There are some financial challenges which I believe will soon be resolved. *Bim* has seen the birthing of too many of our now renowned writers. We cannot afford to let it die.

I am indeed the founder of the Bim LitFest. I think our distinctive children's festival may mark the difference between our festival and others. Apart from that aspect, we share many of the same ideas relative to content and format: seminars, readings, workshops, etc. I would love to put the festival on again in 2020. The difficulty is funding. But I haven't given up on the festival, not at all.

How is your writing woven into your personal life as mother, wife/lover, worker, friend, relative? Do you keep them separate?

My writing is of course influenced and shaped by all the roles you mention. Different views of the same lenses, I suspect. In terms of time, however, that has always been a challenge, as I know it is for many of my female writer friends. My writing time is generally in the early hours of the morning, when it's quiet and I can concentrate more easily.

Do you believe your productivity as a poet has been hampered in any way by being a woman and having care-giving duties?

I know the frustration of wanting to write but having to put that aside in raising my daughter and seeing to domestic duties. One learns to find some time. I do have a private feeling, though, that men have an easier time in the sense that they are usually not burdened with as many domestic duties as women are. I also wish that I had the freedom of movement that men tend to have. What I mean is this: I love to walk on my own and would love to explore more in the later hours of the day. There are ways I may never be able to engage in such ways with the environment since it's simply not safe for a woman to do so alone. A man, I think, has much more latitude in this regard, and for this reason perhaps may be able to garner a wider variety of imagery. Maybe that's one of the reasons why we female poets are inclined to turn to the inner landscape.

Why has it been challenging for Caribbean women writers to achieve the same recognition as their male colleagues? Do you see this changing?

I think that the more women write, the better the chance that the work will be celebrated and taught. It's the usual story of men having got there first. I have no doubt that female poets will rise to

prominence. What we have to say cannot be said by male poets in the same way. Our voices will be heard on a much larger scale.

Briefly describe the writing process behind your collections,* When Ground Doves Fly *(2003) and* The Stone Gatherer *(2009). How would you describe the dialogue between both books?

My inspiration to write invariably comes from some personal experience, somebody else's that I'm told about, or something I see or hear that strikes me in a particular way. Strangely enough, I hear/feel what I call the music of the poem and then I sit and write. I always write my first drafts with pencil and paper. I go to the computer only when I think I'm close to the final draft; when I need to see how the line structure is working. I don't think in terms of a dialogue between the books. The period of time between completing manuscripts and their publication does not necessarily allow for a continuum. I think my writing changes as life takes its different turns.

Is poetry still relevant to the Caribbean?

Poetry will always be relevant in any society, I suspect, because people will always desire to give expression to their emotions and feelings. This certainly seems to be the case judging by the number of entries still submitted to literary competitions in Barbados. More young people are choosing to express their thoughts and feelings through the Spoken Word medium, which I think is different from page-based poetry. I suppose it's quicker; more immediate. But the need to express oneself will always be there, in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

Your poem* Swim *is written for and about your engagement with your granddaughter. Do you find yourself writing more poems for and about your grandchildren? How do you think being a grandmother has changed your attention to poetics and your subject focus?

I feel very blessed to be a grandmother, and I think it is inevitable that I write about my grandchildren, close to my heart as they are. I've watched them grow from babies to where they are now, and I want to record moments of that growth and to share those moments with them through my poetry. I hope they will see these poems as expression of their grandmother's care and love for them.

I also find myself wanting to be more careful of what I write, bearing in mind that I do not want to influence my grandchildren in ways that could affect them negatively. I suppose you could call it a greater sense of ethical responsibility.

Bell *explores an all too familiar theme in the Caribbean– that of a parent migrating and forgetting about the child and family left behind. In this instance, it is a little girl waiting from a letter from her father. How has immigration impacted the landscape of the Caribbean, and what is the emotional scarring that mothers and fathers migrating have on children? Do you believe we have examined this topic enough in our literature, in schools, in society at large?

While parents generally leave for economic reasons, to make life better for their children, it is hard for children to understand that in ways that can fill the emotional void that is created by that separation. The harder part is the outright abandonment of the children, by fathers especially. There are bound to be feelings of rejection that may hamper children for years to come and possibly affect their relationships as adults. What I would like to emphasise here, though, is the stabilising influence of grandparents who very often become the substitute parents and commit themselves to raising their grandchildren. They become a strong link between migrated parents and children and are often able to cushion the children emotionally from feelings of total abandonment.

"Poetry will always be relevant in any society, I suspect, because people will always desire to give expression to their emotions and feelings."

The failure of family, for whatever reasons, is one that we need to examine much more closely. From the effects of slavery to migration, we need to come to some kind of understanding of why so many children are still being raised by a single parent, usually the mother, why too many men will still not face up to their responsibility, and the link between these issues and the levels of crime plaguing Caribbean societies. What is the source of all this rage? What can we work towards that is redemptive?

"I want to use my writing to help improve the lives of individuals."

As a poet, what else do you want to achieve in your career?

I want to use my writing to help improve the lives of individuals. I have been giving a lot of thought in recent times to the idea of Writers in Action. Not a new thought, but I think the writer has become too secluded a figure in contemporary Caribbean society. And so I have recently started to teach Poetry within the Prison Service here. Others from Writers Ink Inc., a group I formed in 2007, are joining me as well. We're also planning to use our writing skills to reach at-risk youths within schools.

I also have a project in mind I call "Poetry Explosion", which would see poetry posted in public places. We need to honour our poets and have the public become familiar with the products of their imagination.

Of course, I hope to continue to write poetry as long I live. I can't think of a better or more natural way in which to express my thoughts, feelings and experiences, and through which to engage with the world in which I live. ic

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Esther Phillips gained an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Miami in 1999, where she won the Alfred Boas Poetry Prize of the Academy of American Poets. She also won the prestigious Frank Collymore Literary Award as well as the Governor General's Award for Literary Excellence. Her publications are Chapbook *La Montee* (1983), *When Ground Doves Fly* (2003), *The Stone Gatherer* (2009), and *Leaving Atlantis* (2015). Esther Phillips is founder of the Bim Literary Festival and Book Fair, founder of Writers Ink Inc., producer of the radio programme, *What's That You're Reading?* and editor of *BIM: Arts for the 21st Century*. Her work was recorded for the Poetry Archive UK, and she was appointed first Poet Laureate of Barbados in 2018.

Swim

(for Zoe at three years old)

"Come, Grandma, swim!"
I crouch, bend over,
on a bare, hardwood floor
hoping this compromise will do.
"No, Grandma, like this!"
She's flat down on the floor,
arms and legs flailing.
I do the same, no cheating
on my little Sweetie!
For days afterwards, my hips
swing west when I intend going east.

"Come, Grandma, let's swim again."
This time, Grandma will lie afloat
while you swim as long and as far
as you choose.

One day you'll swim beyond these horizons.
In the quiet tide, lie still, like Grandma
and let the gentle waves soothe you.
But on those days when you battle
the currents that try to overwhelm you,
remember this room, how the floor,
though hard, stood firm and sure under you.
Eyes with keener vision than mine
will watch over you. And arms beyond
my reach will bear you up. Swim!

