



MANLEY from page 61

gave birth to the intuitive habit of grief in me. The moon? Well, that’s my grandmother again! She loved the moon. She gazed at it, she drew it. She carved it, walked hand in hand with me in its ghostly light through pine forests in the mountains, laughing at the futile attempts of peenie-wallies to compete. She created its magic in me. And there, like her art, the moon remains, long after my grandmother has gone, still following my car, still insomniac. Maybe that’s where my grandmother went to and she’s looking back at me. Clocks? I guess I’m punctual but I don’t think of clocks a lot. I do like watches, but then I like shoes too. The tick-tock of time – that inexorable march whose slipstream makes of us lemmings. Isn’t all art an attempt to stave off time and death? Would we be better off ignoring it, then? Still, I can’t think of a poem that doesn’t somehow have time buried in its meaning somewhere.

One of the things that strike me about the collection is that it is unmoored from a Jamaican/Caribbean landscape (but for the sea) and any Jamaican/Caribbean references throughout. Why is that so? Really! Now that does surprise me you saying so. No matter where I have lived and I have lived probably three-quarters of my life beyond Jamaica, never have I ever been emotionally unmoored from the region – though I admit I am much more a federalist than a nationalist. But then federation and its demise was the biggest personal drama of my youth. It left my grandparents, particularly my grandfather, shattered. Their enthusiasm

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for the archipelago and a deep subterranean historical and cultural bond had placed in me the dream of a federation, and young though I was, the loss of this dream affects me to this day. I have lived as long in Barbados as I have in Jamaica and I probably go back to both with equal frequency. Let me say from the offset that everything I write, poetry, prose, memoir, fiction, I write to honour my ancestors, my island and my region. As for the poetry, I don’t write either historic or social or political or geographical poetry. I seek to reflect my world and hope that in some ways it may help to provide insight which may help those who have the talent to change what needs changing. I write of the human condition I guess, and unlike my prose which does seek to reflect historic and social truths of our region, my poetry which I think readers should thank God I outgrew, mostly focuses on my own human condition which is undoubtedly self-absorbed. But youth tends to be that way. I found poetry enigmatic. I think I didn’t want to be understood. When I wanted to become a witness to my times and the world I have passed through, I had to turn my gaze outwards and needed to write in prose. Probably because having something to say at last, I wished to be understood. But let’s see – “Raron” is set in Switzerland and a few poems set in Canada and are about the first world as I find it different to the third world of my memory. But “The Gate” and “Regardless” 1 and 2 are both about my grandmother’s departure and are squarely at her home in Jamaica and the imagery is all Jamaican – even the mountains are there. “The Ancestor” is a Jamaican grandmother. “Praise”, I can’t say what on earth I was banging on about, but it was one of Edna’s carvings, and the lightning and thunder are Jamaican. “Forty” and “Memory” are both set in a Caribbean landscape – “a life full of stars” is only in Jamaican mountains, and I’m in a plum tree for “Memory”, talking about mules, for heaven’s sake! It’s Drumblair’s backlands in Kingston. There is “Drought” that’s a good old Jamaican drought; there is Barbadian Cropover, there is “Letter to My Son” which is all about us estranged, him in Jamaica and me in Barbados; there is “Bob Marley Dead” that I hope is all about Bob and the throb of his heart’s music. “...time so otherwise, so green” at Mona in the Carol Jacobs poem. “Austral Journey” is tumbling through a Caribbean landscape,

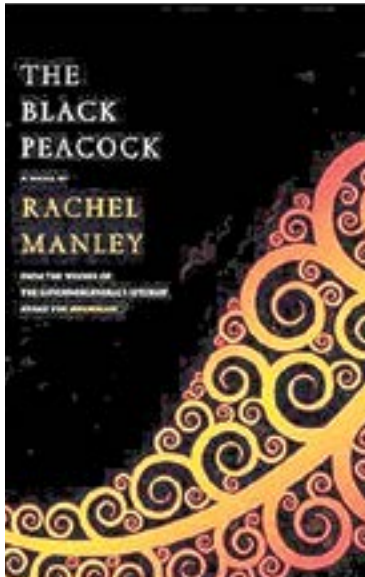
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Eden is Jamaica: An

