

Hope is...eating a pigeon from Kensington Gardens

Patrice Lawrence

I never grew out of my teenage cynicism. Actually, I don't think I ever grew into it. My mother was young, unmarried and separated from my father when she was pregnant with me. I imagine her justifiable cynicism leached from the walls of her womb into my blood. I would love to think well of the world, I really would, but at this moment in time especially, the world isn't helping my cause.

However, three books have made me question my view of the world. On a basic level, they are books that have helped me understand my own heritage and history through being inspired by real events. They have also opened my eyes to the poetic beauty of black literary writing. Finally, in spite of the challenges and indeed horror in one book, they are threaded through with hope.

Like all books I've come to love, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* found me when I wasn't looking for it. I was wandering around a book shop in Brighton, picked it up and was intrigued by the blurb. I went in with no expectations and came out overwhelmed and in awe. Like many UK-born people of African and Caribbean heritage, the only 'black' history I learned at school was that black people were slaves. We were taken then freed by white abolitionists. Until the epic TV series *Roots* was screened, in 1977, we did not have individual names let alone histories.

Beloved is a tough read about how the brutality of slavery gouges scars into black women's minds and bodies. Violence and trauma is woven through every sentence. It is also a beautiful read, lyrical, disquieting and – yes – hopeful. That's because the book is suffused with love: Sethe is

loved by Paul D and by her daughter, Denver. There is also love within the community that wants to help Sethe find a way out of the bleakness.

The second book, *The Wine of Astonishment*, found me too. I don't know how. The author, Earl Lovelace, is Trinidadian and seems to write a counterpoint to VS Naipul's Trinidad books. Lovelace often writes about the African-Trinidadian experience, from a place of love and empathy.

The title is taken from a line of Psalm 60: 'Thou hast shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment'. In 1917, the British colonial government in Trinidad banned Spiritual Baptists from practising their religion. It was deemed noisy and anti-Anglican. The ban wasn't lifted until 1951. Lovelace's book is set during this period and is narrated by Eva Dorcas, whose husband Bee, is a Baptist preacher. The story jumps back and forward in time and, although it is a relatively short book, explores a myriad of themes – masculinity and power, the bonds of community, politics and betrayal, the impact of war.

The power of the book is Eva's enduring love for her husband as the core of his identity is pulled out from him. Yet, the family endures. After 34 years, when they are finally allowed to worship in the open again, Bee struggles to feel the Spirit. As he and Eva walk back from the church, they see young men playing the steel drum – instruments that evolved from colonial resistance: 'the music that those boys playing on the steelband have in it that same Spirit that we miss in our church: the same Spirit; and listening to them, my heart swell and it is like resurrection morning.'

Finally, if you haven't met already, can I introduce you to Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*? This book was waiting for me on my aunty's bookshelf in Trinidad when I visited twelve years ago. Selvon, also from Trinidad, came to London in the 1950s and, in a sense, the book is about the characters he would have recognised in Trinidad who have now pitched up in to cold, post-war London. It's written in Trinidad dialect as a series of

interconnected short stories and yes, it explores the precarious position of many of those men – looking for work, a secure home, love. But also – it is damn funny.

My favourite scenes? Galahad, with no job or money, catching a pigeon in Kensington Gardens and wrestling with his conscience about killing and eating it. Even better, the battle between the dapper, conman Captain and the pigeon on his window sill that refuses to be caught...

This is a book about endurance, friendship, nostalgia and – of course – hope of better times to come.

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Patrice Lawrence was born in Brighton, Sussex, and was brought up in an Italian-Trinidadian family, her mother having come to England from Trinidad to train as a psychiatric nurse. Lawrence has an MA in Writing for Film and TV. Her first story to be published was 'Duck, Duck, Goose', which was included in *The Decibel Penguin Prize Anthology* (Penguin Books, 2006). It was while attending an Arvon Foundation crime writing course led by Dreda Say Mitchell and Frances Fyfield that Lawrence had the idea for her debut young adults' novel, *Orangeboy*. Published in 2016, *Orangeboy* won The Bookseller's YA Book Prize 2017, the Waterstones Children's Book Prize for Older Children 2017, and was shortlisted for the 2016 Costa Children's Book Award. Her follow-up book, *Indigo Donut* (2017), was described by Alex O'Connell in *The Times* as 'addictive'. Her third novel, *Rose, Interrupted*, was published in 2019. 'The Lawrence Line' is a blog on her experiences of writing and having work published. patricelawrence.wordpress.com

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

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