

Title: *Red Jacket*, by Pamela Mordecai. Dundurn Press (TAP Books Ltd.) Toronto. 452 pages + glossary (453-62)

Reviewed by: Stephanie McKenzie

Wonderfully human: A Review of *Red Jacket*, Pamela Mordecai's First Novel

Pamela Mordecai's first novel, *Red Jacket*, is a wonderfully written and welcomingly plot-driven novel. No wonder it has just been made a finalist for this year's prestigious Writers' Trust Award of Canada.

The book is largely the story of Grace Carpenter, a girl from a fictional Caribbean country, St Christopher. A note on the text indicates that Mordecai's imagined St Chris is "smaller than Jamaica and slightly further to the west and north, just south of the western tip of Cuba."

Grace is adopted and raised by/with the Carpenter family, her Ma and Pa, Gramps (Grace's favourite and closest family member), and siblings: Sammy, Princess, Edgar, Stewie, Conrad and Pansy. Grace's birth mother, Phyllis, who gave birth to Grace when Phyllis was only 12 years old, has gone to live in the States, and Grace and the reader will discover that Grace is the product of incest and rape. However, Mordecai's novel is not grim. This is but one detail in the rich life of Grace who, as a little girl, dreams of making her life big: "Whole morning she watch for ships heaving into view from nowhere or slipping away over the edge of the world. Someday she will go too. Someday she will have business to take her to places far from St Chris" (21). Grace is right.

Grace defeats all odds, goes on to study in Canada, at the University of Toronto, and in the United States, at the University of Michigan. Grace is an intellectual, and her prowess will also lead her to a fictionalised country in West Africa, Mabuli, which Mordecai has "situated between Mali and Burkino Faso, taking up a bit of each and bordering Côte d'Ivoire in the south" ("Note"). Grace has gone there to study HIV/AIDS and the manner in which it has ravaged Mabuli. Here, Grace will meet Jimmy, a Jesuit priest "[o]bsessed . . . with sex and celibacy" (83), a "soothsayer" who "see[s] the future . . . divine[s], foretell[s], whatever the hell it is (98), and a "certified midwife" (326) whose work is "twofold: to assist with stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS and to minister to those with the disease and their loved ones" (182). Jimmy is a fully rounded and intricate character among many in this work. Mordecai's impressive dependence on

characterisation is underscored by the fact that Jimmy and the novel's other prime characters give the chapters their names. The novel moves between portraits of Grace, Jimmy, Mark (a philandering university chancellor) and Gramps (already mentioned), who is known for his love of Gracie and "brewing home remedies from banned substances" (129).

Red Jacket is an intricate story that depicts the human in everyone and suggests what it means to be human: to err, to love, to forgive, to hate, to feel, to embody contradictions. As Jimmy muses at one point, even Joseph and Mary must have been human: "[N]o one spoke of Joseph as a normal male with a man's desires. It is such an obvious human question. Did Joseph want Mary?" (87)

The novel is also a story of what it means to immigrate from the Caribbean to North America. In a letter to Grace, who has immigrated to Toronto, Gramps writes: "You are a black person in white people's country and you are there on sufferance. They will not be afraid of telling you so. LEARN TO SWALLOW YOUR SPIT" (118). *Red Jacket* also reminds one of the heterogeneity of the Caribbean. There is Grace herself, "the red jacket in a black family," whose colouring leads shopkeeper Mr Wong (remindful of the Chinese populations in the Caribbean) to remark "Little red jacket! Like we all don't know how the hair so red-dreddy and soft!" (30) However, Grace is not alone when it comes to a mixed inheritance. Walking home from school one day, Grace "looking at the people around her and thinking that some of these town people look so mix up, she can't pick out

any one heritage" (53).

In fact, *Red Jacket* makes us aware that no one is purely bred. One of Grace's lovers, Charlie, is "American born. His mother, from Louisiana, is half-black and half-Native American; his father, from Maine, is half-French and half-Irish" (257). Notably, *Red Jacket* does not define or engage in concepts of racial superiority. Writing to her birth mother, Phyllis, and thinking of the white friends she's befriended in Toronto — Steph, the Scotts and Maisie — Graces notes, "I can't bleat about white racism either. It's not like there wasn't any in St Chris" (242).

