Published in: *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction* (general editor: Brian W. Shaffer), *Vol. 3: World Fiction*, ed. by John Clement Ball (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
Status: Postprint (Author's version). The definitive version is available at http://www3.interscience.wiley.com.

# West Indian Fiction

Bénédicte Ledent

In his 1960 essay, *The Pleasures of Exile*, Barbadian writer George Lamming listed the post-war rise of the West Indian novel as the third most important event in British Caribbean history – after the 'discovery' of the islands by Christopher Columbus in the fifteenth century and the abolition of slavery, which led in the nineteenth century to the arrival of East Indians in the Caribbean and made it one of the world's most cosmopolitan areas. This statement evidences the central role played by fiction in the development of a regional sensibility and in the attempts of the West Indian community to come to terms with its painful, century-long experience of colonialism and exploitation. The rise of the West Indian novel as a 'method of investigation' (38) was further linked by Lamming to the migration to England in the mid-twentieth century of a number of young male writers, among them Andrew Salkey, Samuel Selvon, and himself. Their presence in the so-called Mother Country facilitated the international circulation of their works and triggered an unprecedented upsurge of creativity, with long-lasting effects on the following generations of writers. This does not mean, however, that there had not been any fiction produced in the West Indies in the early twentieth century, but the novels and short stories published before the 1950s suffered from a relative absence of visibility. And even if they paved the way thematically for the writing that was to come, they lacked, to some extent, the originality, political commitment, and vigour that later became the hallmark of the fiction from the anglophone Caribbean.

The first major West Indian novels were mostly written by men from Jamaica and Trinidad, two islands with a dynamic literary culture. Jamaican H. G. de Lisser's *Jane's Career* (1914) is a famous early text. Like many subsequent novels from the region, it addresses social changes through a coming-of-age story – here of a young woman who moves from country to town to work as a domestic servant. A similar concern for social realism is present in *Minty Alley* (1936), by Trinidadian C. L. R. James, a novel that follows the confrontation of its young middle-class black protagonist with the residents of Port of Spain's Minty Alley. Race and class – understandably pervasive themes in former plantation societies – are at the heart of other fiction from the same period, notably by Claude McKay, a Jamaican who contributed to the Harlem Renaissance and spent much of his life outside the West

Published in: *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction* (general editor: Brian W. Shaffer), *Vol. 3: World Fiction*, ed. by John Clement Ball (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
Status: Postprint (Author's version). The definitive version is available at http://www3.interscience.wiley.com.

Indies. In *Banana Bottom* (1933) he addresses the identity crisis of his proud heroine, Bita Plant, who, after being educated in England, returns to Jamaica and is faced with important choices. The alienated individual divided between several cultures is a recurring feature of West Indian fiction; another is the attention paid to collective history and the development of the post-colonial nation, a theme particularly prominent in another pioneering early work, V. S. Reid's *New Day* (1949). Written in a form of Jamaican dialect laced with Biblical language, this national epic traces a direct line from the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion to the 1944 Independence celebrations.

The West Indies has always had a strong storytelling tradition, a legacy from slavery times. Still, except for a few volumes – mostly by expatriates in the US or Europe, such as Eric Waldrond's *Tropic Death* (1926) and Jean Rhys's *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927) – many early short stories were not published in books but in the literary magazines that flourished in the West Indies, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, such as *Bim*, *The Beacon*, and *Kyk-Over-Al*. It was not until the 1960s that stories became more widely available, thanks to the anthologies and collections that were published as West Indian writing acquired a larger readership. Many of the region's leading novelists also composed short stories, particularly at the beginning of their careers.

The second half of the century opened with *A Morning at the Office* (1950), the third book by the prolific Guyanese Edgar Mittelholzer, who had arrived in the UK in 1948. Set in a Trinidadian office and spanning only six hours, the narrative explores through its varied cast the racial complexities of West Indian society and their impact on the individual psyche. Its sharpness of observation apart, this book stands out as one of the first novels published in the UK in the wake of the post-war wave of migration; it ushered in an explosion of fictional talents. Trinidadian Samuel Selvon, whose first book was *A Brighter Sun* (1952), is mostly famous for *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), an episodic novel written in creolized English, tracing with tenderness the bittersweet experiences of West Indian immigrants in London. Its central character, Moses Aloetta, is the hero of two humorous sequels, *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1983). Exile in the former imperial capital is a common theme in fiction published in the 1950s and 1960s, as exemplified by Lamming's *The Emigrants* (1954), Andrew Salkey's *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960), and V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967), the story of a Caribbean politician in exile in London.

However, it would be reductive to view all West Indian fiction of that period through the prism of migration to Britain. Naipaul, for example, wrote *Miguel Street* (1959) and *A*

Published in: *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction* (general editor: Brian W. Shaffer), *Vol. 3: World Fiction*, ed. by John Clement Ball (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
Status: Postprint (Author's version). The definitive version is available at http://www3.interscience.wiley.com.

*House for Mr Biswas* (1961), two early examinations of the writer's native Trinidad that reveal a compassion that contrasts with his later, more cynical analyses of neo-colonialism in *Guerrillas* (1975) and *A Bend in the River* (1979). Likewise, Lamming published *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), a classic *Bildungsroman* set in Barbados, and *Season of Adventure* (1960), a more political novel set on the fictional island of San Cristobal. Jean Rhys, from Dominica, who had already written a migration novel entitled *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), published in 1966 one of the most celebrated Caribbean books, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a fictional response to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Through the experience of her white creole heroine, Antoinette (Brontë's 'madwoman in the attic'), Rhys brilliantly tackles the racial, sexual, and cultural tensions inherent in all human encounters, but which are particularly intense in Caribbean societies. Nevertheless, of all the West Indian novelists in Britain, it was the Guyanese Wilson Harris whose imagination remained most profoundly and consistently shaped by the region, as shown in his visionary, formally groundbreaking first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), which follows the expedition of a multiracial crew into the Guyanese interior and lays the foundation for the original, cross-cultural worldview developed in his many subsequent, densely metaphorical novels.