Bell

In a small country village, a little girl listens
for the sound of a bicycle bell.
It's the postman arriving with his bag of letters,
while he approaches, nothing else matters
but the sound of that bicycle bell.
"Lord Jesus," she prays, "please let him stop here."
He's right by the neighbour. He's near…he's near
with the sound of his bicycle bell.
She knows that her mother is listening too,
looking for an envelope with red, white and blue
at the sound of the bicycle bell.
But the postman hops on his bicycle once more.
No sound of his bell as he rides past their door.
No sound of his bicycle bell.
She thinks of her father who's "over in away."
He's too far to notice, too distant to care
for the sound of the bicycle bell.
She'll wait many evenings by the tamarind tree,
then dry all her tears so no one will see
that she's waited in vain, again and again,
for the sound of the bicycle bell.

Making Sure Children See Themselves in Literature

IC: What or who was the inspiration behind the establishment of Papillote Press?

Polly Pattullo: Papillote Press evolved out of a self-publishing project when I wrote a book about the Gardens of Dominica. I published it myself because I reckoned that no established publisher would be interested enough in the subject to back it. Having self-published that book, I thought to myself 'I can do this', and that there were books about Dominica and by Dominicans waiting to be published. So I started from there and have published a range of books across many genres since 2004.

Do you focus on a specific age group?

In terms of children's books, Papillote Press has published picture books (5–8 years) and young adult titles.

Tell us about the type of stories you are looking for. What is your selection process?

I respond to books that are rooted in the Caribbean and reflect its culture, both contemporary and historical. It's so vital for children to see themselves in the literature they read. This may sound obvious, but there are still too few of such titles. People often think that it's easy to write for children – it's not, so I look for writers who are sensitive to the challenge. There is also the fact that children's writers are entering a very over-subscribed market. What I seek is that "wow" factor – a writer with an original idea, the ability to inspire and the willingness to polish the text to make it shine. Children are tough audiences so although the theme can be well-worn, the treatment must be fresh. I also believe that Caribbean writers and publishers need to be brave in tackling themes such as sexual abuse and mental health – an important dimension of respecting the children of the Caribbean lies in the willingness to address the realities of Caribbean life.

What kinds of assistance do you offer writers, from acceptance to publication?

There is full consultation from acceptance onwards. There is a rigorous editing process and negotiation between writer and publisher/editor to achieve high editorial standards. If the book is illustrated, there will of course be close collaboration between writer, artist and publisher. The writer will be consulted about design, production and publicity strategies.

Tell us about your marketing strategies for promoting authors and their books.

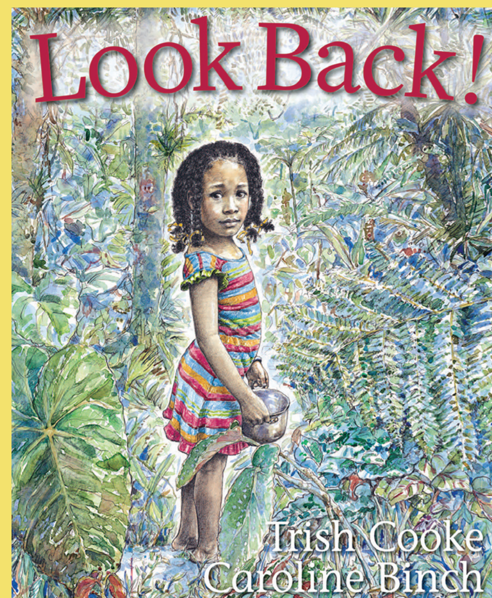
Depending on where the author is – Caribbean, North America, UK – there might be a launch party, but before that all relevant media are sent press releases and review copies. Contacts are made with literary festivals, bookshops, conferences and so on to organise author readings. In terms of schools and libraries, there are also opportunities for authors to visit schools to talk about their books or to hold

Photo: Courtesy Polly Pattullo

workshops for teachers centred on their books. Marketing requires a bit of lateral thinking to make things happen. There is also social media, which can be exploited in original ways.

What is the relationship between text and illustrations in a picture book?

It's key! One without the other won't work. Each supports the other. The images tend to be visually dominant, but without a text that propels the story, the images are weakened. There are of course picture books without text, but they tend to be for very young children.



Have you had any challenges in finding quality children's illustrators?

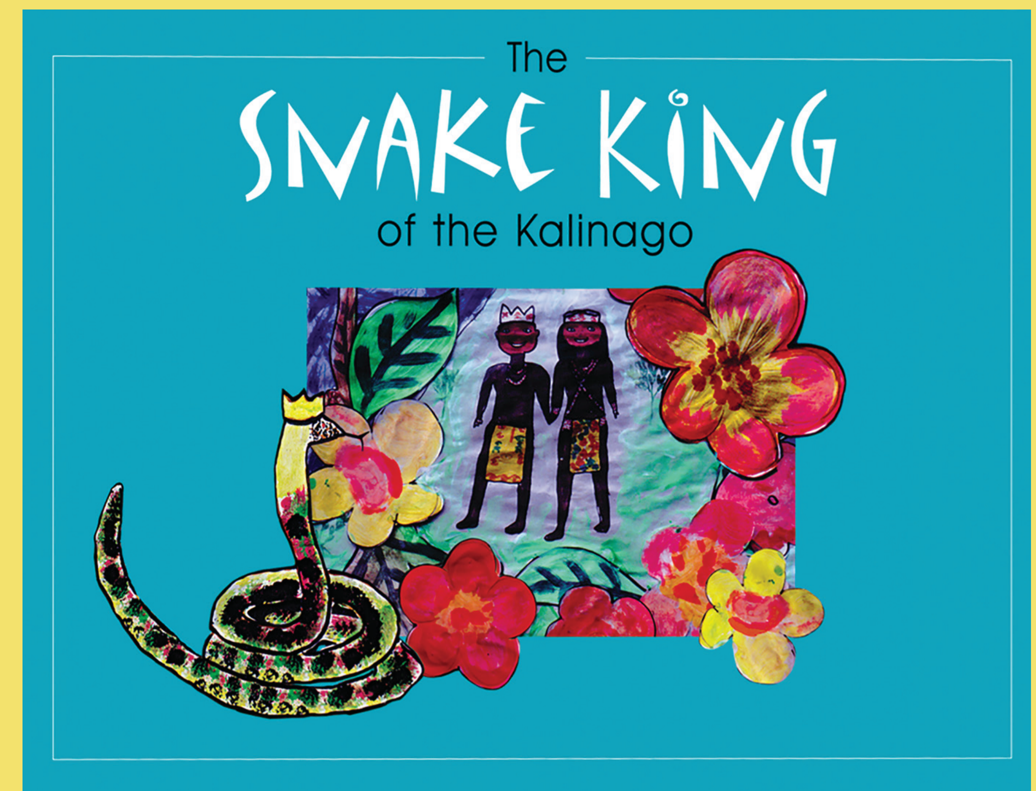
I have published only two illustrated picture books. One, *Look Back!,* by Trish Cooke and illustrated by Caroline Binch, emerged from an original idea by Papillote Press. I asked Trish Cooke, who is of Dominican heritage and an extremely well respected writer from the UK, to come up with an idea for a book based around Dominican folklore. Her story features a Dominican granny telling her grandson about her childhood adventures with Ti Bolom. Having established the text, I asked Caroline Binch (illustrator of *Amazing Grace* and *Hue Boy*) to work with Trish on the illustrations. That was one collaboration.

