



Authorgraph No.72: James Berry

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James Berry interviewed by **Morag Styles**.

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Although James Berry has lived in Britain for more than forty years, much of his writing is dominated by his Jamaican roots. And it's so rich:

*Put me in bright eye of sunlight
in shadows under broad hats,
on hillside pulling beans,
or chopping or planting,
I am restful with my mother*

He grew up in a coastal village, the fourth child in a family of six. James describes his father who farmed a smallholding as a man with no personal ambition and very little interest in his children's education. His mother was another matter. She kept the family safe and steady, working on her old Singer sewing machine making clothes for all the kids till late into the night. 'She knew every button in the house'. He describes her in a poem:

*My mother is a magician.
My mother knows how to ignore my father.
My mother puts food and clothes together out of air. Bush and bark and grasses
work for my mother.*

She was the creative force behind the family. She also had a good singing voice and was a devoted member of the local church and its choir, so James's early exposure to musicality in language was through hymns and the Bible.

Another woman with a strong influence on his early life was his grandmother who, on seeing him as a new-born baby, exclaimed 'my Jimbo has come back to me'. (Her husband had recently died.) Thus the infant was called James and his grandmother treated him as a great favourite which had its drawbacks: grandmothers crop up a lot in his work. A poem like 'Seeing Granny' may not be directly autobiographical, but gives a strong flavour of a powerful matriarch and the effect she has on a small boy - affection mixed with dread!

*She bruises your face
almost, with
loving tree-root hands.*

James was a precocious child, reading early, memorising with ease great chunks of the Bible. He adored literature at school, making the best of a rather thin diet of Nelson readers and the like. Fortunately, they contained plenty of poetry and he was soon immersed in everything from Felicia Hermans' 'The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck' to Eliza Cook's

popular poem about Robert the Bruce. And you can see why it might mean so much to a boy desperate for education and burning with ambition:

*The spider up there
defied despair.
He conquered, and why shouldn't I?
And Bruce of Scotland braced his
mind.
And gossips tell the tale,
That he tried once more as he tried
before,
And that time did not fail.*

The content of the curriculum was English culture. 'There was no Jamaican history - no black heroes.'

In the Jamaica of his childhood, free elementary education ended at fourteen and with it James's chances of further schooling. Other parents scrimped and saved to keep their children on at school. Unfortunately his father had no such aspirations for his children and sent James into the shoe-making trade. In some respects his father can't be blamed: 'he was the product of plantation', but it is clearly still a painful memory.

*You scare me man,
but I must go over you again and
again.
I must plunge my raging eyes
in all your steady enduring.
I must assemble material,
of my own
for a new history.*

From making shoes James moved on to tailoring, then life as a travelling salesman' for patent medicines on an old bike. He was singularly unsuccessful at all trades. As he recounts these tales he laughs frequently and it's impossible not to respond. Although James has many serious convictions and passionate beliefs, one of his most appealing qualities is that humour is never far away. I spent a lot of the interview laughing, too.

His opportunity arrived towards the end of the war, when he and many of his friends formed part of the newly recruited American work force. For James it was the answer to his prayers: 'I would have died if I'd stayed in Jamaica', and he set forth on a troop ship taking him first of all to New Orleans - with all the dreams of idealism and youth. Although some features of life in the USA were sweet, there was plenty to shock a well-behaved Sunday school boy with a natural respect for authority. Most of all, James was appalled by the humiliation and indignity suffered by 'people who looked like me'.

He returned briefly to Jamaica after a few years, then sailed for London in 1948. His first night in a Salvation Army hostel for down and outs was a rude welcome; and there was the difficulty of finding a room in a city full of degrading notices which read 'No blacks, no coloureds, no Irish, no dogs, no children'.

But James is nothing if not resilient. He had youth and hope and ambition and, despite the racism, he grew to love London. It offered libraries and books, Evening School (where he immediately began taking correspondence courses), Trafalgar Square, Big Ben, the buildings and the parks: 'I began educating myself to write. I was in heaven.'

He tried his hand as a dental mechanic fixing false teeth, then trained to become a telegraphist which was his occupation for many years: 'The happiest day of my life was when I was made redundant. I thought to myself "I can write now!"' Back in post-war London after working by day, James took classes to educate himself at night. He also found time to meet with other black people involved in a growing number of cultural activities. The Caribbean Artists Movement had

been formed and James got to know writers who were also politically active like John la Rose and Edward Brathwaite. A scribbler for as long as he could remember, James began to publish short stories, took to writing plays and read his work at venues like The Troubadour.

