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

Pamela Mordecai’s first novel, Red Jacket, is a wonderfully written and well-received 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 fictitious 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 her family, her Mo and Pa, Gramps, her mother and father (Grace’s favourite family member), and siblings: Sammy, Princess, Edgar, Steve, and Conrad and Paney. 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, the 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: “While setting out, she rapidly leaves her view of a distant, far-off world.”... (86)

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 life in West Africa, and in Toronto, where Mordecai has “Situated between Africa and America, the book is set in a place that could be any place, but is actually a mix of cultures and experiences. The novel itself is a mix of cultures and languages.”...

The novel is also something of what it means to immigrate to the Caribbean from 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.”...

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 stopwatcher Mr Wong (remindful of the Chinese populations in the Caribbean) to remark “Little red jacket! Like we all don’t know how the hair is so reddy- and-reddly soft!” (30) However, Grace is not alone when it comes to a mixed heritage. Walking home from school one day, Grace “looking at the people around her and thinking that some of these 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-Irish and half-Irish. (257). Notably, Red Jacket does not define or engage in concepts of racial superiority. Witting to her birth mother, Phyllis, and thinking of the white friends she’s befriended in Toronto, she says to them, “I don’t see what the fuss is about white racism either. It’s not like there wasn’t any in St Chris” (242).

But Red Jacket does challenge colonial. Father John Kelly, a white American, comes to Mabuli, but the Mabuli people cannot compete with polgoyt Jimmy: “Jimmy thinks of the four languages he speaks, the fact that most Mabuli people speak two or three (83). And Grace enters 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 can’t (her Creole) (120). The novel also questions “What is the world like for anyone in the Caribbean?” (118)...

Mordecai also highlights problems and realities common to the Caribbean. Through Grace’s thoughts, the reality of absent fatherhood is raised: “Wonders of anyone who has done a study on how many men in the Caribbean have children about whom they know nothing” (104). Grace develops a crush on a young man named Leland only to discover “that this is true in every part of the world.” (104)...

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 the 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 Mal, traverse Mabuli’s long, thin cataphoric shape, Bog They, 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 Ota, the association of all Mabuli’s holy men — imams, shamans, priests and marabouts — begin to preach the household of water. People read in the trees’ leaves, in the veins of leaves, and on the leaves. When they read the leaves, the leaves dance, and the people weep. By god’s grace and by dint of my prayers, the Mabuli, 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 calls “the word” (86) 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 she is learning to speak, she notes: “I don’t think it’s the same.” (132)

Notably, the novel ends, though, with a return to a consideration of what it means to be human. An older Grace realizes she has lived with so many deceptions, but she says: “She’s had a baby, she could have dumped it. What else is required of her? She has studied hard, worked hard, tried to make the world a better place” (449). Indeed, this 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 corrects the literary world stranger, 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. She said that she had chosen to keep the news among family, confiding mainly in her three children, 54-year-old Tracy, 48-year-old Tiffany and 45-year-old Rory.

A family statement called Collins “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 1980, was listed as the UK’s richest author with an estimated fortune of £56 million. In 2016 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 1988. She was then engaged to Los Angeles businessman Frank Calacagna, 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 those 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.”