

READING ROOM



Author Q&A: Ferdinand Dennis

THE BLACK AND WHITE MUSEUM

(Small Axes)

These 15 short stories, many based in inner-city London, are snapshots of the lives of Black characters that are both personal and universal. Some have the wisdom and acceptance of age, others the wisdom and ambition of youth. Fading memories are rekindled, losses are mourned and corners are turned. Ferdinand Dennis is a writer, broadcaster, journalist and lecturer. Jamaican by birth, at the age of eight he moved to England, where his parents had migrated in the late 1950s. His previous books include *Back to Africa: A Journey* and the acclaimed novel *Duppy Conqueror*.

You say short stories are a “much under-appreciated” genre. Why do you think this is?

Short stories are appreciated among practitioners of prose fiction. Some of the greatest novelists have also been great short story writers. For example, Hemingway, Joyce, Lessing; and there are, of course, writers who specialise in the short story, Alice Munro, a Nobel laureate, being among the most distinguished contemporary specialists, the British writer Helen Simpson being another. But I was often told by publishing professionals that short story collections are unprofitable. This didn't discourage me from writing them, because not all ideas lend themselves to novel-length works, but I always did so with a sense of practising a form that was merely tolerated. It's also noticeable that the nascent Black British writing tradition – in which my own work is often situated – seems to lack a short story strand.

They're written over five decades. Have you noticed themes you were unaware of, or are they more diverse than you might have thought?

Yes, to both parts of the question. Until I set about the task of selecting stories for the collection, I wasn't aware of the recurring theme of abandonment. A daughter abandoning her father, a father and husband abandoned by his wife and children. One story, *Nights at COAC*, even plays with the theme of abandonment within fiction; writers often create and abandon characters. Equally I am struck by the stories' diverse themes: justice, religion, sexuality, love, self-delusion, race, kindness, memory, ageing, history and migration.

London remains at the centre of the stories. How has the city changed over those five decades?

Like all great cities – and London was the first of the great modern cities – London is in a state of perpetual change, and riparian London has seen some of the most striking physical changes over the past five decades. Clusters of soaring steel and glass towers – many bearing the aggressive angularity of the architecture of finance capital – residential and business, have sprung up, creating whole new communities but with names reflecting the city's long and rich maritime and imperial past. That imperial past has long been visible in the city's cultural diversity – from the Bangladeshi community in East London to Brixton's Caribbean feel, to the plethora of West African-owned shops in Peckham Rye, from Neasden's Hindu Temple to the minarets of the Regent's Park Mosque. This is a city far more at ease with its diversity, more willing – but less able, due to the pandemic – to celebrate it, than at any time in the recent past. On the other hand, affordable properties are scarcer, an effect of the right to buy scheme introduced in the 1980s; and homelessness and begging have increased.

Your characters have quiet insights – about their sexuality, their grief or their resolution with the past – but they are no less decisive for it. Does life unfold that way more than it does through explosive events?

I am reluctant to make any generalisations about “how life unfolds”: I am only a storyteller. How it unfolds, I suspect, depends very



much on the complex and unpredictable interplay between an individual's historically specific social milieu, psychological predisposition and chance. One person may experience an explosive epiphany, while another person a quiet moment of insight in relation to similar personal issues. That my characters have “quiet insights” has much to do with the sort of people who interest me. There are no guns in my stories.

But when it comes to writing about a “certain South-west English city with a slave-trading past”, where you lived for a while, life becomes more fantastical. Is there a reason for that or were you just flexing different muscles?

The “certain South-west English city” inspired the title story but the story is not about that city; it's about the legacy of slavery and some of the absurdities of race. Written in the 1990s, the story's fantastical features result from my then interest in the trickster figure Elegba in Yoruba mythology. Similar to the better known Anansi of Caribbean and Ghanaian folk tales, Elegba is regarded as an intermediary between the spiritual and physical realms and a disruptor of perceptions. Exploring – or playing, because there is, for me, always a ludic quality to the practice of writing – how to deploy that figure in my writing gave me a licence to be fantastical, to suspend the normal rules of reality. Another version of Elegba appears in my novel *Duppy Conqueror*, which was produced in the same creative moment.

Dawg's owner believes you can tell a lot about someone from their laugh, less so from their eyes. What does he think is the difference?

There are many different beliefs about the physical attributes of a person that most reveal their “true” character or essence. Eyes, palms, ears, eyebrows, even shadows. Do they contain any truth? As a rationalist, I place them in the same order of knowledge as astrology. None the less, it's worth pointing out that Dawg's owner's belief that laughter is a window into character places him in distinguished company. Horace Walpole, an 18th century writer and politician, for example, believed: “To those who feel, life is tragedy; to those who think, life is comedy.”

Is there great significance in Barbados becoming independent for the wider Caribbean region, including Jamaica, where you were born?

Barbados' decision to become a republic, distinguishing it from the other former British Caribbean colonies, is of symbolic importance and may encourage other islands to follow suit. We do live in a globalised world with powerful, though not powerful enough, international institutions, an environment that is more conducive to the independence of small states. A similar consideration, among other factors, is probably behind Scotland's restless quest for independence. The 20th century ended the British Empire; the 21st might see the British nation itself unravel.

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