

## **Writers who have influenced me**

Valerie Bloom

When I was about four years old, my brother borrowed a book from the library which changed my life. I reread it several times, and it was the first book I borrowed as soon as I could join the library myself. When it was time to return it, I renewed and reread it constantly, until the librarian advised me it was time to borrow a different book.

The book was *Are You My Mother* by P.D. Eastman, and though I was too young to understand the concept of inspiration, it convinced me that I wanted to write books when I grew up.

Philip Dey Eastman (P.D. Eastman) was an American illustrator and children's author whose humorous drawings, basic language and sense of fun have made him a favourite with parents and young children the world over, and his was the earliest influence in my literary development.

There were few black writers in the curriculum when I was at school in Jamaica. Most of our books came from abroad, and in my early attempts at writing poetry I emulated Walt Whitman and Walter De La Mare, Keats and the Williams Shakespeare and Wordsworth.

However, there was one Jamaican writer whose poetry was prominent in our classrooms. Perhaps because he was a local who had managed to be recognised internationally, Claude McKay was highly esteemed in Frankfield Primary School. He was born and grew up near James Hill, a few miles down the road from the school, and is most noted for his poem, 'If We Must Die'.

The poem was written in response to the constant White-Supremacist attacks on Black citizens in America's 'Red Summer' of 1919. Unaware of the background to the poem, my classmates and I nevertheless understood the passion, the pride, the intolerance of injustice which it advocated and imbued it with our own sense of minor grievances as we declaimed it daily. But it was McKay's haunting, lyrical poems 'The Spanish Needle', 'The Tropics in New York' and 'Flame-Heart' which pulled at my heartstrings then and still speak to me now as a fellow exile.

The Honourable Louise Bennett OM, OJ, MBE was a Jamaican poet, folklorist, writer, and educator, writing and performing her poems in the Jamaican language. At a time when, as a legacy of colonialism, the language was still viewed with contempt by many, Louise Bennett proudly promoted the language and culture to the world and paved the way for many writers of my generation to comfortably lay claim to, and further popularise, our rich heritage.

Without a doubt, she was a major influence on my own writing. In primary school, I was performing her poems at fund-raising 'tea-parties'. Once I acknowledged that mimicking dead, white, male poets wasn't going to extend my sphere of influences, it was to Louise Bennett that I turned for inspiration.

I can only mention the other major influencers here: Dr. Seuss, Charles Causley, Robert Frost, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Hazel Campbell, Una Marson, Langston Hughes... All helped to shape my writing, in one way or another.

### **Valerie Bloom**

Valerie Bloom MBE is the author of several volumes of poetry for adults and children, picture books, pre-teen and teenage novels and stories for children, and has edited a number of collections of children's poetry. She has also written articles for teaching periodicals and newspapers such as *The Guardian* and the *Independent*. She has presented poetry programmes for BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4, and has contributed to various other radio and television programmes such as *Fine Lines*, *Woman's Hour* and *The Verb*. Her poetry has been featured in 'Poems on the Underground', and included in the GCSE and Caribbean exam syllabuses, and in the literature component for secondary schools in Malaysia. Her poetry is also included in over 500 anthologies worldwide.

Her books *Let Me Touch The Sky*, *Hot Like Fire*, and *Whoop and Shout* were all Poetry Book Society choices. *Fruits* won a Nestle Smarties bronze award, Américas Honorable Mention 1997, and was shortlisted for the Kate Greenaway Medal. Her novel *Surprising Joy* was shortlisted for the Branford Boase Award. Valerie Bloom is the winner of the Voice Community award for Literature, has been awarded an Honorary Masters degree from the University of Kent, and she was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the 2008 New Year Honours. She presently lives in Kent and performs her poetry and runs writing workshops in primary schools, secondary schools, libraries, and universities.

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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