

1995

Eulogy for Sam Selvon

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Recommended Citation

Ramraj, Victor, Eulogy for Sam Selvon, *Kunapipi*, 17(1), 1995.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol17/iss1/15>

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Abstract

I was not surprised when some years ago I learnt that Sam, as a young man, before he turned to writing fiction, had wanted to become a philosopher. In all his works, even his lightest humorous sketches, and in his daily life with family and friends, we saw the philosopher in him. But he was not just any philosopher; he was a philosopher whose contemplation led him to look at the bright side of things, to see beauty and goodness and glory even in moments of deepest sadness; and this gave him a infinite capacity for resilience and optimism and good cheer.

VICTOR RAMRAJ

Eulogy for Sam Selvon

I was not surprised when some years ago I learnt that Sam, as a young man, before he turned to writing fiction, had wanted to become a philosopher. In all his works, even his lightest humorous sketches, and in his daily life with family and friends, we saw the philosopher in him. But he was not just any philosopher; he was a philosopher whose contemplation led him to look at the bright side of things, to see beauty and goodness and glory even in moments of deepest sadness; and this gave him an infinite capacity for resilience and optimism and good cheer.

I met Sam in person in 1971 and came to know him as a friend since 1978, when he and his family moved to Calgary. But I think I have known him since my teenage days in the Caribbean, when I began reading his novels, the first of which he published in 1952, when he was twenty-nine years old. Sam, as writer and friend, always has been for me and always will be remembered by me as the laughing philosopher, touched by the sad lot of humans but not overwhelmed by it.

Like Althea, Mike, Leslie, and Debra, like Shelley, Martin, Luke, and Sam, like his many relatives, friends, and colleagues, I feel a deep sense of loss at the passing of this warm and generous man. Yet I think that he would want us not to grieve his passing but to celebrate his life and remember the happy moments we shared with him: in my case, the endless hours of lively discussions of idly chatting, of playing Password and Scrabble; of figuring out cryptic crossword puzzles; of over-indulging in gourmet meals he delighted in preparing; and of visiting the Clubhouse at Stampede Park.

We shall all miss him in our own particular ways. I shall miss him when I stand in my garden and look at the green onions he planted one year. I shall miss him as I walk to the Faculty Club, picturing him beside me, hobbling slightly because of his arthritic knee. I shall miss him in the classroom when I am teaching his novels and shall no longer be able to promise that he will visit my class and talk to my students, who through the years have all responded to him with enthusiasm. I shall miss him on a summer day when I am out on Nose Hill Park and recall that we never did get a chance to walk there together as we often had planned.

But my sense of loss - like that of all of us here today - is assuaged by the belief that he is still with us, and if we should doubt that, we just

have to turn to his books. I know that I shall always find him and he will always speak to me, as he does now in this closing passage from the story 'My Girl and the City'. In this story, written for Althea, thirty-eight years ago, in 1956, he portrays an old man in terms that make the perfect epitaph for himself:

At last I think I know what it is all about. I move around in a world of words. Everything that happens is words. But pure expression is nothing. One must build on the things that happen...So now! weave! I say there was an old man on whose face wrinkles rivered, whose hands were shapeful with arthritis but when he spoke, oddly enough, his voice was young and gay.