



Authorgraph No.151: Grace Nichols

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Grace Nichols interviewed by **Morag Styles**.

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It's not a bad way to spend a sunny Friday in January, sitting in Grace Nichols's bright kitchen, eating jerk chicken and rice, talking about her life in Guyana as a little girl. This is a topic close to Grace's heart: 'my own imagination is stirred by my childhood. I was awakened by tropical things.' As Grace went on to explain, Guyana faces the Atlantic so it is not a typical Caribbean island; but it has its own rugged beauty, a place of 'dark, mysterious rivers bathed in creeks, spectacular waterfalls and forests'.

Grace had a happy childhood in Highdam, rural Guyana, the daughter of a Headmaster and a talented amateur pianist. 'It was such a nice childhood' with a big family and a network of friends regularly visiting her house, plenty of freedom and 'a warm, nurturing atmosphere. As a child you take in your most vivid impressions of the world and you remember them larger than life.' It was a home full of books and Grace was a bookish child.

The books I love

are well fingered and thumbbed

have tiny butter smudges

may harbour a crumb

the odd cat-whisker

a few dog-ears

a drop of tear

a brownish stain

(that looks suspiciously like tea)

Even so, she remembers herself as a mischievous girl always climbing trees, looking for birds' eggs and getting into trouble.



Grace is now happily settled in Lewes with her exuberant poet partner, John Agard. They live with his mother and their younger daughter and she is a young grandmother to her elder daughter's son. She likes Lewes ('it kinda chose us') with its friendly sense of community, bookshops with character, plenty of other writers and artists, and London not too far away. Grace enjoys being close to the sea and walking on Brighton beach, especially when it's wild weather.

Grace started her working life as a pupil teacher in her old school in Guyana, then moved to America where a college degree was cut short by her mother's untimely death. Returning to Guyana, she and John met when they were journalists working on a daily newspaper. They both had literary ambitions and decided to move to Britain together in 1978. Grace was then an aspiring novelist and she had her fair share of rejections and disappointments before winning plaudits and awards for her adult poetry, starting with the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1983 for her debut collection, **I is a Long Memored Woman**, a sequence of poems about slavery. On a lighter note, **The Fat Black Woman's Poems** (1984) celebrates large, warm women and the languorous **Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman** (1989) includes the brilliant line, "Wherever I hang me knickers" that's my home."

Apart from one novel, **Whole of a Morning Sky** (1986), it is poetry which now dominates Grace's life. Like most freelance writers, Grace juggles performances, anthologising, paperwork and visits to schools with her own writing. Living with another poet and anthologist is stimulating, but it can also be bracing: "it's nice to collaborate and show each other your work, but sometimes you get a reaction you don't want to hear!" Grace values the process of consultation and argument "another person gives you distance, keeps you on your toes." Grace describes how she works: "Imagination has its own kind of logic; if a poem is coming, I write it down and go with the flow." Grace is secretive about her work, preferring to be alone and quiet, favouring early mornings before the rest of the household is awake. Some poems come easily, others are a struggle, but "I like the battle with the words and the language" I enjoy the game of playing with things till I'm happy with it. I always know when a poem's done."

✘ Grace's first collection for children, **Come on into my Tropical Garden**, was runner-up for the Signal Poetry Award in 1989. Since then Grace has produced many successful collections for children. **Everybody Got a Gift**, her new and selected poems for A & C Black, is about to be published as I write. This is an impressive and substantial work demonstrating Grace's poetic range. The title picks up a positive message for young readers, an invitation which is often there in her poetry: "give yourself a hug"; "come on into my tropical garden"; "everybody got a gift..."

One of the hallmarks of Grace's poetry is her concern with rhythm. "As long as you get the rhythm right, the poem works. You have to write for the ear and hear the music..." Grace talks about Creole being "an integral part of my voice and how I speak". She moves seamlessly between so-called Standard English and Creole in all her writing, drawing on influences as disparate as African rhythms, Caribbean folklore and English nursery rhymes. "There's always the intermingling of the two; Caribbean and English culture both influence each other in my poetry."

