Merle Collins - b. 1950

Thorunn Lonsdale
Thorunn Lonsdale spoke to Merle Collins, the short story writer, poet and novelist, on 19 January 1996, during the University of Angers colloquium on *The Caribbean Short Story*.

**Thorunn LONSDALE:** How did you start your writing career?

**Merle COLLINS:** With my short story “The Walk” [from *Rain Darling*] in 1977 which I wrote after a workshop in Grenada. And this was the first piece I ever remember performing.

**T.L.:** In that story, do you think the ending is amusing, when Queen realizes that for the money spent on food and drink on the long walk across the island they could have got the bus?

**M.C.:** No, not really. It was more the different perception involved – that aspect of poverty, that in saving, you actually spend more. I think poverty engenders the need to hold.

**T.L.:** In your short story “Gran” there’s a sense of retrieving local customs and history. Is that a part of your aim as a writer?

**M.C.:** My immediate answer would be no, because I have a fear of being prescriptive about the responsibility of the writer. But in many ways I do want, yes, to record things that have disappeared. I’ve dedicated *The Colour of Forgetting* to my nephew Kevin, born in Grenada but living in the States, and *Rotten Pomerack* to my niece Keva, who was born in the U. S. I’m concerned that they know about that stuff.

**T.L.:** Was all your early life spent in Grenada?

**M.C.:** Yes, until I left at the age of 18 or 19 to do a degree in English and Spanish at Mona in Jamaica. I’ve returned to Grenada frequently, but I spent, for example, six
months in Mexico to improve my Spanish, and some time in Washington D.C. Then I lived for 11 years in England. Recently I moved to the States to teach at the University of Maryland.

T.L.: Do you like teaching?
M.C.: (Long pause) I imagine I like teaching.

T.L.: Did you think you would live that long in Britain? Or was it like your poem "Seduction," in which you describe the way time slips by unnoticed?
M.C.: Yes, it was like that... The invasion of Grenada by the U.S. in October 1983 was very important to me politically, and when I moved, in 1984, I was too disillusioned with the U.S. to go there. I hadn't been disillusioned with England in exactly the same way, by that recent invasion experience, so I guess that's why I chose to go there, but I wasn't expecting to stay 11 years!

T.L.: Could you say something about the impact of the invasion on you?
M.C.: I've expressed many of my feelings in my novel Angel. The fact that the heroine, Angel, has lost an eye by the end of the novel expresses my feelings about something being lost in a physical sense, but a deeper understanding being gained. I was moving beyond thinking of the revolutionary struggle as a formal political struggle. I now have less trust in formal political leadership.

The attempt to change things before the invasion was important. There was a feeling 'something had to happen'. But terrible things happened. Many people, including Maurice Bishop, the Prime Minister, and Jacqueline Craft, the minister for Education, were killed.

The problem was treated as an aspect of the U.S./Soviet axis, which was not what the whole Grenadian story was about. Grenada had to find its own answers. The invasion was a kind of new colonialism.

T.L.: You wrote your doctorate at LSE on Grenadian politics, didn't you?
M.C. Yes, the title was "Politics and Development in Grenada 1950-1979."

T.L.: Can you say something about your early exposure to literature?
M.C.: At school I didn't think the stories of my relatives had anything to do with serious literature. I wrote a poem which I realized was a rewriting of Hardy's poem "The Darkling Thrush." It was a revelation when I went to Mona and heard Brathwaite read his poem "The Dust," and heard people like Derek Walcott and V. S. Naipaul read their work.

T.L.: Are you working on a new collection of short stories now?
M.C.: Yes, The Ladies Are Upstairs. I'll read from the lead story to the colloquium.

T.L.: Your short story "The Visit" in Rain Darling is set in England. Do you think you'll write more about England now that you've left?
M.C.: Yes, I do in the new collection.

T.L.: Are you nostalgic about London now?
M.C.: Yes, I feel I miss the community of Caribbean writers which I wasn't as aware of when I was there!
T.L.: How do you see the relative importance of the poem, the novel and the short story?

M.C. That’s really an unanswerable question. I’m thinking about short stories at the moment. In fact something someone said at the colloquium about V. S. Naipaul's use of different voices made me see how I could manage the form of a story I’m writing about a young woman and her aunt.

T.L.: What’s the title?

M.C.: The working title is “Gem's Story.“

T.L.: Why is Grenada called Paz in your novel The Colour of Forgetting?

M.C.: Grenada’s history has been so troubled by colonialism and conquest, and I wanted to create an ambivalence with a name that means ‘peace’. I was interested in the blue of tourist brochures, and the way that suggests peace. And Paz is Grenada, but it's every other Caribbean country... it is really the mythical representative of them all.