



1983

The year that was and Book reviews

Anna Rutherford

University of Aarhus, Denmark

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

Recommended Citation

Rutherford, Anna, The year that was and Book reviews, *Kunapipi*, 5(2), 1983.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol5/iss2/11>

The year that was and Book reviews

Abstract

The year that was and Book reviews

The Year That Was

This section on the West Indies arrived too late for inclusion in the previous issue.

WEST INDIES

Readers of West Indian literature are beginning to benefit from the publishing trend initiated by Longman's introduction of the Drumbeat series in 1979. For one thing, the series has sharpened the competition between metropolitan publishing firms with an interest in Caribbean writing, successfully challenging the monopoly of Heinemann's Caribbean Writers Series. During the seventies Heinemann had only managed to put out fifteen titles, mostly 'safe' reprints of the works of established authors which were considered suitable for use in secondary schools. Competition from Drumbeat (or perhaps the introduction of the CXC school syllabus in the West Indies) has now roused Heinemann to action, and in the last two years the Caribbean Writers Series has almost doubled its list of available titles. In addition, a shift in publishing policy of utmost importance to young West Indian writers seems to be underway, as publishers begin to risk money on previously unpublished prose authors. Longman, for example, describe Drumbeat as a 'popular paperback series of African and Caribbean fiction, plays and poetry. The series includes established best-sellers, new works by successful authors and first novels by new writers'. Longman launched four 'best-seller' reprints during 1982: Edgar Mittelholzer's haunting story of a spectral presence that threatens a Guyanese family, *My Bones and My Flute* (1955); Shiva Naipaul's *The Chip-Chip Gatherers* (1973), a scathing account of East Indian life in Trinidad; Orlando Patterson's *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964), an existentialist treatment of Jamaican slum life and the Rastafarian sect; and Andrew Salkey's political novel *The Late Emancipation of Jerry Stover* (1968). With the publication of Trevor Rhone's *Old Story Time and Other Plays* Longman present three plays by one of Jamaica's leading dramatists for the first time in published form. The collection contains a valuable introduction to Jamaican theatre, the author, and the plays by West Indian critic Mervyn Morris. Especially noteworthy in terms of the new publishing policy, however, is Drumbeat's publication of *Danny Boy* by the Guyanese writer James Bradner. This account of West Indian adolescence and interracial love by an unknown author indicates that Longman are serious about their promise of publishing first novels by new writers.

Heinemann's Caribbean Writers Series has tried to match Drumbeat's initiative with the launching of Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*. This is probably the first novel to be published by a Belizean author, and it too portrays a West Indian childhood and adolescence. In terms of structure and content *Beka Lamb* is more challenging than *Danny Boy*, but taken together they indicate that there is no dearth of talent among young prose writers in the West Indies. It remains to be seen if the ongoing competition between Heinemann and Longman will produce a sustained new wave of original paperback titles. Both firms have announced new works by established writers in the coming year: Samuel Selvon's

Moses Migrating (Drumbeat) and Earl Lovelace's *Jestina's Calypso* (Caribbean Writers Series).

Which is not to say that either publishing firm has lost its obsession with ready-made markets and crowd-pulling names. In her introduction to the reprint of Phyllis Shand Allfrey's *The Orchid House*, Elaine Campbell claims that Heinemann had considered republishing this novel with a foreword by Allfrey's better known sister-Dominican Jean Rhys, but when Rhys died before completing the essay, Heinemann dropped the idea. Fortunately, this early gem of West Indian literature portraying the claustrophobic existence of a declining white Creole elite against the beauty of the Dominican landscape has now been republished by Virago Press, a London-based feminist publishing house. Allfrey's development of female characters, especially the rebellious Miss Joan and the narrator Lally, make the novel an intriguing companion study to Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In her introduction to the novel Elaine Campbell draws attention to a number of points that suggest an influence of Allfrey's early novel on Jean Rhys's work.

Several established West Indian writers published new works during 1982. These include Wilson Harris, *The Angel at the Gate* (London: Faber & Faber); Earl Lovelace, *The Wine of Astonishment* (London: André Deutsch); and Edward Brathwaite, *Sun Poem* (Oxford: OUP). In his latest novel Harris grapples with the problem of Utopia on the political, personal and literary level in his by now characteristic fragmentary narrative style. *The Wine of Astonishment*, Lovelace's fourth novel, is almost as powerful as his previous work, *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979). The texture of the new novel is Trinidadian to the core. Lovelace is able to take Trinidad Creole as narrative to new technical heights, an accomplishment for which he is rivalled only by Samuel Selvon. *The Wine of Astonishment* is built around the struggle of the members of the Spiritual Baptist sect for freedom of worship, a struggle that symbolises Lovelace's conviction that the strength of the people lies in their ability to organise themselves, and constantly to renew their sense of identity in the face of culturally alienating forces and rampant political corruption. Brathwaite's *Sun Poem* is the second part of a new trilogy which begins with *Mother Poem*. Set in Barbados, this sequence of poems attempts a 'male' history of the island as a counterpart to the 'female' history offered in *Mother Poem*. The poem works on several levels, depicting the general fate of the black man since his arrival in Barbados, the growing-up experiences of an individual from childhood through adolescence to manhood, and the continuous chain formed by generations of grandfathers, fathers and sons.

