#InConVerSation:

Lorna Goodison

Bookends presents the first of a series of conversations #InConVerSation between the writer Jacqueline Bishop and phenomenal women writers who call Jamaica home. Today’s featured writer is Poet Laureate of Jamaica Lorna Goodison.

Lorna Goodison (Photo: The Scottish National Library)

The Muse of Memory Is The Muse of Poetry:

An Interview With Poet Laureate Lorna Goodison

Mandeville. Because I love how we talk, I try to write in a mixture of Standard English and Jamaican speech so that it resonates perfectly to Jamaican ears but it is still accessible to non-Jamaicans. Somebody once wrote that I seem to be trying to inscribe Jamaican culture onto the consciousness of the world. I think that is a good thing!

One of your initiatives as the new poet laureate of Jamaica is the Helen Zell prize for young poets. Can you expand on this and why you thought it important to initiate this prize in Jamaica?

I was fortunate enough to have taught for many years at the University of Michigan in their Helen Zell MFA writing programme that is consistently rated in the top two such programmes in the world. As part of the job I had to read and evaluate countless applications from highly gifted young writers who are very serious about developing their craft. As the current Poet Laureate of Jamaica, I thought that I would like to encourage our young writers to perform at the highest level, and I am grateful to Douglas Trevor and Linda Gregerson, at the University of Michigan for agreeing to establish this prize.

The details can be read online, but basically it is open to Jamaican poets between the ages of 17 and 25. Applicants are asked to submit a portfolio of between three to six pieces of original work to be appraised by faculty, and the winner will receive a prize of US$1,000.

As the first woman to be given this honour, I am of course well pleased, and I have hopes, dreams and plans for what I’ll do while I am Poet Laureate, and one of the first initiatives I’ve been involved with is the “All Flowers are Roses” Self-Defence and Poetry Summer Workshop. This was a workshop designed to teach young girls basic self-defence and poetry writing. It was taught by the well-known Jamaican poet and martial arts expert Cherry Natural, and the poet Yashika Graham.

The logo was designed by the British Jamaican artist Ruel Hudson, and it went so well that the current director of the NLJ Beverly Lashley is working with Abigail Henry, who does a wonderful job of running the Poet Laureate programme, and me to expand it this year.

As I see it, poets laureate are national praise singers and advocates of poetry, and I believe I have been doing something like that in my own work, in an unofficial capacity, for many years.

I am particularly grateful that I’ve had the great good fortune to have been able to read my praise poems to Jamaica to wide audiences here at home and in many different parts of the world.

I have also been at this business for quite some time. My first collection of poetry was published in 1980, by the Institute of Jamaica Press, and individual poems of mine had been appearing in various magazines and in Jamaican Sunday newspapers for at least 12 years before that.

From the very beginning, I was always writing poems inspired by aspects of Jamaican culture; even some of my most intimate and personal poems somehow manage to reference Jamaica. One of my poems, which appears on the London Underground, is called “Bam Chi Chi La La”, and it is about a Jamaican teacher working as a char woman so that she can build her retirement home in Mandeville.

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God, A Me

God bless the river
That washes out of me
The big river
Sweps me up onto the bank
I was swimming in sync
With all the big currents
Of the big river, one hundred
When I was growing up, I was always
Now I hear I am back
Still breathing.
They say I am the only one
Outside of the whole culture
Where fish and ground swells
Fish out of water
God, a me.
Fish in and fish out
Shyly amphibian
My name is a prayer:
On land I breathe easily
But still breathe though
Until the tides of money
Pull back into the sea.
I am back to the sea.

I am sure you are familiar with "not being in this, but being true to this.
A little later in the interview, I will take up the ways in which I see you currently experiment¬ing in your work. But more and more these themes seem to be the explosion of Caribbean voices and Caribbean literature in the world. I am happy to have you as someone, who has been around for some time in the sense of all the way Caribbean voices now being recognized for what they are. And whether that is right or wrong, there has always been someone who has been trying to tell the tale of that half for over 50 years, I say this for the good. This whole world is experiencing somewhat of a seismic shift when it comes to matters of gender, and this movement is handily righted, the whole world is turning towards the good. And for that, some being more necessary for publishing, printing, follow-ups, etc. and some more specific.

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LORNA from Page 3 every subject, including the constellations and what the King James Bible— I am a big fan of the King James Bible— refers to as “the great lights”, that is the sun and the moon and the stars.

Your mother was a seamstress, and she returns in one form or another in all of your collections, to date. Sewing arises forcefully as a trope in your work, particularly so in your later writings. So, tell us, Lorna, a little about your mother Dorice. How did she learn to sew? What were some of her notable creations that you remember? Do you still have some of the things that she created?

My mother was a great and generous soul. She was powerful and beautiful. Very strong, you did not mess with her, but she was amazingly kind-hearted and she was highly intelligent. She had been a teacher before she got married to my father Marcus. I want to put in a word for my father here, he was one class guy, caring and loving of all his children, Barbara, Howard, Carmen, Vaughan, Kingsley and Karl, Keith, Lorna and Nigel. He had a great work ethic, he was a trusted friend in whom many important people in Jamaican society confided, and he had a killer sense of humour which we all inherited along with his love of music; especially the old stuff in my family is passionate about music. Anyway, I learned many sweet little poems and all sorts of stories from my mother Dorice. Her family, the Harveys, were big-time Anglicans, so she was very familiar with the language of the Book of Common Prayer and her speech was rich with all sorts of high and low references. She is the person who encouraged my eldest sister to become a journalist, and I believe if she had lived at another time, she would have become a writer.

