

Crisscrossing the River: An Interview with Caryl Phillips

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TAKEN TO ENGLAND at the "portable" age of 12 weeks from St. Kitts, one of the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean, 35-year-old Caryl Phillips grew up in Leeds, was educated at Oxford, and has spent his literary career probing the ramifications of displacement, a complex condition that he claims characterizes the twentieth century and "engenders a great deal of suffering, a great deal of confusion, a great deal of soul searching." Describing writers as "basically just people who are trying to organize their confusion," he has opted, it would seem, for the right calling. The rapidly growing list of honours for his prolific output certainly validates his choice. The author of five novels, Phillips was the recipient of the Malcolm X Award for his first novel, *The Final Passage* (1985), and the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize for his travel-commentary *The European Tribe* (1987). While *The Final Passage* and *A State of Independence* (1986) were "written out of a sense of great elation at having 're-discovered' the Caribbean," his third novel, *Higher Ground* (1989), encompasses everything from Africa in the days of slave trading to post-World War II Europe and the Black Power Movement. With the publication in 1991 of his fourth novel, *Cambridge*, which chronicles the story of Emily, a nineteenth-century woman who escapes an arranged marriage by travelling to her father's West Indian plantation where she is exposed to the effects of slavery and colonialism, Phillips garnered more serious attention in North America. Back "home" in England, he was subsequently named (*London*) *Sunday Times*' Young Writer of the Year in 1992 and listed among GRANTA's Best of Young British Novelists of 1993. He is also a well-established playwright and

currently is Visiting Professor of English at Amherst College in Massachusetts, USA.

Phillips's fifth novel, *Crossing the River*, shortlisted for Britain's prestigious Booker Prize in 1993 and published in January 1994 by Knopf, Canada, is a sophisticated, sometimes-sorrowful meditation upon the painful dislocations, longings, and "weird" relationships borne of the aptly named "peculiar institution" of slavery. Three years in the making and spanning 250 years of the African diaspora, *Crossing the River* is a fragmented work plagued by questions of identity, paternalism, and spiritual growth. The novel is framed by an African father's melancholic reflections on his desperate act of selling his three children into slavery following his crop's failure and relates their life stories. In each instance, Phillips conjures up largely unchronicled moments in black history: Nash becomes a Christian missionary repatriated to the new land of Liberia in the 1830s; Martha, at the end of the nineteenth century, accompanies some black pioneers west in search of her beloved daughter; and Travis is stationed as an American GI in a small Yorkshire village during the Second World War.

This interview was conducted by telephone on 14 February 1994, when Phillips was engaged to read from *Crossing the River* at Harbourfront, in Toronto, Canada.

Crossing the River has been called your most ambitious work to date. Do you think that's an accurate description?

Not really. I think they're all pretty ambitious. When you sit down with an idea—to turn it into a novel, it's always a big risk, it's always a danger. So there's an element of ambition always. In the formal sense, however, it probably is my most ambitious work. But it's not in the more specific way of looking at the desire to write a book and the ambition. They're all as hard as each other.

What was the seed of this book?

Originally, I had lots of ideas in my mind, including doing a piece about something in the Second World War. That was the idea to start with and then it just got out of control.

The novel reminded me somewhat of your 1983 play The Shelter. You span a great deal of time there too, moving from Act One, set in the

eighteenth century, to Act Two in the 1950s. You also deal there with interracial relationships.

That's interesting. Most people haven't made any references to *The Shelter*, a play I wrote back in 1982-83, because they don't know of it. It's not as easily accessible as most of the novels, but if I were to look at one piece of work of mine which has the beginning of this structural paranoia and schizophrenia, that would be it. You could say that I've been writing or exploring the way of writing and connecting across centuries for ten years.

What was your principal aim in writing Crossing the River? What did you feel you wanted to do here that you hadn't done in your earlier work?

Well, I wanted to make a connection between the African world which was left behind and the diasporan world which people had entered once they crossed the water. I wanted to make an affirmative connection, not a connection based upon exploitation or suffering or misery, but a connection based upon a kind of survival. This is an unusually optimistic book for me. I don't have a deliberately downbeat feel, but there's never been a redemptive spirit to the things that I've written. There's always been a sense that things have been rough and people have just about managed to limp by and survive, but I don't think there's any reason why one should be "positive." I have never really had a very optimistic view of things.

In some of your earlier interviews, however, you have expressed surprise about being pegged as a pessimist.

I have been surprised because I've never really considered myself to be a pessimist, but I've never really given people any good reason to think otherwise.

