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Interview

Olive Senior

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Interview

Abstract

Anna Rutherford interviewed Olive Senior in London in October 1986.

Olive Senior

INTERVIEW

Anna Rutherford interviewed Olive Senior in London in October 1986.

The child features prominently in your stories. Would you like to say why this is so and perhaps tell us something of your own childhood?

I come from a very large family. My father was a small farmer and I was born in a small, very backward village in Jamaica. At an early age, about the age of four, I was sent to live with my mother's relatives who lived in another parish in a completely different social setting. They had a cattle and citrus property and were what I suppose we would call 'landed gentry'. There, I was an only child. I was shuffled back and forth between these two households for most of my childhood until I went away to high school. I ended up feeling quite alienated from both backgrounds because it was very difficult for me to make the adjustments between the two worlds. I was an extremely lonely child and I think a lot of the stories in *Summer Lightning*, which represent my first work of fiction, also represent an attempt on my part to come to grips with those aspects of my childhood which were painful but which were also significant in shaping the adult I have become, including the fact that I have become a writer. Because at an early age I acquired what I consider a most requisite tool for the writer and that is the ability to deal with solitude. What I have published so far is not autobiographical but it does represent a distillation of my own feelings, my own experiences, my empathy with children who are isolated from the adult world represented by the family, as I was.

When you described the two worlds you moved between, they appeared very different. Could you tell us a little more about them?

Yes. But perhaps I should say that this idea of children being raised in more than one household is very much a part of the whole Caribbean

ethos. It's not unusual at all. A large number of children are raised by people other than their parents.

To return to my own situation. In being constantly shifted between two households I think I was also pretty much being shifted between the two extremes of a continuum based on race, colour and class in Jamaica. The village was largely black and strongly African in character, the whole folk culture was very strong there. There I had a lot of freedom to move about and explore my immediate environment which I wasn't allowed to do in my other life. Although I grew up in a household where puritanical religious values were strongly defended — and this was extremely painful to me from my earliest childhood — I did relate to the rest of the village. I went to the village school, the church, the clinic, took part in concerts and plays, and we were never allowed to feel that we were superior to other people. Like most rural children of my generation the notion of implicit respect for all adults was ingrained in me and I developed a way of evaluating the worth of people in non-material terms. Even though people in the village were poverty-stricken and largely illiterate, many had high status roles which we recognised — Mister Robbie was a great hunter, S'ta Beatrice knew everything about bush medicine, Mass Tom knew all the old-time stories, Brother Sal grew the biggest yams, Mama Coolie was the village midwife, and so on. Every adult had to be given some sort of title — we were never allowed to call 'big people' by their first names — without, as we would say, a 'handle'. In other words, in the village we all inhabited a particular universe which operated according to certain values that were shared by all, where people were all intensely individualistic, nevertheless intensely alive. It all contrasted very strongly with the pallid pseudo-European gentility of my 'other' existence.

At the other extreme there was my 'adopted' family which represented the European element in Jamaican culture. In that world I was being socialised to respect European values exclusively. People in Jamaica who were light-skinned, white, near white, in those days looked down on people who were black, who were African and, as part of that process, they also 'low-rated' or discounted the indigenous culture of Jamaica. So all this made it very difficult to shift between the two worlds, because they represented the two extremes, the polarities of colonial society.

Did the fact that you are very light-skinned present problems for you in the village world? Were you accepted?

Yes. There might have been problems but I wasn't conscious of them. Because we were poor, we lived as a part of the village. I didn't really

have a consciousness of race; I came to this kind of consciousness later when I went to high school.

I am teaching a course on Caribbean literature this term and one of the things that strike my Danish students, who come from a very homogeneous society, is the racial mixture of the Caribbean and the tensions between the races. Did you not feel these tensions?

I felt tensions, but I think I was far more conscious of class tensions than of race. In terms of the hierarchy my adopted family had status because they had land and they were also light-skinned, whereas though my parents were light-skinned, they were poor, so their status was quite different and so both related to darker-skinned people in different ways. It's a very complex situation in Jamaica; I don't think race can be separated from class and nowadays I would suggest that class is a far more important determinant of all kinds of things than is race. At the personal level, of family, friends, colleagues, at the level of personal interaction, race has never been a significant factor.

How isolated was the world in which you grew up?

