

James Berry 1924–2017

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Poetry is a form of music that stirs connections. It's the human experience in discovery. It opens up ideas that you didn't know existed until you tried to put them into words. Writing poetry is a way of striving to see as deeply as possible, as widely as possible, as accurately as possible. Because language does all this for us.



James Berry OBE died on 20 June, 2017, aged 92. His partner, Myra Barrs, described him as 'one of the finest people I ever knew' and his many friends and admirers would agree. Well known and highly regarded for his adult poetry, James was also a fine poet and author of stories for children. He was a welcome figure in many classrooms over the years, especially those in multicultural parts of London, such as Vauxhall Manor School for girls, where he did a stint as poet-in-residence in 1978. He was also the editor of some outstanding anthologies, including the ground-breaking *Bluefoot Traveller*, one of the early, if not the first, compilations of Black British poetry in 1976.

Born 28 September 1924 in Jamaica on a smallholding to Maud and Robert Berry, James grew up with five siblings. As a young adult, he realised that despite his affection for his native country, its people and his own family, he would have to move away if he was going to make a success of his life. James spent four years in America as a contract labourer on farms and factories before returning home, then sailing to Britain in 1948 on the *Orbita*,

the next ship after the *Windrush*, full of West Indian migrants eager to respond to Britain's request for workers after the second world war. Sadly, their experiences in Britain were often disappointing, including overt racism and hostility, as has been documented in much fiction and poetry. Even so, James got a job as a telecommunications officer which he held on to for twenty years before turning to full time writing. I remember him laughingly telling me he had been down on his knees praying that the Post Office would make him redundant so that he would be free to concentrate on his poetry!

Later, James moved from London to Brighton where a lifelong friendship was established with fellow poets based in nearby Lewes, John Agard and Grace Nichols. He joined the Caribbean Artists Movement and was their acting Chair in 1971. In 1977-8 he was awarded a C. Day Lewis Fellowship and his first collection of poetry, *Fractured Circles*, was published by New Beacon Books in 1979 to critical acclaim. He won his first major poetry prize in 1981 for *Fantasy of an African Boy*. *Lucy's Letters and Loving* followed in 1982, *Chain of Days*, 1985, *Hot Earth Cold Earth*, 1995, *Windrush Songs*, 2007, and his Selected Poems, *A Story I Am In*, 2011. The themes that powered James's poetry looked back with longing, affection and honesty at his native Jamaica, as well as exploring issues of identity and exile for those of Caribbean origin growing up in Britain, especially as they affected young people.

James wrote about the inspiration for Caribbean poetry in an interview in Oxford Poetry II.1 with Sue Goad. It is worth revisiting.

The poetry has something to say and there is a compulsive beauty about the way it is being said. Linton Kwesi Johnson and other dub poets have brought a new combination of music and rhythm into the performance of their writing. Even when the exact words cannot be recalled afterwards, the mood and music communicates itself to white people in a lasting way. We are bringing to an entrenched literary culture a new vitality, a strangeness, a difference, and it is infectious.

The importance of this is that it gives people a form in which they can express their long, long repressed feelings of injustice. One of the cruellest things West Indians have suffered is the disqualification and put-down of our language: Creole, the language we developed for our needs and to express what we have to say; West Indian British poetry is in part a celebration of our new freedom to speak. When poetry springs out of an obsession, out of things which must be said, it can liberate people, and there are many vital things we have to say.

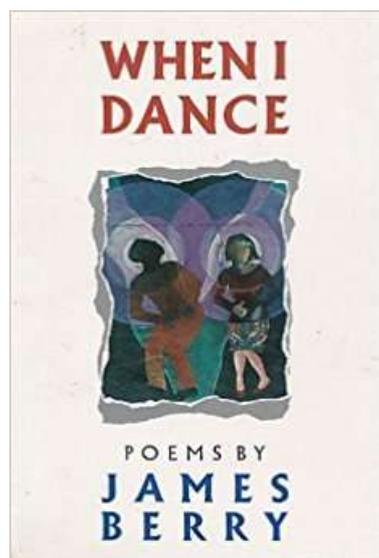
Writing his obituary in the Guardian (July 4, 2017), Alastair Niven, summed up James' contribution as a 'champion of Caribbean culture', 'a determined though unsentimental advocate of friendship between races' who gave 'literary respectability to forms of language increasingly heard in the streets and playgrounds of multicultural Britain.' Indeed, James could write equally well in lyrical standard English as in Creole but he is probably best known for promoting the

latter. A poem such as *In-a Brixton Market* (from *Chain of Days*, 1985), shows off some of his skills, his sense of humour, his use of informal language and, indeed, his attitude to the casual racism of the late 20th century.