Like Harris, many West Indian novelists in exile kept writing to the end of the twentieth century. Their enduring success, however, meant that less critical attention was paid to the literary production of those who stayed on their native islands, such as Jamaican Erna Brodber and Trinidadian Earl Lovelace. Educated as a sociologist, Brodber evoked in her highly innovative work the trauma that slavery and colonial education had imposed on her female protagonists, such as young Ella in *Myal* (1988). For Brodber, the only path towards spiritual restoration and healing involves an awareness of the multiple roots of Caribbean culture. Folk traditions are equally important in the fiction of Lovelace, especially *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979), which presents the annual Carnival celebrations as a source of pride and dignity for the region's dispossessed people. But writers like Brodber and Lovelace remained exceptions, for West Indian fiction at the end of the millennium was mostly written by Caribbean-born writers, many of them women, who had settled abroad – not only in Britain, but also the United States and Canada. Despite its dispersed origins, however, their diasporic fiction displayed strikingly similar preoccupations, most notably an interest in identity issues related to displacement and an almost obsessive concern with the past, themes present to a greater or lesser degree in all the writing from the region.

Published in: *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction* (general editor: Brian W. Shaffer), *Vol. 3: World Fiction*, ed. by John Clement Ball (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
Status: Postprint (Author's version). The definitive version is available at http://www3.interscience.wiley.com.

The second generation of West Indian novelists in Britain started publishing in the mid-1980s. While their first novels often dealt with Caribbean migrants' difficulties fitting in to the colonial metropolis, such as Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging* (1985), Caryl Phillips's *The Final Passage* (1985), and David Dabydeen's *The Intended* (1991), they developed in the following years a special attention to history, in particular to transatlantic slavery, which, they suggested, had shaped postcolonial society radically and could account for its entrenched racism. Chief among these historical fictions are Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993), Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), and Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999), character-driven narratives that subvert conventional views of the past. Their multiple settings – England, Africa, and often the New World – might indicate a trend toward internationalization in Anglo-Caribbean fiction. Yet, other recent novels remain clearly rooted in an occasionally baroque Caribbean, whether Trinidad in *Witchbroom* (1992) or Guyana in *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997), respectively by Lawrence Scott and Pauline Melville, two authors with remarkable short-story collections as well – Scott's *Ballad for the New World* (1994) and Melville's *Shape-Shifter* (1990).

Slightly different developments are perceptible in fiction by US-based West Indians. For some time, its main representative was veteran Paule Marshall, the author among other novels of *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (1959), focusing on a Barbadian girl living in Brooklyn. In the 1980s, however, other major talents came to the fore, generally with texts set in their ancestral homeland. The most acclaimed was Jamaica Kincaid, born in Antigua. Her economical fiction focuses on the vulnerability of apparently ruthless female characters whose childhood is shaped by colonialism, whether the eponymous *Annie John* (1985) or Xuela in *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). Other original voices were Jamaica's Michelle Cliff – author of *Abeng* (1984), another childhood story, and *Free Enterprise* (1993), an imaginative exploration of historical links between the Caribbean and African America -- and Robert Antoni, with roots in Trinidad, whose great formal inventiveness is displayed in *Divina Trace* (1991).

West Indian short fiction was particularly well developed in Canada, as testified, for example, by Olive Senior's collections of stories set in Jamaica, *Arrival of the Snake Woman* (1989) and *Discerner of Hearts* (1995). Senior did not write novels, but it is significant that many renowned anglophone Caribbean novelists in Canada were also established short-story writers. Austin Clarke, who arrived in Toronto in the 1950s, is a good example; by the end of the century he had published five collections of stories and nine novels, tackling both black

immigrant life in Canada, as in *The Bigger Light* (1975), and the situation in his native Barbados, in *Proud Empires* (1986). The same generic and thematic versatility is true of the younger writers, particularly the Trinidadians Neil Bissoondath – whose work is concerned with rootlessness and memory, from the collection *Digging Up the Mountains* (1985) to the novel *The Worlds Within Her* (1998) – and Dionne Brand, whose lyrical prose also shuttles between the Caribbean and Canada, for example in *Sans Souci and Other Stories* (1988) and *At The Full and Range of the Moon* (1999), a family saga starting in the nineteenth century with the slave Marie Ursule.

The works of West Indian fiction writers have been acclaimed internationally, not only for their innovativeness but also because they carry within themselves variegated and profound reflections on multiculturalism, one of the most crucial global issues in the twentieth century and beyond.

## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

Butcher, M. (ed.) (1989). *Tibisiri.* Mundelstrup: Dangaroo.

Donnell, A. (2006). *Twentieth-century Caribbean literature: Critical moments in anglophone literary history*. London: Routledge.

Donnell, A., & Welsh, S. L. (eds.) (1996). *The Routledge reader in Caribbean literature*. London: Routledge.

Figueredo, D. H. (ed.) (2006). *Encyclopedia of Caribbean literature*, 2 vols. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

King, B. (ed.) (1995). *West Indian literature*, 2nd edn. London: Macmillan.

James, L. (1999). *Caribbean literature in English*. London: Longman.

Lamming, G. (1960). *The pleasures of exile*. London: Michael Joseph.

Ramchand, K. (1983). *The West Indian novel and its background*, 2nd edn. London: Heinemann.