

PROGRAMMANUS



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BOOKWORM – JOANNE C.

Script and Word list

Pamela Taivassalo Wikholm:

In *Bookworm* today, the Antiguan writer Joanne C. Hillhouse.

Joanne C. Hillhouse:

I'm always writing something. I write fiction, short fiction, poetry, but I also... I have two longer works in progress, I just kind of don't know where they're going as yet, but... I had two books come out recently, *Musical Youth*, which is this one, and the reissue of *Dancing Nude in the Moonlight*, another writing, so...hopefully I will have a little bit of time before I have to put anything else out. And I also have some children's books in progress as well. So I kind of write all over the map.

Pamela Taivassalo Wikholm:

So how do you manage having so many things up your sleeve?

Joanne C. Hillhouse:

Well...maybe it's a scattered brain, I don't know, it's... I'm not one of those people who can focus on one thing at a time. Like if I'm watching TV, I can't sit and watch TV, I'm watching TV and I'm doing other things. It's kind of like that with the writing, it's kind of... And with the reading, I'm reading several books at once, so it's...it's kind of what feels like it's pulling me at that time. And because I also have worked for many years as a journalist and I freelance as a writer, I have to learn the discipline of trying to divide my time between the different things that I'm working on.

Pamela Taivassalo Wikholm:

When did you know for sure that this is your call?

Joanne C. Hillhouse:

I think I always knew it. I don't think I always felt like I could claim it. Because you know, I... When I was growing up, I didn't know any writers from here, from Antigua, until I discovered *Annie John*, Jamaica Kincaid. The writers from here that I knew, and I have great respect for them, were the calypso writers, people like Shelly Tobitt and Marcus Christopher. Because when I was coming up, calypso was the literature that I would hear, that had some relevance to my community. The other literature that we read was mostly from America or from Britain, but... So it was a while before I could kind of wrap my mind around this idea that this is what I'm called to do.

I started writing earnestly in my teens, and I was in my twenties before I realized, "You know what? I'm going to figure out a way to do this." And it was right after I finished university. I did a writing program at the University of Miami. I went to university at The University of the West Indies in Jamaica. And then I was recommended to the Caribbean Fiction Writers Summer Institute at the University of Miami, and that's where I started working on *The Boy from Willow Bend*.



Characters come to me. They don't always reveal their stories fully. So for me, writing is a journey, sort of a journey of discovery, like I can't always see where it's going, but I'm kind of wandering my way through it and trying to figure out what...what is it all about? And so...I think it would be difficult for me to write if I understood everything up front. It's the discovery that makes it interesting to me.

In the case of my book *Oh Gad!*, I knew the end. That scene at the end of *Oh Gad!* was one of the first things that I knew absolutely. But I couldn't write it, because I had to figure out, "Why does this end here, how do I get there?" So I had to take that journey with the character to get to that place.

Part of the challenge with the pieces I'm working on now, the longer pieces, is that they are kind of coming to me in a sort of jigsaw way. And I figure, if I could get into like a residency program for a while, where I could just sit quiet in my mind, I could kind of put the jigsaw together, but...

Because I think I write best when I have time to just get into the zone and follow the path. And figure out the path as I... The analogy in my head is like I'm driving down a lane, a bumpy lane, like so many of the off-roads in Antigua. And...I've never been on that road before, and there's a bend, and I don't know what's around the bend, but I want to find out, and so I keep going, even though it's a little bit scary, because...you know, you could get attacked or anything could happen. You could get lost. I mean, I say attacked, you could get lost or whatever, but you get to that bend and then you follow it, and then you find another bend and you follow it. That's kind of how I do with the first draft. And then of course, as you're redrafting and redrafting, you kind of have a clearer picture of the full story, and it's kind of threading it together at that point.

Pamela Taivassalo Wikholm:

The Antiguan writer Joanne C. Hillhouse's book *Musical Youth* is about music, discovery and love. Zahara meets Shaka.

Joanne C. Hillhouse:

She didn't know his name, he didn't know hers, and wouldn't if she had anything to say about it, with his forwardness, jumping right in and chatting her up like they were long-time friends. He didn't seem to mind her silence, picking up both sides of the conversation when she didn't answer right away.

"So, you play guitar."

"Yeah, me like music too, nuh."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..."

"Me like hiphop mostly."

"Yeah, yeah, me like Bob Marley though, he min wicked pon the guitar, right?"

She almost answered then. Bob Marley's *Redemption Song* was the first thing she'd learned to play on her own, no hand guiding hers, no chords to follow; the first song she'd taught herself, playing along with it on the radio, fiddling with it from memory.



When she'd mastered it, she'd felt so proud of herself she'd almost auditioned for the school pageant, the winner of which got to represent first her class in the school's Talented Teen-Best of Forms then, if victorious, her school in the Teen Splash at Carnival.

