

Book Reviews

Sam Selvon. *An Island Is a World*. 1955. Introd. Kenneth Ramchand. Toronto: TSAR, 1993. Pp. xxv, 237. \$12.95.

It was poignant to receive this new edition of Sam Selvon's 1955 novel, *An Island Is a World*, shortly after the novelist's death on April 16. The book has been out of print for almost 40 years, and Selvon would have been pleased to see it. In a conversation with Michel Fabre (reprinted in Susheila Nasta's *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, 1988), Selvon said, "[i]t may be the novel of mine I prefer most. Not my best . . . for reasons of form. But, in it, I tried to express the ideas and feelings I had about the social conditions and people's reactions to them. It was very personal" (69). The young novelist seems to have used this, his second novel, to explore his subject and to experiment with methods of presenting it.

The plot of *An Island Is a World* is more diffuse than those in Selvon's subsequent novels because of the number of characters and individual lives the book chronicles. In so far as one character dominates the narrative, it is the questing intellectual and aspiring writer Foster whom Selvon uses to present musings and questions about Trinidadian society, experiences as an emigrant, and the nature of the artist. Foster is looking for an answer without being able to form a question, which is most nearly explained by his artist friend Andrews as they drink beer together. Andrews explains that drinking beer is enough for him, whereas Foster would want to "discuss at length the subject of beer and glasses" and "ask questions, funny questions that people don't ask at all. Like, Why are we drinking beer in glasses?"—his way of asking "What are we doing here?" (51-52).

Foster grapples with this philosophical question throughout the novel and never finds his answer, partly because it involves the related problems of identity and the relation of Trinidad to the rest of the world, here figured by London, where Foster spends three years, and by a rather nebulous midwestern American city where his brother Rufus studies dentistry.

The parallel experiences of the two brothers form the structure of the novel and bind them to a third major character, the drunken jew-

eller Johnny. Each of the brothers marries one of Johnny's two daughters, and at the end of the novel Johnny's immigration to India parallels Rufus's return to settle in the United States. In a comic inversion, Foster's nebulous quest is paralleled by Johnny's dreams of a Great Invention to make gravity work sideways. Johnny inadvertently burns his plans but passes his dream to a grandson. Similarly, the novel leaves Foster's quest unresolved but hints that he may find his answer in Trinidad by working out the dream he in turn inherits from the significantly named Father Hope.

As that sketch indicates, the canvas here is broad. The story is engrossing, but shows only flashes of the Selvon wit and comedy. In light of the later work, the central section is most experimental and most interesting. It consists of chapters divided between Rufus's experiences in the United States and those of Foster in London. The portions devoted to Foster often incorporate essays, some, as Kenneth Ramchand points out, printed separately elsewhere and here mostly presented as letters to Foster's friend Andrews in Trinidad. Selvon seems to be testing the limits of novelistic form to see just how much he can get away with.

Apparently he also used this novel to experiment with language. The narrative portions fluctuate between the Queen's English and tentative dialect, as though, once again, the young writer were testing limits and possibilities. The dialect, incidentally, is probably the reason for the occasional typographical errors (perhaps repeated from the 1955 edition), for example, "the" for "they" (71), "Burgehouse" for "Burgerhouse" (92), "her" for "he" (186), and a dropped "I" (109). An interesting speculation is how many similar errors slipped into the later books, with their more extensive use of dialect.

The book is most interesting, however, as a preview and anticipation of the later work, particularly, and indirectly, in Foster's musings about art, writing, and language. It is hard, for example, not to extend Foster's passionate defence of semi-popular music to Selvon's views about art in general and novel writing in particular. Foster says,

It seems that because a piece of music is melodious and easy to understand, it becomes classified as a popular classic, not to be bothered with by intelligent people who want something more complicated to chew on. I say that is balls. To hell with the critics; if I like a certain piece I like it, I'm not going to be swayed by any sophisticated opinion. (68)

That Selvon practised what Foster here preaches is one of his strengths as a novelist.

Because Selvon is especially known for his London trilogy, beginning with *The Lonely Londoners*, the glimpses of Foster's life in London have special interest, as in this description of West Indian *émigrés*:

There were those who worked at anything they could get, the railways, factories; living in cheap dirty rooms, meeting the boys now and then for a game of rummy or poker. Out of the frying pan into the fire. No sense of gain or

loss, no backward glance. No hope of making progress in the old "Brit'n," but it was better than living on the "rock." Here and there they slouched about the streets, men without future or hope or destiny, lost in London . . . (153)

The passage anticipates *The Lonely Londoners*, in which racism is treated overtly, and invites comparison with the essay-like passage early in *Moses Ascending*, in which Selvon describes, with the wry wit and irony he adopted in describing racism, the black man at work in the London dawn.

An Island Is a World gropingly explores yet another concern of Selvon's work, the power of love and brotherly compassion. The drunken jeweller Johnny is redeemed by his daughter's love, and there are strong hints that it is the answer Foster will find when he has completed Father Hope's treatise ". . . about a universal religion, a common ground" (236).

This edition is physically attractive, with clear print on high quality paper. Ramchand's introduction is especially valuable, not only for its examination of the text and its biographical basis but for its explanation of the political situation in Trinidad in the 1940s, the setting of the novel. A complete set of Sam Selvon's works, in similar handsome form, would be welcome.

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Carol Morrell, ed. *Grammar of Dissent*. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 1994. Pp. 256. \$17.95 pb.

Carol Morrell's *Grammar of Dissent*, a selection of writing by Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese Philip, and Dionne Brand, demonstrates how, in their writings, these three writers subvert the Eurocentric perspective while foregrounding that of the people of the African diaspora. In excerpts of their work included in this volume, Harris, Philip, and Brand employ such tools of the colonizer as form and language to "negotiate a new literary space" (Hutcheon and Richmond 9), interrogating a range of subjects, among them racism, sexism, class, culture, and history.

This richness of subject matter is evident, for instance, in the work of Claire Harris. In "Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case," Harris exposes the injustice of a judicial system which demeans and dehumanizes a young, black girl while exonerating a racist policeman. In "Where the Sky Is a Pitiful Tent," the poet's concern is war and oppression, her inclusion of Rigoberta Manchu's account of his experience of the Guatemalan war reinforcing the notion that in spite of the toll in lives taken by war, the struggle for freedom will persist. "Nude on a Pale Staircase" probes the importance of memory, which is viewed