

From Poetry to Prose, writing *Kiskadee Girl*

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I first thought of writing a memoir more than twenty years ago, when in an adult education creative writing class my tutor put an arrangement of assorted items on our table and asked us to respond to whatever took our fancy. One of these items was a conch shell, and when I saw it, a memory from 1969 immediately came to mind. My father had just died, suddenly and terrifyingly, and previously I had begun to experience an unexplained fear that turned out to be a premonition. My mother, my three younger sisters and I moved from shock to sorrow, and then became witness to a series of strange and unexplained events. My mother then exercised what she had been told was the way to free my father's spirit: by throwing away something that had belonged to him, and sending it on its way with as much cursing as she could bring herself to do. For my mother, a staunch and well-behaved Catholic, to curse was itself a rite of passage, and the possession selected was an unfortunate conch shell, which as far back as I could recall had sat on a doily on top of our Phillips radio doing no-one any harm.

In that Adult Ed room, a full-grown woman and late-developing writer picked up a pen and wrote a short description of what had occurred back then. That the memoir took this long to be written and eventually published, was a combination of several elements: being a busy mum, going to university as a mature student, and ambling on a road that was almost accidental, becoming a poet.

Poetry opened up a world for me: it gave me an opportunity to enter British life as a performer, something that had been part of my make-up since childhood, always singing and dancing and showing off, being part of drama groups, and loving books, film, music and theatre. Side by side with my university learning (Caribbean and African Studies), I took whatever chances came my way, whether it was using my djembe to beat out poetry rhythms in schools, organise events because no-one else was, send my poems out to magazines, and equally important, building a relationship with other creative people. I found it quite easy to create poems, they came tripping in more or less of their own accord, and everything that touched me, whether it was the songs of Leonard Cohen, the passion of Jean Binta Breeze, the reaching back of Grace Nichols, or the rhythm of Linton Kwesi Johnson helped me to position content and delivery as equal partners. My first collection, *Limbolands*, was a requiem to Guyana, and bears traces of my voyage of discovery through reclamation, an exploration of poetics, and a contemplation of the 'lands' – mother/lands, father/ i/slands, spirit/ – that were part of my geography and my new positioning in a new country.

Both *From Berbice to Broadstairs*, and *After a Visit to a Botanic Garden* are much influenced by place; and have more of an open-ness of language than LL had. It must be my experience of running writing workshops, and of performance that helps towards that. However, what is always difficult, is the philosophy of it all, why a writer thinks what she thinks, why write about blinking gardens at all? But there you go, no post-colonial is ever far away from themes of paradise!

Kiskadee Girl took me some years to write; and has gone through a series of changes. I had kept a diary intermittently since the age of ten, and at first had hoped to write one of those books that sees someone growing up through the book. The voice of the child, then the teenager,

was I believed, truly authentic and deserved to tell its own story. However, as many writers of diaries will know, most of what we deem to be important at age 13 may have no relevance now, and at times will be downright boring to readers! It's also very difficult to keep narrative interest from one point of view, at some point you will need the adult you to step in and with that comes hindsight and reflection. You have to interrupt, and sometimes I felt there were two distinct personalities vying for the storyteller role! I wrote the whole thing more than four times, in several different voices, and points of view. Writing a memoir is a maelstrom of choices, how much background, how much family story, how much fiction? Matters of privacy are also of prime importance and I was ignorant not to know almost on the point of publication that you need permission from everyone you mention! That sent me on an internet journey, in which I discovered the neighbour who had picked me up when I fell out the window, aged 2, and old school friends.

With regards to my poetic background and its precise role in KG, apart from the dialogue which gets into its own conversation in a way, the creation of each phrase, sentence and paragraph was not much different to writing a poem, only that you have much more room to play with! Having said that, the rule against over-description exists even in poetry. In fact the parts which I allowed myself to get carried away with were ruthlessly edited out by my editor who said 'beautiful, yes, but interrupts the narrative!'

Memory and stories are like dreams, writing them down is very difficult, you can never really achieve that ethereal shifting quality they have, so to help me I would close my eyes and replay them, slowing them down as if I had a remote control, seeking the words bit by bit in an attempt to transcribe it. The supposed length of a memoir can also be terrifying, but I didn't think too much about that, I gathered my memories and family stories, and put them into chapters, like giving a poem a title. I would also do little creative workshops by myself, using photographs and letters, and weaving paragraphs around them. I then expanded on them with further research, which sometimes led away from what I was looking for, hours and hours on the internet getting side-tracked by Google mapping Guyana or reading lists of Guyanese proverbs!

The writing of the memoir therefore, has been a long journey through which my voice has been seeking entrance to a wider world. At the heart of it all has always been narrative, and for all those children and grandchildren whose elders once came from a country called Guyana, hopefully they might recognise something of their own journey, and see themselves as rainbows that stretch far away across the sea.