Very. We were isolated even from the nearest town. The village I grew up in had no running water, no electricity, one or two people might have had a radio. There was only a dirt road and even a trip to the nearest town was a considerable undertaking. There was virtually no transportation. The train was our main means of communication and then you had to get the mail van to the railway station which was about twelve miles away. So even the rest of Jamaica seemed very far away. People think of us islanders as all living by the sea. I grew up in the mountains. I never saw the sea until I was pretty old. It was a very isolated kind of existence.

Funnily enough the kind of metropolitan contacts that a lot of us had was with Latin America because a lot of people in my background had been emigrants to Panama, to Costa Rica and the United States. They had been among the wave of migrants who had left the Caribbean in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. In fact my adopted family, my great uncle and my great aunts had gone to Panama during the time of the building of the Panama Canal and had later gone to the United States. So in a sense the contact with the outside world was a contact with the Americas though we were socialized to revere 'Mother England', 'Missis Queen' and all things British.

In the world you have just described there were obviously not a lot of books.

No. There was of course the Bible because religion was very significant to these societies and still is. There was also Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and uplifting moral material like that. I learned to read at an early age, and reading really became a refuge from the world around me which I found hard to cope with. I can't recall as a child having children's books. The only children's book I can remember having was *Alice in Wonderland*, though there might have been others, but I have no clear memory of them. Apart from school books, people didn't go out and buy books for children because that would have been a luxury. I ended up reading very strange adult literature from an early age, simply because that was the only thing around to read.

For example?

At my mother's house I think we only had religious books. At my grand-aunt's I remember I used to read the newspaper every day for grand-uncle. My grand-aunt also had a set of books which she had brought with her from the United States, which meant that by the time I came along they might have been forty years old. They were a sort of romantic literature of her era which I consumed, Marie Corelli, that sort of thing. I loved it. I was so inexperienced as a person I'm sure I didn't understand most of it, but it was reading material. I read anything I could lay my hands on.

How did you come to write yourself?

As a small child I first wanted to be an artist and I'm still interested in drawing and painting though I have never pursued art seriously. Then at a very early age, for some strange reason, I decided I was going to be a journalist. I'm not even sure I knew what a journalist was, but I knew that writing was somewhere in my future. I used to write things as a child — poems, stories, and at school I used to win prizes for all kinds of things, essays, poetry, but I only started to write seriously when I was at university in Canada. That for me represented a period when my own identity crisis came to a head and I started writing as a means of trying to integrate myself, trying to make a whole person out of a very fragmented past; so writing served a largely therapeutic function at that stage. I started to write *out* some of the things that had been hurtful and painful to

me. I have gradually moved from that early, highly subjective stage to a more conscious objective pursuit of writing as a craft.

Does that mean that some of the stories from Summer Lightning were written many years ago?

Yes. Most of them. Most of the stories in that collection represent the very earliest I wrote. In fact there is only one story in there that was written fairly recently, meaning late seventies, and that's 'Country of the One Eyed God', but the rest of them are from the sixties, mid-sixties, early seventies.

Very often in your stories you have the sense that the child feels threatened by the adult world. Does this reflect your own feelings when you were a child?

I'm not sure that 'threatened' is the word, but certainly as a child I felt totally at the mercy of forces outside my control. I never felt secure, had no sense of belonging or any real identity with adults, including my own family. I think I was an unusual child, probably a strange child, and I'm not sure anyone made any attempt to understand me. People wanted me to conform to their notion of what the 'good child' was, and I don't think that is what I was at all. I had this tremendous sense from a very early age of being in constant rebellion, of my relationships with adults as being one of struggle against them. I felt that my freedom was being compromised and taken away from me in most of my encounters with adults, including my own parents. I should perhaps add that a lot of this rebellion was not overt, it was internalised or expressed in oblique ways. I suppose nowadays I would have been classified as hostile.

You commented the other day on forms of oppression and it would appear from your comments and your work that you found the oppression of the church particularly damaging. Is that so?

Yes. I felt more oppressed by religion as a child than I did by anything else. A very restricted, narrow kind of Christianity combined with poverty is, I think, a ruthless combination, in that they both attack the spirit, they are both anti-life, they are both anti-freedom, soul-destroying as far as I am concerned. My whole childhood, adolescence, early adulthood were spent — wasted, I feel — trying to transcend these.