The other picture book, *The Snake King of the Kalinago*, is also based on Dominican folklore, in this case from the Kalinago Territory. Children from a local primary school wrote the book, and we used existing paintings by Kalinago teenagers to support the text. Those are my two experiences; I know that there are some exceptional artists in the Caribbean, so finding illustrators would not, I am sure, be difficult.

How can we make children's literature more affordable/accessible to working class people in the Caribbean?

For a start, we can encourage school and national libraries to stock local books. Then at least Caribbean books will be available to read for free. Also, encouraging second hand books to circulate and not being ashamed of that. Ebooks for picture books have not been explored as much as they should have been and I'm also guilty of that — although all four of my Young Adult titles are available as ebooks. Bookshops – a rare sighting sadly and not just in the Caribbean — have a problem because most books have to be shipped from overseas, thus hiking the price. But at least in most Caribbean countries there is no VAT on books.

We are now mourning the end of the Burt Award for Young Adult Caribbean Literature, which was sponsored by the Canadian charity CODE. This was an annual award for three writers from the Caribbean; each winning author then selected a Caribbean publisher to produce the book, and then 2,500 copies were distributed throughout the Caribbean to schools and libraries. This was a tremendous example of joined-up thinking and a way for young people to read quality literature from Caribbean writers.



What is your overarching goal regarding the creation of Caribbean children's literature?

We have to try and make it normal for Caribbean children to have access to books that reflect their history and aspirations. The fact that this has to be stated reflects the need this is, of course, bound up with colonial histories and hegemonies. The tiny size of the Caribbean publishing industry means that schools and libraries are often supplied by charities and organisations outside the region. In worst-case scenarios, there is a tendency to "dump" books into the region – books that may have no relevance to Caribbean readers. The whole industry needs to be more region-centred, so that Caribbean authors, publishers, printers, readers can flourish in a symbiotic relationship. There are many passionately committed people in the Caribbean seeking to further the cause of Caribbean children's literature (Anansesem is, of course, a shining example), so let's hope that things can move forward and that Caribbean children no longer think that the best and the modern is what is created elsewhere.

Where can we find your books?

Bookshops in Trinidad, Jamaica, St Lucia and Dominica stock Papillote Press books. They are also available online. *ic*

Polly Pattullo is a former journalist and the founder of Papillote Press. She worked for national newspapers in the UK for many decades as an editor and feature writer. She is also the author of *Last Resorts: The Cost of Tourism in the Caribbean* and *Fire from the Mountain: The Tragedy of Montserrat and the Betrayal of its People*. She lives in Dominica and London.

Daniel O'Brien:
The Carnival Prince's Universe

IC: Why did you decide to become an illustrator?

Daniel O'Brien: Some of my earliest memories were tracing the drawings my grandfather made for me. Being an illustrator was never really a choice. It's something that makes me happy and keeps me feeling whole.

What kinds of stories do you want to illustrate and why?

I'm a huge fan of fantasy themed stories, especially Caribbean fantasy/folklore. My dream job would be illustrating a children's book written by Neil Gaiman. He is by far my favourite storyteller.

Once you have been given a story to illustrate, what is your process?

Once the contracts are signed and the deposit has been paid, I sit down with the client and discuss my ideas for the illustrations. From there I start collecting references. I cannot stress this enough; proper references are key! Once the proper references are collected, I start on the rough sketches. I then present the sketches to the client and discuss their likes and dislikes. After consensus has been reached, I move on to the 'work-up' sketch phase while keeping my clients' proposed revisions in mind. My next step would be another round of revisions, with my client making sure they like where the project is heading. Once the drawings are approved, I move forward with the final illustrations. I then submit the near completed illustrations for final approval and make sure there are no more revisions that need to be made.

What are some of the challenges you face as an illustrator?

One of the things I deal with on a regular basis is being severely undervalued as an artist. I get comments like: "But you already love drawing. If I loved it as much as you did, I would do it for free". Even though it's true that I love what I do, I have spent countless hours honing my craft to be able to present it to you as a valuable product. My time as an artist is valuable, and I should be compensated accordingly.

Talk about your successes as an illustrator.

As an illustrator, I have been fortunate enough to do everything from spot illustrations for magazines to logos for movie production companies. But my most rewarding project was writing and illustrating *The Carnival Prince*. It was a labour of love and a way to spill everything that represented me as an artist and storyteller onto the page. From time to time I get fan mail about *The Carnival Prince*, thanking me for creating the book, and I can't help but feel pride.

Photo / Illustration: Steve Jones / Daniel O'Brien

What are you working on now?

I'm working on another self-written and illustrated picture book based in *The Carnival Prince's* universe. This time I'm focusing on *The Legend of the Midnight Robber*!

How will you make* The Legend of the Midnight Robber *appeal to this generation of young readers? Why does this legend excite you?

I'm hoping to appeal to younger readers by taking a much more tongue-in-cheek approach to the character. I'm making the character much less menacing. Without giving up too much information, I ultimately want kids to look at this story as a source of empowerment. The reason this character excites me so much is because the person behind the mask, with the larger-than-life personality could be anyone when the costume comes off. The Robber could be my mother, father, brother or sister. There are so many possible stories you could tell with such an iconic Traditional Mas character.

What advice do you have for the young person who is considering a career as an illustrator?

Be infinitely curious, and pull inspiration from everywhere you can. You never know where your next great idea may come from! ȉc

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Daniel O'Brien is a Trinidadian-born author and illustrator currently residing in New York. He holds a BFA in Illustration from The School of Visual Arts. He is enthusiastic about contributing to the telling of Caribbean stories and is honoured to be a part of the CaribbeanReads community.

Yolanda T. Mar-shall: Preserve the Beauty of the Inner Child

An Interview with Juleus Ghunta

Juleus Ghunta: Tell us about your early years in Guyana. What are some of the stories you read or heard while you were growing up there?

Yolanda T. Marshall: I was fortunate enough to experience a variety of environments while growing up in Georgetown. My parents were very cultured. My dad's side of the family was highly religious, so I was exposed to the deep spirituality of the church. When my mother moved to Canada to build a life for us, we bounced between my dad's family and hers. Those who remained in Guyana taught me to appreciate agriculture, to master the cutlass and bathe in the back-dam, to build wooden scooters, beat tires down the hot streets, and each day I played ring games with friends. I would consider myself a well-rounded Guyanese child. My uncles were fantastic storytellers, especially Uncle Brian after a few drinks. He introduced us to *Sensi Bill* and *Stupidy Bill* – funny stories about *Brer Anansi Jumbies* and *Ole Higue* tales. During the frequent power outages, we would look forward to enjoying the funniest and wittiest stories.

How did these stories impact you?

