

Why do I write?

Patricia Cumper

Although I wrote my first play at 23, my writing life began years earlier. I always got good marks at school. I was clever and I came from a clever family, said my teachers. The truth was a little more complex.

I have always read copiously: from the Bobbsey Twins and Nancy Drew stories of my childhood to holiday reading by Agatha Christie, Georgette Heyer and Ellis Peters. I read Jamaican writers like Erna Brodber, Jean D'Costa, Olive Senior and Lorna Goodison; I learnt something of the Jewish experience from Anne Frank and Leon Uris; about the wider Caribbean from Andrew Salkey, Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott; the lives of Black Americans through the words of Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Toni Morrison.

Indeed, when I eventually came to university in England, I wanted to be sure that I was not at a disadvantage so I set myself the task of reading the classics. I got as far as all of Shakespeare's plays and most of his sonnets, the Brontë sisters' books, and D. H. Lawrence's short stories *Love Among the Haystacks* but sadly stalled a hundred or so pages into *Crime and Punishment*.

I also grew up in a household where debate was the most popular occupation. Not arguing. I only ever heard my parents argue once in my whole childhood and it shook me to the core, it was that aberrant. We – my brother, sister and I – debated. Over dinner. In the back of the old family Volkswagen. Sitting on the verandah surrounded by a hibiscus hedge in the cool of the evening. Over games of rummy and Monopoly, sitting out on the beach by the light of a full moon. Conversation, ideas, humour were

currency and I was a middle child and determined to get my share of any attention that was going.

Words came easily and I was fascinated by them. It was the one thing I knew I could count on in life no matter how dismal I felt: I could think and I could write. My good marks were often due to clear sentences rather than any particularly in-depth knowledge or dedicated revision.

Not long after graduation, standing in line on a warm Kingston night to buy a drink at the interval of a popular revue, I opined that the sketches were not particularly well-written. The producer, who was standing in line behind me, challenged me to do better. I wrote a sketch for his next revue. The sketch went down well and the producer commissioned me to write a full-length play. It ran for nine months (in a small theatre) and has been remounted several times and produced throughout the Caribbean since that first run. Truthfully, I had no idea what I had done, having written the play with all the confidence that ignorance grants, but I knew I wanted to learn more, try again and do better. I still do. And as for most playwrights, my next play is always going to be my very best.

Patricia Cumper

Patricia began writing for the theatre in the Caribbean, where she had a dozen plays produced, many of which won awards or writing competitions. They include *The Rapist* and *The Fallen Angel and the Devil's Concubine*. In the UK, Patricia has been commissioned by Talawa Theatre Company, Carib Theatre Company, the Royal Court and Blue Mountain Theatre.

She was artistic director and CEO of Talawa Theatre Company from 2006 to 2012 and produced George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* in the Victoria & Albert Museum, and a touring production of Samuel Beckett's

Waiting for Godot, the first all-Black production in the UK. She was made Member of the Order of the British Empire in 2013 for her work in Black British theatre.

Patricia founded and was co-artistic director of StrongBack Productions from 2013 to 2018, with work including her play on Jamaican soldiers in World War One, *Chigger Foot Boys* (2017). A collection of three plays under the title *Inner Yardie* was published by Peepal Tree Press in 2014. She contributed to *The Diverse Bard* (2016), and *New Daughters of Africa* (2019).

Patricia was a member of the team of writers on *Westway*, the BBC World Service drama serial, and wrote more than 70 episodes. Adaptations for radio include Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth*, Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (which won a silver Sony Award), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Marie Ndiaye's *Trois Femmes Puissantes* (nominated for the BBC Radio Contribution to Diversity award 2016). She adapted four of the six volumes of Maya Angelou's autobiographies broadcast in 2018 and 2019. Original radio plays include *Mr Trollope and the Labours of Hercules* (2016) and *Pardna* (2017).

She is currently working on *Red Dirt*, a play about the Windrush scandal, a musical adaptation of a Shakespeare play, and a screenplay about the Scottish Abolitionist movement.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at writersmosaic.org.uk

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