One evening he took up an attractive woman's invitation to a Writers' Workshop on T S Eliot: she later became his wife; James was also hooked for life on poetry and began writing it seriously himself. Later he attended workshops at the City Lit which he found both stimulating and nurturing. He moved on to a Poetry Society workshop run by Geoffrey Adkins where writers took turns in reading their work and having it criticised by others. It was a tough and rigorous apprenticeship, just what this particular young poet needed - 'My way is a fumbling way, full of wanting to express myself.'

In 1976 James published **Bluefoot Traveller**, a book of black British poetry. I remember my own excitement at coming across it: there was nothing else like it on the market. **Bluefoot Traveller**, as well as containing some excellent poetry, was a document of black voices telling their own 'tales' about life in Britain. Since his early days in this country, James has remained an active campaigner on the part of black people and has helped to promote young black writers in particular. He's delighted the African writer, Ben Okri, has just won the Booker Prize - 'There's a thunder roaring in him.'

In 1977 James won a Greater London Arts Association Fellowship and spent part of the next two years working in Vauxhall Manor Comprehensive alongside writers like Michael Rosen. He enjoyed running workshops for pupils and has continued to do so. 'It's wonderful. Children let you in on their way of thinking.' However, he was horrified by the paucity of literature which reflected the lives of black pupils. It's hard to remember now, but in the seventies there were still relatively few books in school either by black writers or representing black people as central characters. 'These black kids knew nothing about the Caribbean, nothing about our history. If you are excluded [from literature] you know you're not wanted. Everything's a put-down. I wanted to do something about it and that's how I got into writing for children. I have surprised myself. I didn't really think I'd write for children. I'm amazed at how much I enjoy doing it. Adults want to make sense of their own childhoods. By writing for them, we become children again.'

James won the National Poetry Competition in 1981 and hasn't looked back since. Two adult collections were well received in the mid-eighties, as well as *News from Babylon: the Chatto Book of West Indian-British Poetry* which he edited. 1987 saw his first book for children, *A Thief in the Village*, which won the main Smarties Award. When *I Dance*, a superb book of poetry for older readers, followed in 1988 and won the Signal Poetry Award. Mostly in standard English, but with a delicious helping of Creole, it fairly vibrates with life:

*I say I wohn get a complex
wohn get a complex.
Then I see the muscles my sista flex.*

But don't imagine it's only the language and rhythms of dialect poetry at which he excels. He's a delightful humorist:

(from 'Letter from your special big puppy dog')

*You know I'm so big
I'll soon become a person.
You know I want to know more of all that you know.
Yet,
you leave the house, so, so often.
And not one quarrel between us.
Why don't you come home ten times
a day?*

He is able to handle sensitive issues like racism head-on without haranguing his reader:

*my eyes packed with hellos behind
them
my arrival bring departures,
it seems I test people.*

In a poem for adults ('On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria, 1955') he treats the unintended prejudice and ignorance of a white person with compassion:

*Where are you from? she said
Jamaica I said.
What part of Africa is Jamaica?
she said.
Where Ireland is near Lapland
I said.
Hard to see why you leave
such sunny country she said.
Snow falls elsewhere I said.
So sincere she was beautiful
as people sat down around us.*

Now he spends his time between London, where he still loves the bright lights, and his home in Brighton, where he enjoys the contrast of Sussex's rolling countryside. Having been heaped with literary honours, has James any ambitions left? 'The more you move into a new area, the more the horizon recedes - you see the great area you haven't touched ... There's other things I want to do ... There's so much to say ... not enough time.'

His latest book for children, **The Future Telling Lady**, may be his best yet.

Photograph by Lucy Rogers.

James Berry's children's books:

A Thief in the Village, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 12011 X, £6.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.2679 0, £2.50 pbk

When I Dance, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 12426 3, £6.95; Puffin, 014 03.4200 1, £2.99 pbk

Anancy Spiderman, Walker, 0 7445 0793 6, £7.95; 0 7445 13111, £2.99 pbk

The Future Telling Lady, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 13127 8, £8.99

For adults:

News from Babylon, Chatto (1984), 0 7011 2797 X, £7.99

Bluefoot Traveller, Thomas Nelson (1985), 017 444104 5, £2.45 pbk

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