despotic thunder, shoulders of mountains, muscles of the sun. “Landscape” – layers of green in an afternoon in my grandmother’s garden again. Eden is Jamaica; the wind with fine fingers blows through Jamaican pine trees and eucalyptus, the fingers of the tribe circling their own dream in “At Night” is our Caribbean tribe as is the terror of the night we share in “Only The Moon”. In “Evening” “the hills philosophical” is Jamaica and the dancer in the trees is Yvonne Dacosta of Rex’s dance troupe NDTC. So I’m not sure why you only hear the sea in them.

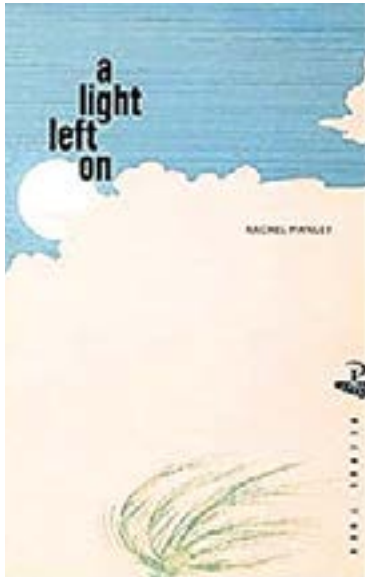
In many ways your poems from 1992 are a precursor to *The Black Peacock*, which came 25 years later. I am thinking here specifically of a poem like “Orpheus – The Listener”. But there is a raft of Greek characters and allusions throughout the collection. What relationship would you say exists between the collection of poems and your “novel”? This is such an interesting question. I had never thought of it, never seen the link between my poetry and *The Black Peacock*, but you are so right. I can feel it in my head and my heart as I consider that they may come from the same place. So I suspect Wayne has to be the link, for yes, Daniel is mostly Wayne. People ask me if it’s Derek Walcott, and no of course it’s not Derek. But Derek and Wayne had a lot of traits in common, not just poetry. And they both had an intellectual adamancy that ruled their being. But back to your question, obviously any relationship was unconscious or I would not be surprised by your question. Now that I think about it, the protagonist in the novel, Leah, is based on me, but me as the poet I was, me before I wrote prose, though in *TBP* Leah has attempted a first memoir. But the spirit of the work is steeped in Mona Campus and my university years, my 1970s visits to Wayne in Trinidad and Tobago. And this is also the landscape from which I wrote much of my poetry. But there is no deeper connection that that. The fact is, the mind of the protagonist is the mind of the same author of both. So, thanks for pointing this out!

I confess, Rachel, that I chose to interview you around your poetry and fiction because, in a sense, I wanted to get away from the overwhelming pull of your family narrative, which you have written so persuasively about. However, *The Black Peacock* for me is actually fictionalised autobiography because so many events in that book align with what



is known about your life and the life of other characters in the book. So let’s start with you discussing the genesis of this book and your thoughts on my description of it? Why this turn to fiction?

And I thought it was because they were the two slimmest volumes! Seriously though...One of the vexing things about getting published is that publishers hold sway over one’s work, and a lot of their decisions are based on marketing rather than literary considerations. Hence, when I wrote *Horses in Her Hair*, the third book in my memoir trilogy, my publisher at the time insisted it be written as a novel. I tried, failed, and ended up going to a different publisher and writing it as memoir. So I won that battle, in a sense, though maybe I lost a bigger war in that losing Knopf was a great regret, and I can’t read *Horses in Her Hair* without the feeling I am driving a car whose chaise is twisted. And Wayne never forgave me for relenting even for a moment to try writing it as fiction. He saw it as a sell-out. He would never have considered that option for a moment, but then nothing – money, publication, social mores – came before the iron intent of his work. So Wayne dies and along comes the Wayne Brown book which I was committed to write. He would have done the same for me had I died first. That was a promise we made. Someone had to in a sense memorialise our most unusual friendship and the survival of our work against all odds. Something like that, anyway. And my dilemma wasn’t so much marketing, but the many people alive and involved who unlike my patient, tolerant family who in the most generous way allow me to spill all their secrets and I probably often get them wrong, I didn’t think it fair to his world to presume



