

Caribbean literature

Countries



The evolution of Caribbean Literature started centuries before the Europeans graced these shores and continue to develop today. Quite noticeably, it developed in a manner that transcended all language barriers and cultures. Today the languages of the Caribbean are rooted in that of the colonial powers - France, Britain, Spain, and Holland - whose historical encounters are quite evident throughout the region.

The cosmopolitan nature of the region's language and cultural diversity develop from the mixture of European languages with Native American languages (mainly the Caribs and Arawaks) in the formation of creoles and local patois (hybrid languages) and those of Africans brought to the Caribbean as slaves, notwithstanding the contributions of Asians mainly from India and China, and Middle Easterners. The fabric of Caribbean Literature is woven with the historical issues of enslavement and forced migration, the related themes of home and exile, and colonialism and decolonization.

The social and cultural themes of tradition, landscape, culture, and community are also encompassed by Caribbean Literature. It also addresses such universal questions as identity, sexuality, family life, pain, joy, and the uses of the imagination. It is virtually impossible to keep Caribbean Literature only within the confines of writings produced within the Caribbean Islands. Caribbean Literature also transcends the borders of Central and South America extending to the shores of Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana; and coastal areas of Colombia, Nicaragua, Belize and Honduras.

Evidence of aspects of Caribbean Literature can also be seen in literary works produced in various areas of the USA including Miami and New

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Orleans. Works of Caribbean Literature have also been produced by people of Caribbean ancestry who live primarily in Europe and major urban centers of the United States. ORAL LITERATURE Oral literature can be considered as the earliest form of Caribbean Literature consisting mainly of rich folk-tale traditions, legends and

myths, songs and poetry. Today this legacy is resplendent in popular music such as the CALYPSO, the Cuban SON, and the Puerto Rican BOMBA; in the traditions of storytelling originating out of West Africa and India; and in supernatural tales from African religions, including SANTERIA, LUCUMI, VODUN (voodoo), and SHANGO. Proverbs, riddles, and sayings that reinterpret African, European, and East Indian traditions are also most prominent in Caribbean literature.

Among these are Anancy (a cunning spider) stories; animal dilemma tales, which typically teach a moral lesson; stories of village life or evil women; tall tales; and rhetorical flourishes, such as boasting, toasts, and speeches.

Pre and Post Independence Literary Works

Autobiography and poetry were the most prevalent literary works from the 16th century to the mid-19th century. In these works were introduced themes that became common in Caribbean literature; exile, migration, displacement and questions of identity.

The history of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, (Related by Herself), is the most prominent of these writings in English. Early Caribbean writings in Spanish saw that of the autobiography of the slave Juan Francisco Manzano of Cuba in the 1820's and 1830's, Jose Maria Herida Placido (a slave who

was executed in 1844 for his role in a slave uprising) and the Cuban anthropologist Miguel Barnet. Max Urena of the Dominican Republic produced nationalist works in the 19th century. The French speaking Caribbean saw works by Emeric Bergeaud and Desmevar Delorme.

Distinct national literary traditions began in the 20th century because few Caribbean countries gained their independence before this period. Twentieth century Caribbean literature can be divided into three periods: the first thirty years during colonial rule; the years just prior to independence between the 1940's and 1960's or later, and the period after independence. During the fledgling years (1930's) a movement celebrating African culture and values rose to prominence. The movement originated in France and was called NEGRITUDE.

However, its founders include Leon Gontran Damas of French Guiana and Aime Cesaire of Martinique. Rene Maran of Martinique won the Prix Goncourt (a French literary prize) with the novel *Batouala* (1921) which called for identification with black culture. In the Spanish - speaking Caribbean African themes were presented in a most exotic manner, highlighting African and black identity for artistic inspiration. Prominent writers in this movement include Luis Pales Matos from Puerto Rico and Emillo Ballagas from Cuba.

The works of Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen from the 1930's share sentiments with the politics of NEGRITUDE and address issues surrounding the struggle against colonialism. Alejo Carpentier, also of Cuba, achieved recognition with his novels in which he explores the history and sources of Caribbean culture.

