



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

61 | Autumn 2013

Special Issue: The Transatlantic Short Story

Merle Collins, *The Ladies are Upstairs* (Leeds, UK: Peepul Tree Press, 2011. 155 pp.)

John Wharton Lowe



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1413>

ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2013

ISBN: 0294-0442

ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

John Wharton Lowe, « Merle Collins, *The Ladies are Upstairs* (Leeds, UK: Peepul Tree Press, 2011. 155 pp.) », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 61 | Autumn 2013, Online since 01 December 2015, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1413>

This text was automatically generated on 3 December 2020.

© All rights reserved

Merle Collins, *The Ladies are Upstairs* (Leeds, UK: Peepul Tree Press, 2011. 155 pp.)

John Wharton Lowe

- 1 When Merle Collins published her startling novel *Angel* (1983), which told of the troubled years 1951-1983 in Grenada, she was immediately acclaimed as one of the most important voices of the Caribbean renaissance. She embellished this fine start with her 2003 collection of poetry, *Lady in a Boat*, which employed her gift for lyrical expression and salty dialect to limn the discord of her native island, and to commemorate the deaths of her compatriots in the ill-fated revolution. She has now turned to the genre of the short story, in order to create a domestic vision of Caribbean women who inhabit the mythical island of Paz, at a time when many of their children have left for new lives and opportunities in the U.S.
- 2 The volume is comprised of a novelette, "Rain Darling," followed by ten tales that feature her most memorable figure, Doux Thibaut. "Rain" details a visit to the title figure's hospital bed by Sister, Ermintrude, and Cousin Lyris. Their gossip en route fills readers in on other members of the family circle, particularly the domineering aunts. The omniscient narrator, however, directs our attention to the wide horizon over the war-haunted city of Paz, "crucified and beautiful." The inset story involves Rain's memory of her childhood and her love for her father; both he and her mother left Rain with Aunt Orilie while they sought work in the States. The indifference her parents and Aunt show her contrasts with the loving, large family of her friend Tisane. Rain's Cinderella-like existence worsens when Orilie gives birth to Sister.
- 3 These memories become interbraided with Rain's current hospitalization, and she has terrified images of a *diabesse* that resembles her cruel aunt. A terrible secret is revealed in the inside story, which clarifies the tangled emotions we have observed among the family members, all of whom seem haunted by sexual torments and blighted dreams, leading to Rain's series of incarcerations in mental hospitals, a miserable state broken only by the sunshine of her friend Tisane's visits. Almost all the characters suffer from

the effects of male notions of honor, the grinding poverty that generates the immigration that separates families, and the repeated pattern of absent fathers. This tragic tale grows on the reader as we sympathize with the women, while deploring many of their actions; our hearts go out to Rain, whose name might as well be Job. The sunlit backdrop of Paz forms an ironic commentary on the “rainy” events of the title-character’s life, while the colorful dialect and sometimes saucy humor relieve the gloom, but also contrast with it. The title figure’s full name—Rain Darling—constitutes an oxymoron that offers a commentary on unfulfilled lives.

- 4 The “Doux” stories are something else again. They begin during Doux Thibaut’s childhood, when she is attending a rural school and learning how to cornrow her hair. Her teacher, Mr. Moses, apologizes for wrongly punishing her, in a vignette that exposes the limitations of underfunded schools. Each tale rounds out our understanding of Doux at differing points of her life, but they also provide a sense of the culture, climate, and mood of the tropical island she inhabits. One tale comments insightfully on the problem of female bullying, a subject currently garnering wide discussion. The carefully rendered dialect of the Doux vignettes adds immeasurably to our sense of this oral culture, and also generates rejuvenating humor and folk wisdom. We also see generations feuding and making up; Doux’s mother’s wisdom proves valuable when our heroine has to deal with her irascible grandmother.
- 5 The multi-tiered class structure of the island and the abuse of lower class workers by their elite employers receives an acidic and satiric portrait in one of the stories, while another, “Big Stone,” shifts from Doux to Nurse Chalmers, who, walking home in the tropical night, encounters a small girl, seemingly lost, but who turns out to be a supernatural creature, whose grasp the Nurse escapes gasping. As such, the story contributes to the rich repertoire of what the Martinique natives call “la guiabliesse.” A similar shift occurs in “Jericho and the Lady,” where Doux’s grandson picks up a mysterious lady who later vanishes in the air, an adult approximation of the little girl in “Big Stone.” As Jericho jests with his friends, one of them compares his tales with the “nanci stories,” a reference of course to the anancy fables of Jamaica, often built around the exploits of the spider that is sometimes human, Anancy, a New World exponent of similar tales from West Africa.
- 6 The brief title-story tells the sad tale of the decline and fall of a patrician family, one with a mysterious racial background. The madness and depravity of “Miss Mary” is pondered by Doux as she remembers serving the family in her youth. The concentration on the image of the island’s “ladies” offers a telling counterpart to the similar construction of the Southern Belle in the U.S.
- 7 The sequence draws to a close with Doux, an old grandmother, living with her daughter and grandchildren in Boston, dreading but also anticipating a visit from the ghost of her husband Jeremiah. The tale brings the cycle to a satisfying conclusion, conjoining bittersweet memories of now lost Paz youth, and a troubled tropical world that nonetheless conjures warmth in a cold (in more ways than one) new realm. The Doux stories, as this brief survey indicates, sweep across generations and many markers of colonial and postcolonial life; alternately realistic, comical, magical or mournful, they conjure up multiple aspects of the circumCaribbean. Collins’ economy of expression paradoxically coexists with a rich and imaginative language, weaving her own “speakerly” narration with the pungent and wise coinages of her characters. The fact that Paz is a mythical island rather than Collins’ own Grenada gives her poetic license

to make her Doux stories representative of the archipelago and wider circumCaribbean. Further, the strongly mythical component of this collection offers a pendant and vivid contrast to her early novel, while signifying the shape-shifting of this protean writer, whose works continue to attract, startle, and enchant.

AUTHORS

JOHN WHARTON LOWE

University of Georgia