their tolerance. And so yes, it’s a fictionalised autobiography as you say, to a large extent...to the extent of Daniel and Lethe and they are dominating the book, but to be honest, nothing else. There are few other characters and those are imaginary as is the island which I tried to conjure up from all the other places in the eastern Caribbean I knew or had visited. Any freedom fiction allowed me to change facts actually confused more than helped me. I am not a natural novelist. I can’t bear making choices even on a menu in a restaurant much less the great prairie of choice afforded one by fiction. Anyway, I hope I have answered your question.

This is a work told from alternating points of view, Daniel and Lethe. But the interesting thing is that the alternating points of view are told in the same voice. Who then is the narrator of the story?

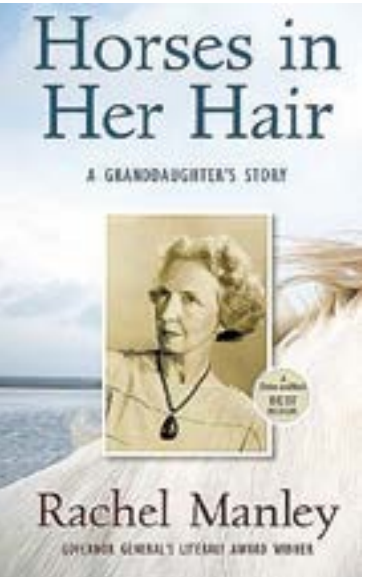
Well, the author of a book writes a book, so yes, it’s all my voice. But hopefully I have managed in some way to mimic the voice and to some extent the thoughts of the Wayne I knew in the sections where it attempts to be his voice. I hope you can hear him, hear the difference in even some these sections? So, I am author of the story, but the two characters share the narration in the book.

Your book is atmospheric, well-written and very engaging. It actually reads like poetry. But more than that, it sheds light on an important moment in Jamaican and Caribbean history, namely the articulation of black power ideas on the Mona campus. Dispensing with fiction and poetry for a moment, can you first talk about the schools you attended in Jamaica and what your experiences at those schools were like? Secondly, can you give us a sense of what your time was like at Mona and what were some of the events unfolding there, vis-à-vis, for example, Walter Rodney? Why did you choose to go to university in

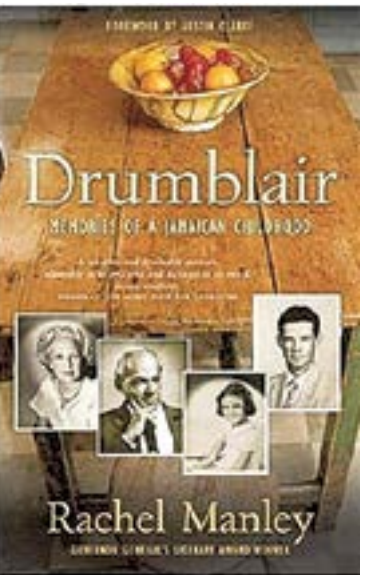


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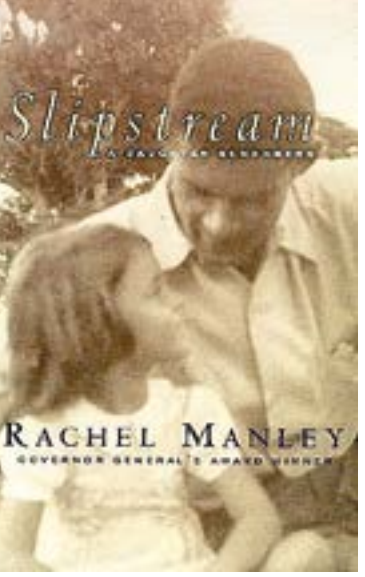
Interview with Rachel Manley



