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### **Abstract**

As a writer who has used dialect with great success as a literary form I was surprised when the matter came up at one of the sessions and was flippantly dismissed by a new novelist from the Caribbean. My regret at not taking up the point then is not for my dialect work- which stands on its own merit and has been acclaimed in England and America- but that the students might have been misguided into a belief that the dialect is frivolous and has no lasting value: indeed, that it has none at all according to the remarks made. I think I can say without a trace of modesty that I was the first Caribbean writer to explore and employ dialect in a full-length novel where it was used in both narrative and dialogue. I was boldfaced enough to write a complete chapter in a stream-of-consciousness style (I think that's what it is called) without punctuation and seemingly disconnected, a style difficult enough for the average reader with 'straight' English

SAM SELVON

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It was *after* the success of this novel, *The Lonely Londoners* that I did several short stories in dialect, 'by request'. Later, after two 'straight' novels, *Turn Again Tiger* and *I Hear Thunder* I lambasted them with another dialect novel, *The Housing Lark*. By then critics and reviewers were not even bothered about the dialect - they were more concerned with the content of the book.

I feel that if an author has to explain his work he might as well not write. My dialect books and short stories have been written and assessed. That speaks for itself. Unfortunately some of them are out of print but I am hoping to have them re-issued.

This short note is not in defence of the use of dialect in writing - I don't think that's necessary at all. It is really a kind of apology to the Conference that I did not speak up at the time of the session and make rab.

### A Note on the above

In Spring 1971 I organised at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, the first Commonwealth literature conference to be held in Europe. It was also at this conference that we formed the first branch of EACLALS and *Commonwealth Newsletter*, the predecessor of *Kunapipi*, came into being.

We followed the practice that had been established in Leeds in 1964 when the

Association was formed, namely to include both writers and critics. Classes in the English Department were cancelled and for a whole week writers and critics spoke to an audience of over two hundred people. Amongst the West Indian writers were Wilson Harris, Shiva Naipaul and in a paper called 'The Writer Without a Society' he expressed ideas very similar to those expressed by his brother V.S. Naipaul and as Sam says dialect was 'flippantly dismissed'. Sam did not reply at the time but when he heard that I was going to publish the papers he asked that the above piece be included and I readily agreed.

To add a personal note. Sam Selvon was a friend of mine for over thirty years and he remained at the end as I found him at the beginning, a warm, gentle, humorous, modest and humane man. In a tribute, Jeremy Taylor has written about how, during English lessons on long hot afternoons in Caribbean classrooms, his students reacted to Sam's work: 'Somehow Sam Selvon always managed to speak to those youngsters through all the boredom and the heat. Once we got into stories from *Ways of Sunlight* or another episode from *The Lonely Londoners*, they perked up, they were laughing, anxious...to read more...Those students were seeing *themselves* in a book: the way they spoke, the way they thought and laughed'<sup>1</sup> I have had the same experience with my students, particularly when teaching *A Brighter Sun*. Unlike Jeremy's students, mine were not seeing themselves but Sam had the ability to introduce them to his own rich world, to help them see and understand a world very different from their own. It was a funny, sad, bittersweet, natural world. It was a different world but it did what I believe Sam would have wanted it to do, it showed them that other cultures exist, that they were as rich as their own and in achieving these aims created a tolerance so much needed in our world today.

Anna Rutherford

1. Jeremy Taylor, 'Play it Again Sam', *BIWI Flight Magazine* (Autumn, 1994), p.31.