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Bennett, Louise

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Bennett, Louise (1919–). Louise Bennett, affectionately called Miss Lou, is Jamaica's most beloved folk poet, performer, and collector; she was born in Kingston, Jamaica, on September 7, 1919. Her father, a baker, died when she was seven years old, and her mother worked as a dressmaker to provide for her only child. She was educated in Jamaica at Calabar Elementary School, Excelsior High School, and St. Simon's College, after which she received a scholarship to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in England.

Very early in life Bennett developed an interest in writing poetry. Though her first efforts at writing were modeled on the English poetry to which she was exposed in school, it was not long before she was motivated to experiment with her native **dialect**. From her earliest poems, she has devoted herself to capturing the realities and nuances of the lives of her countrymen through the rhythms and vocabulary and metaphors of **folk speech**. Her goal throughout her career has been to “transmit the love of the folklore of our country to others” (“A Tribute to Miss Lou,” D4).

When she was in her teens, she began performing her poetry locally at concerts and later on radio programs. When she went to England to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, she continued her radio performances with the BBC. From 1953 to 1955 she lived in New York, where, among other things, she did some radio work and produced a folk musical production. It was during this brief period in New York that she met **Langston Hughes**, with whom she maintained a warm friendship, the two folklore aficionados often discussing and sharing their works over the years. In 1955 she returned to Jamaica, where she continued her study of folklife, including visiting and observing the **Maroon societies**, old-time tea meetings, digging matches, religious ceremonies, **dinkies (wakes)**, country weddings, concerts, and field days throughout the country. She continued to work in radio, television, and the theater, and to write poetry, **folktales**, and dramas, making use of the materials from her study of Jamaican folklore. From 1970 to 1982 she was the host of a popular television show for children called *Ring Ding*, a project that was a part of her lifetime goal to assure that “de pickney-dem learn de sinting dat belong to dem” (the children learn about the things that belong to them, that is, their own culture).

Beginning with her first volume of poetry, *Verses in Jamaican Dialect*, which appeared in 1942, Bennett has published at least six books of poems, all of them with small, local presses. The poems brought together in 1966 in *Jamaica Labrish* presented a representative sampling of her work. A smaller but more selective collection edited by Mervyn Morris appeared in 1982, *Selected Poems*, and is the most accessible and compact source of the corpus of this prolific poet. Her collection of **Anancy** tales, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, was published in 1979. *Aunt Roachy Seh*, a collection from *Miss Lou's Views*, a radio program that aired from 1965 to 1982, appeared in 1993. In 2003 Sangster Bookstores reprinted *Jamaica Labrish*, *Anancy and Miss Lou*, *Selected Poems*, and *Aunty Roachy Seh*.

In *Anancy and Miss Lou*, Bennett presents forty-four tales of the popular **trickster** of Africa and the West Indies, most of them traditional tales impressed by the distinctive trademark of the **storytelling** style of the inimitable “Miss Lou.” No matter how many versions of these tales readers may have heard before, they can experience a special delight in, as Mervyn Morris puts it in his introduction, “hear[ing] the voice of Louise Bennett talking from the page.” Furthermore, as Morris illustrates in his comparison of some of Bennett’s stories with other printed versions, “The Louise Bennett story is

more fully developed and is told with greater sophistication.” Bennett herself explained the enduring attraction to the African trickster hero Anancy: “But the way I learnt Anancy, I knew Anancy as a child and it was a joy-y. We loved to listen to the stories. We loved to hear about this little trickify man, you know, and one thing we knew, that this man was magic, and we could never be like him. You know—he is a magic man. He could spin a web and become a spider whenever he wanted to. You can’t do that, so you better not try the Anancy’s tricks, you know, but it was *fun!*” (Dance, 28). The fun and delight of the antics of this little “trickify man” are dramatically and memorably captured in the tales in this collection in which Anancy employs his cunning and wit to achieve his often selfish and greedy goals, which range from appropriating the choice food to winning the hand of the daughter of the king. Though Anancy is occasionally outwitted, he most often prevails over those other animals he attempts to deceive (including his wife, his children, and the wide range of animals in his world, such as Pig, Wasp, Dawg, Crab, Cow, Tiger, Mongoose, Monkey, Mosquito, Lizard, Nanny Goat, Puss, Toad, and Donkey). Several of Bennett’s tales explain certain animal characteristics and attribute their presence to Anancy. Thus, we learn why “Pig got long-mout,” why “Wasp noh got noh teet,” why “a hungry mawga dawg him got two sink ina him side dem,” why “Crab got dat tick shell pon him back,” and so on, ad infinitum. In each case, Bennett explains, “Is Anancy meck it!”

