

Bocas Judge's talk

To be given May 4 2019

Marina Warner

April 27 2019

The Bocas de Dragon the Mouths of the Dragon, which give this marvellous festival its name evoke for me the primary material of stories, songs, poems in the imagination of things which isn't available to our physical senses – the beings and creatures – like mermaids, like dragons – which every culture has created and questioned and enjoyed – thrilled to and wondered at. But the word Bocas also calls to our minds the organ through which all the things made by human voices rise from the inner landscapes of our being - by which we survive, breathe, eat, and kiss. Boca in Latin would be *os*, which also means bone- as Derek Walcott remembers and plays on as he anatomises the word *O-mer-os* in his poem of that name. Perhaps the double meaning crystallises how, in so many myths and tales, musical instruments - flutes and pipes and lyres - originate from a bone, pierced or strung to play. Nola Hopkinson in the story she read for the *Daughters of Africa* launch imagined casting a spell with a pipe made from the bone of a black cat. When a bone-mouth begins to give voice – it often tells a story of where it came from and whose body it once belonged to: in a Scottish ballad, to a sister murdered by a sister, her rival for a boy. Bone-mouths speak of knowledge and experience, suffering and love, as do all the writers taking part in this festival and on this splendid short list.

The shortlisted books for this year's Bocas prize, the ninth in its history, continue to build the tremendous roll call of the prize-winners; together they are plotting new meridian lines on the atlas of world literature. In several ways, the crucial role that the radio played in the past, when *Caribbean Voices* brought the writings of the region to the attention of readers far away, the internet has now picked up. But the growing archival riches of the world wide web need orientation: guidance, appraisal, criticism. We know that reviews on line are not always honest. Prizes have become vital in this act of choosing, and the more open the criteria for entry the better: judges read long and hard in order to become 'curators' for our benefit of a new section in the world's virtual library. And judges need to change often so that different arbiters listen for voices in a different way. I am very happy when asked to judge a prize because I'll then read many many books I would not have read without this

opportunity landing on me. Likewise, as a reader I've been led to books I never would have encountered. Festivals like Bocas are key to activity of curation: it is here I heard, in 2015, readings by writers who have since appeared on prize lists, including Marlon James, Vahni Capildeo, and Kei Miller. As you know the Bocas Literature Prize is very ecumenical, books in the three categories - poetry, fiction and literary non-fiction –can be published anywhere a Caribbean writer is working or living, and, in recognition of the digital age, they can include work which has been self-published.

[The judges who chaired the three panels this year are Geoffrey Philp for Poetry, Gary Yonge for Non- Fiction, and for Fiction Jane Bryce who was the overall chair.

The judges declared, 'The books that made the shortlist were all characterised by new and provocative approaches to form, whether mixing fiction and biography, novel and film script or novel and philosophy, and none more so than the overall winner {in each category]

This year's short list is *Doe Songs* by Danielle Boodoo- Fortune; *Theory* by Dionne Brand; and *High Mas* by Kevin Adonis Browne.]

I was invited by Marina Salandy Brown to make the final decision of the winner. It's a great honour and a pleasure. But I did not realise how hard this would be... The three books all stand out for originality and substance, thoughtfulness and skills of style and execution. How to compare them, how to choose one of the three?

I am very grateful to Jane Bryce, the chair of the judging panels. and to Geoffrey Philp and Gary Yonge for discussing the books with me so patiently and insightfully.

In alphabetic order:

[*Geoffrey Philp Doe Songs* marks the arrival of an extraordinary voice. In poems haunted by Ovid, Danielle Boodoo-Fortuné investigates the personal and the political, deploying a stunning range of imagery and themes. Mothers and daughters, hunters and the hunted, metal and fire meet in this dazzling constellation of archetypes that moves us to a new understanding of the Caribbean landscape and its realities. An unforgettable book, as dulcent as it is ruthless.

On the phone he said she is a breath of fresh air, a new voice, who breaks with the Walcottian tradition that has been so powerful (for himself, too).]

You have already heard Geoffrey Philp's praise for *Doe Songs*: with startling, edgy images, Daniele Boodoo-Fortuné builds a world of creaturely suffering and ecstasy; her passionate

voice pierces outward simulacra of experience to the inner well of feral, reciprocal absorption and separation in the throes of all kinds of loving.