My students have commented on the seeming power and influence of the Church and have at the same time noted the fact, not in a moralistic way, that so many of the people live together 'outside of marriage', and they wondered at what seems in some way to be a contradiction. Could you say something about this?

The Caribbean family system is very complex and cannot be judged according to European values. The churches of course would prefer to have all their flock nicely married off, but... To understand the low level of marriage in Caribbean society one has to relate it to sociological, economic and historical factors. The fact is that different members of society adhere to different value systems. For upper and middle class people and some ethnic groups, such as Indians and Chinese, the nuclear family model is the ideal and the one prevailing. For poor Afro-Caribbean people it might be the ideal but is not often regarded as attainable because the main requirement of that family structure, the role of father as breadwinner, cannot always be a reality. Caribbean people have in fact institutionalised other family forms which reflect the reality of their condition. For poor Afro-Caribbean women what is important is not so much marriage as the fact that they must have children. The historical dimension is that during the system of plantation slavery which prevailed for most of our history, the father had no official role to play in the family, the child belonged to the slave owner and the mother was the only officially recognised parent. Marriage was not possible under this system and has not, therefore, become institutionalised in the 150 years since Emancipation.

This leads on to the question of the women in the society. Looked at from our point of view the women seem to have a very rough deal.

Caribbean women have had to be very strong because they have had to assume the role of both mother and father, because the father is usually absent for one reason or other. There are a lot of contradictions in her situation. The myth of the black matriarch projects an image of the Caribbean woman as strong and powerful, and she does play a powerful role in the family, even though that role might be forced on her because of an absence of male support. But the myth disguises the fact of her powerlessness in the wider society. The majority of working women are in low-paid, low-status jobs such as domestic service, and women, especially young women, experience the highest rates of unemployment. Women have little share in the formal power structures although they are the ones who are the domestic managers. Caribbean women shoulder the

most tremendous burdens. There is something sacrificial yet noble about the lives of poor women especially because they end up investing everything in their children. But there is now growing a new generation of well educated, upwardly mobile young women, so maybe this will herald a change in women's attitudes and statuses.

I have just read an article which argued that both Jean Rhys and Phyllis Allfrey presented their female characters as victims and the writer endeavoured to show that these white women had an affinity with the coloured population, both groups being colonized by the capitalist patriarchy. Do you have any comment?

I would really have to read the article. I believe that the degree of oppression experienced by women is directly related to race and class. Upper class women would be playing the traditional role of wife and mother and possibly not work at all; they might be under some form of tyranny in the domestic sphere, but they wouldn't have the economic stresses or strains that the black peasant or working class woman would have.

I find it hard to identify with most of Jean Rhys's work because it seems so alien from the Caribbean. Apart from *Wide Sargasso Sea* and now the autobiographical material, I don't know that there is a strong Caribbean element; it seems far more European to me. The difference between her women and Caribbean women is that the latter group don't act as if they're victimized. They're very positive, no matter how poor they are. They're into struggle, whereas Jean Rhys's heroines give up very easily. That's what Caribbean women don't do. The majority of Caribbean women are affirmative, they're fighters. So that kind of female is not one we can identify with. Caribbean women are powerful in the sense that they are positive for the most part, which doesn't mean they don't allow themselves to be exploited by the system or by men, which is in fact the paradox about them: that they are often very weak in their relationships with men but very strong otherwise.

Do you have any theories about why they are weak in their relationships with men?

Part of it has to do with the fact that the 'powerful' Caribbean woman is still socialised according to traditional lines — to defer to men, to accept patriarchic structures and values, even though she might be entirely independent of male support. Our socialization still continues to reinforce the stereotyped female image which girls still internalise but which might be at odds with the reality of women's lives in the Carib-

bean. Women are still trapped in the thinking of their mothers and grandmothers and somehow haven't yet been able to develop a sense of their own self-worth in their relationships with men. That is a very personal opinion and is only a small part of the story...

I am writing a book on the roles and status of Caribbean women in which I am attempting to examine some of these issues. The book will be largely based on the research findings from a three-year multi-disciplinary Women in the Caribbean Research Project which operated from the University of the West Indies in Barbados. In fact some of the findings of this research is now being published by the Institute of Social and Economic Research and it is important because this is the first extensive woman-centred piece of research from the English-speaking Caribbean. I think it will contribute greatly to a better understanding of the Caribbean woman — including her relationships with men.

