



The Cambridge Children's Literature Students' Blog

SUNDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER 2012

A weekend of Caribbean Poetry

For the past year or so, I've been working with Morag and the Caribbean Poetry Project team, helping to prepare for their conference. To be completely honest, I did not know very much about Caribbean poetry, but that didn't matter — I was still able to send millions of emails, put up posters, distribute brochures, research hotel rates, etc. I had intended to do some poetry reading before the conference began, as I did not want to arrive completely ignorant, but time crept away, and before I knew it the conference had arrived. In the days preceding the conference, I felt a bit stressed about taking four days away from my own research and writing time. I was excited about being there, of course, but I did not think it was particularly relevant — I am not researching poetry and I am not looking at a Caribbean context. But I had promised Morag I would be there. She was so excited that it was happening. I knew it would be worth it.

Lucky for me, Morag had also asked Ashley to help out. I am certain I could not have done it without her. On Wednesday, we parked ourselves and our computers near the Homerton porters' lodge, waiting to greet our Caribbean visitors with smiles and cups of tea. We did not really know what to expect, as we had never met the Caribbean side of the project team, but we were both blown away by their kindness, by their genuine excitement about being in Cambridge. They found it cold but beautiful. Once they had arrived, Ashley and I ran around doing jobs: printing lectures, finding beat boxes and spare laptops, checking powerpoints. As you do when you are helping run a conference. I still did not know what to expect.

On Thursday, the Jamaican poet Mervyn Morris delivered the keynote lecture. Shortly before his conference (like, an hour before) he asked Ashley and I to help him prepare a few bits for his talk. We ended up typing up poems in a dialect of Creole, frantically, so that his talk could be delivered on time. He was absolutely lovely. His introduction (and my *real* introduction to Caribbean poetry) was moving. He focused on the relationship between word and sound (the theme of the conference), using recordings of poetry readings, recorded in various contexts, to illustrate the power of the voice to convey the meaning of the poem. The same poem, read in varying ways, to different audiences, is a whole new poem. He had proof. In the afternoon, we also had the absolute pleasure of hearing London based, Barbadian poet Dorothea Smartt read her poetry. Intermingled with the poetry readings, there were two parallel sessions. I attended a session on poetry and the environment, wherein David Whitley and Lorna Down considered the influence that the Caribbean, as a geographical place, has had on the imagination — so relevant to my research, after all. After an afternoon of equally stimulating sessions, and a nice meal in the Fellows' dining room, we had an evening of poetry entertainment, with Velma Pollard, Christian Campbell and Philip Nanton sharing the microphone. Mervyn's argument about the power of sound, when it comes to poetry, was clear again.

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A weekend of Caribbean Poetry

Their voices, all very different, made the poems come alive, in a way that would be impossible in a reading off the page.

On Friday were graced by the presence of Olive Senior, who opened the day with a reading. Although Olive is Jamaican, she currently resides in Canada. After her reading, someone asked her about the influence that Canada, as a place, has had on her as a poet. She explained that Jamaica, even after years of living in such a different context, has remained her poetic muse. Canada has not yet worked its way into her poems. As someone who is interested in the influence of place on identity, I found this fascinating. I am still thinking about it. Parallel sessions of academic papers were broken up with readings from Christian Campbell, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Kei Miller read, all of who were special in their own way. Another evening of poetry entertainment followed a lovely dinner, with readings from John Agard, John Lyons and Mark McWatt. It went on until nearly eleven, but nobody seemed to mind. Whilst giving me a ride home at the end of the evening, Morag told us it was one of the best days of her life so far. I wonder how many people can say that about a conference.

On Sunday, we heard Morag and her team talk about their ongoing research between the University of Cambridge and the University of the West Indies, wherein the focus is the *teaching* of Caribbean poetry. They discussed some of the workshops they have run for teachers, the focus of which is to familiarize them with Caribbean poetry, in an attempt to encourage them to implement this poetry into their curriculum. We also heard from Grace Nichols, Anthony Joseph, Mervyn Morris and Olive Senior.

What made this particular conference unique was the combination of poetry readings *and* critical, academic papers about the nature of Caribbean poetry. The papers were wide in scope — some were theoretical, some more practical. I attended a session with Ally Davies from the Poetry Society where we had to write a poem, using one by Grace Nichols as our guide. Some sessions were geared towards teachers, some to academics. Some sessions were given by poets, some were given by teachers or critics of poetry. It was collaborative and interdisciplinary. The mix of voices, and the range of topics, made it special. Not only did I learn *about* Caribbean poetry — who its poets are, what themes emerge, what it sounds like — but I learned that I actually *really enjoy it*, and wouldn't mind knowing more.

What I learned last weekend is that, as emerging academics, we shouldn't shy away from things that do not seem relevant. Sometimes I can get caught up in my own topic that I forget about the wealth of other things 'out there' that can provide enjoyment and stimulation. I approached my writing this week from a new perspective — a fresh page, so to say. I am thankful for the inspiration I was given.

Most of all, I feel lucky to have been in the presence of such gifted poets, and to have heard the poems for the first time, straight from them.

Pictures to come!

Posted by Erin at 16:45



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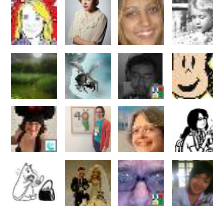
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