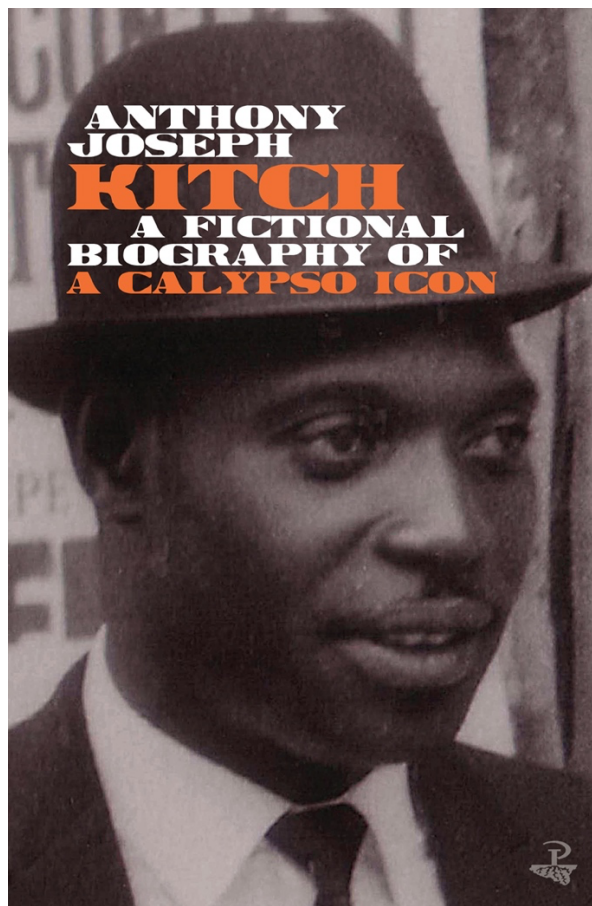


The surrealist and the trickster: the writing of Anthony Joseph

Colin Grant

Anthony Joseph is a whip-smart and cool Trinidad-born poet, novelist, academic and musician. He's the author of four poetry collections. In the latest, *Sonnets for Albert*, published in June 2022, Joseph reflects on the impact of being the son of a father who was only an intermittent presence in his life. Joseph is also the author of three novels: a magical realist work, *The Frequency of Magic*, an Afrofuturist fiction, *The African Origins of UFOs*, and *Kitch: A Fictional Biography of a Calypso Icon*.



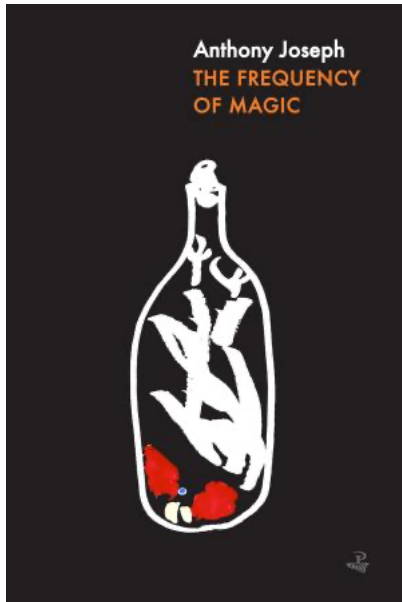
Kitch was shortlisted for several prizes including the Royal Society of Literature's Encore Award, a prize acknowledging writers' difficulty in building on a debut to write a second novel. His most recent publication, an experimental novel, has a perfect title, *The Frequency of Magic*. In its construction, Joseph was inspired by the notion of simultaneity in art as proposed by his compatriot, Earl Lovelace. Simultaneity echoes an earlier artistic movement, Surrealism.

In the 1920s, Surrealism suggested a new way of seeing and representing reality. The movement was broad enough to include myriad forms – visual art, literature, film and theatre. Artists began aligning objects and ideas that seemed incongruous but arrived at some kind of harmony or resonance in proximity, in the act of creativity; artists also explored dream-like states, often with mischief and wit.

One of Surrealism's greatest practitioners, whether he considered himself part of the movement or not, was the Italian playwright, Luigi Pirandello, most notably with his absurdist drama, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. In the play, the characters complain that they are underdeveloped. In particular, they're critical of their author who couldn't complete the play for which they were conceived.

A century on from the birth of Surrealism, Anthony Joseph brings a Trinidadian twist (with a dash of Anansi the Spider tricksterism) to the art form with his magical realist novel, *The Frequency of Magic*. Here the novel's characters are not searching for an author but trying to escape from the manuscript of the protagonist, Raphael. A village butcher in Trinidad, and an aspiring novelist who's been toiling away at his unfinished book for more than 40 years, he holds the key to his characters' destiny; they are, in fact, trying to flee from the pages of Raphael's novel. Anthony Joseph

appears to be posing the question: what if surrealism is the true realism? The very act of opening a book and reading is surrendering to, and entering, another world; it's an act of faith in another reality.



Joseph has proven himself something of a magician in his intricate and intriguing literary experiments. They first delighted me when I read his debut novel, *Kitch*. Almost 75 years ago, Pathé news and other broadcasters descended on Tilbury to capture the arrival in Britain of around a thousand people on board the HMT Empire Windrush. This seminal moment has long been cast, wrongly, as the foundation story of mass Caribbean migration to Britain; there were several ships that preceded the Windrush in the years before 1948. Nonetheless, the arrival was momentous. A flavour of the excitement was to be found in the alleged impromptu rendition of 'London is the Place for Me' performed just down from the gangway of the ship by Lord Kitchener, the self-proclaimed 'King of Calypso'. The drama of that event and the life and liveliness of Lord Kitchener burst like fire from the pages of Anthony Joseph's biographical fiction – set in both Britain and Trinidad.

In the book, life on the island of Trinidad has credits and deficits. There's fierce competition, for instance, between the self-dramatising con men who could 'thief the cigarette out your mouth and you wouldn't notice'. Importantly, though, Joseph sets his gaze squarely on the pernicious objectification of women and the violence meted out to them by men who pride themselves on their beatings.

As ever, Joseph's writing is tough but tender; it has become something of a signature description. In recent years, the writer has made a name for himself as much as a musician as a poet and novelist. In his latest roadshow which he's performing up and down Britain (next up is the Attenborough Arts Centre in Leicester) he blends both music and prose. Alongside three of his longtime collaborators – Andrew John (bass), Thibaut Remy (guitar) and Colin Webster (saxophone) – Joseph illuminates his novel *The Frequency of Magic* with improvised jazz from these virtuoso musicians.

From personal experience, I can tell you that when Anthony Joseph performs his readings from novels and poems with his band, he is a difficult, almost impossible, act to follow. As in all his work and that of his heroic protagonist in *Kitch*, when Joseph takes to the stage, he's 'coming with real fire'.

Anthony Joseph performs at the Attenborough Arts Centre, Leicester on 29 March. Book your free tickets here:

<https://bookwhen.com/speakyspokey#focus=ev-sr6p-20220329193000>

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

© Colin Grant