As your wonderful portraits of the elderly Western pioneer, Martha, and the restrained British housewife, Joyce, attest in Crossing the River, you have a tremendous ability to do cross-gender writing. By that I am referring to the ability to enter the consciousness of a woman—and in the case of Joyce, here, and Emily in Cambridge, you have the added difficulty of traversing racial difference too. Do you have any thoughts about assuming a female voice? Do you think this involves a special ability at all?

I don't feel it requires any particular strengths. The deal is really that we all play to our own strings, and you find out where you feel most comfortable. Women's position on the edge of society —both central in society, but also marginalized by men—seems to me, in some way, to mirror the rather tenuous and oscillating relationship that all sorts of people, in this case, specifically, black people, have in society, and maybe there is some kind of under-current of communicable empathy that's going on. Again, I don't want to make too much of anything because I don't really see it as that much of a mystery. It doesn't appear to be that way to me, and I don't want to find a logical reason in case the ability to do so somehow goes away. I do think that to write only from the point of view of a male is to exclude half of the world and I obviously want to include as many different points of view as I can, so I'm very pleased that I've never really felt a problem doing that.

There are certainly many different literary influences in Crossing the River. Several critics mention the echoes of Toni Morrison's Beloved in the Martha Section. It also seems to me that the father figure here whose voice frames the four narrative segments encompasses the voices of the African diaspora just as Saleem Sinai encompasses the whole of India in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children. Could you speak a bit about the various literary influences at work here?

I haven't sat down and thought too clearly about what books have perhaps influenced me in putting this novel together, but you have certainly named some authors who are big influences. *Beloved* has been particularly influential. It's always easier for an author to see these things in retrospect and, looking back, yes, I can see the influences of all of these people. It's a novel which is fragmentary in form and structure, polyphonic in its voices, which means that a lot of my reading and a lot of the people whose work I've enjoyed have made their way in. Obviously there's ample room for echoes of all sorts of people. It's great for me as a writer because it allows me to switch gear or switch direction, shift perspective, and at each new turn I'm able to employ something else which, obviously, I have learned by reading other people's work.

Another book that kept coming to mind while I was reading Crossing the River was Edward Brathwaite's jazzy Caribbean poem-trilogy, The Arrivants. I decided finally to pull it off the shelf and, lo and behold, I discovered that Chapter Five is entitled "Crossing the River."

Is it? I know him. He's going to murder me. Is it really? I'm going to write that down. That's probably where I got the original title because I first thought of this title 10 or 11 years ago.

There is a haunting, reiterated Biblical question throughout this novel, namely, "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" Nash mentions this about his white "father" Edward; Martha seems to be addressing God when she repeats the same phrase in Section Two. In the larger picture, of course, they are addressing their flesh-and-blood father who has sold them to the slave traders. The connected issues of paternalism and responsibility are often meditated upon here. What exactly fascinates you about these subjects?

It seems to me that the very nature of the relationship between the master and the slave, the colonizer and the colony, Britain and the Caribbean, is paternalistic. The whole question of relationships between black and white historically has tended to be paternalistic and perhaps enshrouded in some air of patronage at times, and so I've always been interested in those kinds of power relationships. It has such Biblical overtones as well because it is also a reference to religious themes. In the immigrant experience in Britain, the father was often pretty absent from the home. There are so many broken families in the black community in general, not just in the migrant community. There tends to be a preponderance of single mothers. I'm very interested in the whole question of how, on the personal level, that has emerged out of the larger development of slavery and all of those kinds of diasporan movements. There is a very commonly held theory that one of the reasons there is such a preponderance of single mothers is *because* of slavery, an institution which greatly disrupted the black family. There is an idea that if you take away a man's responsibility for his children, which is what happened in slavery when the man was replaced by the master as head of the family, it does something to the psyche of the man of African origin. It induces an irresponsibility. I don't know whether this is

true or not. I'm not a sociologist or an anthropologist, but all of these issues make me interested in that whole power-father-paternalistic-patronage issue. They all seem to be pretty linked.