Long impressed with the beauty, vitality, and strength of the Jamaican folk, Bennett has devoted her career to faithfully portraying them in their own language. That she chose to work in dialect did not endear her to most of the Jamaican intelligentsia, but this never deterred her: “I believe that my language is the best! ... I feel that if I have something to say, I say it in the language that people have been saying it around me for years, for hundreds of years, before they knew how to say it in any other language.... And this language is going on still. It is still the strongest thing that’s happening around here” (unpublished interview with Daryl Cumber Dance, Gordon Town, Jamaica, September 15, 1978). Indeed, Bennett insisted in an interview with Dennis Scott, “I think in the dialect” (Scott, 97).

Bennett is an oral poet, one who frequently performs her work and one whose work is often designed to be performed. Fortunately for those who have not heard her recite her work, she has done many recordings, among them *Jamaican Folk Songs* (Folkways Records, 1954), *Jamaican Singing Games* (Folkways Records, 1954), *Children’s Jamaican Songs and Games* (Folkways Records, 1957), *West Indian Festival of Arts* (Cook, 1958), *Miss Lou’s Views* (Federal Records, 1967), *Listen to Louise* (Federal Records, 1968), *The Honourable Miss Lou* (Premiere Productions, 1981), “Yes M’Dear”: *Miss Lou Live* (Imani Music, 1983), *Anancy Stories* (Federal Records), *Carifesta Ring Ding* (Record Specialists, 1976), *Lawd Di Riddim Sweet* (Sangster Bookstores, 1999), and *Ring Ding Again* (Creative Production and Training Centre, Ltd., 2003).

Bennett has received numerous awards, including the Member of the British Empire award for work in Jamaican literature and theater (1960), a Musgrave Silver Medal for her research and contributions to Jamaican cultural studies and folklore (1965), the Norman Manley Award for Excellence in the Arts (1972), the Order of Jamaica Award for work in the field of native culture (1974), the Musgrave Gold Medal in recognition of her contribution to the development of the arts in Jamaica and the Caribbean (1978), honorary degrees of doctor of letters from the University of the West Indies (1983) and York University in Toronto, Canada (1988), an appointment as a Member of the Order of Merit on Jamaica's Independence Day in 2001, production of a film in her honor by the Agency for Public Information in Jamaica (*The Hon. Miss Lou*, 1979), and induction as a fellow of the Institute of Jamaica in 2003.

Bennett lived in Gordon Town, a village in the mountains just outside Kingston, for thirty-five years with her husband, Eric Coverley, and their many adopted children until her husband's ill health caused them to relocate in the early 1980s to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and then in 1987 to Toronto, Canada. Her husband died in Toronto at the age of ninety-one in 2002. Bennett's return to Jamaica as a special guest at the 2003 Emancipation Celebrations sparked the grandest, most venerable welcome of any figure since Haile Selassie visited in 1966, where he was greeted by Rastafarians as the "Lion of Judah," "King of Kings," "the Elect of God." No less enthusiastic and devout were the crowds that welcomed Bennett at the airport and lined the streets wherever she went on this first visit since she moved to Canada.

Bennett continues to live in Canada, where she is working on her memoirs.

Further Reading: Cooper, Carolyn, 1978, "'Noh Lickle Twang': An Introduction to the Poetry of Louise Bennett," *World Literature Written in English* 17: 317–327; Dance, Daryl Cumber, 1992, "Louise Bennett," in *New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers* (Yorkshire, England: Peepal Tree); Doumerc, Eric, 2000, "Louise Bennett and the Mento Tradition," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 314: 23–31; *The Gleaner*, 2003, "A Tribute to Miss Lou," August 5, D1–12; Morris, Mervyn, 1979, "Introduction," in *Anancy and Miss Lou* (Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster's Book Stores); Morris, Mervyn, 1982, "Introduction," in *Selected Poems, Louise Bennett* (Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster's Book Stores); Morris, Mervyn, 1986, "Louise Bennett," in *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Daryl Cumber Dance (New York: Greenwood Press); Morris, Mervyn, 1967, "On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously," *Jamaica Journal* 1: 69–74; Ramazani, Jahan, 2001, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); Scott, Dennis, 1968, "Bennett on Bennett," *Caribbean Quarterly* 14: 97–101.

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