



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Driven to DiscoverSM

Voices
from the
Gaps

Olive Senior

“

Why do I write? Because the imperative to do so has been the strongest single force in my life and though I have been sidetracked by many, many muses, abused this one and wished it away, anxious always about the exacting nature of the commitment, I think it has finally claimed me. I have finally accepted the fact that, yes, writing is what I am suppose to do with my life; it is the way I affirm myself. [...] The constant tug between private aloofness and community and social sharing has shaped my personality, my world-view and my work. [...] Ultimately, we are all nothing more- or less- than children of the universe.

— Interview in Callaloo, 1988

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1941
- * Jamaican short story author, poet, and non-fiction writer
- * Author of *Summer Lightning* (1986)

Biography

Senior has taught as Dana International Professor at Barnard College in New York. She has taught creative writing in Canada, the United States, England, and in Jamaica (Tanna). She has also presided as editor of the Jamaica Journal. She is the author of several collections of short stories: *Summer Lightning* (1986), which won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, *Arrival of the Snake-Women* (1989), and *Discerner of Hearts* (1995); collections of poetry *Talking of Trees* (1986) and *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994); and non-fiction about Caribbean culture, *A-Z of Jamaican Heritage* (1984) and *Working Miracles: Women's Life in the English Speaking Caribbean* (1991).

This page was researched and submitted by: Katie Horan and Olga Simonovich on 16 December 2004.



Olive Senior

Biography continued

When Rowell inquired how Senior felt about winning the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, she replied, "[w]inning the prize has meant a validation of my faith in myself as a writer and has given me and *Summer Lighting* the kind of publicity and exposure I would not have had otherwise" (488).

Many of Senior's works focus on the turmoil that occurs when one is young and feels that she is never truly understood, and the experiences one amasses by residing in both the country and the city and by coming in contact with both poverty and wealth. Steven Seratin states, "at the end of their exploration [Senior's] children have a better understanding not only of the adult world, but of the self, and their psychological dependence on parent-surrogates is gradually replaced by a growing identity and a better understanding of human interdependence" (78).

Senior tackles a variety of subjects in her writing. *Poetry International* states "[Senior] deals with moral issues, with the environmental crisis brought on by single-crop agriculture, and deforestation, but she handles her subjects with subtle irony and humor and her tone is always relaxed." She has also noticed that there is more acquiescence to formal experimentation in female Caribbean writers than their male counterparts, enabling the reader to "examine the relationship between national identity, gender, and subjectivity in Caribbean discourse" (Gikandi 32, 99). In many of Senior's short stories, she provides a voice for overlooked individuals: women and children. Gikandi states "...in the same private spaces that were supposed to denote silence, Caribbean women writers have nurtured a language that, [...] in the words of Olive Senior, 'personalizes the socio-political issues': now the individual life becomes the primary focus..." (200). By highlighting the plights of the ignored portion of society, she brings to the forefront issues that have become taboo, such as child abuse, marital infidelity, and social status based either on color or social standing. In an interview with the *Jamaica Gleaner* on November 7th, 2004, Senior said: "I've had to deal with race because of who I am and how I look. ...I do not think you can be all things to all people. As part of that process, I decided I was a Jamaican. I represent many different races and I'm not rejecting any of them to please anybody. I'm just who I am and you have to accept me or not" (Tanna).



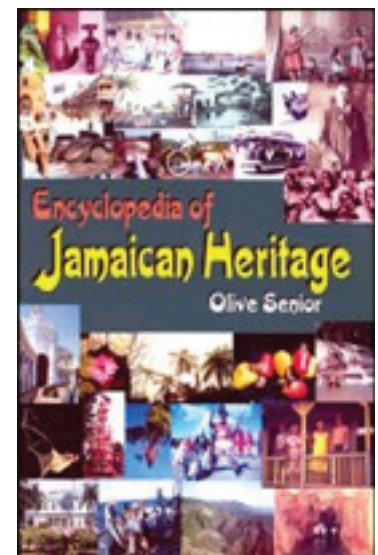
Olive Senior

Biography continued

Major Critical Responses

The recipient of international acclaim, Olive Senior continues to explore the relationship between native Jamaicans and their cultural roots. Most reviewers agree that one of Senior's strongest assets is her ability to use language and dialect to reveal cultural differences, "the stories seem to offer language itself, the communicative act, as balm, as recompense" (Flemming). Senior is particularly effective in reproducing the speech of her characters. Some critics see a connection between the oral tradition Senior grew up with and her writing style. Reviewers point out that her use of language exposes the reader to a wide range of possibilities between Jamaican Creole and Standard Jamaican English. In her writing she "exploits fully the complex Jamaican speech community, making use of the flexibility the different codes allow (Pollard). The language allows the reader to discern the character's class. There is a mix of native Jamaican language and a new, colonial English. However, others argue that Senior's use of language negatively impacts the reader, because "these stories and the collection as a whole need a glossary for the less-initiated reader" (Thorpe).

Regarding her own works, Senior admits she attempts to remain faithful to the principles of "simplicity and restraint" (Newson). She achieves simplicity in telling, which allows the work to be accessible. All of her stories are set in Jamaica where she attempts to present Jamaicans as real people and not as the American stereotypical images of Rasta and idleness. Senior succeeds in producing works in which there is no inherent good or evil, thus allowing the lives of both the victim and the violent to be explored. In her works, Senior fails to provide the whole story, which allows the reader to use his/her imagination to complete the work. Her stories are often left open-ended, so the tension created by the conflicts "creates a momentum that propels the action forward but not always to a definitive conclusion" (Thompson-Deloatch).





