

## “Man, I know ‘bout you”: A Reminiscence of Austin Clarke

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I first met Austin Clarke in Georgetown, Guyana, at a Caribbean Writers Conference in February 1970. I had been invited by the Government of Guyana to attend, having been a young poet from Berbice county. I recall meeting Austin decked out in his colourful dashiki, unlike the more unassuming or sedate Trinidadian-born writer Sam Selvon, who also caught my attention. I instinctively gravitated to both of them. I eavesdropped on Austin’s conversation with Selvon and others; and yes, Clarke’s novels intrigued me—if only because about six months later I would be living in Canada. Expectations about the immigrant’s life were already forming in me, tied to the outsider’s gaze subliminally with us as Guyana’s political turmoil heated up. In context, Black Power and civil rights ideals were also becoming transformative. Andrew Salkey’s *Georgetown Journal* presents an evocative account of that early 1970 Conference, depicting the spirit of the arts associated with Caribbean nationalism tied to a Black Power elan.

Indeed, reading Clarke’s novels and warming to his narration and dialectal energy, I observed that his style seemed to me to be somewhat analogous to what American writers were doing in the Harlem literary movement. Clarke’s verve and elan intrigued me more and more. However, by the time I had moved to Canada and formally studied CanLit at university, there was no mention of his work. The likes of Morley Callaghan and Hugh McLennan occupied the canon, the central fictional space. I tried to move between spaces as I brought up Clarke’s name in discussions, but no CanLit professor then seemed interested. In Ottawa during the 1970s, I gradually began making my own mark as I interacted with published writers, like the Japanese-Canadian novelist and poet Joy

Kogawa, and the Jewish-Canadian poet Seymour Mayne. The latent and nurturing spirit of creative writing grew in me. During that time, I also “grounded” with many others, especially the West Indian-immigrant community.

Significantly, I directly interacted with Austin at the ground-breaking “Black Writer in the Canadian Milieu” Conference at McGill University in 1980, which was organized by the Trinidad-born English Professor Lorris Elliott. What I knew of Clarke from that first “Canadian” meeting and my subsequent interaction and friendship with him fostered an appreciation of the Black literary aesthetic. You see, Clarke became renowned as a pioneer. I reflected more on Clarke’s trailblazing writing while editing my anthology, *A Shapely Fire: Changing the Literary Landscape* (Mosaic Press, 1987). This anthology aimed to foster awareness of diversity in Canadian writing. The “shapely fire” in the title derived from Guyanese poet A.J. Seymour’s well-known poem to suggest my connectivity to West Indian literature, and I figured the anthology was invalid without Clarke’s fiction. It was then that I’d begun to view Clarke as one of the finest short story writers in Canada.

I briefly corresponded with him over the years, and was often taken, if sometimes amused, by his demotic style and his formal calligraphy in his letters to me, sent in “officially” embossed envelopes. In these letters, he filled me with cheer because of his West Indian panache and word-play, sometimes with whimsicality. We also met a few times over the years, once notably at the Commonwealth Institute in London at a West Indian Conference, where we sat on a panel on diversity in Canadian Writing, and later when we would come across each other, in Toronto and Ottawa, at book-launch events and readings. Always down-to-earth his manner was, rooted in his rough and ready Bajan humour. I also observed the esteem the Black or West Indian community had for him—all keen admirers of his work. His playful ease was accentuated: “Man, I know ‘bout you. I know you is a rass Guyanese, too. I got a story for your rass boy” (Correspondence, 19 October 1979).

I listened to him in his more measured tones deliver a keynote speech to a large audience in the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa during a commemorative Black History Month event in the nineties, where he won over all in attendance. And yes, my last memorable meeting with Austin was when I was a guest-writer at the Miami Book Fair. There, he and I along with two other writers, including the eminent Lamming scholar Sandra Pouchet Paquet, were invited by the Canadian Consulate for dinner at a local restaurant. When the time came for a thank-you speech, Austin nodded to me, but I deferred to him. He was, after all, our senior Canadian literary figure, and it was his wit and charm that I treasured on that occasion.

I noted to myself then to keep re-reading his fiction and poetry, and, to muse over the literary prizes he’d garnered over the years, such as the Rogers

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Writers' Trust Fiction Prize for *The Origin of Waves* (1997), and the Giller Prize and Commonwealth Writer Prize for *The Polished Hoe* (2002). I would also continue to reflect on Clarke's beloved Toronto, which he was instrumental in figuring as the "Caribbean of the North." I also contemplated writing a comparison of Austin Clarke's narrative with Sam Selvon's, speaking in particular to their shaping of a Caribbean diasporic spirit in letters, through an attentiveness to voice, character and place tied to a Creole-Caribbean *métier*, aligned to a Canadian psyche—a showcasing of them as modern folklorists at best. My thoughts often inevitably flit back to that memorable first meeting in Guyana in 1970, walking among Austin and Sam, moments that birthed enduring contemplations of my immigrant writer's sensibility.

Cyril Dabydeen

AUSTIN CLARKE LOVE POEM<sup>1</sup>

--for J.H.

"Woman," Harewood, when I tell you woman,  
Harewood, um, is the first time in my life  
I actually fall in love with a woman,  
I mean a woman-and-a-half, and  
I never knew love could be so sweet.

Man, she have me doing things  
I never do before in my life,  
things that sweet--  
things that bring-out the man,  
things that bring-out the woman.

Things that true love made of,  
but more than anything else  
is the peace that she bring  
into my life. Peace and security,  
and sure-ness. And confidence, yes.

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1. This poem previously appeared in *Membering Austin Clarke*, ed. Paul Barret (Wilfred Laurier University Press), 2020.

