

## **Why I Write**

Philip Nanton

There was first a concern to please others, especially my colonial Caribbean primary school teacher. The context was the hard wooden school bench, head down, legs swinging and not quite touching the ground. In front of me lay the cheap, blue exercise writing book, the lion and unicorn on the front, times tables and weights and measures on the back. Inside were endless lines of single letters hung out to dry across each page. Further inside the book were whole sentences to be copied, composed more for the shape of the letters they contained than for any particular meaning. The upward loop of an 'h' and the downward one of a 'y' were each required to touch, never to extend beyond, the ruled upper or lower lines. Such tasks were a test of my ability to imitate the cursive style across the width of the page and achieve the ultimate goal – joined-up writing. And then the book, of course, returned with red crosses wherever my hand slackened and the pencil failed to hit the mark or, in weakened moments, wiggled in its pathetic attempt to climb above or fall below the line in a neat curve.

Later there was the culprit's endless writing out and painful repetition of twenty or so detention lines that stated: 'I must never throw ink darts at Janice Millington'. Dear Janice Millington has, of course, long forgotten the ink, the darts and my attempt at attention-seeking.

Time moves on. A reason I write now is to hone another skill – also called 'writing'. This activity is undertaken by two kinds of practitioners. One is known as a 'writer', a person so dedicated that writing is a self-absorbed compulsion. This person experiences a kind of calling, one akin to entering a priesthood. Sometimes the recognition of this sense of calling is expe-

rienced as an epiphany. For such writers, little stands in the way of the practice of the craft.

The second category, the one in which I locate myself, is more accurately described as 'one who writes'. It is the practice of the skill without the all-consuming level of dedication. Occasional transitory moments are the nearest I might come to epiphany. Once in a while, somewhere between waking and sleeping, a few lines for a poem swirl in my head and I am driven to get up and write regardless of the time. But usually I write out of a sense of responsibility. I come from St. Vincent, a tiny island not known for writing and with few role models. One was the island's late poet/jazz musician, Shake Keane. I bumped into him in my thirties, and learnt from him to value humour and nonsense. Like him, I find it impossible to take too seriously the grander notions of small island nationhood. And like Emily Dickinson, I've learnt to see things slantwise. So, ultimately, I write to capture the place in my own way. And because I can.

### **Philip Nanton**

Philip Nanton is Honorary Research Associate of the University of Birmingham. He was born in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and studied and lived in Britain from 1960 to 2000. Since 2000, he has lived in Barbados. His career began in British local government policymaking, and after completing his D.Phil at University of Sussex (1986), he combined the world of a practicing academic and that of a creative writer. He has published reviews of contemporary Caribbean literature in journals and magazines including *Caribbean Review of Books*, *Shibboleths: a Journal of Theory and Criticism* and *Caribbean Quarterly*. He has more recently developed as a writer of humour and a spoken word performer. In 2008 he released a CD *Island Voices from St. Christopher and the Barracudas*: the book based on the CD was published in 2014 by Papillote Press. He has performed sketches from this

collection across the region from Guyana to Jamaica. His second collection of sketches and poetry, *Canouan Suite and Other Pieces* (Papillote Press, 2016) was highly recommended in the 2018 Cuban Casa de las Americas Awards for Anglophone Caribbean Literature. In 2017, he published *Frontiers of the Caribbean* (Manchester University Press). He has recently published *Riff: The Shake Keane Story*, a biography of the Vincentian jazz musician and poet Shake Keane.

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

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