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Foreword

Sam Selvon

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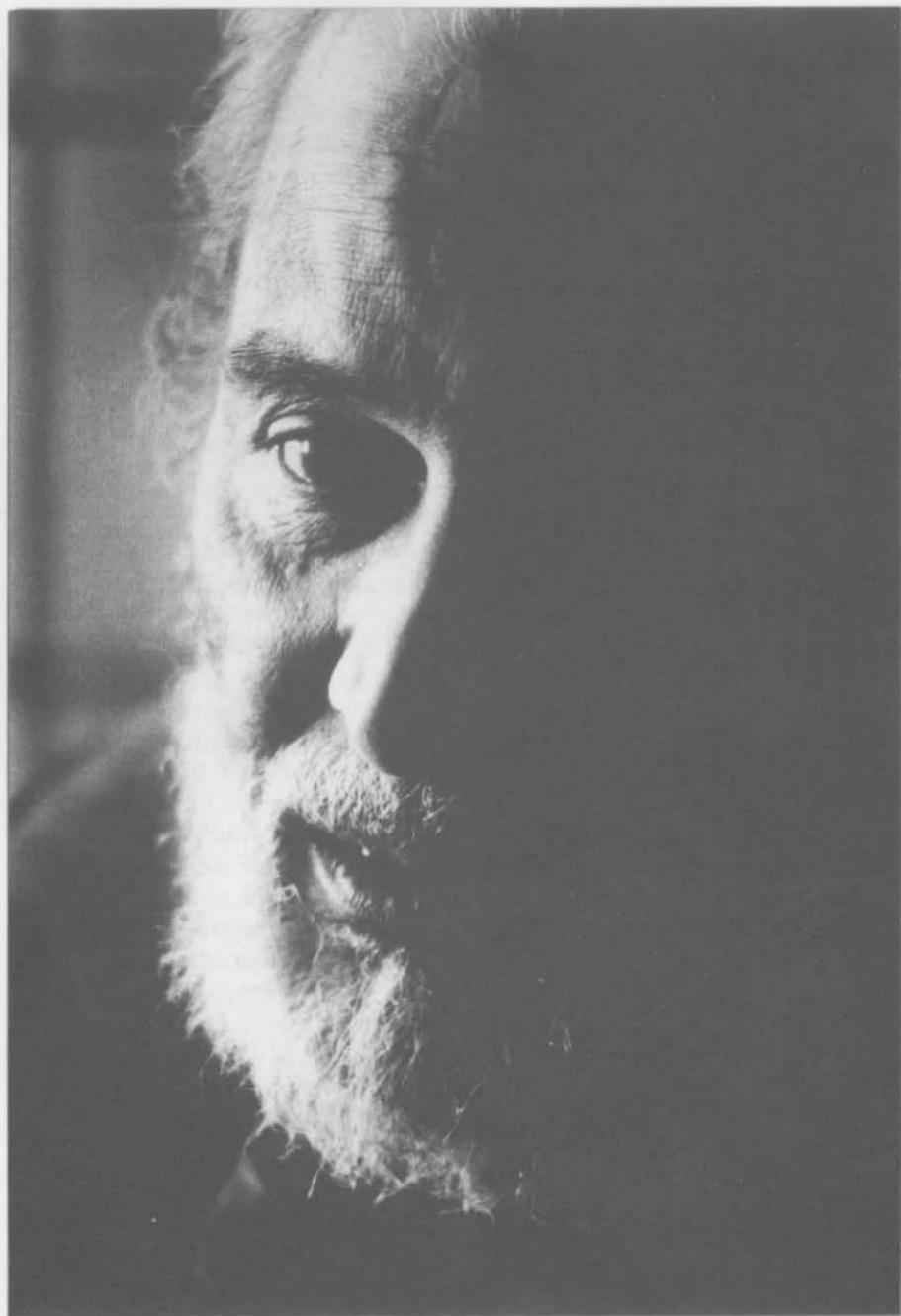
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Foreword

Abstract

When I come back here to Trinidad, I hear the kiskidee in the morning. You can identify yourself with the soil and the feeling of those sounds, and you instantly become part of the land.



Sam Selvon by Philip Meech.

Foreword

When I come back here to Trinidad, I hear the kiskidee in the morning. You can identify yourself with the soil and the feeling of those sounds, and you instantly become part of the land.

Sam Selvon

... you took the small
language used by the island
for picong and calypsoes
and stretched its vowels
across the mouth of the world

Cecil Gray

Tiger's Triumph is a celebration of the life and work of the internationally distinguished Trinidadian writer, Sam Selvon, who died at the age of seventy one in April 1994. Sam, as many of the pieces in this collection will testify, was distinguished not only by the sheer range and variety of his published works - which include ten novels, numerous short stories, radio scripts, a screenplay as well as many other non-fictional essays collected together in *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose (1946-86)*¹ - but also by his influential position as one of the founding fathers of the Caribbean literary renaissance of the 1950s. Many ballads and eulogies were sung all over the world following Selvon's sudden illness and death during a brief trip home to Trinidad last year but one message seems to shine through all of these tributes and that is Sam's extraordinary warmth and generosity as a man, the depth of his vision as a natural philosopher, a writer to use a phrase from Ken Ramchand's memorial speech who was 'a believer fighting off unbelief' and his passionate attachment, despite the many years he spent abroad, to the land, to Trinidad. As he said in 1979, 'This island is my shadow and I carry it with me wherever I go.'

