



Give the Ball to the Poet ? A New Anthology of Caribbean Poetry

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off

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Just a few pages in, Eric Roach's 'To Learie'. 'Here in our native sun, in the cold clime / Of Northern England are his praises loud. / Here have we seen him hit a hundred, take / A grandest catch, and give the thundering crowd / A smile as though he'd done it for our sake..?'. The clime was probably pretty cold that afternoon at Stockport Cricket Club. I was six, and my Uncle Jack had taken my brother Ernie and me, specially to see the great Learie Constantine. He crouches at short leg, maybe a couple of yards from the bat. The batsman rocks onto the back foot, pulls hard. On its way to the square leg boundary. Except Learie leaps, knocks the ball up, catches it easy as you like on the way down. He's one big grin. The good folk of Stockport didn't thunder a lot in those long ago days, but that grandest catch, that grin, have been in my mind's eye ever since, his smile as though he'd done it for my sake. Pure poetry.

There are more recent sporting memories. A paean to Brian Lara from Jean Binta Breeze ('an all de time / he smilin sweet / gentle, humble / dress well neat / bat like a ratchet / in he han / slicin troo / de hard red heat?'). [John Agard](#) [4] celebrating Michael 'Whispering Death' Holding, most feline of fast bowlers ('You might think I aiming joke / at the laws of the canon / if I say poetry is de motion / of three wrecked stumps / re-collected in tranquillity?'). Mervyn Morris, Jamaica's Poet Laureate (and a Davis Cup player himself), recalls his countryman Usain Bolt's desperate false start and disqualification 'and Bolt's response: 'Greatness is / to get mi head to settle / on di nex event /run right dis time / an hear di stadium / goh wild.? In Valerie Bloom's poignant 'Keeping Wicket', a sister is always behind the stumps, while her brothers bat and bat; she doesn't get a bat in later life either, since it's she who cares for her sick parents while the boys are 'all busy at the crease?. 'No man it seems wants a wicket-keeper for a wife?.

From its sporting opening, the collection opens out into skilfully organised clusters of poems likely to appeal to 11 to 16 year olds. Foods, often fruits, prompting idiosyncratic reflections are on offer in 'I Must Share These With You' (an ingenious editorial selection, this), a section on 'Family Matters', another about the shaping Seas around the islands, while in 'Running Wild' children find their different ways into adolescence. We meet well-known names: Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, [Benjamin Zephaniah](#) [5], [James Berry](#) [6], Olive Senior, Linton Kwesi Johnson and [Grace Nichols](#) [7], whose gentle, unpretentious introduction promises 'poems to chant and sing and dance to as well as poems for quiet wide-eyed contemplation?. There are newer voices too, such as Kei Miller, winner of the [Forward Prize](#) [8]

for the best poetry collection of 2014. And all presented upon, around and within the vibrant illustrations of [Jane Ray](#) [9], often extending the words themselves. Plenty to contemplate for sure, since the carnival, joyful spirit is tempered by more sombre perspectives, from Edward Baugh's return to the brutalities of the Middle Passage (the sleep-sigh of a drowned African / turning in his sleep on the ocean floor) to the sustained rage of Dean Atta's 'I am Nobody's Nigger' which opens, 'Rappers, when you use the word 'nigger', remember / That's one of the last words Stephen Lawrence heard / so don't tell me it's a reclaimed word'.

Forget any dutiful notion of UK children's need to hear 'multicultural voices'. These poems deserve readers and listeners because they are fine poems; because they are exciting, funny, serious, infectious, provocative. Most ask to be read aloud. So if there really is more flexibility in the Curriculum, they need to be found a way in to classrooms and libraries simply because they're a great choice for secondary students. Maybe a selection for school book clubs? Maybe a poetry show in Assembly? Easy to suggest, I know. There's a long way to go, and the route has its challenges, but here's the collection to take on the trip.*

* **Teaching Caribbean Poetry**, published by the National Association for the Teaching of English, edited by Beverley Bryan and Morag Styles, might prove a helpful companion.

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