

## **The writers that have influenced me**

Miguel Cullen

There's no accounting for taste, but my Argentine father was my first literature teacher and he sure liked to balance the books, giving me a monetary incentive to read five of his choice. I recall two of them, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), and I remember my reading of the former incensed my Tory grandfather, still prejudiced by the ban. I loved Agatha Christie as a child, and when I was depressed at boarding school, I would lie in bed eating chocolate under the covers and reading one a day over the weekend. I also liked violent books by Bret Easton Ellis and James Ellroy, as well as hooligan ones by John King.

The most memorable books I read as a child were by the Yardie pulp fiction writers like Don Gorgon and Victor Headley, as well as Robyn Travis writing about gang warfare in London Fields. I loved the fervid, sexual depictions of a black Travis Bickle in Donald Gorgon's *roman à clef* homage to the film *Taxi Driver* (Gorgon's book was *Cop Killer*). Like Bickle, he greasing the action on his Colt automatic, saws his dum-dum bullets, and drives a minicab; I would also love the 'Scotland Yardie' cartoons at the back of these books, the officer in question with his dreads stuffed into a policeman's helmet, a sagging patchwork sensi spliff drooping from lips.

Further memorable reading included Don Letts' book *Culture Clash* (2007), with his fastidious scenester's story of punky reggae, as well as *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King* (2000) by the music journalist Lloyd Bradley, an incredible writer, with his stories of gun-packing Duke Reids and Prince Busters. Then there was *The Dead Yard* (2009) by Ian Thomson, the anhydrously hilarious and poignant – bleak, yet loving – depiction of Jamaica, as well as *Bonjour Blanc* (1992), his book about Haiti. He has a knack for making his interlocutors speak in a certain way – beginning illogical, then becoming doubtful, ponderously reflective, and then from the impasse of a Mexican-standoff a break-clear expostulation – the way picaresque, lonely, quirky characters in those places seemed to me to unfold through his eyes.

Dostoevsky: I reached the neurotic finale of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) on a neon-lit park bench at night in Guayaquil in Ecuador. Tolstoy, as well; Turgenev's *First Love* (1860) tided me over, well, my first heartbreak aged 19. Woolf, Proust (I never actually got past the seaside town of Balbec in the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time* (1913)) – but Proust would stay with me – like a good work that really *counted* for a long time (my literature teacher dad was a great Proust fan), so I wouldn't feel the need to read all the volumes (in French, it's no joke, boss!) ad nauseam.

I notice in writing this that, in later cases, the books feel like real *moments*, achievements. This could be because I take neuroleptics for my schizoaffective disorder, and this stops me from being able to stay *with* a novel, instead leaving me no option but to 'play gadfly' (and more easily read poetry).

My last big novel was V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), with the storm scene in Green Vale sugarcane plantation representing his peak

in writing and in madness – the ominous channels of ants, lightning, the flickers of the candle, the wind, the descriptions of rain on zinc.

Given where I am at now with my poetry, I feel that Naipaul's axiom – that if you think about using a word you don't know the meaning of in your work, don't – (from Naipaul's Seven Rules for Beginner Writers he gave to the Indian newspaper *Tehelka*) is incredibly useful for an intuitive writer who might try to emulate the kind of writing Naipaul deals in. And what writing is that? It feels like a flame advancing up a sheet of paper, the advancing prose working on the paper and on the reader like a crackling, acrid delta of fire

Finally, August Kleinzahler and Frederick Seidel, the two underdog American poets, are my all-timers. I'd like to think what I'm writing here resembles a poet's prose, a wiseguy exercising his right to think joined-up, but not pledge allegiance to the flag, not sit through all that good-government bullshit and still not get touched, like in *Goodfellas*.

## **Miguel Cullen**

Culturally, Miguel Cullen is a Kelper (Falklander) evacuee, nourished in London by cocoa butter liniment.

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

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