The English - speaking Caribbean abounds with prominent writers including Jamaican novelist Tom Redcam (Thomas Macdermot), Claude Mckay,

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Jamaican born poet, and perhaps the best known writer of this generation internationally.

Mckay later became one of the leading writers of Harlem Renaissance, a flowering black culture in New York in the 1920's and 1930's. Other writers who rose to prominence during this period are C. L. R. James of Trinidad, whose works protest against colonialism and help to define the anticolonial political and cultural struggles of his time. He was also instrumental in the formation of the literary magazines Trinidad (founded 1929) and the Beacon founded (1931); these publications were instrumental in the development of a Caribbean literary tradition.

Alfred Mendes and Ralph de Boissiere (Trinidadians) both contributed articles and poetry to the magazines.

PRE - INDEPENDENCE RENAISSANCE

This period saw the emergence of a generation of writers whose works sought after liberation and presented a distinctive portrait of Caribbean culture. The Jamaican Vic Reid, looks forward to a " new day" of independence with his novel *New Day* (1949); the displaced, downtrodden, urban population of the Caribbean is portrayed by Roger Mais also of Jamaica.

He also experiments with jazz rhythms in his language, while Una Mason, a Jamaican poet uses blues rhythm in her poetry collections. A vivid portrait of Guyana's countryside and society is presented by Edgar Mittleholzer in his novel *A Morning At The Office* (1950). On the other hand, one of the first and most important Caribbean works dealing with childhood and coming of age in

a colonial context was produced by George Lamming, from Barbados, in the novel "In The Castle Of My Skin" (1953).

This novel focuses on the struggles of three young boys with poverty, a colonial education, social change and the forging of an identity; hovering in the background is the promise of migration to the metropolitan centers. The mythology of Native Americans and Africans is emphasized in Wilson Harris's novel *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), while Martin Carter's *Poems of Resistance* seek liberation from colonial rule. During this period a number of female writers were also very active. Beryl Gilroy of Guyana wrote novels, children's stories, and an autobiography.

Sylvia Wynter of Jamaica incorporates elements of folk culture into her work. From Dominica, Phyllis Shand Allfrey won recognition for her analysis of colonial power in her work, while Jean Rhys received critical acclaim for novels about women caught in situations they are unable to change.

POST INDEPENDENCE

This period saw the emergence of poets from the English - speaking Caribbean; Derek Walcott from Saint Lucia is perhaps the best-known Caribbean writer internationally. In 1992 he won the Nobel Prize for literature. In addition to poetry, Walcott is well known as a playwright.

At the same time Eduard Kamau Brathwaite challenged the formal structures of European poetry by adopting the rhythms, references, and language of the African and Afro- Caribbean traditions. Brathwaite broadened the possible use of language in his works for a number of subsequent writers, including Jamaican oral poets Mutabaruka, Linton Quesi Johnson, and John Binta Breeze. Earl Lovelace and V. S. Naipaul count among other noted

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English - language writers born in Trinidad and Tobago. Naipaul received recognition for novels that focus on East Indians living in the Caribbean.

Lovelace whose works won a Commonwealth prize wrote on issues of poverty, education, and village life. The French - speaking Caribbean saw prominent contemporary writers in Daniel Maxim of Guadeloupe and Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau of Martinique. Chamoiseau explores issues of black identity, and creolecultural identity. The latter was produced along with Jean Bernabe and Rafael Confiant. Chamoiseau won the Pri Goncourt for his novel *Texaco* (1929). Noted female writers are Maryse Conde of Guadeloupe who is considered a significant voice among female writers, having won several French prizes for her literary work.

Simone Schwarz -Bart, also of Guadeloupe, writes of the search for identity while Nancy Morejon of Cuba is recognized as a leading poetic voice. Her collection entitled *Cuaderno de Granada* 1984 (Grenada Notebook, 1984) honors those who participated in Grenada's socialist revolution in 1983. Caribbean writers have impacted greatly on the international arena and have gained worldwide recognition for their numerous works. Literary critics are also recognizing the Caribbean roots of some African American writers who are explicit about their Caribbean parentage