These stories allowed me to identify with my culture and ancestors and ignited my imagination. Caribbean folktales express the richness of our beliefs and history. They offered me a sense of identity. When I moved to Canada, I searched the Toronto libraries for Caribbean literature, history books about slavery, pre-colonial African religions and cultures. It is through these stories that I developed a love of Caribbean literature, and that I proudly identify myself as a Caribbean person.

Your father is a jazz musician, and you played the guitar when you were young. Tell us what it was like to grow up in a musical home and the role that music plays in your writing.

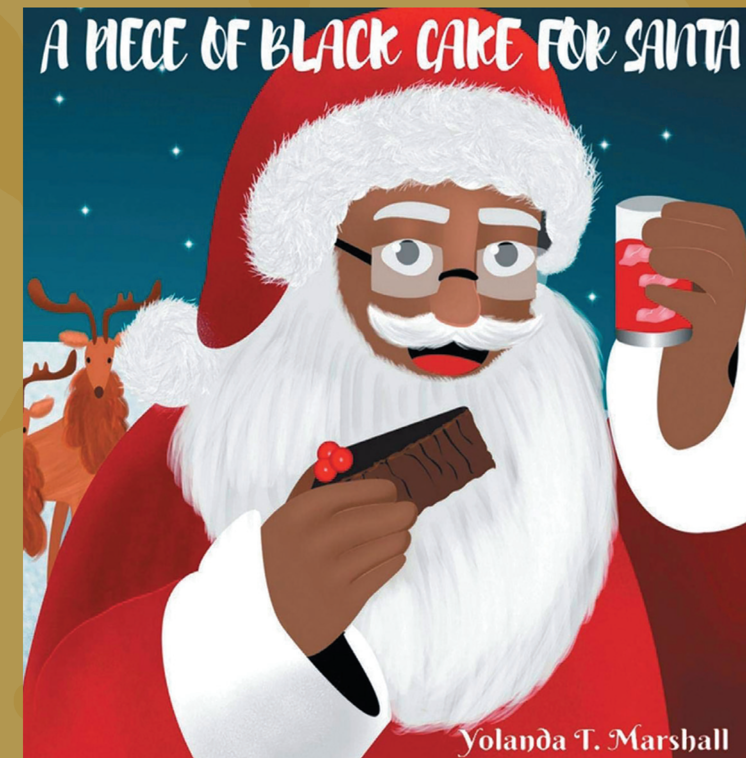
My dad, Herbert Marshall, is a talented Bajan/Guyanese Guitarist. Both of his parents played the guitar and taught him and his siblings how to play. As a child, my lullabies were jazz and gospel songs on the guitar. My dad played every day and taught me to strum along. In form one of high school, I was the guitarist for the school's folk group and played in church concerts. As a child, I started to write poems with a melody in my head. Many of my poems, such as *Serenaded in New York* – which was published in my first poetry book, *Obayifo* – were written as Jazz songs. Music is in the heart of every poet.

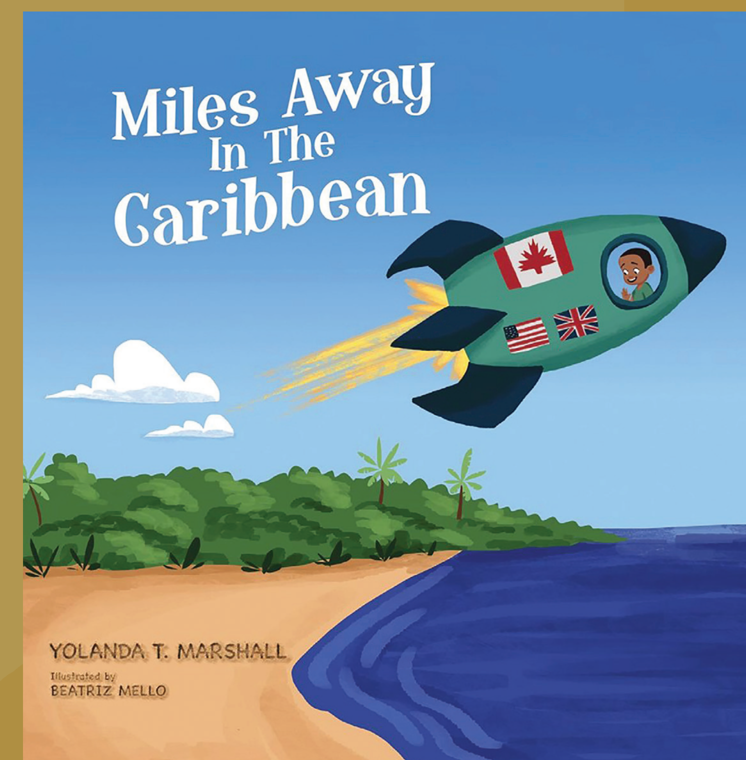
Your book,* Obayifo*, looks at the practice of Obeah in the Guyana. Why did you feel a need to address this issue?

Obayifo is the Ashanti word for 'witch.' In Caribbean culture, we associate witches, ole higues, duppies, jumbies with evil. Many of us were raised to fear Obeah. When I started gaining knowledge about the history of Obeah, I also learnt of the healing, spiritual practices many enslaved Africans used to survive. I grew up hearing scary stories of the Obeah man or Obeah woman – their wicked spells, acts of revenge and potions to lure lovers. My grandmother used to yell at us when we combed our hair on the front steps while the Obeah women's cumfa drums echoed loud on Saturday evenings. This made me more curious. I wanted to share their stories in my poems.

When and why did you decide to write for children?

I started to write for children after becoming a mother at the age of thirty-six. My son is Canadian-born, of Caribbean and East African heritage. His father is Kenyan. I searched for children's books written about Canadian-born kids of Caribbean descent and was disappointed when I didn't find any. In Canada, a large proportion of Blacks are of Caribbean heritage, and yet we are barely represented in Canadian Children's literature. Our writers of colour face considerable discrimination in the publishing world.





I am proud of the Caribbean authors whose work made an impact in my life. I decided to share my love of my Caribbean culture with my child, other children and parents who are passionate about reading diverse literature. In 2015, months after my son was born, I wrote *Keman's First Carnival* and published it in 2016. Every year since then, I have published a Caribbean children's book.

In an article in* Toronto Caribbean Newspaper*, writer Leanne Benn says that your books "are about celebrating Caribbean culture." Is this an apt description of your goal as a children's writer?

That is correct. We are a powerful, beautiful and vibrant people. It doesn't matter where on earth we live, we have a positive influence. In Canada, Caribbean people host the most significant cultural celebration, Carnival. Carnival attracts millions of people and preserves our heritage. Each book was written to educate and encourage our future generation to revel in our rich Caribbean culture, no matter where you reside.

Tell us about the children's books you have published so far.

My 2019 release, *Miles Away in the Caribbean*, is a story about a Canadian boy named Miles. In his magical spaceship, he visits several Caribbean countries highlighting magnificent landmarks and enjoying his cultural adventures. *Sweet Sorrel Stand* was published in 2018. This book teaches kids and parents how to make our traditional sorrel drink and encourages them to become entrepreneurs. It was close to the Christmas season in 2017 when I released *A Piece of Black Cake for Santa*, a book about Christmas and various West Indian holiday dishes.