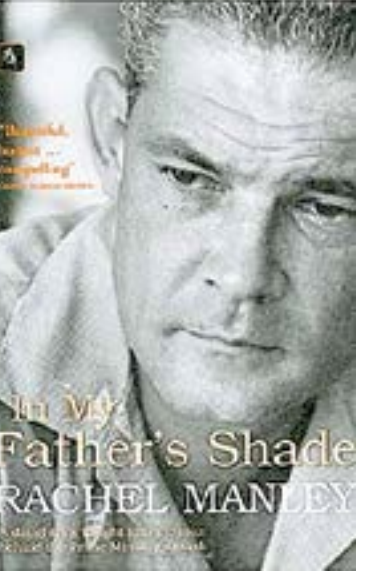
Jamaica? You know, the danger in singling out certain books of any author’s body of work (such a grand term – body of work!), especially an author who has written non-fiction/memoir, is that the things you seek answers for in some books may be answered in others. I believe most of this section’s questions have been answered here and there in my memoirs. Certainly, the Rodney march I have written on extensively more than once, so may I refer you to my trilogy – I think *Drumblair* and *Slipstream* described much of my school and university experience. That has been a continuing dilemma with my writing, that in tackling a large and to some extent historic story of historic, political people from three different angles for each of the three books, I have had to try not to repeat too much, so usually one book has the whole story and the others only refer to it. But to reiterate briefly: My most memorable school would be Knox College in Spalding. The red earth of Manchester was my grandfather’s birthplace and the Shearer sisters, mothers to my grandparents, were rural Jamaicans. Coming from Kingston, I felt a pull to that school and landscape and its wonderful Scottish Presbyterian approach to education that included farming, cooking, drama, carpentry, art, money management and social consciousness in addition to the academic 3 R’s and general and particular sports. Growing up as an only child, a co-ed school was also a social education for me. I remember at Saturday night dances sitting petrified, a skinny wall flower, terrified of being asked to dance and humiliated when I wasn’t. But in a boarding school, and often homesick with my grandparents away down



the islands a lot during the years leading up to Federation, I was in a way being socialised into a world of other children. St Andrew High School – I was there for two years and did my Senior Cambridge, but also learned to be a modern teenager to the alternate rhythms of ska and rock and roll. I then was in London for two years doing my ‘A’ levels and getting to know my English mother and sister. I remember that time more for the Beatles, the Stones and my most original mother on her third or fourth marriage, than for the schools, to be honest. I wish I could tell you that I enrolled in UWI due to nationalistic or regionalist fervour. I did not. I had surprised myself and my father by getting accepted to the University of Sussex, which at one time was a dream of mine as it was said to have an excellent English department and English is all I have ever been any good at. But by the time my father discovered he didn’t have the money to send me, I had a Jamaican boyfriend I longed to get back to, so I was quite happy. UWI was not really the golden memory others have of university. I was very distracted with my stepmother dying, my heart-torn hurricane of a father, my grandfather losing elections, broke and getting frail, and the off-campus boyfriend, so I really didn’t give UWI a fair chance. The high point was coming second in the carnival queen contest as an Angel in a Stain Glass Window – drifting out onto the stage in darkness accompanied by *Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring* on the steel drums and then the stage lights suddenly turned on and flashing on the panes of the “window” with its rainbow of cellophane colours kaleidoscoping, and getting a typewriter as my consolation prize. Very apt. This led to my



representing Jamaica in Antigua where I came second again. And I take pride in the fact I was beaten by Jennifer Hosten, who went on to become Miss World 1970! I’m good at being second. It’s a good position. I quite like it. Doesn’t inspire envy! But at UWI, I think I learned more about sewing than Chaucer there for I started a little business with the boyfriend on campus sewing dashikis and headscarves, most of which I ended up giving away (probably trying to be popular...didn’t work!). Those were good memories. The bad ones were mostly about my feeling conflicted over the great tide of change that as a young Jamaican I would have embraced if not for the UWI magazine Abeng which represented a new shift in ideas at the expense I felt of my grandfather. They blamed him ferociously for everything. *The Daily Gleaner*, a staunch right-wing status quo newspaper, had abused him for everything for years – the JLP in campaigns and Parliament had done the same – now Abeng in wanting change blamed him for being the past. I took the constant criticism of my grandfather much too personally which he didn’t. I guess it was the straw that broke my back. He, on the other hand, quite sensibly saw that it was good that youth questioned and criticised and that the times called for change. You’d think I’d had time to get used to these attacks but I think I expected it from the right-wing status quo but not from fellow students whose youth and futures NW had done so much to shape. Maybe it was because by then he had become physically frail and it seemed to me like an unfair fight. At the time my father as the new PNP head was emerging as a new alternative, and many of the students expressed interest in him which only made me more



