Jean Rhys: a tribute

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Abstract
It was Lennox who broke the news to us. Usually we listen to the BBC news and News about Britain; but on Wednesday morning we listened to DBS, trying to find out what new imbecility the Government of Dominica was up to. So we missed the notice, worthy of a Prime Minister, about our friend's departure from life. Lennox knew how close she was to us, and had read some of her short letters starting 'Dearest... ' in a huge crabbed handwriting.
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Well, it was hardly a surprise; she was 84; and in her last letter she had said ‘I am cracking up’. The strangest thing of all is that so many Dominicans do not realise what a great writer Jean was. Someone asked me whether she was a feminist. I should not say so, though she was intensely independent and championed womanhood when it was degraded or ill-used by man; she hit back with the most marvellous derision. At one stage, after she was abandoned by a wealthy admirer, she drank, she took drugs, she took lovers. Yet she maintained an absolute integrity as an artist, always writing the truth, even when it hurt her own self.

She was a Dominican. ‘I'm the fifth generation born out here on my mother's side' she wrote in Voyage in the Dark. And even though she left Dominica at the age of sixteen all her books have at times a strong yearning towards the island.

I am happy to have discovered Jean's greatness and become her friend long before she became famous. I had been told by my mother that Jean was a rebel, and 'rather fast'; that she had let down the Williams family by her life as a stage chorine and a wanderer in Europe. 'That woman who writes those terrible books' was how my aunt described her. I read Voyage in the Dark in America, and was instantly enchanted. After that I tried to get a copy of each book she wrote.
Robert and I met her at last in England, during her early middle age and our youth. She always called us 'my young friends'. I had to remind her the other day that we were no longer her young friends. I recall a wonderful ballet party she arranged with us for her 18-year-old girl Maryvonne, daughter of her first husband, a Dutchman.

Then came the war. And a terrible thing happened. We did not learn of it until long afterwards. Maryvonne, who was visiting Jewish friends, disappeared during the Nazi invasion. Her mother's heart was broken. She also vanished for years. We thought she was dead. Then, one day, a broadcast appeal from the BBC: 'Will Jean Rhys kindly contact the BBC, she will learn something to her advantage...' This was often repeated. And at last she was discovered, in a tiny cottage in Southern England. From then on she returned to the world of literature, and gradually, gradually, her reputation was assured. And then – in 1966 – Andre Deutsch published The Wide Sargasso Sea. This made her a fortune. But as she wrote to us, 'when I was young and lovely I had only one dress and now Dior and Chanel offer me their masterpieces'.

What I admired most about her was her persistent courage. Through pain, starvation, heart-break and ill-health she kept on writing to the very end. She had completed her autobiography this year.

I once wrote a poem for her:

I remember a fair tall island
floating in cobalt paint;
the thought of it is a childhood dream
torn by a midnight plaint

There are painted ships and rusty ships
That pass the island by,
and one dark day I'll board a boat
when I am ready to die...
But she didn’t board that boat, though she longed to do so. She died in the land that had ultimately given her refuge and riches – England.

We are glad that Maryvonne was saved by the Jews and will inherit her mother’s fortune. And we are more than glad that Jean Rhys lived, wrote, and was recognised.

Jean Rhys’s home in Roseau

Phyllis Allfrey

These photos were taken ten days before hurricane David hit Dominica and completely destroyed Roseau.