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## *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* by Bruce King (Book Review)

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In *Another Life* Derek Walcott wrote, "I had entered the house of literature as a houseboy"; Jamaican poet Mervyn Morris signified on this image in his *The Pond* when he declared, "And these are my rooms now." The journey that Walcott makes from "houseboy" to master/ruler/owner of the house of literature (the Nobel Laureate is frequently acclaimed the greatest poet writing in the English language) is painstakingly detailed in Bruce King's tome *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life*.

Arranged according to places where Walcott spent the majority of time, the book is in eight parts, beginning with "St. Lucia: Formation and Early Writing" and ending with "St. Lucia, New York, London: Laureate," and subdivided into thirty-four chapters. King explains that his goals in this work required that he reject a simpler and perhaps more interesting thematic organization for this biography. Thus we have a (sometimes tedious) chronological,

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year-by-year, day-by-day, work-by-work, relationship-by-relationship development.

King, one of the most prolific and respected scholars of British and Commonwealth literatures, especially Caribbean, provides detailed accounts of all the major events in Walcott's life, including his mixed heritage on both sides (we are told much more about the White grandfathers than the Black grandmothers); his "perfect" artist/father who died when he was fifteen months old and whose cultural ideals the young Derek was raised to complete; his mother's training and encouragement of the young poet/artist; the religious, educational, and cultural life in the St. Lucia of his childhood; his relationships with Harold Simmons, Dunstan St. Omer, and other early friends and mentors; the disastrous fire in Castries in 1948 (which destroyed the Castries of his childhood and represented the start of Americanization there); his attendance at the University College of the West Indies; his founding of The Little Carib Theatre Workshop (later the Trinidad Theatre Workshop) in Trinidad, his efforts to raise funds, produce plays, and travel with them to the United States, and finally his break with them; his Rockefeller Fellowship to study drama in New York; his relationships with Robert Lowell, Joseph Brodsky, Susan Sontag, and other writers whom he met in the United States and Europe; his relationships with his publishers; the critical reception of his work; his teaching in the United States; his winning of countless grants and awards, including the MacArthur and Nobel; and his dream of returning to St. Lucia, living by the sea, and painting. In each of these accounts we learn more about the evolution and development of what become the major subjects and themes in Walcott's work: race and color, history and colonialism, identity, exile, gender, and language. In each of these accounts, we are also provided details of the poems written and published and the plays created and produced. In many instances King provides useful summaries and explications of individual works and places them in the context of the larger Walcott canon, thus helping us to appreciate the evolution of this complex and contradictory genius.

King's detailing of Walcott's achievements acknowledges his failures as well. We are told that he is rumored to be "the only person to have failed a Diploma in Education at the University of the West Indies" and that his *The Capeman*, written with Paul Simon, was "the biggest flop in Broadway history." Despite his winning almost every prestigious award available to writers in the Caribbean, the United States, and England and the record-breaking success of many of his plays and publications, Walcott's greatest failure seems to be his continual financial problems. Even with the substantial awards provided by the MacArthur Fellowship and the Nobel Prize and with constantly increasing remuneration for teaching, reading, and lecturing, Walcott continued to experience financial difficulties. Chapter 18 (1974) begins, "Walcott remained in need of money"; Chapter 20 (1977-1978) begins, "Walcott was broke"; the second sentence of Chapter 21 (1979) reads, "He needed money for his mortgage and taxes"; Chapter 29 (1992-1993) ends, "There were amused comments about how he was working towards a second Nobel Prize to pay his debts." We are reminded ad nauseam of his financial woes until somehow, despite King's detailing of his debts even after winning the Nobel, we are told at the beginning of Chapter 30 (1993) that "the early years of genteel poverty [were ended] . . . he was among the wealthy."

The book has a twenty-four-page inset of pictures of Walcott, his family, friends, and associates, his sketches, and his productions. These provide a useful, if somewhat uneven, visual history of his life and work. Unfortunately there is no picture of any but his first wife and no picture of his daughter Lizzie.

While this story of Walcott's life from 1930 to 2000 offers little basic information that is really new, it does provide a number of specific details. Everyone knew about his financial problems, for example; what King does is to provide the exact dollar amount of all of the income, the expenses, the loans, the losses. Everyone knew that Walcott enjoyed drinks and parties; what King does is tell us where, when, and with whom.

As King himself observes in his preface, this account of Walcott's life and writing is "a long haul"; he goes on to declare that "lives are not clear unless you take the blood out of them and reduce them to ideas and illustrations." While any Walcott scholar and reader of this book will appreciate King's efforts to show the many sides of this complex and talented man, husband, father, poet, dramatist, artist, and teacher, one cannot help but wish at times for a little more blood to help us digest the ideas and illustrations and long cataloguing of production costs, cast members, lecture dates, etc., ad nauseam. This is a masterful work of scholarship, but one that it is easy to put down. It is often tedious and boring. One wishes that more of the story could have been told through a compelling narrative that captivates our interest, perhaps most closely realized in the account of the announcement, awarding, celebrations, and impact of the Nobel award. One wishes too for more intimate and revealing glimpses of Derek Walcott; while one would never wish that a scholarly work like this would degenerate into a salacious detailing of Walcott's marriages and affairs, the reader is provided little beyond the bare details about Walcott's relations with his love interests, wives, and even children. Perhaps here King was overly cautious because of Walcott's caveat that the book avoid "unnecessary private and family matters," but given that his private life is the source (real, metaphorical, thematic) of so much of his work, one questions the brief treatment of some areas of that life. On the other hand, his relationships with his mother, grandmother, aunts, teachers, mentors, and friends (especially his literary and theater associates) are given extensive treatment, and all of these help us to understand Walcott and his works. The one exception here is his relationship with his twin brother Roderick; there is no lack of references to Roderick's life, interests, and works, and there are a number of comparisons of the two boys. Yet the reader is told almost nothing about their relationship.