In your talk at the conference (Caribbean Writers' Conference, Commonwealth Institute, London, October 1986) you said that you had very little reading material as a child. But still most writers have some other writers who have influenced them. Are there any you could mention?

Well, I'm not conscious of whatever influences there might have been before my early teens. I went to high school in the town of Montego Bay and there was a library there and I started doing a lot of reading, and of course at school English literature was an important area of study. But the earliest writers that impressed me greatly that I can remember are the writers who are now referred to as the 'Southern Gothic School', people like Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote. I distinctly remember when I read their works how moved I was because for the first time I realized there were people like myself; because they do write of young people who are at odds with the world around them, and they write of societies that are constricting and narrow, so I identified very strongly with a lot of their characters and with a lot of what was happening in their world. Those writers represent for me my earliest identifiable influences. Later on there were many other influences from English and American literature.

I was exposed to Caribbean literature at a much later date because when I went to school we weren't taught Caribbean literature or Caribbean history. This was in the closing days of the colonial era, so I came very late to reading Caribbean writers. I did read Vic Reid's *New Day* when I was at school and I think that had a profound impact on all of us, on my generation. And of course we all recited Louise Bennett's

poetry, but we did not recognise Louise Bennett's work as 'literature'. It wasn't until Mervyn Morris wrote his seminal essay 'On Reading Louise Bennett Seriously', which was published in *Jamaica Journal* (Vol. I, Dec. 1967), that people began to consider that Louise Bennett who was writing in dialect which we were taught was 'bad talking' was writing 'literature'. I came to Caribbean literature very late. In fact up to when I started to write in Canada I had read very little Caribbean material.

You said there were very few books, newspapers or radios in the village in which you grew up. Does that mean that perhaps your strongest influence at that time was the oral tradition?

I think that the oral tradition has profoundly influenced me as a writer because I grew up in a society where the spoken word was important. We created our own entertainment, every night as a child living in the village I remember an adult told us stories — Duppy stories, Anancy stories, or whatever, or we told each other stories. There was also something dramatic in the quality of real life, people would narrate everyday events in a very dramatic way. As a child I didn't talk much, but I listened a lot and I think the results of that listening have come out in my work. To me the sound of the voice is extremely important. I try to utilize the voice a great deal in my work and more and more find that what is happening is that the voice is taking over. In other words, I am more and more concerned that my characters should speak directly to the reader and therefore I am dealing almost purely in narrative, in letting people tell their own story. I suppose fundamentally I'm a story teller and I attribute that to my early experience of growing up in an oral culture.

Another feature that struck my students when reading Caribbean literature was the prevalence of physical violence.

I think we do live in a violent society. It starts with domestic violence, it starts with violence against the child. Children are raised very very strictly and are beaten, though not so much as they used to be. There is a certain amount of brutality directed at children. A lot of it is unintentional. People are just perpetuating the way they themselves were raised. And then there's also a lot of violence in the home; not necessarily physical violence, though there is that too. People are very aggressive in the language they employ and in the way they deal with one another. And of course then it goes out into the street. We all grew up with this sense of one group of people threatening another; there is a whole

manipulation of the weaker people by the more powerful, and in our society a lot of the powerful people in the domestic situation are the men. I grew up with a great consciousness of this, with people being aggressive towards one another. In a way of course it's a reflection of the social structures in which people find themselves, because if a man is unable to support his family because he can't get work, he's going to come home and take it out on his wife. The economic conditions contribute to a lot of what happens in the home and ultimately on the street. And yet, having said all this, I also feel — and I believe that this also comes out in my work — that there is in our society still a great deal of love, of caring, of good fellowship, of kinship and friendship bonds which are strong and lasting. Jamaica is still a society of great spirituality, of great psychic energy. A lot of creative artists feel this — and this is probably why we stay.

You have also had a book of poetry published. Do you have a preference for either genre?

I write prose or poetry as the material dictates, though what I feel is happening now is that my prose and poetry are getting closer together. I'm not a prolific writer, I don't really have the time to devote to writing, but what I'm working on now are narratives. Some are long, so they are stories; some are short, in poetic form, so they are poems.