What are some of the challenges you face as a Caribbean children's writer?

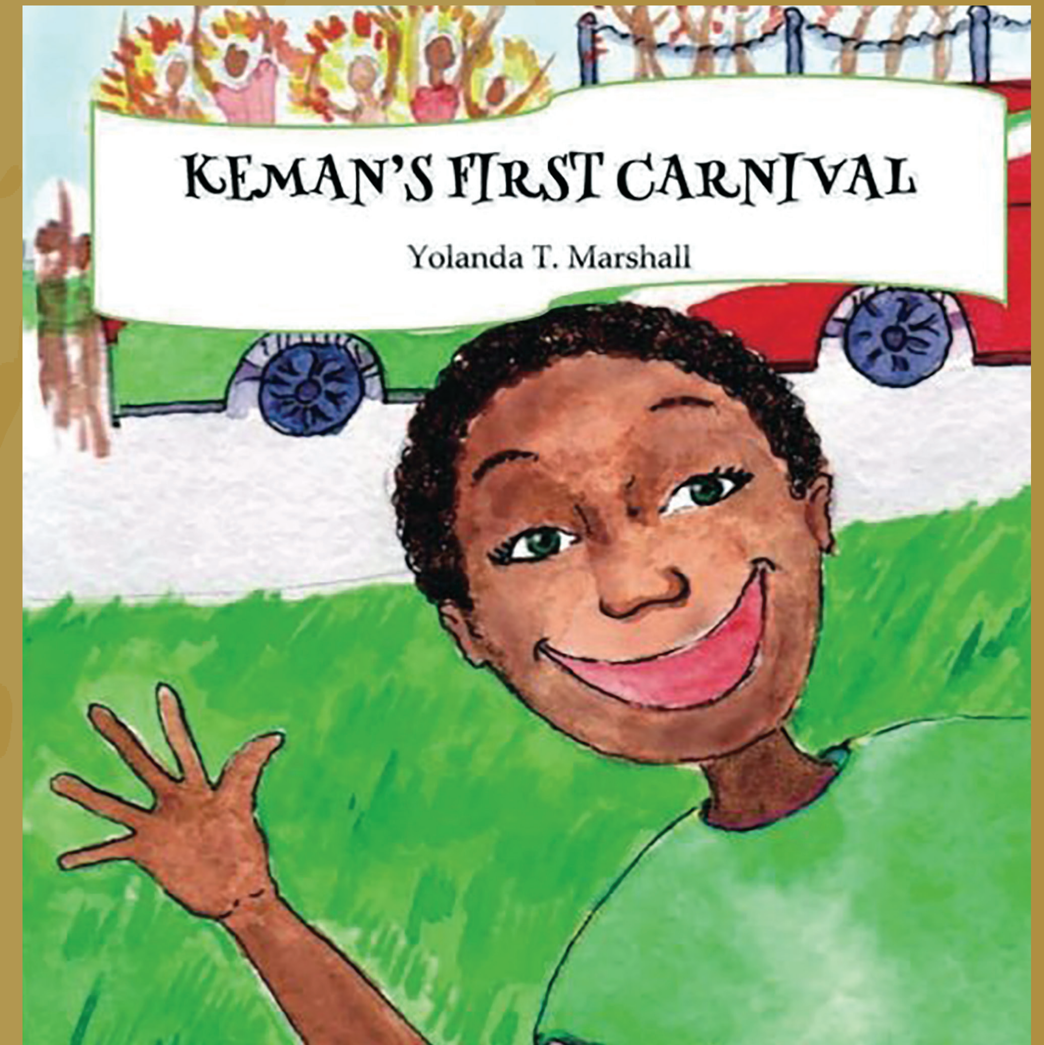
One major challenge is getting schools to include Canadian Caribbean Literature into their "diverse" reading collections in the classrooms and getting major publishers to acknowledge that representations of our children of Caribbean heritage matter.

What are some of your successes?

My books have been accepted in twenty-three Toronto Public Library locations. This is a massive deal for me as it allows children free access to Caribbean literature. I have gained positive support from an independent multicultural bookstore called A Different Booklist, which specialises in books from the African and Caribbean diaspora. Every time I read, and children of Caribbean heritage hear me mention their traditional food, countries where their parents were born, etc., the surprised stares and smiles on their faces make me feel successful.

Do you have suggestions for developing a stronger culture around children's literature in the region?

To develop children's literature, our educational institutions need to invest in attaining more books for classrooms and encourage reading programmes in all local libraries. Invite your local authors who are representing the culture to make appearances and read with the children. Create more significant incentives to encourage children to read more books when on school breaks and host more book events for children and parents to partake in.



You are the creator and host of a podcast called* Caribbean Storytime*. Tell us about it, including some of the writers you have featured, who your listeners are, and how it has been received.

Caribbean Storytime is a podcast I created to talk about all things Caribbean. My goal is to encourage parents to support our Caribbean authors and to find more Caribbean literature books. I was able to learn about some fantastic writers and publishers, such as Nneka Edwards in Trinidad and Tobago, Carol Mitchell of St Kitts, Henry and Raquel Reid-Grandison from Jamaica, Dr Rachel Thwaites-Williams who resides in St Lucia, Marjuan Canady who wrote the Callaloo series and many more awesome people who contribute to Caribbean children's literature. My listeners are usually fans of my writing and anyone interested in the Caribbean culture. So far the reception has been great, and I plan to continue growing my audience.

Yolanda T. Marshall is a Guyanese-born Canadian author of four Caribbean children's books and two poetry collections. She is a world traveller, jazz lover and devoted mother.

Merle Hodge:

A People's Fiction Helps to Ground Them

An Interview with Opal Palmer Adisa

Photo / Illustration : Steve Jones / Merle Hodge

Opal Palmer Adisa: Your very first book,* Crick Crack, Monkey *(1970), was a success and is still considered a classic. You were relatively young when you wrote it. Reflect back and share with us some of the thoughts that went through your mind as you were writing that rites-of-passage novel? Who were you writing that book for and why?

Merle Hodge: I wrote *Crick Crack, Monkey* fifty-something years ago, over a period of about four years, so I don't remember those thoughts in any detail. I can only speak about the overall motivation behind the writing of the book. It may well be that I wrote this book for *me* in the first instance, out of a need to identify and claim the reality in which I had grown up. A stocktaking exercise. As children, I and my generation had never seen ourselves in a storybook or a movie, never seen, represented in fiction, the way we and our families lived. A people's fiction helps to ground them in their own world by helping them to see themselves.

Of course, there did exist a body of fiction based on our own reality – the Caribbean oral tradition of literature. But not all of us had access to that source of self-knowledge. The oral tradition tends to be upstaged by modern forms of fiction, and boxed into a space known as "folklore," a term which carries a hint of condescension, depending on who is using it. It might be argued that those stories reflect our world in a bygone era, making them irrelevant; but we do read novels, short stories, plays and poems from other people's past, and even stories from other people's oral tradition, and consider them to have great value even in modern times. The scribal tradition of Caribbean literature that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century was, to a large extent, born in exile. Caribbean people going to their supposed "mother country" were able to see their own societies in sharper focus. They realized that their homeland was a place with a culture different from the culture of the metropolis, so that Caribbean people were not just British or French citizens of colour.