I learned much from watching my mother sew. One of my favourite definitions of a poet is that of “maker”. I like the idea that you are actually making something when you write a poem. When my mother and her sisters Cleodine, Cleopatra (also called Jo and Alice) sewed dresses (only Aunt Rose never sewed) they paid close attention to everything from how the fabric looked in different lights, to how it would fall if you cut it on the bias as opposed to just cutting it straight, and they made sure that the inside was finished as neatly as the outside, all kinds of things like that. I think I try to do something like that when I write poems. I’m not sure where they learned to sew, but my aunt Cleodine had gone to a special school run by an English woman and maybe she learned sewing there, because she was actually a world-class seamstress, who had a highly developed aesthetic sense. She was the eldest so she may have taught her younger sisters. My mother used to sew the most gorgeous dresses. I remember one off-white damask linen dress with a circular skirt that must have had at least five yards of cloth in it that she made for my sister Barbara. It could have been in the pages of Vogue! I lost all the beautiful dresses she made for me to Hurricane Gilbert.

In the later poems, there is a lot of transience, restlessness and movement. On the one hand, I read these as the natural outcome of partaking perhaps unconsciously in the triangular trade route travelling among Africa, Europe and the Americas. Yet, there is a resistance to the notion of exile by the narrator of these poems, who insists she is not in exile from Jamaica, simply “making life” away from Jamaica. How is exile different from making life and how do you as the poet of these poems understand the restlessness and constant movement and travel, particularly in the later poems of the collected works?

Other people have drawn attention to the themes of transience, restlessness, and constant movement in my work, especially the later work. The fact that I have been doing a great deal of moving up and down, working and living in several different places during the second half of my life, has come as a great surprise to me, because I was not prepared for all the restlessness, etc. My dear son Miles, things have changed. Few years ago when he is in no hurry to go travelling anywhere. I think this may be because he has lived with me in so many different places.

Continuing on the theme of travel, there is a deepening understanding of what New York City means to the consciousness writing these poems. But it suddenly occurred to me that most artists going abroad to study when you did perhaps most likely went to Europe, specifically England for their training. But for you that was different. Why did you choose to study in New York City as opposed to England? What was your time in New York City and at the Art Students League like? Who did you study with and what kind of work did you produce? Were you writing poems at this time as well?

I went to New York because I wanted to go to the School of the Art Students League. I believe it was Karl and Seya Parboosingh, who were good friends with my sister Barbara and her husband Ancile Gloudon, who recommended that I go there. Jamaican painters like Cecil Cooper, Vernal Rueben and others had also studied at the School of the Art Students League like? Who did you study with and what kind of work did you produce? Were you writing poems at this time as well as painting? If yes, how did you juggle doing both art forms at once? I am wondering what your thoughts are on this observation, and the poem “So Who Was The Mother of Jamaican art?”

She was the first nameless woman who created images of her children sold away from her. She suspended those woodinches from a rope round her neck, before she ate she fed them, touched bits of pounded yam and plantains to sealed lips; always urged them to sip water. She carved them of heartwood, teeth and nails were her first tools, later she wielded a blunt blade. Her spit cleaned face and limbs, the pitch oil of her skin burnedished. When the woodworms bored into their bellies, she warmed castor oil; they purged. She learned her art by breaking hard rockstones. She did not sign her work.

I never thought that I’d ever live outside of Jamaica. But as my beloved cousin Joan Moran once said to me when she came to visit me when I spent a year at the Bunting Institute in Cambridge Massachusetts, “If God can’t move you, God can’t use you”. That is the only explanation I have for all the restlessness, etc. My dear son Miles, things have changed. Few years ago when he is in no hurry to go travelling anywhere. I think this may be because he has lived with me in so many different places.

Finally, there are praise songs in many of the poems in your collected works, but two that really stand out are dedicated to your contemporary poets Velma Pollard and Derek Walcott. It is indeed breathtaking that one poet should “turn thanks” to other poets in her work. Why did you feel the need to do this?

I learned a very important lesson after the publication of Tamarind Season. In that book, I dedicated poems to people who were just friends and, in some instances, almost casual acquaintances, people I was not particularly close to, but whom I maybe just liked. I discovered after that, there is a kind of reader and/or critic who reads a lot into a dedication, who puts things they use in an interview away more than I actually intended. So since then I have become very careful about who warrants a poem from me. It goes without saying that Derek Walcott more than deserves praise poems by the bushel for all he has done for poetry. My poem dedicated to “ivicised” (as Rastafari would say, and Velma Pollard being a boss of dread talk would agree) to her came about because I once heard her give a very funny and smart reading of the loincloth worn by Bombo the little boy who lived in the Congo, a story taken from The Royal Primer, which we used to read in primary school. It is meet and right to praise; writing praise poems is something all good poets are must and bound to do.

So Who Was The Mother of Jamaican Art?

BY LORNA GOODISON

She was the first nameless woman who created images of her children sold away from her. She suspended those woodinches from a rope round her neck, before she ate she fed them, touched bits of pounded yam and plantains to sealed lips; always urged them to sip water. She carved them of heartwood, teeth and nails were her first tools, later she wielded a blunt blade. Her spit cleaned face and limbs, the pitch oil of her skin burnedished. When the woodworms bored into their bellies, she warmed castor oil; they purged. She learned her art by breaking hard rockstones. She did not sign her work.

The Gymnast & Other Positions

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.