As might be expected in a book of this size, there are some passages in which so much material is thrown together that we lose any sense of coherence and transition. At one point, after discussing the editing of a Walcott poem, King begins cataloguing Walcott's university lectures with "after finishing in Virginia," having made no prior or subsequent comments about the Virginia trip or college—which may well have been his visit to my university at the time, Virginia Commonwealth University. On another occasion King writes in the same paragraph (referring to the three wives), "Sigrid and Margaret had learned to accept each other, unlike the terrible and continuing clash between Norline and Margaret. Even now Walcott was alert for new local artists."

The reader may occasionally be exasperated by King's failure to clearly indicate the source of some information. He explains at one point that he could not possibly document all of the information in this mammoth book. Unfortunately this makes it difficult at times to separate fact from opinion, objective account from rumor, one source from another, or a source from the author. For example, it appears at times that something one person has said about Walcott is presented as fact, when it may be mere opinion or even rumor. At other times King summarizes a source, but then concludes with some interpretation or question that seems to be his own, after which the footnote reference is given. At times there is an unquoted "I" that is ambiguous (is it the most recent source quoted or is it King himself?). While it is usually obvious that certain information comes

from a clearly identified source in the form of an interview, telephone conversation, letter, etc., there are times when neither source nor context is clear. Occasionally dates are given or can be determined by checking the brief listing of slightly more than a page in the bibliography of personal communications with the author, interviews, telephone interviews, and e-mails. This listing seems woefully incomplete, however, when compared with the long lists of individuals whom King thanks for assistance in his acknowledgments and mentions in the text.

Finally, though this is a biography approved by Derek Walcott, it is clear that King did not consult him to clear up certain points or to get his view on some of the controversial issues that arise here. Near the end of the book when King reflects on his decision to write this biography for Walcott's seventieth birthday as "a small repayment for my enjoyment of his work," he adds, "He would not be very co-operative, he has his own life to lead and it was in full swing." Whether this suggests that Walcott made it clear from the beginning that he should not be bothered with this project beyond making papers available or whether Walcott simply did not respond to King's possible requests for interviews is not clear. King makes good use of Walcott's writings (indeed, this biography is greatly facilitated by King's access to letters, unpublished manuscripts, and even the author's diaries), but one often laments the lack of a view from the horse's mouth. King acknowledges, "I would need to depend mostly on the paper trail and interviews with others"; unfortunately, he has been less than thorough in his consultation of the latter.

Though King is a meticulous and careful scholar, there is the occasional lapse: One wonders, for example, why he included John Hearne and Andrew Salkey among those who "preceded [Walcott] about a decade," given that they were only four and two years older than he, respectively, and published their first works after his appeared. Velma Pollard was not at Jamaica College (the boy's school) as King suggests on p. 100, but Excelsior High School. Another annoying problem is the all-too-frequent repetition of information.

After combing through this encyclopedic volume, I was left with the certainty that I would be returning to it time after time for some facts, figures, and details of Walcott's life, some examinations of specific works, and a review of critical responses to a book. I will certainly use it to check dates, names, summaries, and explications whenever I teach a Walcott work. But just as certain is the recognition that to flesh out the "bloodless" information in this biography, one must await the promised Walcott autobiography or turn to one of those countless, remarkably revealing lines from the poet himself. In the following four lines written over twenty years ago (reminiscent of Herman Melville's declaration that "America . . . [is] not a narrow tribe, no: our blood is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble currents, all pouring into one. We are not a nation so much as a world"), Walcott gives an intimacy to most of the themes, contradictions, and goals that King has expounded in these 700-plus pages:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,  
I had a sound colonial education,  
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,  
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation. ("The Schooner Flight")

Blood or no blood, occasional flaw or annoying stylistic lapse, long-winded or not, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* is a tremendous contribution to Walcott studies and serves to complement a number of very fine books that have appeared, starting with the first monograph published on Walcott, Edward Baugh's *Derek Walcott: Memory as Vision: Another Life* (1978), and including,

among others, critical studies by Robert Hamner (*Derek Walcott* [1981] and *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's "Omeros"* [1997]), Rei Terada (*Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry* [1992]), John Thieme (*Derek Walcott* [1999]), and even King himself (*Derek Walcott and West Indian Drama: "Not Only a Playwright But a Company": The Trinidad Theatre Workshop 1959-1993* [1995]). Though one might quibble about King's claim that "this is the first literary biography of . . . Derek Walcott," there is no doubt that it is the most complete and current literary biography of this eminent writer.