I wrote *Crick Crack, Monkey* in my student years, between England, Denmark and France. In Denmark I lived and worked as a member of staff in a children's home. I saw, at close quarters, how children in these old societies were educated *into* their own environment. The overwhelming majority of human characters appearing in their storybooks and their school texts were people who looked like themselves or the adults around them; ate the foods they ate; experienced the weather conditions they did; sang songs and played children's games that had come down through generations of their ancestors. When we went for walks in the surrounding woods, they could tell you the name of every plant on the way, which I could not do in my own natural environment. Part of the purpose of education in confident, self-respecting societies is the induction of the young into their own environment, cultural and otherwise – getting citizens from an early age to identify with and develop a certain dedication to this environment.

It struck me during my stay there, more forcefully than ever before (or perhaps I was able to formulate the sentiment in clearer terms than ever before), that in contrast to the experience of these children I was interacting with, I had been educated *out of* myself – the self-produced by the environment I was growing up in. Education, in my childhood, had served to alienate us from, rather than induct us into, our world. Officialdom, and therefore school, did not acknowledge the culture that had inevitably taken shape on Caribbean soil in response to specific realities such as the historical and social context; the elements of culture we had brought from our ancestral societies as well as those we had learned from the First Peoples we met here; and the natural environment in which we had lived for centuries. *Crick Crack, Monkey* was my stand against the arrogant assumption that we had no culture to speak of, and that our best course would be to shed our ways in favour of a superior culture that came with education, including informal channels of education such as movies and storybooks.

Crick Crack, Monkey was written for me to begin with, but I was not unique in belonging to an unrecognized, unvalidated culture. The book was also written for my compatriots people with a similar history - and ultimately, of course, for people anywhere in the world who might find this story worth reading.

Fifty years later, do you feel that the themes you explored - (a) class/colour; (b) rural versus urban; (c) the educational system that alienated; (d) the colonial legacy – are still relevant in Trinidad and Tobago, or in the Caribbean region more generally?

The novel was published in 1970, but the era in which it is set is the early fifties, so the stretch of time to be considered is more like going on 70 years. In the era of independence, we have been more aware of certain issues and more willing to confront them. There is palpable social change, due in part to the increased access to education that came with independence.

Class, which rests on the inequitable distribution of resources, is difficult to fight when we continue to live under an economic system that facilitates the concentration of wealth in a small minority of the population. Class remains a reality; but I would venture to say that class prejudice has been eroded somewhat, or may be less overtly expressed, so that in terms of social contact, people may seem less sharply divided by class, except at the very top, than in the colonial era.

In Trinidad and Tobago, attitudes to race and colour have undergone some degree of transformation in the wake of the Black Power movement, although some negative notions still linger. The self-image of Afro-Caribbean people in general is more positive today. A matter of continuing concern in Trinidad and Tobago is the quality of relations between the two largest ethnic groups – African and Indian. The electorate is divided along ethnic lines by the two major political parties, and that tends to undermine the harmony that characterizes everyday interactions between people of the two groups.

Twenty-four years after* Crick Crack, Monkey *you gave us* For the Life of Laetitia *(1994), another story of a 12-year-old girl who, similar to Tee, must leave the comfort of her rural life to move to the city and live with her father to attend school. Both novels present a movement from rural to urban and its accompanying change of values and lifestyle. Speak about this movement between urban and rural and how these settings and class differences impact children.

For those of us who live on little islands, rural and urban are not widely separated by geography. In the past, however, rural areas were more isolated than today, and town and country were separate in ways more fundamental than physical distance. Today, improvements in transport systems, communication, and infrastructural development generally, are blurring the urban-rural dichotomy.

My fiction has not, thus far, explored in any detail the contrasts between the rural and urban Caribbean. My interest in rural communities has been to do with their role as repository of an indigenous Caribbean culture. For example, all my fictional grandmothers live in the countryside.

The place to which Laetitia moves for part of her first year of high school is actually a rural town rather than a city. In both novels, the child's discomfort is not so much to do with living in a town. As far as I can recall, neither of them registers or reacts to the town environment, but rather to their experience in the home and in the school. Their discomfort is with being farmed out to live with people whom they do not know, and the quality of family life within the two households. Both households – Auntie Beatrice's and Mr Cephas's – are fairly disastrous in their functioning as families. The two girls, Tee and Laetitia, come from loving, supportive homes and would just rather be back there.

Tee experiences class prejudice at home and in school. Auntie Beatrice is engaged in social climbing, and Tee's school is full of upper-class children and teachers. The snobbery of all these parties destabilizes her by undermining her confidence and alienating her from the family to which she has the deepest emotional attachment.

What Laetitia meets in her father's home cannot, I think, be described as class prejudice. That family is but a step or two out of the labouring class, and most if not all of the children in Laetitia's school are from the same social class as herself. (Some of the contrasts between the two novels are associated with the dramatic increase in access to secondary education that came with political independence.) The treatment Laetitia receives from one teacher is based on that teacher's sense of class superiority; but the child is not daunted by this and stands up to the woman's snobbery.

Tee is thrown into such confusion that she sees emigration as a rescue – getting away from Auntie Beatrice's home, the school, and Tantie's milieu, whereas Laetitia returns to her roots, settling back into her grandmother's household. She is determined to live there, despite the relative material poverty of this milieu and the difficulties of transport to and from school that she will now face.

I know you have always insisted on living in the rural area, although you often work and teach in the capital. I also know you have done work with girls in rural areas, helping them to expand their horizon and fight against the patriarchal oppression that would limit their future. Speak about this work you have been doing. How do you measure your impact, your success?

My home base has been the same since I was three years old – the once-rural St Augustine, today the location of The University of the West Indies campus and not so rural anymore. Apart from a brief stint in the Civil Service between finishing high school and going abroad to study, I have not been called upon to work in the capital. I have worked wherever the Ministry of Education has sent me to teach – high schools in different municipalities outside the capital. My last place of employment was The University of the West Indies, right in my neighbourhood.

But yes, I love the countryside. Some of the best days of my childhood were spent at my grandmother's, in what was once a village. And today I retreat whenever I can to a place in the countryside, surrounded by bush.

Regarding the second part of the question, I belong to a women's organization that I co-founded with two other women in 1985. Our work has not focused specifically on young women. We have done a lot of advocacy on a variety of social issues; mainly, but not exclusively, to do with gender equity. Some of our work has been done in collaboration with other groups, including the trade union movement.

Re. measurement of impact, we know that the work has borne fruit by indicators like the changes in consciousness that are evident in public discourse; the passing of various pieces of legislation; the fact that beating children has become a national debate rather than an unchallengeable fact of life, and that in direct response to our campaign, the use of corporal punishment in the schools has been outlawed.

How familiar are you with the current school curriculum for Trinidad and Tobago? Does it reflect/take into consideration local identities and those of the larger Caribbean region? Have we shed our colonial legacy and stepped into independence, or are we and our children still being directed and dictated by the metropolis?

