



Poetry by Appointment

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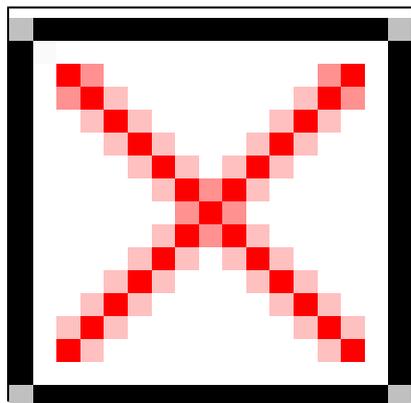
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Byline:

John Agard interviewed by **Nicholas Tucker**

‘John Agard has always made people sit up and listen,’ said Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy, on the announcement that Agard would receive the **Queen’s Medal for Poetry**. She added, ‘He levels the ground beneath all our feet, whether he is presenting Dante to children or introducing his own culture to someone who hasn’t encountered it before. In performance he is electrifying. His work in education over the years has changed the way that readers, writers and teachers think about poetry.’

Recipient of the **Queen’s Medal for Poetry**, bringing out collection after collection all to his own exacting high standards, continuing along with his wife Grace Nichols to wow mass audiences in poetry readings, John Agard, still a youthful presence at the age of 62, is having an excellent year. **Nicholas Tucker** joined him for a pint of draught Guinness in his favourite high street watering hole in Lewes, Sussex, his home now for some time, and quite a contrast to his birth place in Guyana which he left in 1977. They talked about bringing poetry alive in public readings, something at which Agard has always excelled.

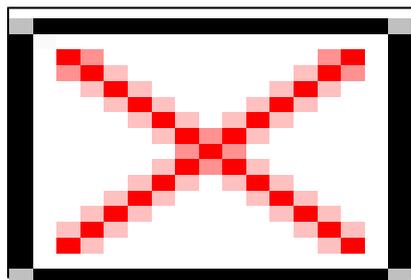


What happens after you have read out some of your poems in schools? Would you expect teachers after that to try to emulate the Caribbean voice you bring to your poetry?

Not necessarily, but if the teacher had a regional accent I would encourage him or her to use that rather than try to eliminate it when it came to reading out in public. And in general, I think teachers should also try if possible to get some idea of the sound-scape of any poet even if they can’t reproduce it themselves. I first heard T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas reading their poems on records I borrowed from the British council in Guyana when I was still at school. I was fascinated by their approaches, and experienced the poems themselves differently after that. Nowadays children can get to hear the voice of the poet more easily from YouTube and the like. I remember being fascinated by poems written in the Mersey Sound when I was still in the Caribbean. When I came to England, and had learned to recognise the Liverpool accent, I read them all over again. This made it a much richer experience, but I still enjoyed the poems when I first read them too. Getting to know the Liverpool accent was a bonus but not essential as a reader.

Does it ever worry you that some of the dialect words you use may not be familiar to non-Caribbean listeners?

No, because the sound of the word may be just as important as its meaning in a poem. Take 'pork-knockers', one phrase that I have used. This refers to overseas 19th century gold prospectors who used to knock on doors asking to buy the salted port that would sustain them in their explorations. Few would recognise the phrase today, but it's just too good not to use again.



Do you think the BBC in the past may have been at fault by its almost exclusive use of Received Pronunciation when it came to broadcasting poetry, even when a regional accent may have been more appropriate to the poet's actual voice?

I think the BBC certainly helped develop something like a hierarchy of sound, whereby some vowel pronunciations were treated as more valid than others. But all this is breaking up now, with former attitudes giving way to genuine diversity. I remember the shock on first hearing a poem read out on the BBC in a syncopated rhythm and then saying to myself, 'Well, why not?'

You often refer to the British poetry you learned when you were a schoolboy in Guyana. Is there still a role for it in the post-colonial Caribbean of today?

Oh yes. But the difference is that pupils can now also learn poems taken from their own culture. And English-Caribbean is so rich when it comes to writing poetry. There are those typical word compounds originally brought over from West Africa, like 'eye-water' for tears or 'nose-hole' for nostril. Or triplications, such as 'quick quick quick'. There are also traces of Irish drawn from phrases handed down by indentured labourers centuries ago, as well as odd words taken from the French, such as 'bateau.' A wonderful mixed bag for any poet to draw on.

So would you say your poems existed mid-way between words and music?

That's a nice way of putting it. The music should be there and also an inner suggestiveness that touches the conscious somewhere.

So how do you feel about schoolchildren being examined about your poetry, when there is so much going on within it, sometimes near impossible to put into words?

I respect the position of my dear friend Adrian Mitchell, who always used to put a notice in his poetry books forbidding their use in public examinations. But look at the other side. If I were to withdraw all my poems, I couldn't be sure that the thousands of pupils who read me now while studying for their exams would ever get to hear any other Caribbean voices. And that would just be one more victory for the type of Eurocentric position that still needs to be challenged.

Time for a quick roll-up, outside the hotel of course, before John makes his way back home and to more poetry. Re-visiting Guyana at the end of the month, where he should surely receive a hero's welcome, he continues to delight audiences wherever they are lucky enough to hear him. With more books coming out soon, this truly is a poet on the top of his form.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

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