

Mark McWatt in Conversation about *Suspended Sentences: Fictions of Atonement*

Pamela McCallum and Aritha van Herk

Mark McWatt, Guyanese writer and scholar, is currently Professor of West Indian Literature at the Cave Hill (Barbados) campus of the University of the West Indies. He is a co-editor, with Stewart Brown, of *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse* (2005) and a joint editor of the *Journal of West Indian Literature*. He has also published two books of poetry, *Interiors* (1988) and *The Language of Eldorado* (1994). His short story collection, *Suspended Sentences: Fictions of Atonement* (2005), was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first book of fiction.

*Suspended Sentences* tells the stories of a group of students whose completion of the secondary school A-level examinations coincides with Guyanese independence in 1969. At a celebration party they vandalize the Sports Clubhouse of the Imperial Bank, and are consequently "sentenced" to each write a story about Guyana. These stories, brought together some twenty years later, make up the book. Their atonement is not only for the relatively minor incident of damaging the Clubhouse, but also for a moment in history when a generation of educated Guyanese left their homeland. In this sense, the book becomes a narrative, with both celebratory and melancholy tones, of the intriguing splendor of the Guyanese landscape, the diversity of its peoples, the multiplicity of its potential, and the erosion of that very potential.

We spoke with Mark McWatt in Calgary in March 2007. We began by asking about his turn to the short story form in *Suspended Sentences*.

*You had written two books of poetry before Suspended Sentences. What was appealing to you about shifting to prose? Was narrative a particularly useful strategy for what you wanted to say in the book?*

I didn't really think of it that way, but yes, there is a kind of a seduction in narrative. Even in poetry I had started writing in long narrative

sequences so that I was moving in that direction anyway. As for what I had to say, yes I suppose it could be better said in narrative, because I wanted to celebrate both the physical reality of Guyana, the landscape, which I had done in the poems, and to mourn what had become of the country. Also, I wanted to talk about the period from the 1960s on, and prose narrative seemed more appropriate than poetry.

*There is a strong sense of mourning in the book, perhaps most strongly felt in the fate of the characters, despite the exuberance of many of the stories.*

Yes, that is something I really feel. When I go back to Guyana and visit the university, there are always one or two people who say, "You should be here helping your country instead of teaching in Barbados." I do not pay too much attention to that, but I do feel a sense of guilt for, along with most of my class, having left Guyana. Although many of us tried to get back, it is just not possible.

*Suspended Sentences has resonances with fiction that has formed the canon of postcolonial literatures: the echo of Conrad's Heart of Darkness in Victor Nunes's tale of traveling into the interior and spending time at a "phantom outpost of civilization" (Suspended 70); the parallel with Rushdie's Midnight's Children in the association of the students' graduation with Guyana's independence; a hint of Faulkner's Emily ("A Rose for Emily") in the spinster, Miss Alma Fordyce. What do you see as the effect of these dialogues with other texts?*

Some of it was conscious, a lot of it wasn't. You mention Conrad and I really didn't have that in my mind as I was writing. Marquez yes, and one or two others, the story about the courtesan, "A Lovesong for Miss Lillian," is modeled in part upon a Garcia Marquez story called "Maria dos Prazeres." But I just feel that the context of everything that I write is literature itself, these things echo and re-echo, although I am happy to have them pointed out.

*It was fascinating reading the book because there were such obvious meta-narrative gestures, and you are also talking about the way we write fiction with an eye on all the fiction that has been written. How would you theorize about that?*

For me, I think reading is just a natural thing. The only way you can write fiction is if you have read; the reading leads to writing, and you are not always consciously aware of the process. But I think that when I am doing it I always like to try to gesture towards other authors not only just for the sake of gesturing, but also because I think they are important pointers to what is crucial for me. I always find it helpful when an author makes these signals. It's a kind of clue: think of Marquez, or think of this other writer at this point. It resonates as well with what is going on in my story, and it enlarges and enriches the writing.

