

An Interview with Vladimir Lucien:

Winner of the 2015 OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature

saying to me, almost hauntingly, "He was not a religious man." That juxtaposition of the candle and Rawle's comment has never left me. Reminds me of my own dilemma.

So Sounding Ground was trying to begin reconciling these two things which also came down to me from my parents: my father who was once a poet reciting on the platform of a leftist political party, and my mother who needed the experience (her words) of church on a Sunday. So, for instance, Vahni has always been someone I knew I could speak to about that (m)Other world of spirituality. In our way of speaking in Caribbean "intellectual circles," faith and belief and spirituality seem to be terribly absent or peripheral as a useful way of speaking about experience. Rawle Gibbons has been instrumental and different in this respect. On the other hand, reading, for the first time, Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, despite very voluble contestations of the myth of African inferiority, gave me comprehensively the history of these places' interaction with each other, within a framework, an understanding/philosophy of how history, how societies work. Kamau does the same thing in *The Arrivants — Rights of Passage and Masks*, in particular. CLR did the same for me in *Black Jacobins*. So I'm moving slowly towards creating a kind of Bois Caiman within.

SM: Sounding Ground draws attention to the power and beauty of Obeah in a number of poems. Can you talk about Obeah and its role in the book?

VL: While finishing *Sounding Ground*, I began an MPhil in Cultural Studies, in which I chose to study something I was taught to fear like the average Caribbean

kid: Obeah. So I've spent the last few years speaking with Obeah men about their practice. Now, the language these practitioners have to speak about their practice is still Euro-Christian — ultimately colonial. But you can feel words being stretched, that some of them either ill-fit the meaning they are trying to convey or are totally incapable of containing the meanings. Especially the ways in which they spoke of "good" and "evil," which I didn't feel was tendentious or apologetic. So it brought me to a crossroads, a Kalfu in which I met all that has been said about Obeah and it being both confirmed and complicated and even contested in what I was meeting. It was a case of not knowing what/who to believe. So there are poems where I try to capture Obeah as a response to social degradation. Which it is. I also tried to capture dark moments in its history, and one having to cope morally with that, even while believing in its right to exist unmolested. I think what Obeah taught me, thus far, is that one has to see force and morality separately. Morality being the application of force to either good or evil ends. So Obeah on its own cannot be evil; however, a particular application of it may be. Anyway, I wanted, in writing about my experiences doing that research and learning what I did, to not be an apologist or to cast it merely as an anti-colonial force, because it certainly was not that, or not that alone. I wanted to be responsible in the way I wrote about it.

SM: Your rhythms in *Sounding Ground* are very strong — this book shows an obsession with sound and a very crafted ear (typical marks of a first-class poet). Your rhythms, for me, though so strong and so beautiful, are not easily traceable (for me, anyway) to a particular language — though I do notice the reliance, of course, on what I

presume are your first languages: Creole and Standard English. Do you speak French? Other languages? I do trace certain rhythms to the language of poetry itself, perhaps. Can you talk a bit about rhythm in the book and your influences in terms of sound?

VL: I am learning French now. I speak English and love picking up things from the varieties of English in the Caribbean, and I also speak Kwéyòl, also known as French-lexicon creole. In *SG*, I was interested in probing the chasms and seismic pressure between these languages that I inhabit. In "Donbwé," for instance, I was interrogating, at one level, the quarrels we have about what seem like minor differences in the Caribbean (I was in NY recently when a bunch of writers were having a very entertaining quarrel about what constitutes authentic callaloo! No small matter!), and how eventually the words fail us, and the arguments fall flat and it is finally in the doing that understanding may come or these differences fail to matter. Whose dumping is the real deal means nothing to a starving mouth.

I was very conscious of the richness of the various languages I possessed and also of the creative potential in their conflicted relationship to each other. And also, I was very aware of the ostensible conflicted relationship between (still) underlying ideas in society of poetry as high art and its fraught relationship to the vernacular we speak in our various islands. And, well, all languages ride rhythm like a dubplate, no? To put it simply, I hadn't drawn out blueprints and, then, put the poems down. I was playing and tinkering with the rhythm throughout the process guided in a way by its content. I wanted the sound of those moments and stories which was to be found in my immediate surroundings.

In a more general way, rhythm is what invites the Gods to dance. Rhythm is

what we share while we wait for them to arrive, even unto the end of the World. TS Eliot speaks of culture as being the incarnation of religion or, more accurately, religion and culture being two aspects of the same thing. I believe him. Without the concentration inherent in the provincial, one is spiritually diffuse. Or at least that is my reasoning and path. So the rhythms have to be true and have to be mine: ours. I remember my father telling me a story about when he approached Walcott to show him some of his poetry. Walcott spoke in his Walcott way and eventually started speaking about rhythm, insisting that "If there is no rhythm, there is no God."