Most readers familiar with Selvon's work remember him primarily for his humour, his comic vision and his creation of easily accessible, picaresque and calypsonian characters whom one meets both on the streets of London and Port of Spain. He is also remembered importantly for his use of a creolized and non-Standard form of English both in his 'peasant' novels set in Trinidad - *A Brighter Sun* (1952) and *Turn Again Tiger* (1958) in which he gave voice and status to the East Indian cane community and heroic dimensions to his early character, Tiger - as well as in his famous London novels, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1983), where he colonizes England in reverse and liberates his black characters from standard

English and the entrapping stereotypes that surrounded them. Whilst there is a surface humour in all of these books, it is also important to note a far more serious side to Selvon's writing which is often disguised as simple naturalistic reflection and masks the profound sensitivity he felt about all the big questions in life, a sensitivity that is explicitly apparent in many of his non-fictional essays. As he wrote of the 'boys' in *The Lonely Londoners*: 'They only laughing because they afraid to cry'.

Selvon's range of literary talents was far larger than most people ever knew. Apart from the novels and short stories, there were reviews, essays, poems which he contributed to literary journals all over the world. Whilst he was in Britain between 1950-1978, many of his radio plays were broadcast. He was co-author for the first black feature film to be released in Britain, *Pressure* (1978). There were, later in life, other honours and awards, lectures and reading.

Sam was born in South Trinidad in 1923 and grew up in the small semi-rural town of San Fernando. He was the son of a dry goods merchant, a first generation East Indian immigrant to Trinidad, and an Anglo-Scottish mother. From an early age Selvon loved to write and listen to stories though he did not continue his formal education beyond High School. Always describing himself as a 'self-educated' man, Selvon was committed to becoming 'creolized', and to being a positive part of the cultural and racial mix of modern Trinidad. It was this pride in the hybridity of his background and his need as an artist to translate this vision into fiction, which resulted in his influential first novel *A Brighter Sun*. And it was this novel that established Selvon according to George Lamming as 'the greatest and therefore the most important folk poet the British Caribbean has ever produced'. Whilst this was an early statement of applause by Lamming (who travelled to England from the Caribbean on the same boat in 1950), and set up what is perhaps now in retrospect an unnecessarily extreme polemical opposition between Selvon's work and that of his fellow Trinidadian, V. S. Naipaul, it nevertheless pointed to a significant difference in the commitment of the two writers. For Naipaul, Trinidad could never be made in to anything; for Selvon, the celebration of the island was paramount even when as the title of one of his short stories suggests cane is bitter.

Selvon was never bitter or jealous of the success of others. In fact in 1990 he supported Naipaul's entry for an international literary award. He accepted his difference and was not interested in Naipaul's more glittering success; in fact he often joked about their different perspectives on race and the significance of 'home' by saying that old leopards can't change their spots. Sam never felt he had to try to impress; writing had always come first. Reputation was a bonus and he made no attempt at any stage in his career to falsely adapt his subject-matter to current trends or outside expectations of what 'black writing' should or should not be. In fact part of his decision to leave Britain for Calgary in the late

1970's was to do with this sense of beginning to be told what to write, whether it was Black Power politics or issues of gender. Selvon's art and his life have always formed 'a seamless whole'; he felt deeply about many of the political concerns of the day but refused to write propaganda, to destroy the integrity of his fiction by self-consciously espousing particular issues. As he said just after he left Britain in 1978: 'We have now to start thinking in terms of world literature, of contributing universally rather than ...merely with protestation novels, with days of slavery, with hardships of the black man...We want to rise above that'.

The pieces in *Tiger's Triumph* have been organised to reflect the many dimensions of both the man and his work. Creative pieces have been placed alongside the personal and the critical in a way which I hope reflects Sam's own feelings about the important need to cross over boundaries and mediate between a number of different voices and discourses. As will be obvious, the cover for this book depicts a leopard, in this case a mythical Mayan figure represented in a painting by the late Guyanese artist, Aubrey Williams. Whilst we know that you don't get leopards or 'tigers' for that matter in Trinidad, Sam has not only created an important 'Tiger' in Trinidadian literary history and the imaginations of many many readers - a 'tiger' like his character of that name who is rooted to the soil, to the mango tree and the kiskidee - but was also a special kind of Tiger himself, a tiger whose voice has risen from the language of the island and triumphed in stretching that language across the mouth of the world. This book celebrates Sam Selvon's achievement.

Susheila Nasta, 1995

NOTES

1. A full bibliography of Sam Selvon's fictional and non-fictional work is provided at the end of this collection which is edited by Ken Ramchand and Susheila Nasta (Longman, 1989, rpt. 1992) pp 226-248.

Main Books by Sam Selvon

A Brighter Sun (1952)
An Island is a World (1955)
The Lonely Londoners (1956)
Ways of Sunlight (1957)
Turn Again Tiger (1958)
I Hear Thunder (1963)
The Housing Lark (1965)
The Plains of Caroni (1970)
Those Who Eat the Cascadura (1972)
Moses Ascending (1975)
Moses Migrating (1983)
El Dorado West One (1988)
Foreday Morning (1989)
Highway in the Sun (1992)