

Give the BALL to the Poet

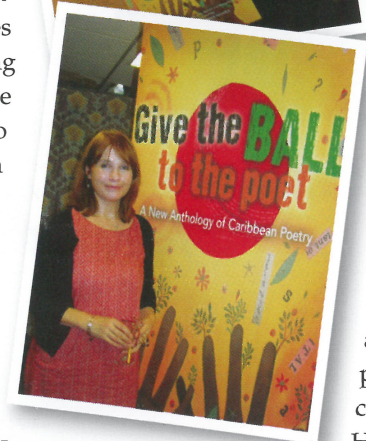
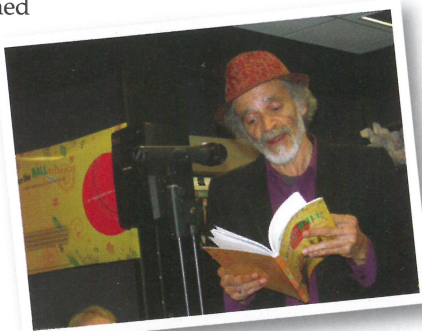
A New Anthology of Caribbean Poetry

The Caribbean Poetry Project was launched five years ago as a collaborative venture between the Centre for Commonwealth Education at the University of Cambridge and the University of the West Indies. The project seeks to encourage engagement with Caribbean poetry amongst young people and teachers and promote the teaching and learning of poetry in both British and Caribbean schools. A notable outcome for this initiative is the recent publication of *Give the BALL to the Poet*, a new collection of Caribbean poetry featuring some established and new voices. *Carousel* was delighted to receive an invitation from The Commonwealth Education Trust (CET) for the launch at Waterstones, Cambridge last October. The event featured readings by Kei Miller, John Agard, and Valerie Bloom, along with an introduction by Morag Styles, one of the editors of the anthology. Jane Ray was also present to sign copies alongside a display of her original art work specially commissioned for the anthology.

Choosing which poets and poems to include in the collection was not an easy task as Morag Styles explained, "We were spoiled for choice. The thing about anthologising is keeping all the balls in the air – and not dropping any! We wanted to represent the beautiful range of Caribbean poetry – from the musical, dynamic, performance poetry, to gentle lyrical moments. From Standard English to Creole and many different voices; ensuring the great tradition of Caribbean poetry was well represented but making space for plenty of younger, fresh voices including a good representation of women." Working in collaboration with her co-editors, Georgie Horrell and Aisha Spencer, the process of gathering together the poetry took approximately a year during which time the three met just once to decide on the poems. Aisha is based in Kingston, Jamaica so it was not without its challenges. "The distance made it hard. But we were completely in tune and had very few disagreements."

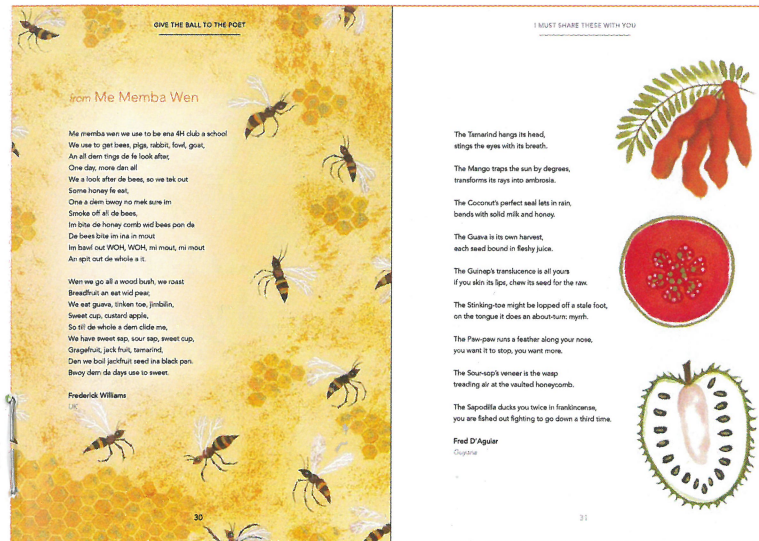
design to illustration treatment, copyright and marketing. I must say it was probably the most genial and constructive

From top: John Agard, Kei Miller, Val Bloom, and Jane Ray



Beginning with a series of poems devoted to sport (the anthology was published to coincide with the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow), the sections that follow are broader in scope and chosen to appeal primarily to eleven to sixteen year olds. Morag explained "Each poem had to win its place. Once we had chosen about one hundred poems, we started working on themes. Some got abandoned, some changed but mostly they selected themselves. We then made sure each section was strong enough and actively looked for gaps to fill with some new poems being commissioned." The titled sections which include *I Must Share These With You*, *Rap 'n' Roll* and *Things Far Away*, reflect the complexities as well as the rich and varied culture of the Caribbean. "We had to face up to the Caribbean's painful history but also represent its beauty. We wanted to present the vitality of its language, the terrific grace and sense of humour of its people."