But *Red Jacket* does challenge colonial thinking. Father John Kelly, a "white American" come to Mabuli, can't compete with polyglot Jimmy: "Jimmy thinks of the four languages he speaks, the fact that most Mabulians speak two or three" (83). And Grace arrives at the University of Toronto and suggests to the woman who tells her she must take "a language proficiency test," who barely acknowledges Grace, that she "speak[s] two [languages], three if [she] count[s] [her] Creole (120). This novel also questions "[w]hy is the greed always in African governments, never in the European lust for gold, oil, diamonds?" (328)

Mordecai also highlights problems and realities common to the Caribbean. Through Grace's thoughts, the reality of absent baby-fathers is raised: "she wonders if anyone has done a study on how many men in the Caribbean have children about whom they know nothing" (404). Grace develops a crush on a young man named Lindsay only to discover "that in truth he love a Carpenter, but not she — her brother Edgar (155), though "[s]odomomy is illegal in St Chris [and] [h]omosexuals have to hide" (156).

What stands out, too, is that Mordecai's novel is to be noted for its musicality of language and a rich and extensive vocabulary. This is not surprising. Mordecai,

of course, is an accomplished award-winning poet, and the richness of the novel's language surfaces at every twist and turn, especially in intricate descriptions of the different places in which the novel is set, such as Mabuli:

Mabuli has been lucky. Tributaries of the River Bani, next door in Mali, traverse Mabuli's long, thin caterpillar shape, hugging the western border of Burkina Faso. Once the rains cease and it is clear there will be no further celestial blessings for a good long while, the Oti, the association of all Mabuli's holy men — imams, shamans, priests and marabouts — begin to preach the husbandry of water. People hoard it in containers sunk in basins of sand and stored in dark places. If they travel with it, they hide the water gourds in larger vessels of sand or seeds. The drought tests them, but the country weathers it. By god's grace and by dint of many prayers, the Mabenke, larger stream feeding the Bani, runs low, but never dry. (85)

Red Jacket is as much a celebration of language as it is a good story driven by very real people, their strengths and weaknesses. Mordecai's use of what she explains is "Chrissie Creole [and which] is much like Jamaican Creole" ("Note") lends rhythm and pleasing sounds to this novel. When Grace considers the difference between her first language and the English largely spoken in Toronto, it is as if Mordecai is addressing the very "keyboard" upon which her novel is played: "[H]ow is she going to make these people understand that their one-note English is nothing like the keyboard of language that every St Chris child in primary school can play?" (132)

Notably, the novel ends, though, with a return to a consideration of what it means to be human. An older Grace realises she hasn't had such a bad and fruitless life: "[S]he's had a baby that she could have dumped. What else is required of her? She has studied hard, worked hard, tried to make the world a better place" (448).

Indeed, that is what *Red Jacket* achieves. Through its poetic prose and compassionate depictions of humans frail and strong in their contradictions, the novel is an important addition which makes the literary world stronger, more beautiful.

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rich and scandalous, dead at 77

published this year.

Collins told *People* magazine, which first reported her death Saturday, September 19, in her final interview September 14 that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer over six years ago, but she had chosen to keep the news among family, confiding mainly in her three daughters, 54-year-old Tracy, 48-year-old Tiffany and 46-year-old Rory.

A family statement called Collins "a true inspiration, a trailblazer for women in fiction and a creative force. She

will live on through her characters but we already miss her beyond words".

In *The Sunday Times Rich List 2011*, Collins, who held dual citizenship — British (by birth) and American (after becoming naturalised in 1960), was listed as the UK's fifth richest author with an estimated fortune of £60 million. In 2013 she was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) Birthday Honours for services to fiction and charity. Collins was married twice, the second time to art gallery and nightclub owner Oscar Lerman in 1965. Lerman

died in 1992. She was then engaged to Los Angeles businessman Frank Calcagnini, who died in 1998.

Asked by the *AP* in 2011 if she was dating anyone, Collins said "I have a man for every occasion."

"When I was a kid growing up, I used to read my father's Playboy and I'd see these guys and they had fantastic apartments and cars," she said. "I have all of that now. Why would I want to hook myself up with one man when I've had two fantastic men in my life? One was my husband for over 20 years, and one was my fiancé for six years."