*I walk in-a Brixton markit,
believing I a respectable man,
you know. An wha happen?*

*Policeman come straight up
and search mi bag!*

*And wha them si in deh?
Two piece a yam, a dasheen,
a han a banana, a piece of pork
an mi lates Bob Marley.*



At a time when many other black British poets were understandably reacting to police racism and brutality with violent lyrics, James was making fun of the suss laws (Stop and search) by showing how ridiculous they were and, at the same time, urging restraint. Even though the character in the poem feels overwhelming anger at the injustice - *This yah now/is when man kill somebody, nah!* he tells himself to calm down - *'dohn shove', 'battn down', 'An, man, Tony win.'*

We are very lucky in Britain that so many of our distinguished poets spend as much time on the young as on an adult audience. James was no exception and he became celebrated for his poetry collections, anthologies and performances for children. His Signal Award-winning debut, *When I Dance* in 1988, showed off his talent at its best with an ambitious range of tone from lyrical to amusing, hard-hitting to tender. Always musical and with copious references to Jamaica, he brought the vernacular speech patterns and culture of his homeland to life. Many fine collections followed, including *Playing a Dazzler*, 1996, *A Nest Full of Stars*, 2002 and his Selected Poems for children, *Only One of Me*, 2004. In addition, James turned his attention to editing anthologies for the young, wrote the text for several picture books and won the Smarties

Prize for his first set of short stories, *A Thief in the Village*, 1987. As Myra Barrs has pointed out, his writing offered a documentation of immigrant experience in Britain without parallel. His collections for younger readers honestly explored what was like for children of Caribbean origin growing up in Britain but James was often able to find a positive message. For example in his poem, *Black Kid in a New Place*, a young boy realises he is not 'a migrant bird' but 'I am/a transplanted sapling, here, blossoming.'

On a personal note, I met James at one of the Cambridge Poetry Festivals in the early 1980s. I was in the process of editing my first book of multicultural poetry for children and he was full of enthusiasm for the enterprise, generously introducing to young Caribbean/British poets. This was shortly before poets such as Agard, Nichols, Bloom, Zephaniah and others were in print for children. In the glory days when Alastair Niven, then Chair of Literature at the Arts Council, set up a scheme with NATE, poets and creative writing tutors worked with a group of teachers in a nice hotel (all paid for) over a week-end to get them writing and then performing their own poetry, a sure way to set poetry on fire back in their classrooms. At one of these events (it was Birmingham, I think) James heard that he had been awarded OBE so we had a very jolly journey home in the train, celebrating his well deserved honour! He had done so much for poetry by then, promoting and 'raising the tone' of Caribbean poetry in particular, and becoming a star of children's poetry, too.



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There was a gentleness in James, a love of humanity, a belief in better times to come, as well as a generous heart, a passionate voice and that bubbly sense of fun. One verse of Jamaican Song offers a flavour of some of this.

Little toad little toad mind yourself
mind yourself let me build my house
build my house to be at home
be at home till I one day vanish -
the sea is full of more than I know

moon is bright like night time sun
night is dark like all eyes shut
Mind – mind yu not harmed
somebody know bout yu
somebody know bout yu

Despite the fact that James eventually succumbed to Alzheimer's, he never lost the desire to create with words as that had always been central to his life. His ability to keep working with language was fostered particularly by Susanna Howard of Living Words who visited him regularly during his final years and kept a record of some of his monologues. Myra Barrs, who took care of him devotedly during this difficult period, pointed out that, 'although he was losing language his work with Susanna showed he was essentially still there.' She also emphasised the fact that James was always utterly serious about his art. Here are some of his transcribed last words (Transcription by Susanna Howard October, 2016).

I have learnt to see what I can take in And what I can prepare and understand

I've been at it long enough to take it in To collect and to accept it And adapt it and call it what it is –To see some ways to understand

On ways of human being Are at me all the time To show me there is something to develop

I look to understand and be part of it And see it and understand it And be with it And follow it - - - - -

We got to understand each other We sort of – we pray – we think About the others.

Well, I am in thought really I have some bits of whole words I need to put in a piece of poem Until it is a whole piece. To do what we can do before the pasture.

James loved Italy and he and Myra often visited the mountains above Lucca which reminded him of Jamaica. Always a great walker, James' love of the natural world was almost spiritual. It is so fitting that he was buried under a hornbeam tree in Green Acres within the beautiful Chiltern Woodland Burial Park. His legacy is his outstanding contribution to poetry, in particular his promotion of the rich seam of Caribbean poetry emanating from many different parts of the region, coming together in this country. James was a very special human being and he is much missed. As we say in Scotland, 'We'll no see his like again'.

Myra Barrs hopes that there will be a Memorial for James Berry some time ahead where serious reflection will be given to his work. I am sure that many UKLA members would be interested in attending such an event, perhaps in helping to organise it, and some would no doubt have contributions they would wish to make. Further information will be provided in due course.