Orality is very important to Grace, so it's no surprise that two of her anthologies (with John Agard) focus on the oral tradition of the Caribbean. **No Hickory No Dickory No Dock** (1991) features traditional Caribbean nursery rhymes with some new ones, while **From Mouth to Mouth** is full of schoolyard chants, work songs, street cries, sea shanties, lullabies, riddles, curses and spells. Grace is a natural storyteller and there are little narratives wrapped up in many of her poems and frequent references to magic.

"I like poetry where the landscape still features." Grace is a sensual writer who evokes the Caribbean by making reference to the colour, taste, texture and smell of real things. A "sweet rainwashed" mango is "a rosy miracle/ Here/ take it from mih hand." A Star Apple is a fruit with a "sweet star-brimming centre/and a turn-back skin" that leaves you with a "sweetly sticky mouth".

Grace had a rewarding residency at Tate Modern recently, as part of Colin Grigg's Visual Paths Project which brought children, writers and artists together in the context of paintings and sculpture in the gallery. She was inspired by working alongside children and by the art itself: "Learning about the different styles and periods of both painting and sculpture opened up a new world for me." The end product is **Paint Me a Poem** which has colour images of the artwork, occasional poems by children and some of the best poetry Grace has ever written, such as her response to Paula Rego's *The Dance*:

Even the white packed sand

darkened by the shadows

of their dance

is rinsed in blue

Blue nimbus too

over the enigma of faces

the cobbled cliff

the small white moon...

Grace is a gifted anthologist, editing two well researched volumes of black and Asian poetry at a time when there were few available ? **Poetry Jump-Up** (1988) and **Can I Buy a Slice of Sky** (1991). Her two Caribbean poetry anthologies (co-edited with John Agard), **A Caribbean Dozen** and **Under the Moon & Over the Sea**, came out to critical acclaim; the latter won the first CLPE poetry award in 2003. Grace enjoys the craft of anthologising, searching out the poems in the first place, the process of sifting, the agonising decisions. Although she lives in a house full of poetry books, it means visits to favourite places like the Poetry Library in the South Bank, second hand bookshops, Lewes Public Library and, in the past, the Commonwealth Institute Library. ?The process of literary selection in the past is out of your hands, so it?s like a gift to have the opportunity to make a real difference to what?s read by children.?

It has often struck me that Grace was wisely named as she is a beautiful woman with natural elegance. ?There?s always some idea playing in your head and you can?t help but attempt to write it.? Long may those ideas play and she continues to *grace* the poetry world.

Morag Styles is a Reader in Children?s Literature and Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.

The Books

A Caribbean Dozen, edited with John Agard, ill. Cathie Felstead, Walker, 0 7445 5201 X, £10.99 pbk

Everybody Got a Gift, A & C Black, 0 7136 7375 3, £10.99 hbk

The Fat Black Woman?s Poems, Virago, 0 86068 635 3, £5.99 pbk

From Mouth to Mouth: Oral poems from around the world, edited with John Agard, ill. Annabel Wright, Walker, 1 84428 474 3, £5.99 pbk

I is a Long Memored Woman, Karnak House, 0 907015 67 0, £6.95 pbk

Number Parade, with Jackie Kay, John Agard and Nick Toczec, LDA, 1 85503 343 7, £14.99 pbk

Paint Me a Poem: New poems inspired by art in Tate London, A & C Black, 0 7136 6648 X, £12.99 hbk

The Poet Cat, ill. Bee Willey, Bloomsbury, 0 7475 5064 6, £6.99 hbk, 0 7475 5272 X, £3.99 pbk

Poetry Jump-Up, Puffin, 0 14 034053 X, £4.99 pbk

Under the Moon & Over the Sea, edited with John Agard, ill. Cathie Felstead, Jane Ray and Christopher Corr, 0 7445 3736 3, £14.99 hbk, 0 7445 9842 7, £8.99 pbk



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