

## David Ellis, *Writing Home: Black Writing in Britain Since the War*

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## REFERENCES

David Ellis. *Writing Home: Black Writing in Britain Since the War*. Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2007. xv + 223 pp. ISBN 978-3-89821-591-6. £20.90

- 1 In the last decade, quite a few articles and several volumes have been written on the literature produced in the wake of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury Docks in 1948. What has been labelled “Black British” writing, for want of a better term, constitutes an important and original body of works that has not only changed the face of English literature, both thematically and formally, but has also chronicled the social and cultural transformations generated by post-war migration in a country apt to turn a blind eye to its inherently heterogeneous nature.
- 2 David Ellis’s *Writing Home: Black Writing in Britain since the War* is a useful contribution to the debate around this literary phenomenon. Written in an altogether clear, engaging style, this study traces the development of the literature authored by writers of Caribbean descent in England through a discussion of selected works by nine of them. The volume opens with a foreword which outlines its ternary, generation-based structure, and briefly touches upon some of the major elements underlying its rationale, mostly the importance of the context of literary production. Each of the three sections making up the book deals with three writers and addresses how their attitude to English society has affected their writing. The first part, devoted to Sam Selvon, George Lamming and E.R. Braithwaite, focuses on novels written with a white audience in mind, at a time when the idea of integration was still in fashion. The second part discusses works by Wilson Harris, Andrew Salkey, and Linton Kwesi Johnson, and views their writing set in England as challenges to English society in a context of confrontation rather than assimilation. Finally, the third part focuses on Joan Riley,

Caryl Phillips, and David Dabydeen, and examines how their works (until the early 1990s) convey a sense of Britishness associated with a criticism of their native Caribbean.

- 3 The strong point of Ellis's survey, which combines literary history with textual analysis, is without doubt the careful attention he pays to the political and cultural contexts of the texts he analyses, as well as his ability to examine the complex points of articulation between Caribbean and Black British writing, in other words, between a literature of emigration and a literature which can now be regarded as part of a national tradition. One should also praise the author for focusing on such writers as Braithwaite and Salkey, who have not received much critical attention recently, but are nonetheless significant figures of Caribbean writing in England, and for giving an illuminating reading of two novels by Harris, *Black Marsden* and *The Angel at the Gate*.
- 4 Yet, even if *Writing Home* offers some perceptive readings and touches upon compelling issues, among which the question of labelling or the use of non-standard linguistic forms in creative writing, it does not always fulfil its potential and remains an uneven study. It contains occasional inconsistencies and some of its chapters, for example, the one on Linton Kwesi Johnson, tend to be more descriptive than analytical. For these reasons, *Writing Home* is eventually more valuable for the questions it raises than for the answers it provides.
- 5 There is, however, a more annoying flaw in this book: its time frame. It appears that the temporal references in the text (found in adjectives like 'recent' and 'current' or phrases like 'to date' and 'the last decade') relate not to the actual time of publication, i.e. 2007, but to the early 1990s, obviously the time when the text was written, which is confirmed by a bibliography containing no items published after that period. This is frustrating not only because of the editorial sloppiness it implies, but also because so many changes have occurred on the literary and political scenes in the last fifteen years. These could have been profitably included to make this study more comprehensive. For instance, it would have been interesting to consider Caryl Phillips's 1996 film adaptation of his first novel *The Final Passage* (1985), or to look at Phillips's writing after *Cambridge* (1991), as most of his subsequent books, fiction and non-fiction alike, crucially broach the issue of the Black British identity, one of the major concerns of this volume. It would also have been worthwhile to add a fourth chapter devoted to the latest phase of Black British writing, including a discussion of the works of British-born novelists of Caribbean heritage such as Andrea Levy or Zadie Smith. But there is perhaps enough material in all this for another book.

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## AUTHORS

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**Bénédicte LEDENT** is Professor of English at the University of Liège (Belgium) where she also teaches Caribbean Literature. Her field of research is contemporary Caribbean and Black British

fiction. She is the author of *Caryl Phillips* (2002) and has edited *Bridges Across Chasms: Towards a Transcultural Future in Caribbean Literature* (2004) as well as *Familial and Other Conversations* (2007), a special issue of *Moving Worlds* on Caryl Phillips.