I am out of touch with the school curriculum, having left teaching in the system 40 years ago, so I do not know to what extent it has become sensitive to the issue of national or regional identity. Yet it is safe to say that the decolonization of our education system is a work in progress.

In 1970, when I came home from studying abroad and entered teaching, eight years after independence, our literature was still not on the curriculum. Our country had already built up a vibrant body of published literature, extending back to the 1930s. We had novels by Alfred Mendes, C.L.R. James, Ralph de Boissiere, Samuel Selvon, V.S. Naipaul, Michael Anthony, and Earl Lovelace. The larger Caribbean had also thrown up an impressive array of literary works. None of it had entered our school curriculum. Students were still being fed *Tales of the Greek Heroes* (because, I was told by someone, it was the basic mythology of Western civilization) and British classics that reflected nothing of their Caribbean civilization.

I introduced my literature classes to Michael Anthony's *The Year in San Fernando* by reading it aloud to them, chapter by chapter. Their response was a sight to see – a recognition that at first expressed itself in embarrassed sniggers but soon settled into intense concentration. One boy who was habitually disruptive in class would sit stock still, leaning forward on his desk except when he angrily raised his head to shush any of his classmates who dared make a sound while *The Year in San Fernando* was being read.

In that era I encountered that embarrassed response time and again when I read our literature to students. It was as though their underwear was being exposed. They were not accustomed to the idea of their world being elevated into books, for literature was a space reserved for detailing the everyday lives of British and American people.

When we had finished reading *The Year in San Fernando*, we went on a bus trip to San Fernando where Michael Anthony welcomed us, chatted with the students, and took us to see the house where the story is set. There were other initiatives, led by individual teachers and others, that would have nudged the Ministry of Education into eventually placing West Indian texts on the school curriculum.

As for the other subjects on the curriculum today, school texts are being produced by nationals, largely based on indigenous reality. With regard to the indigenous performing arts, some schools have their own steelband as an extra-curricular activity, and there are inter-school steelband competitions and calypso competitions endorsed by the Ministry of Education. Arising out of work done by various individuals and institutions on the retrieval of traditional songs and dances, these items of indigenous culture have also infiltrated the school curriculum to some extent.

With regard to the colonial legacy, Trinidad and Tobago was colonized by two European nations and settled by citizens of a third. Planters from the French Caribbean were invited to migrate to Trinidad, and they brought their enslaved workforce. That colonial legacy is visible today, not in the form of domination but as an enduring influence; for example, the retention of the Westminster political system, European religions planted on our soil, facets of our cuisine, the fragments of French-lexicon Creole embedded in the English-lexicon Creole that is our mother tongue our Christmas music parang, featuring Spanish music and lyrics, and so on.

Today the colonial situation we have to worry about is the cultural domination of our region by a different metropolitan power. The US entertainment industry pervades our consciousness via the various media available in modern times, softening us up for political and economic penetration, aka American imperialism. The old colonialism also operated the strategy of subjugation by acculturation; but today's colonizer possesses more powerful and painless methods of taking over our minds.

Our young people are moving away from us mentally. Today we have a staggering food import bill, to cater for the change in dietary tastes away from what grows here to American fast foods and other tastes inspired by American TV. Our populations are caught up in runaway consumerism, alias materialism.

One disturbing symptom of the hold that American culture has taken on the consciousness of the Caribbean is seen when young people engage in creative writing, either voluntarily or for an exam. Children are called upon to produce a piece of fiction as part of the exam taken at the end of primary school, and again in the secondary school Language Arts test of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC). And then there are young people enrolling in Creative Writing courses at university or in writing workshops for youth.

Too many of these young people (often nearly all of the participants in a class or group) do not even consider the possibility of setting their stories in their own environment. They completely bypass the setting of their own lives, which they either do not see, or do not see as real, significant, or worthy of attention, and reach for a metropolitan milieu like those they have seen in the fiction that they read or watch.

This abdication was, of course, a phenomenon of the colonial era. In my childhood, the pictures we drew featured landscapes with apple trees, snow and snowmen; houses with chimneys emitting smoke from the fireplace inside; people with blue eyes and flowing yellow hair. But that was the colonial era.

What do you think Tee would say looking at Trinidad today? Has she accomplished her goals?

Having left the country in the early 1950s for Britain, at about age 12, Tee would be, today, a black British woman going on 70 years old. I'm not sure I can see through her eyes on this one. But that

question could prompt an interesting novel, written by someone who has either had the experience of growing up black in Britain from that age and in that period, or who has thoroughly researched it.

Not sure, either, about her goals, not beyond her desire to get a high school education, which we can presume she gets in England, and, at the end of the book, her desire to get away, which is also fulfilled.

***Crick Crack** has been taught in schools, and I am sure you have been invited to share with students as a result. Reflecting on some of those exchanges, what are some of the biggest take-aways for you, and for students? Can you relate a specific memory that epitomizes your engagement with students?*

I have been invited to several schools, in Trinidad and Tobago as well as the French Caribbean, to meet with students reading *Crick Crack, Monkey.* (A French translation of the book was published in 1982.) This always turns out to be a lively and seemingly inexhaustible conversation. Students pose question after question, about the title, whether it is autobiographical – did any of those things actually happen to me; why did Tantie turn against Tee… Some of the questions are meant to test or confirm their interpretation of some part of the narrative.

My general impression is that students in both the Anglophone and francophone Caribbean feel a strong affinity with the world presented in the story, despite the fact that it was set in a time before they were born. The uncomfortable response to readings of West Indian literature that I sometimes observed in the 1970s eventually faded away and was replaced by a certain excitement and satisfaction on the part of students at seeing their world represented in published fiction. This was presumably because some of the younger generation had some exposure to this literature as it entered the school. However, for the past few years I have been involved in an annual creative writing workshop for high school students where I discovered that ninety-something per cent of each year's contingent of young would-be writers of fiction, poetry and drama, have never read any West Indian literature.

How has motherhood and raising a boy impacted your work, given that all of your published creative work features female protagonists? How do the themes that you write about impact boys? Is the impact vastly different or similar? In what ways?

It is strange to hear myself described as having raised anybody. My son was raised by my whole family – my immediate family as well as aunties and uncles, biological and not. I do have a boy protagonist in one of my stories for children: "Jeffie Lemmington and Me" (in the collection *Over Our Way*, edited by Jean d'Costa and Velma Pollard). And there is a very important boy child in my forthcoming novel, a child brought up by the protagonist and her sister, with the collaboration of a larger group of family, biological and not.

Living with my son has, perhaps, equipped me to portray a boy child from the toddler stage into the first year of secondary school. I'm not sure that a boy toddler is very different from a girl toddler. In their earliest years, children across the board present similar behaviours, it seems to me. At some point, however, sex-role conditioning begins to take effect, hormonal divergences kick in, and male and female children go off into two different subcultures.

Writers tend to choose protagonists of their own gender. One writes best about what one knows best. I, for one, would not presume to undertake writing a whole novel with a man as protagonist, as distinct from the many male characters who do appear in my novels and short stories, portrayed mainly from an external point of view – visible behaviour rather than innermost thoughts. I do not know enough about how the masculine subculture has shaped men's psyche, their perspective and thought processes, to do justice to a male protagonist.