Bob Marley - Redemption Song:

*Emancipate yourself from mental slavery,
None but ourselves can free our minds.
Have no fear for atomic energy,
'Cause none of them can stop the time.
How long shall they kill our prophets,
While we stand aside and look?
Yes, some say it's just a part of it,
We've got to fulfill de book.*

*Won't you help to sing
These songs of freedom?
'Cause all I ever have,
Redemption songs.
All I ever have,
Redemption songs.
These songs of freedom,
Songs of freedom.*

Joanne C. Hillhouse:

I'm a huge music fan. I always have music going when I'm working. And the very first line that came to me is the very first line in the story - that her name is Zahara, rhymes with Sahara. You know, so it's like that rhythm, and then I just kind of free-styled it. And then every day, I would get up... Because it was one of those like foreday morning, that's like at the crack of dawn type of thing. And I would get up and these kids would be there, and I'm just trying to keep up with them.

This is actually my first experience ever, because normally it takes me a while to put a book together. This is my first experience ever with what I would call binge writing, where it just kind of happens in a very compact period of time, because every morning they were there, every night they were there, every spare minute they were there, and...

You know, it's about teenage love, but it's also about coming into your own and discovering that your voice has power and meaning. And so for me, writing was that. For Zahara and Shaka, that's music. For these kids involved in this musical theater production, which I can relate to as someone who was involved in musical theater coming up...

I was...I remember I was in bed, and I was sitting up in bed, cross-legged on the bed at the computer and my fingers were just flying. I didn't have to go look into these characters, they were just kind of there and the story was revealing itself to me.



And it was just...the music. The music, the fact that as a character who was... She doesn't have confidence in her voice, she doesn't have confidence in herself. There's a lot about her personal history that she doesn't know and doesn't feel she can ask, but when she connected with the guitar, she found her voice. And it took her a while to learn to believe in that voice, which I guess is the connection between Zahara and myself. But then she meets this guy who has all this swagger and all this talent, but he has his own issues as well, but the connection they have is music, and I can relate to that. I just had fun... I have to say, these are the... In terms of writing characters, these were characters I had the most fun writing. They're just a fun group to be around.

Like, English language, that's what we grow up learning, and that's what we're taught and that's what we read, and we know the standard and... We know how to speak Antiguan, we know how to speak Caribbean, but often we don't know how to write it, and so I tend to write it how I hear it, and I think that's why people can read it, so I'm not overcomplicating it, how the characters speak is how it comes through. How it sounds to me is how I hope it will sound to the reader. And it's giving them, you know, a little bit of Antigua, you know.

Pamela Taivassalo Wikholm:

Where does it come from, that in the Caribbean you don't say "ask", you say "ax" and so on?

Joanne C. Hillhouse:

Where did the...wow... I think our language, like so much else about us, is a testament to the adaptability and the creativity of our people. In Antigua, in the Caribbean as a whole, we're people who came from other places, for the most part. We came from Africa as, you know, enslaved, captured from our own country and brought here.

And if you consider what it must have been like, apart from the extreme brutality of chattel slavery. Having to adapt, you're talking about people from different tribes, having to find the language that they can speak to each other and understand the people who are dominating them as well. And so, out of that comes what I think is this pepperpot of language.

And when I say in all areas, the whole life... Because you take the food, you take the language, different customs and so on, you realize that things adapted and recreated from these different influences, primarily the African influence. To some degree, because we were colonized, the...depending on which country you go to, English or French or Dutch or whatever.

And so to me, we survived, and we did more than survive. And that's why I'm just so amazed by the people that came before me. Because I don't think I'm half as strong, half as creative as they had to be in order to not just survive, but make a life, to sustain their spirit. To keep something of themselves and to pass something on to their children, something like hope and possibility. So all of that, to me is wrapped up in the language, and I use it because it is a part of me, just as they're part of me.

As I said, I grew up on calypso. That is the folk music of the people. When I was growing up, beyond the media and the formal institutions, the calypso was where you went to get the news, and to tell it to you straight. And I think that's something that's at the back of my mind or has influenced me as a writer.



When I was growing up, I didn't know any writers from here, from Antigua. The writers from here that I knew, and I have great respect for them, were the calypso writers, people like Shelly Tobitt and Marcus Christopher. Because when I was coming up, calypso was the literature that I would hear, that had some relevance to my community. The other literature that we read was mostly from America or from Britain.

In the Caribbean, we don't have spring, summer, winter, fall, or fall, winter, however it goes. We have carnival season, we have hurricane season, Christmas season... Carnival season begins when you start hearing the calypso songs on the radio.

When I said they're the folk music of the people, it's you know...the roots of calypso is *benna*, which comes up from the way the sort of grassroots people would be able to express themselves. And calypso kind of matured that idea, that idea of what is the common man's experience? What are his concerns, what are his frustrations, what are his...his hopes?

I think, I think it's essential that we document our lives, I really do. We come from an oral tradition, and I respect that tradition. As I said, it has influenced me, but I think we need to document more of our stories, our lives, so that when our kids look back, they know who we were, they know who they are because of those stories, and I think it's important.

Part of our challenge, I think, as formerly colonized people dealing with sort of this neo-colonial world...or post-colonial world, I guess, depending on how you look at it, is...so much of what you've been given, of your history, has been given and written by someone else. And it's not the full picture. It doesn't... It's another's perspective on what has come before, and so it's essential that we document how we see ourselves.

Pamela Taivassalo Wikholm:

The Antiguan author Joanne C. Hillhouse. The sound was engineered by Joakim Davidsson and my name is Pamela Taivassalo Wikholm.