Jane Bryce has given you an insight into the riches of *Theory*, Dionne Brand's brilliantly experimental work of fiction, in which her narrator enacts on the page her rebellion against identity labelling and gender expectations. It is also a spirited, often very funny, satire on the melancholy frustrations of academic life.

You have also heard Gary Younge's citation about *High Mas*. The winner of the OCM Bocas LitFest Prize 2019 is Kevin Adonis Brown, *High Mas*.

[Impressive in scope, lyrical in style and innovative in form, *High Mas* impresses both as a work of literature and art. Kevin Adonis Browne's exceptional exploration of Mas blends photographic essay, essay, memoir, poetry, polemic and prose poetry to transformative effect. The gimlet-eyed photography forms an integral part of the action, demonstrating the inseparability between masque and mas. Going beyond the history and narrative, Browne peers into the soul of a people with whom he feels a deep kinship. The result is a radical, genre-defying tribute to a cherished tradition in the finest tradition of literary non-fiction. Jane B: 'a sustained meditation on and critique of the role of photography in the Caribbean. It succeeds in making you look differently at both Mas and its meanings, as well as photography itself. Its great strength in the end is the interaction between what he sees himself doing with the camera and what his subjects see themselves as doing - viewing both as forms of performance. It's interesting, provocative and politically purposeful. Our feeling was that the photography was integral and provided the basis for a photographic essay in the genre of *A 7th Man* (John Berger and Jan Moir). Faced with a more conventional challenge we felt that *High Mas* presented something different, challenging and that was worthy of reward. Given the range of aphorisms which it is built I think the issue is less whether there are specific statements in it with which one would disagree than whether the broader sweep of the prose is plausible and engaging.]

This is a hugely energetic, original, many faceted, deeply engaged action in book form: Kevin Adonis Browne takes up 'the magic of perishable things' as he moves between memoir and history, aesthetics and gender politics, visual images, poetry and prose to think about carnival and Mas at a highly original and personal depths. He asks, 'What does a Caribbean pessimist do with the unfulfilled imaginings of his former deities?' He confronts his own methods as a photographer to forge astonishing images from the inside of the rituals

and the frenzy, and combines these with his academic critical formation to meditate on theoretical approaches to the spectacle of the male body, and the black male body, to being visible and being invisible. He is troubled, and his material is often troubling, but the book took me to unexpected dimensions of understanding and awe at human complexity. The scenes he evokes, in the streets of the island, represent a unique form of play, storytelling, testimony and poetry which evolves here but reverberates wisely for self-fashioning and self-questioning far beyond in these times of dislocation and fragmentation.

In conclusion.

I want to thank Marina Salandy Brown for inviting me here and trusting me with this task. [My grandfather Plum Warner was born here, and brought up in Port of Spain and went to school at Harrison College in Barbados, then played cricket for the West Indies, in the team with his brother Aucher, then left for England where he went on playing and was captain and then manager of the England team. He never forgot his Caribbean roots. He wrote more than a score of books, all about cricket – and founded the magazine the Cricketer which he edited for years. This is where I get my writing gene. Plum’s many memoirs all remember Port of Spain and the people here among whom he grew up. I have wrestled with this family history – it is entwined with so much that was terrible about the British empire. It therefore means a great deal to me to be here again, to be welcome. Thank you for the openness as well as the for the great riches of the literature and culture, which reach deep back in time and across the world.]

By way of a coda:

A strange new phenomenon is taking place in London where I live: birds are now singing at night. When I first heard a cascade of song in the gathering darkness, I thought it must be a nightingale. But since then, which was a few years ago, the experience has become quite common, especially in springtime. A friend of mine, the poet Ruth Padel, who is a keen naturalist, recently told me the reason: the daytime pandemonium of today, the traffic roar and wailing of sirens, means that birds can’t make themselves heard by one another – and they need to do that, they want to communicate with other birds. So they have taken to singing in the quiet of the night instead.

I see this as a fine image for the way writers keep writing, keep on finding a space in the cacophony to open their bone-mouths and make their voices heard.