And so, for the second part of the question – the impact of certain issues on boys – I have no coherent or reliable answer, and I am reluctant to offer speculation.

"…I discovered that ninety-something per cent of young would-be writers of fiction, poetry and drama, have never read any West Indian literature."

You spent time in Grenada during the New Jewel Movement, working with Maurice Bishop's government developing curriculum for children that would in all ways reflect their Caribbean identity and culture. Was that curriculum implemented wholly or in part? Can you briefly speak about that important period in Caribbean history that many want to obliterate or are silent about?

In Grenada I worked in the specific area of the language arts, under the umbrella of an innovative structure set up by the Revolution called The National In-Service Teacher Education Programme (NISTEP). This involved taking untrained teachers out of primary schools for one day every week for classes. During that day, parents and other members of the community would go into the schools and engage the children in a variety of activities. This latter undertaking was called The Community School Day Programme (CSDP).

Curriculum development was emerging out of teacher education. For example, teachers were exposed to an approach to the teaching of English recommended by Caribbean scholars working in the field of language education. This approach involves using methods associated with teaching English as a second language, adding English to the learner's repertoire rather than disrespecting and seeking to stamp out their first language, English Creole.

We began the work of developing a new textbook series that we called the Marryshaw readers, which would cater for the teaching of English as well as reading. In this series, grammatical structures of English that are different from Creole were introduced gradually, with guidelines for teachers regarding reinforcement activities.

These readers were produced in collaboration with teachers. I met with teachers over a period of time to learn from them about the interests of children in the age group that they taught. I would draft the text for that level, and teachers would let the children read it. Then I met with the teachers again for them to give feedback, and I would make changes accordingly. We got as far as the first three levels of the Marryshaw Readers.

The Grenada Revolution was a time of intensive development. Major strides were made in education, health, agriculture, agro-industry and other areas. The Revolution set in train the building of a system of governance based on the principle of participatory democracy. It also managed to kindle a spirit of solidarity, a tangible atmosphere that it is impossible to adequately convey. There was goodwill, enthusiasm, optimism, and a strong sense of purpose.

People were willing to band together and work for the betterment of their community and country, resorting on a large scale to the old "maroon" style of collective effort (called in Trinidad "gayap," in Tobago "lend-hand," and in Jamaica "pardner.") People got involved in voluntary work on, for example, road repairs, the cleaning and repair of school buildings and furniture in preparation for the re-opening of school after the holidays, the Community School Day, mentioned above, and other community-building activities.

Grenadians participated energetically in their "Revo" as they called it. There was also a constant influx of people who moved to Grenada to help, from other parts of the Caribbean and elsewhere, (including the USA).g. The events of October 1983 brought all of this to a premature end.

Tell us about the creation of* The Knots in English: A Manual for Caribbean Users. *How long did it take you to produce? Who is the intended user, and why did you feel the need to create it?

Knots emerged out of my teaching English for two and a half decades in a number of Caribbean countries and at various levels of the education system. In all of my teaching experience, the same errors keep cropping up consistently in the students' production of Standard English. These errors are largely related to differences between English grammar and the grammar of our mother tongue. The two codes have the same vocabulary but not the same grammar.

And it is not only students; there are people who have come all the way up through school and into their working lives, still making some of these errors of English. This can be a real handicap, especially in jobs which require a firm grasp of the official language, for example the media. *The Knots in English* zooms in on the features of English grammar that are different from Creole, and seeks to teach those in a focused way, as recommended by Lawrence Carrington and other scholars in the field of language education.

I may have begun to seriously envisage writing such a textbook while I was teaching at the University of the Virgin Islands, St Croix, in the Academic Year 1986-87. But I cannot accurately quantify the length of time it took me to write it, because up until my retirement, all of my writing, fiction and non-fiction, has taken place during sporadic little blocks of time in between a full-time job and other activities, with long stretches of nothing doing on the writing front.

In subtitling it *A Manual for Caribbean Users*, I identify it as a tool for independent learners; a reference text for people needing to check specific points of English grammar; or a teachers' resource for class-room work at the secondary and tertiary levels.

I, like many other readers, have been waiting, hoping, for you to give us another novel. Is there one in the works? What are you working on now?

My forthcoming novel is set mostly in the period 1900–1955, in a Caribbean Crown Colony. The protagonist is a teacher, Gwynneth Cuffie, who engages in the social and cultural struggles of the time – the period leading up to independence. Her public activism is interwoven with her personal life: the little school she runs in the backyard; the personalities and relationships within her family; the foster-child "born in her hand"; the re-appearance of an old flame; snippets of her family history stretching back three generations. The novel is as much a chapter in the history of a colony's struggle for peoplehood as it is the story of Gwynneth.

How has Trinidad - the place, the landscape, the people - shaped your development as a writer and social activist?

This is a brilliant question, an original one – new to me, anyway. It has never occurred to me to analyse myself from this perspective. Since I've never given any thought to it, and have no time to figure it out, I have no ready answer. I don't want to answer off the top of my head.

What suggestions do you have for developing a stronger culture around children's literature in the region, especially for young adolescents, that vulnerable stage of development?

A great deal of effort and creativity would have to be placed into getting our children to be habitual readers, to begin with. This means competing with the wide range of entertainment media that children now command. Many of our children don't read anything at all outside of school, let alone West Indian literature.

We would need some programme of preparation – workshops, perhaps – to expose interested writers of children's literature to relevant issues and skills involved in writing for children. That learning exercise would include knowledge of the stages of child development generally, but it would also sensitize the writers to specifics of the social and cultural landscape in which Caribbean children live. For example, some of the Caribbean children's literature that I have seen portrays exclusively nuclear families with Mommy in a frilly apron waving Daddy off to work, Daddy dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase. That may be the reality of some Caribbean children, but the others must also see their families in the stories that they read.

Workshop activity would engage the writers in exploring the alienation of our children from their own environment, and the role that a strong countervailing literature could play in helping them to develop a strong and healthy self-image.

All of this involves writing out of a Caribbean consciousness. I have too often heard aspiring young writers say "I don't want to be a West Indian writer – I want to write for the world," or "for everybody to understand." What this usually translates into is a fictional world modelled on the reality that informs other people's literature, especially the representation of reality carried on American TV. Good writing is writing grounded in a specific reality that the writer knows well. We write best about what we know best. All the best and most-read works of serious interpretive fiction in the world come from specific societies.

Each outstanding work of world literature is recognizable as coming from a specific place, and that is part of its appeal – letting the world into the experience of people in a specific society, showing readers their shared humanity. Good literature has universal appeal, and the universal emerges from the specific.

What are some of the things you still want to achieve – personal, for your country, and/or society in general, as a writer?

I would like to gather and write about my memories of revolutionary Grenada. ic

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Merle Hodge is a Trinidadian novelist and critic. She is recognized as the first black Caribbean woman to publish a major work of fiction—the novel *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970), which is a classic of West Indian literature. In 1993 Hodge published a second novel, *For the Life of Laetitia,* a narrative aimed at young adults.