Olive Senior

Biography continued

Critics note several of Senior's common themes, namely issues of class prejudice, greed and materialism, lamentation of lost tradition, and the chasm between colonialism and tradition. "Her stories are not pastoral idylls, however, but reveal instead the classism, racism and colonialism that are so integral to Caribbean life, past and present" (Smilowitz). Many of her works contain an overriding concern for humanity. Reviewers note, "few writers are able to combine social comment with such a deep understanding of human nature and such a linguistic facility" (Pollard). *In Arrival of the Snake Woman*, Senior begins to address the lives of the rising black and brown bourgeoisie. Senior herself clarifies that the race issues she discusses are battles not only with "white racism," but with the struggle to affirm indigenous culture.

In Senior's works, critics observe predominantly female characters, young and old, who are caught between present-day colonial values and their repressed African heritage. The child's perspective illustrates the powerlessness, frustration, and lack of understanding by the adult world. It also allows the reader to gain perspective on the irrationalities of adults, the inequities in society, and the redeeming features of the environment (Pollard). Senior's native adult characters tend to employ silence as a resistance to dominant discourse. Critics note that many of her stories explore dichotomies, particularly of old and new, and of old and young. More recently, Senior has begun to explore the topic of the Caribbean mother and to use it to personalize socio-political issues.

Our Interpretations

Senior uses Jamaica as the setting for many of her stories. Her tales revolve around the conflicts between race and class, cultural roots, and modernization. These tensions appear in her collections *Arrival of the Snake Woman* and *Discerner of Hearts*. *Arrival of the Snake Woman* is a compilation of stories that captures the color prejudices and the changing roles of women in contemporary Jamaican society. The stories take place in rural Jamaica. The reader is treated to insightful images of village life from the perspective of both the child and the adult. Senior then demonstrates the characters' strength by showing their reactions in various situations. The stories testify to the intrinsic nature of humans, that one will shield a part of herself to prosper, and while another may choose one part of herself with which to identify.



Olive Senior

Biography continued

The story “The Two Grandmothers” demonstrates the effects that others have on one’s beliefs and values. While the narrator was young, she enjoyed being with her Grandma Del, who was from the Caribbean, did not live in the city, and had not adopted colonial values. The narrator also spends time with Grandma Elaine, who is from Miami. While young and innocent, the narrator is fascinated by the simple surroundings of the Caribbean. However, she is constantly surrounded by city people who care about tangible things, and soon she becomes entrapped by the notion of social status. She distances herself from Grandma Del and instead begins to immerse herself in pop culture, and to identify with Grandma Elaine’s social structure. The narrator has chosen one part of herself with which to identify. Structurally, this is a sound story once the reader realizes that it is in the form of letters. The length of the letters decreases with the age of the narrator, signifying the narrator’s change in values. As she ages and becomes less inquisitive and more stagnant, her letters shorten.

In the story “Arrival of the Snake Woman” the title character, Coolie, reveals her strength through her actions. She is brought to a town where others see her as a heathen because she is of Indian descent. She is not immediately accepted into their society, but Coolie maintains her dignity by not succumbing to their unkindness. Her language is not equivalent to that of those around her, but she still finds ways to communicate with them. She encourages Ishmael to pursue his dreams, regardless of obstacles. Eventually, the town accepts Coolie and she becomes the most affluent member. She rises above the label she was given because of the color of her skin. This story is an example of what can transpire when an individual dares to transcend language, culture, and religious barriers. Coolie made a conscious decision to integrate herself within the town. The transition does not signify “selling out;” instead it reveals Coolie’s empowerment with her ability to rely on herself.

Another of Senior’s anthologies, *Discerner of Hearts*, contains a mix of stories that take place both in the colonial era and the present day. The collection presents a society in which race, class, and power determine relationships. White is admired, and black is not yet fashionable. Characters are preoccupied with forward progress. The characters in many of the stories emphasize the importance of education and the ability to afford the proper education in order to move on to study abroad. This is evident in the stories “Zig-Zag” and “The Case Against the Queen.” In these stories, characters sacrifice necessities in order to send their children to school because the ruling class and wealthier Jamaicans value education. Senior debunks this theory with the story “Window.” Dev returns from studying abroad and faces the same class restrictions he faced before he left. While he gained knowledge, he did not gain social status.



Olive Senior

Biography continued

The islanders are class-conscious, and the accent they use illustrates how they choose to distance themselves from their own ancestry. Working class Jamaicans teach their children Standard Jamaican English so that they will be perceived as more educated and of a higher class. In “Zig Zag” there is a clear difference between the way Desrine, the servant, speaks and the way her daughter, Manuela, speaks. Desrine has sacrificed shoes for her children so that Manuela may get lessons in hopes of making a better life for herself. The characters who use Jamaican Creole are shunned by other Jamaicans. At some points the language can be difficult to translate. “Swimming in the Ba’ma Grass” is told entirely in a mixed dialect of Jamaican and English. While all readers can grasp the essence of the story, some words remain a mystery to the non-Jamaican reader.

The stories in *Discerner of Hearts* are told from a variety of different perspectives. This signals a change in Senior’s writing. In her early works she stuck to the child’s-eye view, but in her more recent works she has expanded her point of view to that of adults, male and female, and children of different races and classes. Still, the consciousness is predominantly female, signaling Senior’s interest in women’s roles. *Discerner of Hearts* is Olive Senior’s attempt to encourage Jamaicans to embrace their heritage. She presents likable characters who find comfort only when they achieve a balance that includes their cultural roots. *Arrival of the Snake Woman* explores the potential of each individual, regardless of race or class.



Olive Senior

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