Press release:

Doe Songs, the debut book by **Danielle Boodoo-Fortuné** of Trinidad and Tobago, “investigates the personal and the political, deploying a stunning range of imagery and themes,” write the judges. “Mothers and daughters, hunters and the hunted, metal and fire meet in this dazzling constellation of archetypes that moves us to a new understanding of the Caribbean landscape.” **Loretta Collins Klobah** of Puerto Rico is longlisted for her second poetry collection, *Ricantations*: “richly observed stories told by a poet with an acute eye. We are made to see the extraordinary within the ordinary, to find music and richly varied textures in the penumbra between languages and societies.” And *Giant* by **Richard Georges** of the British Virgin Islands — another sophomore collection — is “a work of great economy and beauty, that builds steadily like a wave, to moments of the sublime,” write the judges. “This is a book that knows ‘here’ and ‘home’ are not the same thing.”

In the fiction category, all three longlisted books are by writers from Trinidad and Tobago living in the diaspora. The books, write the judges, are “all characterised by new and provocative approaches to form.” *Cut Guavas*, by US-based **Robert Antoni** (a former OCM Bocas Prizewinner) “adopts the form of a mock film script to dramatise the story of a Trinidadian movie star who can’t quite remember which role he’s playing.” It is joined by *Theory*, a novel by Canada-based **Dionne Brand**. “Its motivating energy,” write the judges, “can be boiled down to the question the protagonist asks herself: ‘Why am I here now and what is my next move?’ . . . challenging not only academic theorisations, but the very idea of identity itself.” The third longlisted work of fiction is *Kitch*, by UK-based **Anthony Joseph**. The novel “projects a kaleidoscopic picture of calypsonian Lord Kitchener in the voices of those who knew him. Using Creole as a multi-stringed poetic instrument, Joseph gives us a musician’s tribute to a musician, a wordsmith’s tale of another wordsmith.”

In addition to the longlisted books, the fiction judges also named two honourable mentions: *Mouths Don’t Speak*, a novel by the US-based Haitian writer Katia Ulysse, and *Free*, a novel by Canada-based Jamaican writer Martin Mordecai.

The overall winner, selected from the three category winners, will receive an award of US\$10,000 and the two other category winners will receive prizes of US\$3,000, courtesy the Caribbean's largest media company, Trinidad and Tobago-based One Caribbean Media.

The OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature is unique. It includes debut and self-published books in the overall judging, giving a huge boost to those newcomers recognised by the judges for outstanding literary achievement. Vladimir Lucien from St Lucia took home the overall prize in 2015 for his debut poetry collection *Sounding Ground*, the Prize's first overall poetry winner since Derek Walcott's *White Egrets* collection in 2011. Following this success, Lucien has been featured at major international book festivals, including the upcoming Brooklyn Book Festival and Miami International Book Fair. He also featured at the NGC Bocas Lit Fest in Tobago in July.

The OCM Bocas Prize has contributed much to raising the profile of Caribbean writers, and its past winners have been making waves on the international literature scene. Multi-talented Jamaican writer Kei Miller won the UK's Forward Prize for the best poetry collection of 2014, the same year that his collection of essays was named winner of the non-fiction category of the OCM Bocas Prize. Marlon James, another Jamaican and 2015 winner of the fiction category of the OCM Bocas Prize, made history this year as the first Jamaican to appear on the long list of the prestigious Man Booker International Prize.

"Prizes help to point the public to the best on offer, and they bring professional attention to writers, broadening their prospects, encouraging publishing, and enhancing sales. Prizes are an essential element in the literary eco-system and we are extremely fortunate that in the Caribbean we have the OCM Bocas Prize that is allowing us to build on and resuscitate the great tradition of Caribbean letters," says Marina Salandy-Brown, director and founder of the Bocas Lit Fest, which administers the Prize and, funded principally by its title sponsor the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago, hosts three annual literary festivals and a children's festival in Trinidad and Tobago.

Past overall winners of the OCM Bocas Prize are *As Flies to Whatless Boys* by Robert Antoni (2014), *Archipelago* by Monique Roffey (2013), and *Is Just a Movie* by Earl Lovelace

Among the Dragon's Mouths: Down the Islands, Trinidad

The tiny islands scattered off Trinidad's north-west peninsula, separated by the sea channels called the Bocas del Dragon, are beautiful and sometimes eerie outposts of history. Gasparee, Monos, Chacachacare, and the others have long been known as holiday retreats, writes Sharon Millar, but their bays and hills also conceal a wealth of stories

Many people would say that the true "down the islands" is life on Gasparee and Monos, the two islands closest to the mainland. They lie along the First Boca, that famed first exit to the Atlantic Ocean on Trinidad's North Coast.