Allison and Busby (London) published another novel by Roy Heath, his sixth to date, entitled *Kwaku or The Man Who Could Not Keep His Mouth Shut*. The novel is an entertaining account of the career of a picaresque Guyanese trickster figure, set against the backdrop of Guyana's current economic woes. Two novels for younger readers deserve special attention: Michael Anthony's *The Bright Road to El Dorado* (Nelson Caribbean) and Margaret McIntosh's *The Raid* (Heinemann Caribbean). Both deal with the early inhabitants of the Caribbean and build their stories around the exploits of Amerindian youngsters. McIntosh focuses on the clash between Arawaks and Caribs in Jamaica long before the coming of the Spaniards, and Anthony builds his story around the rivalry between the Englishman Sir Walter Raleigh and the Spaniard Antonio de Berrio. The two explorers believe the stories of El Dorado spun for them by the Arawak boy Ayun who by feeding their greed encourages them to fight each other and proceed to the Guyanas, leaving Trinidad and its Arawak population in peace. In both novels young readers are encouraged to identify with the adolescent Arawak heroes who are presented as history makers in their own right. Walter Raleigh seen through Amerindian eyes is a far cry from

the honourable hero of British tales. For Ayun 'all the sea-people were blood-thirsty' and 'would seek to destroy the Arawaks'.

The most important critical work to appear in 1982 was Sandra Pouchet Paquet's *The Novels of George Lamming* (London: Heinemann), a compact 130-page study that concentrates on the political nature of Lamming's oeuvre and devotes a chapter to each of Lamming's six novels.

During the year 1982 there was no shortage of Caribbean literary anthologies and poetry collections, with new titles appearing in London and the West Indies. Heinemann and Nelson both launched major anthologies: John Figueroa's *An Anthology of African and Caribbean Writing in English* (Heinemann), which is meant as a textbook for the 'Third World Studies' course at The Open University, is a voluminous compendium of 297 pages. It will surely serve as a valuable introduction for newcomers to West Indian literature but the more advanced student will be struck by the imbalance in quality and range between the prose and poetry offered. The short stories and extracts from novels are almost all written by the better known writers who started publishing in the 1950s and 1960s — Mittelholzer, Naipaul, Lamming, Collymore, Hearne, etc. — whereas the poetry section offers a chronologically broader and more representative range of works from Claude McKay and George Campbell to Dennis Scott and Honor Ford-Smith, at the same time allowing for sufficient emphasis on the work of major Caribbean poets such as Martin Carter, Derek Walcott and Edward Brathwaite. Kenneth Ramchand's collection of *Best West Indian Stories* (Nelson) is by contrast very up to date and almost élitist in its selectivity. It offers, side by side with the work of well known writers (e.g. Anthony, Mais, Harris, Rhys, Selvon), some excellent work by young writers, most of whom have only had short stories previously published in local magazines (e.g. Janice Shinebourne, Wayne Brown, Noel Woodroffe, Noel Williams). The anthology is able to trace continuities of development rather than canonising the already established.

A third, quite different anthology appeared as a special issue of *Ambit*, a quarterly of poems, short stories, drawings, and criticism published in London. Most of the contributors are Britain-based West Indian writers and the collection offers an interesting cross section of today's 'black' writing in the metropolis. *Ambit 91: Caribbean Special Issue* can be ordered from *Ambit*, 17, Priory Gardens, Highgate, London N6 5QY.

During 1982 local publishing within the West Indies seems to have concentrated on poetry collections and anthologies. In Jamaica, two noteworthy collections of new work were published: Beverly Brown's *Dream Diary* and Dennis Scott's *Dreadwalk*. Mervyn Morris of UWI Jamaica edited a new Bennett anthology, *Louise Bennett: Selected Poems* (Kingston: Sangster's Book Stores). This is a solid work of 175 pages, complete with an introduction, notes to the text, critical commentary and teaching questions. It brings together the best of Bennett's work in a form well suited for use in the classroom or on campuses wherever West Indian literature is offered. From Barbados come new collections by Tony Kellman: *In Depths of Burning Light*, with an introduction by Edward Brathwaite, and Bruce St. John: *Bumbatuk 1*. Bruce St. John also edited *Ascent — La Subita — La Montée*, the first volume in a poetry chap-book series planned by the University of the West Indies in Barbados. This volume contains poetry by the Guyanese writer Mark McWatt, Vincentian David Williams, Antiguan John Hewlett, Barbadian Esther Phillips and Bruce St. John himself.

One piece of trivial literature published in Jamaica perhaps deserves mention. Perry Henzell, of *The Harder They Come* movie fame, presents in *Power Game* (Kingston: Ten-A Publications) a racy potpourri of all the clichés of modern-day Jamaican life, including gang wars, the ganja trade, the IMF squeeze, Rastas, sex and violence ... and a

Book Reviews

Janet Frame, *To the Is-Land: An Autobiography*. New York: George Braziller, 1982. 235 pp. \$US10.95.

To the Is-Land is the first of a planned 3-volume autobiography by New Zealand writer Janet Frame and covers Frame's early years up to the time that she completed high school and left home for Dunedin teachers' training college.

The title *To the Is-Land* refers to a book of the same name that the child Janet read and pronounced as 'To the ISland', thinking of that land as different from the Was land and the Future. In recreating the world of her childhood, Frame relives a continuous present, when everything in one's waking life is or is becoming. The title can also imply the world beyond the islands of New Zealand that keeps asserting itself in New Zealand consciousness. For Janet Frame, always, there has been no removal of herself to another world of the imagination, simply the other world's arrival into the world of everyday routines. The other world is one of imagination, poetry, and romance, but also one of brutality, even horror. Frame herself shows its two sides in the chapter where she tells of her most extended venture into that world through writing a number of poems: she concludes the chapter with the news of the outbreak in the other world of World War II.

It is doubtful that either of the later two volumes will deal with 'The Making of a Writer' (as a series is called in the *New York Times* Book Review), a process that is a mystery to the writer as well as to everyone else. This first volume shows Frame's interest in literature, especially in poetry, and records with an amused indulgence her schoolgirl's attempts at writing, but it does not attempt to explain the creative impulse that led her to produce thus far nine novels, four books of short stories, and a book of poetry. Perhaps