

Writers who have inspired me

Carol Russell

I was 16 years old when I first became acquainted with James Baldwin. It was the weekend. I was boarding with a family in Kingston, Jamaica and the other girls I boarded with had gone home, leaving just the grandmother of the family with whom I lived, and me.

I was lonely and I was bored and the only books I had to read were set texts. So, I looked through the meagre offerings on the single bookshelf in the drawing room, tossed aside the Sidney Sheldons and the Mills & Boons and there it was, the black and blue cover, James Baldwin's name writ large in yellow, the title, *Giovanni's Room*, in white. I'd never heard of him. I turned the book over and read the back cover. I was hooked. I took it to the verandah and devoured it in one sitting.

From the start, the story tumbled into the most essential part of me, invigorating me. It introduced me to homosexual men – as they were called then – and their deep emotions, many of which were ones I recognised: the deep sense of shame (this was the 1970s); the knowledge I didn't yet have words for, that as a dark-

skinned Black woman living in a former British colony, it seemed the world believed there was something very wrong with me. By the time I was done, I had an affinity for gay men that has never left me.

This was also the first book I'd ever read by a Black man, and I was intoxicated. The language delighted me. I fell in love with Baldwin's mind and went on to read everything of his I could get my hands on. The more I read, the more I understood myself as a diasporic Black woman whose ancestors had been enslaved – especially when read in conjunction with Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and, later, the complete works of Toni Morrison. These writers put words to my feelings of displacement.

Their fiction and non-fiction were brave and unflinching. The essays, clear-headed and sharply observed, educated me politically, as surely as living in Prime Minister Michael Manley's socialist Jamaica did. The women in his plays, especially *Amen Corner*, were universal; I knew them, they lived on my street, stopped to chat to my mother on their way into town. He gave words to the claustrophobia I had felt since moving to Jamaica but could not articulate.

These writers have done two things: they've inspired me to take risks in my own writing, galvanising me to continue to forge my own identity through my craft. They have also encouraged me to strive to enter intimate conversations with my readers and viewers to, as Toni Morrison puts it, 'experience one's own mind dancing with another's' when sharing knowledge, ideas, and musings.

As I put the languages given to me by dint of being born in England of Jamaican parents into the service of communication, I carry with me the advice and encouragement of the world's greatest writers.

Carol Russell

Carol is British-Jamaican and trained at Jamaica School of Drama (now known as Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts). As a writer, Carol's screenplay, *House of Usher*, was one of six short films made by Crucial Productions for the BBC. She was the principal scriptwriter for two series of *Comin' Atcha*, starring pop group Cleopatra, for ITV and was also one of the BAFTA nominated team of adapters of Jacqueline Wilson's *Story of Tracy Beaker*. Carol was one of 15 writers chosen for the inaugural MEDIAEXCHANGE ADVANCED TELEVISION DRAMA WRITING programme 2017/2018, and was one of 20 writers chosen from around Europe for the inaugural SERIES MANIA WRITERS CAMPUS 2018. Carol wrote one of the multi-award winning drama series, *Soon Gone: A Windrush Chronicle*, celebrating the 70th anniversary of the *Empire Windrush*, broadcast on BBC4 in 2019. Carol's two episodes of the ninth series of *Stone* for BBC Radio 4 were broadcast in 2021. She has been accepted on the Criterion New Writing Programme and has several series in development, including one about the first Black Victorian circus owner, Pablo Fanque. Her book, *Invisible to Invaluable: Unleashing the power of midlife women*, co-authored with Jane Evans, was published in May 2021. Carol is also

the founder of Fresh Voices UK, a company founded to support and amplify the work of ethnically diverse writers of theatre and television.

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

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