



## InConVerSation:

In recognition of Women's Month, Bookends presents the first in a series of conversations, #InConVerSation, that will run every Sunday in March between the writer Jacqueline Bishop and phenomenal women writers and artists who call Jamaica home. Today's featured writer is Rachel Manley.

# Eden is Jamaica: An Interview with Rachel Manley

**Rachel Manley, thanks for this interview, which will focus on your collection of poems *A Light Left On* (1992) and your "novel" *The Black Peacock* (2017). Let's start first with your collection of poems. You started life as a writer by being a poet, but it has been several decades now that there has been no poetry from you. Why is that so? Are you done with writing poems?**

I have a theory which Kwame Dawes always questions – that, like eggs in a woman's womb, there are just so many poems in each poet. The number may vary, but when menopause is complete there are no more. My poetic menopause is over as are my poems. Once, briefly, when my beloved uncle died, leaving me as the oldest living Manley, after 20-odd years I suddenly felt the urge to write him a weepy poem. It just wouldn't come. My eggs were done. So yes, I'm done with writing poems.

**In *A Light Left On*, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke emerges as a huge influence. What is it about Rilke's work that you so admire?** Sometimes the answer belies the question. The poet Rilke was not an influence on me. I have not

read a lot of his work. But Rilke was a powerful influence on my grandmother Edna's sculpture and on her. And Edna was a great influence on me and my poetry. So not long after her death, when I was living in Switzerland, I went to visit Rilke's grave in a little hamlet called Raron. The cemetery was at the very top of a steep hill, and I would be haunted by the beauty of the graveyard and the tiny church and the fact that this great soul belonged to the bones in this grave; the way man's imagination carries on through one's own work and its influence on others so that here was I an unknown Jamaican would-be poet traipsing up round and round this steep path that threaded a Swiss mountain when from its heart the deep-throated bell started pounding, calling the congregants of the village in its foothills to God. From that experience came my four-part poem, the last poem I ever wrote.

**Perhaps the strongest poem in the collection for me is "The Ancestor". What is the poem about, and where do you believe it came from?**

I was often influenced by Edna's daily work, and her creative process. From I was a small child my grandfather and I would go

for the "laying on of hands" on the wood or the lump of clay. This was our benediction, so to speak, for every new work. And we would check on its progress in the late afternoon, with them drinking their G & Ts in the studio discussing the journey and me just listening, taking it all in. So when she was sculpting *The Ancestor* my grandfather was gone by then, and it seemed to me that the towering figure holding mankind like a child, this woman was the ancestor, the strength of the tribe, its memory. It's the grandmother who so often brings us up; it's the grandmother who survives. I was always struck by the aloneness of that figure gazing out high above the top of the man's head which was no more than half her height. So I guess it speaks to the responsibility of the woman in our society, in our history. I was brought up by my grandparents and I think I saw my grandmother as that ancestral figure, to give us our grounding and ballast.

**Death, grief, the passage of time, the moon and a ticking clock are all recurring images and tropes in this collection. Why those preoccupations and those specific images? Where does imagery come from, I wonder...the deep**

subconscious? It builds in us over time. Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* discusses the question of icons and imagery, mythology in literature as it develops over human history, some of that is common to all mankind; others are common to certain tribes and peoples and areas of the world. But your personal "images and tropes"? No doubt the tropes are how we think. The images must obviously reflect our preoccupations. I suppose death is a preoccupation in my poetry, maybe because I knew loss as a child. My great friend Wayne Brown

always felt we had a lot in common because we both grew up without a mother. His died, mine was in England. So that's loss, I guess, though I never knew it consciously since my blessed grandmother filled that role. The loss of my stepmother Barbara, my father's shipwreck of grief, and shortly after, the death of my beloved grandfather, I'm sure, settled death as a theme in me. And grief is grief. It comes with death and loss. I am sure that when I crossed the Atlantic at age two, leaving all I knew Of father, mother, country, house, granny, sister, dog, cat, although I don't remember it, I believe it

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Rachel Manley