

Margaret Busby

in conversation with Burt Caesar

Margaret Busby: Soho had a reputation for being the sort of 'sex centre' of London. So, from our office, you could hear people whipping each other next door sometimes. You know, there were shops across the... it was kind of seedy and sexy, but it was fun and there were also literary things happening. There were pubs, there were cafés, there were clubs. In fact, one of the books we published at Allison & Busby was a novel, but it started out as a true story written by an American about... it was a book called *The Professor* about a professor who taught the children of the mafia. The author had written this as a true story. But then I think at a certain point, the actual professor choked to death on his supper, or something, so we decided we had to change it into a novel. We changed all the real names into fictional names, and one of the mafia characters was given the name of a waiter in the café in Noel Street so, whatever his real name was, he became Vito Fulgoni. In fact, we had our first publication party for *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, in a restaurant in Noel Street, a Jewish restaurant called Folman's, and that's where we had our publication party. I've got photographs taken in Folman's at the party, with me and Roland Kirk, who happened to be playing at

Ronnie Scott's, so, he came to our first party. So, there was a mixture of sleaze and showbiz.

Burt Caesar: I want to come back to *Spook* in a short while, but that scene, that music scene and the club scene, there were quite a few clubs owned by African entrepreneurs, people from West Africa. There was Ronnie Scott's of course, the 100 Club quite close by, I mean, what was the scene like... the music scene, the after-work, after-hours music scene?

MB: We didn't have time to go to... you know, after work we were working late. But actually, I was married. I wasn't married to Clive Allison; I was married to a jazz musician. So, I knew all those clubs from that perspective. I was a jazz wife. No, I went to The 100 Club, I went to Ronnie Scott's, I did all those things and, you know, it was wonderful. The publishing... it was just hard work, if you like. We didn't have time to go partying in Soho, as a general rule. But, we did have recourse to the pubs around the corner and the cafés and the clubs if we wanted to and the pinball machines, and the entertainments ... there was a lot of things going on.

BC: Publishing *The Spook – The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, to give it its full title – it was quite an incendiary occasion, wasn't it?

MB: Yeah, well actually publishing *Spook* came about because a university friend of my husband... my husband was called Lionel Grigson; he was at Cambridge, and a friend of his was called Alexis Lykiard, who was also a novelist and a poet. We ended up publishing Alexis. So, Alexis was on a Greek island called Mykonos, he met this African-American called Sam Greenlee who had been trying unsuccessfully to get a publisher interested in his first novel, and Alexis said, 'Oh, I know somebody who's started a publishing company.' So, Sam was directed to me in London, and I worked on the manuscript of *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* with Sam, and it was at that point that Clive and I decided that this was going to be our first full-time book. It was a political thriller; in fact, you could look at it now as a parable of diversity. It was about the CIA deciding that they didn't have any black employees so they were going to employ this black man – the spook who sat by the door – so everybody could see that they were actually integrated. So, we thought this was a really important political thriller. We persuaded *The Observer*, against their better judgement, to do extracts and that was our first full-time publication as Allison & Busby. That came out in March 1969.

BC: Which other books from that time do you look back on with a fondness or remember having an impact on the wider culture, on politics even. I'm thinking of, say, the re-publication of CLR James' *The Black Jacobins*. That must have caused quite a stir as well at the time.

MB: Well, CLR James was somebody I knew as a family friend because my father had been at school with him in Trinidad; CLR and my father were life-long friends. So, I knew that CLR was an important writer. *The Black Jacobins* was actually first published in the 1930s. When I became a publisher, and I could see that most of CLR James' work was out of print, and he had been writing since the 30s – he had the first novel by a black writer published in Britain – and it was important to me to bring it back into print. So, we started publishing CLR by compiling three volumes of selected writings: *The Future in the Present* [1977]; *Spheres of Existence* [1980] and *At the Rendezvous of Victory* [1984], and we went on to publish other books of his that were out of print or had never been printed before or never been published before. So, it was really kind of reclaiming CLR James and trying to make him an important figure because at that point he was not as well-known as he is now. You wouldn't have thought that a book as iconic as *The Black Jacobins* would be out of print in Britain – but it was.

BC: Margaret, I want to thank you for sitting down in one place for this long without moving. So, I thank you on behalf of WritersMosaic and on behalf of all of us who recognise how important and valuable and how beautiful you stand in our estimations. My name is Burt Caesar.

MB: Thank you, Mr. Caesar and, thank you, WritersMosaic.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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