*Do you think intertextual gestures are particularly significant for those of us who work in postcolonial literature because we are so burdened by the master narratives in the larger frame? Trying to work our stories into this enormous overarching tradition is a challenge.*

Yes, it is a challenge, and I think it is a necessary one. One of the things I want to do as a writer is to try and inscribe my own experiences, and what I see as the centre of Guyanese experiences. I can only go by what I have experienced (which would, of course, include accumulated reading). Postcolonial writing is always engaged in this process of writing back. I am not especially critically conscious in my writing. It's just that these kinds of connections come up at crucial points.

*You take up and use many genres in *Suspended Sentences*: science fiction, the travel story, the academic novel, the romance, magic realism, the epistolary novel, Caribbean folktales of shape shifting, the bakoo, and so on. What do you see as the strength of this mixture of genres?*

I suppose on one level you could say it is sort of self-indulgent. I just enjoyed myself exploring all of these forms and traditions that I have been drawing upon. It's a kind of translation or accommodation, wanting to accommodate your own experiences, your own vision, your own desires, and the physical reality of a place and a time into what you consider to be central or important forms in literature. Here I do not necessarily mean only canonical literature, but in literature in general. My impression is that every writer makes use of some other forms or traditions. A mixture of genres is very much in the spirit of this book

and how it uses framing, the characters, the different forms of storytelling and so on.

*Suspended Sentences also has strong affinities with Latin American literature—with Gabriel Garcia Marquez and others. Earlier we mentioned Conrad as an intertext for Victor Nunez's voyage up a river, but it could equally be situated alongside Alejo Carpentier's novel The Lost Steps [Los Pasos Perdidos] that tells the story of a trip up the Orinoco, a river in the same region as Guyana.*

Yes, through my wife, who is Colombian, I become aware of Latin American literature, especially the experimental writers, the Argentinian avant-garde, who play games with the rules of narrative. I am fond of Borges, particularly his short stories.

*Do you think that extensive cornucopia is part of the inheritance of Caribbean writers or is there one who you would privilege as an influence on your work?*

I am not sure I would privilege one. The first comment you made—the cornucopia—is what appeals to me. And, I have heard many people say I am not a Caribbean writer.

*Why? What are their reasons?*

They say I am not sufficiently concerned with using writing to redress the wrongs of history, and that there is not enough cultural nationalism in my writing. I am not sure I agree with that, but the comments reflect the climate in the Caribbean now.

*Your engagement with Guyana's history is fascinating. It is intriguingly oblique, and yet it seems to be everywhere in the stories. You do not mention the successive colonizations the country underwent (Dutch, English), nor slavery, nor the indentured labourers brought from India and China (and also Europe) in the nineteenth century. At the same time, in *Suspended Sentences* history is written into the characters and their narratives: the names of the different ethnic groups of Guyana, the indigenous peoples in Victor's Amerindian heritage; scenes like the story late in the collection which*

*recounts the seduction of Dornford's mother by the wealthy white man, and which re-enacts the past history of plantation societies, or the migration of many of the characters away from their homeland, a moment of recent history that has resonance across the Caribbean. How would you describe the book's engagement with history? You also associate the story of the students very strongly with the story of Guyana as a nation. The "vandalism" of the Clubhouse takes place alongside independence in 1969, and so many of the students become part of the emigration of the late 1960s and 1970s. Sometimes the choice is personal: a young homosexual man finds he can live more openly and freely in England than in Guyana. At other times, the act of leaving a homeland speaks strongly to a historical lack of opportunities. Suspended Sentences articulates this much more recent history together with the distant history of slavery and colonization. What are your reactions to readers who see the book as a narration of history?*

I am always asked some version of this question about history. My activity in history and the highlight of that history is in a sense inscribed into personality and identity. I do not draw any particular attention to it. I use characters and names that are quite plausible Indian or African names. I think they evoke the history of Guyana. It is difficult for people who are not familiar with Guyanese history to see that aspect of the story unless you draw particular attention to it, but I always prefer to just suggest it and move on with the story itself. So you evoke history in the name of the places and the people. Guyana has a particularly vivid history, and I do not like to dwell on it. On islands like Barbados the slaves planted cane and reaped it. The planting and reaping of cane in Guyana was extraordinarily arduous because the land on which cane was planted is below sea level. For every square mile of cane field, further miles of waterways and drainage, and higher-level waterways for transportation of the cane, had to be built. Shipping had to be done by water because the roads were too muddy to transport loads of cane. The slaves worked most of the time with shovels in their hands in heavy, waterlogged mud. It was a different kind of life than that lived by other Caribbean slaves.

