Writing My World, Encouraging Younger Writers to do the Same

By Joanne C. Hillhouse

In 2012, shortly after the release of my book Oh Gad! I had the opportunity to speak and read at the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars conference being held that year in Suriname. I decided to embrace it as an opportunity to talk about opportunities the digital age had opened up for writers writing from a small place. Rather than lamenting the challenges of being marooned on an island in the Caribbean while dreaming of telling my stories around the world, I spoke of the ways Caribbean writers were working and using technology to overcome those hurdles.

What does this have to do with children’s writing? I am not, after all, a children’s writer though since the initial draft of this article I’ve signed a contract for the publication of my first ever children’s picture book. I do, however, run a writing programme for young people in Antigua and Barbuda.

Here’s the thing. No one should have to hide their talent or watch it atrophy from disuse for want of opportunity. But as a writer coming up in a working class community, on Antigua, a 108 square mile island in the Caribbean, models close to home were lacking. I hadn’t a clue really, about how to become this writer I dreamed of being, and it seemed such an impossible dream, I couldn’t even voice it to myself. And yet through it all, I devoured books and kept on daydreaming and writing. Then I discovered the writing of Jamaica Kincaid, the internationally renowned writer who began in the same small place I came from, and in time I dared to speak my dream out loud, and to take leaps of faith that would bring me to the point of being a published author, three times over now (thanks to my books The Boy from Willow Bend, Dancing Nude in the Moonlight, and Oh Gad!).

It still rocks my world when some teenager reading my book in school approaches me to ask, if I’m the author and to tell me how much they related to the book. I’ve been interviewed by and had the opportunity to speak to bands of these high schoolers on my island and it literally
transports me to the world of I can’t believe this is happening. Because not all that long ago, I
was a girl dreaming and not quite daring to believe.

Now I don’t want this and the next generation of scribes to ever think it’s easy, it isn’t, but I
don’t want them to doubt that it’s possible. I want, as much as possible, to stir in them a sense
of the rightness of putting their art out into the world. Out of that desire grew the Wadadli
Youth Pen Prize, to help young writers in the Caribbean, though I was myself a young writer still
trying to figure it all out.

At the ACWWS, I presented my Wadadli Pen experience as a case study, eight years on; looking
not just on what I’ve done, with the support of my partners, with the programme and why, but
about how it connects to my larger ideas about writing authentic fiction with which, if well-
drawn, a reader anywhere in the world can connect. Here’s what I said:

Fostering a sense of Caribbean-ness, and within that a sense of Antiguan-ness, has been a
priority, meanwhile, for my pet project, the Wadadli Youth Pen Prize since I started it in 2004.

During a visit to Villa Primary school, in Antigua to promote the annual writing contest that’s
the centre piece of what we do, the Wadadli Pen 2012 Challenge, a visit I blogged about at
shewrites.com⁠¹, I wrote that in making my pitch to the young ones we talked about using your
environment… realizing the stories that live in and around themselves and their world. When I
shared with them Ashley Bryan’s Dancing Granny, encouraging them to keep the beat and
played a recording of the first Wadadli Pen winning story Gemma George’s Stray Dog Prepares
for the Storm⁠², their eyes lit up, they got into it, because they recognized it, they recognized
themselves and their world.

There I am! My life is the stuff of literature too!

That’s where it starts.

¹ http://www.shewrites.com/profiles/blogs/time-taken-not-made

Because you see Wadadli Pen exists not only to give them an outlet but an inlet. From the beginning Wadadli Pen was about giving young Antiguans and Barbudans something I had not had growing up. I wanted them to see that they have a voice. I wanted them to believe that great stories don’t just happen in other places.

As a child I would have read Uncle Arthur Bed Time Stories and Charlotte’s Web, Little Women, Are You There God It’s Me Margaret?, and Tom Sawyer, in my teens To Kill a Mockingbird, more Sweet Valley Highs and Sidney Sheldons than I can count, Dickens, Bronte, Austen. In fact, outside of the calypso and anansy and jumby stories of my youth and the few short stories and occasional Caribbean novel touched on in high school (excerpts from Michael Anthony’s Year in San Fernando come to mind), I would credit the University of the West Indies, in my late teens/early 20s, for really stoking my awareness of and curiosity about writing from the African Diaspora – to include the Caribbean, the U.S., and Africa. Dr. Carolyn Cooper was one of my teachers at UWI, and her class was one of my favourite places to be. I remember reading her newspaper column in English and Jamaican. The pride she had in her Jamaican-ness, and especially her Afro-Jamaican-ness was palpable and inspiring.