Neil Titman, Publishing Director of Third Millennium who produced the anthology, had previously collaborated with the CET on the title *A River of Stories*, a collection of tales and poems from across the Commonwealth. He was keen to acknowledge the team of people involved in the production of the volume including the Production Manager, Bonnie Murray, Art Director Matt Wilson, and from CET/Cambridge, Judy Curry, Diane Louis and John Picknett. Sabine Edwards also had a major role, concentrating on copyright permissions and promotional initiatives. Neil commented, "We convened at New Zealand House, Haymarket, every month, to discuss everything ranging from editorial content and

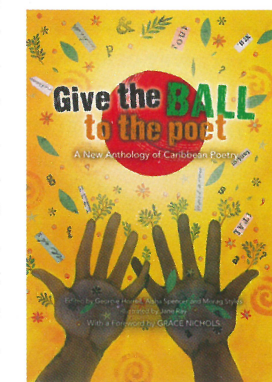


Poems from Give the BALL to the Poet

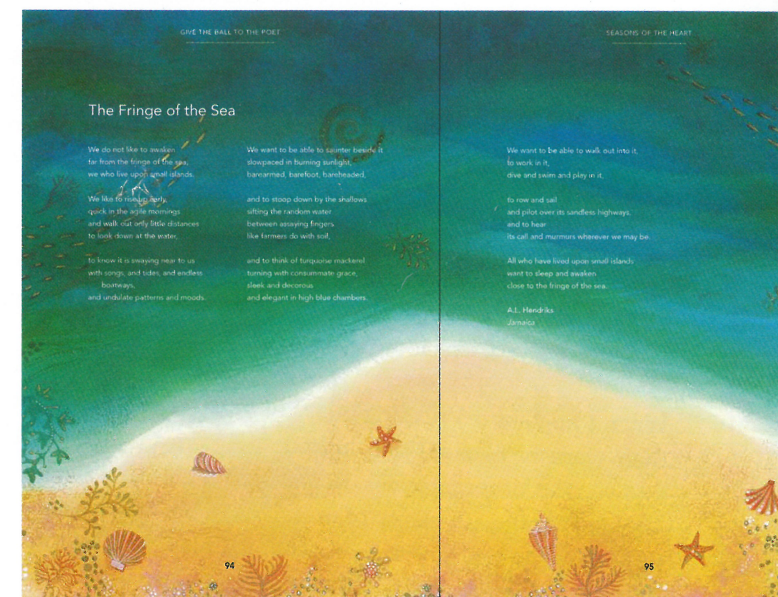
panel I have ever had the pleasure to work on, and we all believe that the book could make a significant impact in primary and secondary schools."

Undoubtedly, the highlight of the launch was the poetry readings. John Agard, who had an advisory role in the conception of the anthology, gave a spellbinding performance of his titular poem 'Give the Ball to the Poet'. In his entertaining introduction, John accurately described the anthology as "a thing of beauty". Valerie Bloom read the reflective, 'Keeping Wicket', one of two of her poems specially commissioned for the anthology. She shared with *Carousel* some of her favourite poems in the collection, "So many! Jean Breeze's 'simple tings' Alma Norman's 'Ballad of Sixty-Five' (because I used to recite it at primary school and it brings back memories), Kei Miller's 'The Only Thing Far Away', Frank Collymore's 'Hymn To The Sea' (another blast from the past), 'Icons' by Grace Nichols, to name but a few". There was much excitement in the room with the later arrival of Kei Miller who had been announced that week as the recipient of the 2014 Forward Award for poetry. Kei has five poems in the anthology including the beautiful 'A Parting Song', which he read as a memorable conclusion to the evening.

A striking feature of this handsome volume is the illustrations by Jane Ray which as Morag aptly noted, "Capture the sensual, colourful warmth of the Caribbean, its people and flora and fauna." Jane had previously illustrated a poetry anthology edited by Morag called *Mother Gave a Shout: Poems by Women and Girls*. "It was lovely to be in touch with Morag again, especially over such an exciting book as this," enthused Jane, "The illustrations that I did for *Mother...* were in black and white, but this collection cried out for colour and luckily that was what she wanted and had a budget for." Jane outlined some of the thinking and preparation required



for the illustrations, "A recurring theme in the collection that particularly struck me was that of the contrasts between the Caribbean and Britain in terms of light, climate, and the natural world. Mervyn Morris's poem Montage is about an autumnal dusk in England, described as a 'muted, lingering farewell'. I loved the contrast with his memory of the fall of darkness at home – a 'flamboyant fireball laughing a promise to return'. If I was not living in England it is things like autumn, and dusk, and falling leaves that I would miss, and I can imagine how Morris misses the way night falls in Jamaica. So for this illustration, using watercolour and collage, I tried to create the feeling of cosiness, of windows lit as the evening comes, before the curtains are drawn, of autumnal streets, a tang of smoke and bare trees, the things that make something in my heart do a little flip of excitement, something of 'home'." Jane acknowledged that Matt Wilson was an integral part of the process. "He took my images and played with them and the words, and put them all together in a magical way." Jane commented that the reception of the poets to her work had been very positive and was delighted that Valerie Bloom had bought one of the illustrations to her poems, "Which is the best compliment!"



The Fringe of the Sea from Give the BALL to the Poet

Give the BALL to the Poet is a fine anthology; impressive in its breadth of poems and beautifully presented. It is a labour of love which deserves a place in every classroom and school library. As Grace Nichols so aptly observes in her Foreword to the anthology, "Who can resist the invitation to *Give the Ball to the Poet*, if only to see what the poet will do with the ball?"

Elaine and Dave Chant

Give the BALL to the Poet
 Edited by Morag Styles and Aisha Spencer Illustrated by Jane Ray
 Commonwealth Education Trust Books £9.99 ISBN: 978-1909931008