defensive of NW. I am afraid I react more personally than politically to life.

After leaving university, you would seek to make your way as a writer and eventually a mother of two sons. How did you come to the understanding that you were a writer and what mentoring did you receive? What was getting published like for you? When I was about five years old, my long-suffering grandmother, having become frustrated with my lack of talent as an artist as I spent time in her studio, gave me lined paper and a pencil to write. If you can’t be an artist, she said, you will be a poet. And that was that. My first poem was published by the *Daily Gleaner* – I think it was about the huge oak tree at Drumblair. I was very proud because my grandparents made a big deal of it. Then CLR James in Trinidad repeated a tall story I had told him about our dog walking home from a vet 100 miles away when he was to be put down. That one got me in a lot of trouble – a lesson to be learned about publishing. I think I may have been about eight and 10, respectively. Years later, I was very offended when one of my English teachers said she thought my grandmother had written the poem in the *Gleaner* for me! Actually I should probably have taken that as a compliment! After that it was my grandmother’s constant encouragement to write (she wasn’t big on my having babies; said I had “dicey” kidneys – *I did not!* – suggesting having babies might kill me) and Wayne’s unproven faith in me that kept me going. I had no official schooling, training or mentoring really in writing other than George Scott my English teacher at Knox who urged us on to write essays and poetry in his Creative Writing class. And in those days I resisted any criticism or editing suggestions

with misplaced vehemence. My first two poetry books were self-printed but I had a sense of accomplishment nonetheless. The Peepal Tree Press stopped my heart when they accepted *A Light Left On*. I am eternally grateful to Jeremy Poynting. And then Andre Deutsche published *Edna Manley – The Diaries*, which I edited. That really was a job fuelled by grief, but preparing these brilliant and beautifully written journals was my delight. Getting published by Knopf Canada was an extraordinary feeling because it was *Drumblair*, my firstborn work of prose, written about my grandfather and represented the indomitable power of memory and love. It was Cecil Foster, the Barbadian writer who suggested I go to Louise Denys at Knopf because she was Graham Greene’s niece and he had loved Jamaica. To be honest, it was the first time in my life I felt a sense of my own accomplishment. Winning a prestigious literary award didn’t hurt either. My father came to my launch and remarked approvingly to my husband: “She’s her own Manley now.” So in a way getting published had more than one powerful impact on me. And after that it became easier to get a publisher which was all-important in those days if only just to get your books in the bookstores and to get reviews written. A self-published work was still frowned on as a “vanity project” and got little public marketing support. But that was 1996. Nowadays, self-publishing is considered quite respectable and a necessary reality for many an emerging writer as the publishing industry goes through if not death throes, some process of transformation as it readjusts itself to the internet age and the reality of Kindle etc, and Amazon.

Finally, you were born in Cornwall, England, grew up in Jamaica, and presently live in Canada. Where is home for you and why is that place home? Also, what is it that you are working on these days? I am back in non-fiction. It’s familiar, it’s where I feel safe, it’s where I belong. It’s home...and home is Drumblair.

The Gymnast & Other Positions is Jacqueline Bishop’s most recent book, which was awarded the 2016 OCM Bocas Award in Non-Fiction. Bishop, an associate professor at New York University, is also the author of My Mother Who Is Me: Life Stories from Jamaican Women in New York and Writers Who Paint/Painters Who Write: Three Jamaican Artists. She was a 2008-2009 Fulbright Fellow to Morocco, and the 2009-2010 UNESCO/Fulbright Fellow.