SM: I just want to say big congratulations on this very great honour of winning the Bocas prize. More than that, congratulations on putting out such a fine work. Are there any other questions you'd like addressed that I haven't asked, or would you like to add anything?

VL: Rien.

Vladimir Lucien is a writer, actor and critic from St Lucia. In addition to the Bocas Prize, Lucien has also been awarded the first prize in the poetry category of the Small Axe Literary Competition in 2013. Some of his poems have been translated into Dutch and published in the literary journal *Tortuca*. Lucien is the co-editor of the anthology *Sent Lisi: Poems and Art of St. Lucia* (2014) and the screenwriter of the documentary *The Merikins*, which premiered at the Trinidad and Tobago film festival (2013).

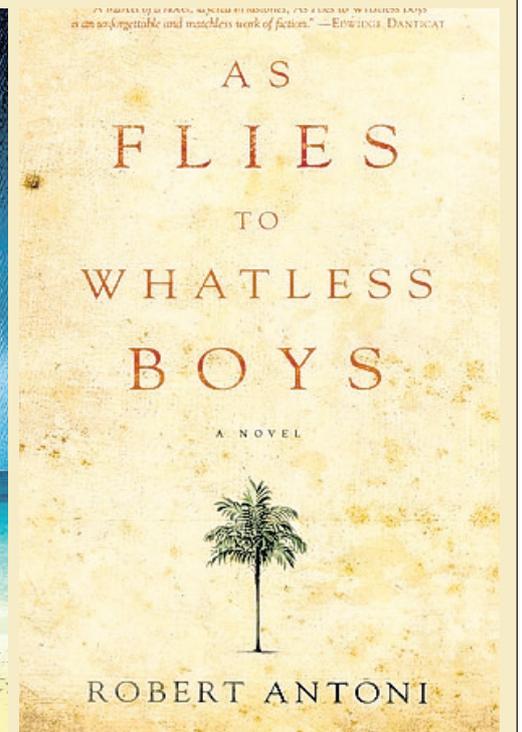
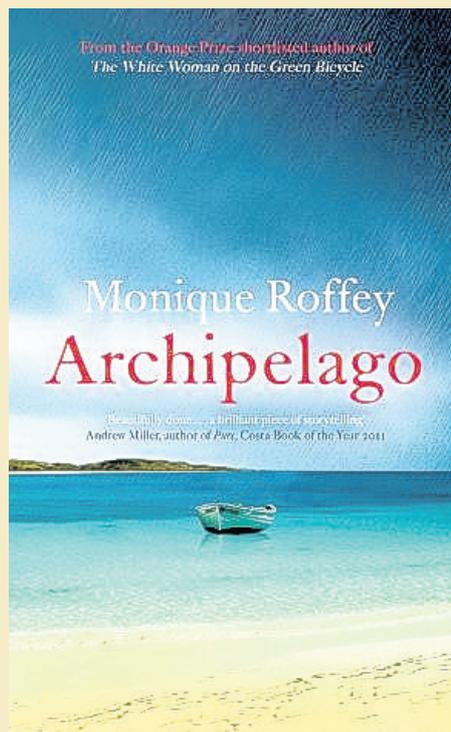
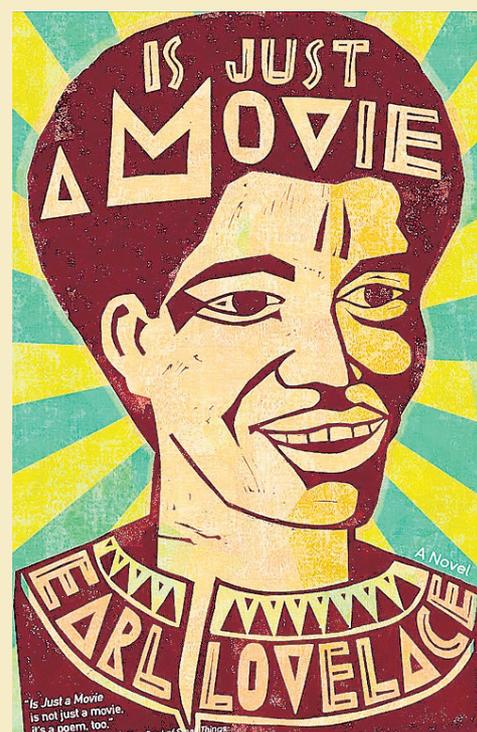
Dr Stephanie McKenzie is an associate professor, English Programme, Memorial University of Newfoundland (Grenfell Campus), Canada.

White Egrets

POEMS

Derek Walcott

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE



Past winners of the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature: *White Egrets* (2011), *Is Just a Movie* (2012), *Archipelago* (2013), *As Flies to Whatless Boys* (2014)