Wadadli Pen would come many years after I’d left UWI, prompted in fact by a speech by Guyanese writer Ruel Johnson in 2003 at the Caribbean Canadian Literary Expo, in which he lamented the absence of nurseries for the literary talent in the region. Having felt the absence of such a nursery both as a wanna-be writer, and as a young writer-emerging, I returned home and promptly drafted up the plan for Wadadli Pen which launched in 2004. It has undergone many changes over the years, but what has remained true is its insistence on a Caribbean sensibility. It’s been interesting to me that some have found this off-putting because they feel hemmed in by the clichés of the genre, that if they’re writing speculative fiction, for instance, there is no place for them under this umbrella of fiction with a Caribbean sensibility. And so I’ve taken to explaining it as writing from an imaginative space rooted in their Caribbeanness but not fenced in by it, use it as the tether that allows them to soar like a kite caught up in the brisk Easter winds. In urging them to embrace a Caribbean aesthetic, if you will, I was hopefully helping them to see that whatever the genre, the seed of the idea can come from this rich soil.
of Caribbean lore, mythology, geography, history, society, imagination. I believe the work so rooted can have universal appeal not in spite of but because of its rich detail. Think of those dank boarding schools and how we felt the chill of them; could they not bathe their prose in the sunshine of their world.

Antigua, my country is not paradise, nowhere in the Caribbean is, it’s not a fantasy, it is as real as anywhere else in the world, but most importantly it is home; not just home to the physical me but home to the things that first sparked my imagination and sense of wonder and curiosity. Everything that is Antigua runs through me. I wouldn’t know how to dilute and I wouldn’t want to, which is why I love this customer review posted to Amazon, re Oh Gad! in which I attempt an authenticity re the language of the American, Antiguan and Jamaican characters – the reader said, “even though the dialect wasn’t something I was used to, at the end of the book, I felt that I could go to Antigua and carry on a conversation with the best of them.”³ Whether she could or not is neither here nor there but if, as she said, the book “pulled” her in “and refused to let go”, I was happy in the end that the U.S. publisher, notwithstanding the suggestions of the original editor, felt the language was understandable in context and opted to keep it primarily as is.

I want to be the kind of writer that takes the reader there, makes their world go blurry and out of focus, and brings the world of the book, my world, into vivid focus. And I want to encourage the young writers in the Wadadli Pen nursery to aspire to a similar sort of authenticity. To varying degrees, they have embraced the idea of sharing their world.

And it’s not just the physical world. It’s the social mores. Siena Hunte, a 2004 Wadadli Pen Challenge Honourable mention, writing of a wedding in her story Nuclear Family Explosion: “In England ‘RSVP’ means you let the people know whether you are coming or not. Relatives from all over the Caribbean who had not responded were arriving with their families. A look of delight, which then turned to panic, spread across my aunt’s face as she tried to calculate how far the food would spread.”⁴ It’s the food. Runner up in the 18 to 35 age category, in 2011,

³ http://www.amazon.com/Oh-Gad-Novel-Zane-Presents/product-reviews/1593093918/ref=dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1

⁴ http://wadadlipen.wordpress.com/2010/05/10/a-nuclear-family-explosion-by-siena-k-margrie-hunt
Latisha Walker Jacob, in Market Day, wrote, “Her big shiny silver pot was steaming with hot rice pudding, head skin and maw...”\(^5\). The language is there, “when me a likkle bwoy, she min dun owl a-ready”\(^6\) Kemal Osmel Nicholson, a 2006 Wadadli Pen Challenge Honourable mention, wrote of Ma Belle. As for fantasy, there is the make-believe, or is it, world of Redonda as imagined by Rilys Adams’ 2005 second placed story, Fictional Reality, a world where “marble rocks were visible along the coastline and the sky was a deep violet... (And) the shore sparkled with fragments of diamonds.”\(^7\)

All of these stories are archived at wadadlipen.wordpress.com which I initially founded in 2010 to showcase the winning stories but which I have used in the time since to showcase Antiguan and Barbudan literature, as well as Caribbean literature.

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One of the things I’m most proud of on the site is the bibliography of Antiguan and Barbudan literature. Yes, there is more to us than Kincaid.

And the virtual village allows me to share that, helping to bridge the formerly huge chasm between my small place and the global marketplace.

This remains true though, opportunities to publish (albeit somewhat opened up with respect to self-publishing online) and the foundation needed to nurture both a literary and artistic culture and the business of literary and other arts, remains lacking in the region. The talent, though, is the thing that flourishes in spite of this drought of opportunity. And the writing where it’s allowed to bloom, and nurtured with constructive criticism and encouragement, where it’s allowed to stretch itself and fresh eyes look upon it, reveals that the glory days of Caribbean literature are far from over, reveals that details aside, human experience – pining, passions, pain, pleasure – is universal, literature, the creative arts, being that window to seeing each...

other more clearly, more insightfully; a fact Caribbean readers who grew up reading more of the outside world than of the world within understand all too well.

I said in an online interview, now archived at Wadadli Pen, that literature while connecting us with the outside world, can help deepen our sense of place in the world, while broadening our sense of possibility, and I referenced Kincaid’s Annie John, key to my evolution as a reader and a writer as an example. “I think that for marginalized groups, reading literature about ourselves has that power,” I said then.

I write with an inherent sense of my Antiguan-ness and with an increasing desire the more my international aspirations grow to be true to that Antiguan-ness, not to dilute it into some kind of weak beverage with no real flavour. So that effectively what I’m doing, I hope, is not taking my writing to the wider world but allowing the wider world to come inside my Antigua and squat for a while.

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