The interior is important too: interior Guyana is different; it is extremely difficult to get there. That is why myths like *El Dorado* [the city of gold]

arose, to which I allude in *Suspended Sentences*. Colonists like Raleigh would go up the river, meet the first waterfall, and decide that it was too difficult to try to get around the obstacle. But then stories circulate that life is especially hard because the landscape is concealing something from us, something fabulous from which it wants to exclude us. And, as it were, these tales are part of your heritage; they are there, and together with the brutality of slavery and history, they produce the kind of people, the kind of stories, and the kind of superstitions that interest me.

*Visual art figures strongly in the stories. In one story, the young art student, Yasmin DeMattis, paints her way out of a bad relationship and reconnects with her father. In another story the artist, Alex Fonseca, imagines himself stepping into a painting and moving through time. And yet, visual art has a quite different effect than reading narrative; it's more immediate, perhaps more like poetry. How do you see the relationship between visual art and writing?*

I have always been fascinated by visual arts, and I love wandering around galleries. The character Yasmin is based loosely on my daughter, who studied art at the University of Toronto, so some of the scenery in that story pertains to those experiences, although she never had a boyfriend like the young man in the story. There is a very fine Guyanese artist who lives in Barbados, Stanley Greaves, who did the cover for one of my books of poetry. He was part of a panel on local television in Barbados when the book came out and he talked about how the two stories about art validated some of what he had been saying and doing all his life. It was a moment of recognition for him. I do not know about all that, but I have always been interested in arts and I think that there is a nice interplay between writing and the visual arts. It is productive to look at one through the other, so I try to reflect the values and the moods of art in written form. Art and literature can overlap and embrace each other. And the whole idea of entering a painting is a very strong metaphor of life, but it is not real because it is fiction. The image represents one kind of creation containing or reflecting or commenting on another creation. Again, the process is part of the layering and interpenetration of realities.

*The collage that your daughter, Ana McWatt, produced for the Peepal Press cover of Suspended Sentences is very intriguing. It represents a window, through which a viewer seems to see the 'real.' And yet, what is beyond the window is not quite 'real.' It is an invitation into a magical world.*

The Spanish translation of the book was just published in Cuba, and its cover uses another image of art: a Mexican painting, *Homage to Miro*, an abstract figure of a bottle with a face visible inside. It's very appropriate.

*It's quite audacious to introduce a character named "Mark McWatt" into the group of students. Obviously, he is a fictional character like the others, but the name does suggest an association with the author, or at least with the position of "author." Why did you, in effect, put yourself in the stories?*

It has definitely caused surprise. I received a University award in Barbados recently and at the ceremony the unfortunate public speaker had taken his facts from the fictional biography of "Mark McWatt", as in the stories! Many people who read the book have questions about it: does a character named Mark McWatt, for instance, mean that the other characters are also real? Perhaps I should not have done it.

*I want to take these issues further. In what contingent position have you situated this character? The fictional Mark McWatt in Suspended Sentences seems to be the one carrying the weight of atonement.*

To a certain extent, yes. He is the one who in the end has to pull the stories together; he has to urge the others to complete the task; he has to undertake the editing. He breathes a sigh of relief when the project is finished. And I personally have never been able to escape the feeling of a kind of lonely guilt for the betrayal of Guyana, by those of us who left, but also by those who remain.

*There is a very striking image in the introduction to The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse that you edited with Stewart Brown. It is the image of a "coffle," a group of slaves chained together. Such an image is fascinating to me because they are chained together, a collectivity, but they are also individ-*

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*uals. You comment that the coffin might be a figure for Caribbean literature in its diversity and its collectivity. What drew you to this image?*

The importance for me is that the slaves are singing. They are chained together, but they are still singing; the image reminds me of the Dylan Thomas line at the end of his poem, "Fern Hill": something like "Time held me green and dying/ Though I sang in my chains like the sea." The slaves are going off to do extremely hard work, but they are still singing. The song expresses solidarity and mourning, but also the fact that they can act, that things can change.

*Thank you.*