*I want to ask you about your changing ideas about the writer's responsibilities. In the introduction to your play *The Shelter*, you speak of the various burdens on the writer; in particular, you state that you were then motivated by the luxury of inexperience and felt that your "only responsibility was to locate the truth in whatever piece I was working on, live with it, sleep with it, and be responsible to that truth, and that truth alone." In *The European Tribe* [1987], written a few years later, you seem to be more aware of the power the writer has along political lines. You state towards the end of that book: "I had learnt that in a situation in which history is distorted, the literature of a people often becomes its history, its writers the keepers of the past, present, and future. In this situation a writer can infuse a people with their own unique identity and spiritually kindle the fire of resistance." What do you feel today about your responsibility as a writer?*

I think that the second piece from *The European Tribe* is a development from what I thought earlier. It doesn't displace what I thought earlier, because I do think that that remains true—your first responsibility is to locate the truth and to deal with the truth, particularly as it relates specifically to the characters—but I think that by travelling and writing a bit more and becoming hopefully a bit more knowledgeable about writing and the world and about other writers' lives in other communities, I did realize—and I think that I already knew it, but I wasn't able to articulate it—that there is a particular responsibility in *certain* situations for the writer to take up. He doesn't have to become a politician, but the writer has to be aware of the writer's power, his capacity for good as well as his ability to duck larger social responsibility. I agree with the position I had in *The European Tribe*, but I would go further than that and say that it seems to me increasingly important since then that one, as a writer, does try to locate the truth in one's work. You do become aware of the possibility of being somebody who can identify a history and perhaps do something about redressing the imbalance of some of the ills and falsehoods that have been perpetrated by others about

your own history. But beyond that, I think a writer really has a responsibility to at least acknowledge that he was produced by very specific social circumstances. We weren't, any of us—male, female, black, white, whatever—immaculate conceptions dropped out of nowhere without a history. One shouldn't feel a guilt for one's history and one shouldn't feel ashamed of one's history, one should just take responsibility for it.

Do you ever feel, though, that you have to compromise conveying your own personal "truths" because they clash with your responsibilities as a writer, or is it your primary responsibility to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

The latter. I don't think I could actually write properly if I felt that in any way, even in any small way, that I was somehow in my life as well as in my writing, not tackling issues of injustice and speaking up when they appear. I just don't think I could do it, because I think that eventually those kinds of lies and that kind of self-deception do seep into your work. It has honestly never occurred to me to pull a punch a little bit or change gears. I don't think you can do that. I mean I just don't see how you can. You just have to continually risk coming up against irate people.

As you are certainly aware, today is not only Valentine's Day. Today marks the fifth anniversary of the fatwa declared against Salman Rushdie. Do you have any comments about Rushdie's situation and the issue of censorship and writing in general?

I just got off the phone with him. He and I speak a lot. To tell you the truth, I don't think that I have got anything to say that hasn't already been said and maybe said better by others, but I was talking to somebody earlier today about his situation. It seems to me clearly that one of the most unfortunate things in the *fatwa* is the way a lot of people in the West have taken it as a convenient excuse to hammer Islam, and it's not Islam that needs to be hammered. It's a particular extreme branch of Islam. It really is like judging the whole of Christianity on the actions of the Spanish Inquisition. It doesn't really make any sense. That has nothing to do with Salman personally. That is just my own discomfort at watching writers and other people, including a lot of

people who should know better, who claim to be defending Salman Rushdie making incredibly sweeping and stupid comments about Islam, but not taking into consideration that this isn't Islam. There are many Muslims all over the world who think this is an outrage.

What were your feelings about being nominated for the Booker Prize? Were you surprised?

That's a good question. Was I surprised? Well, I suppose I was a little bit. To tell you the truth, I was more surprised that *Cambridge* wasn't nominated because everyone kept telling me it would be. So by the time this came around, I was pleased but I just didn't care because I realized how much of a lottery it was. I wondered about it in the days leading up to it when it was *Cambridge*. This time I didn't even know that it was the day of the announcements or anything. I came into my office and there was a message from Salman on the machine. I was pleased because of the sales.

What were your feelings when Roddy Doyle received it?

Oh, that was fine. I know Roddy. I was sitting right at the next table. I didn't mind you see because it wasn't really about winning it. I was just pleased to be on the shortlist. After a while, you need to get sales because the more sales you get, the more money you get. The more money you get, the more time you have, and that's the deal. I'm not sure that I would want to be like Miss World for a year, which is what you would be if you won. I was pleased that Roddy won because he is a nice guy. At the Booker Prize dinner everybody talked to everybody. The person that I knew the best was David Malouf and, in some ways, I would have liked David Malouf to have won simply because he's 25 years older than Roddy and I who are both 35. I'll get another chance as will Roddy, even though he doesn't really need another chance, but I would have liked David Malouf, whose work I really admire, to have won it and gained this recognition at this stage of his career. As Kazuo Ishiguro, who called me up the morning of it, said: "Just remember, it's an exercise in public humiliation."

Speaking of influences, taking into consideration both their life and their work, who stands out as the most important single literary influence on you?

I would probably have to say, if it's a combination of their life and their work, James Baldwin. I hesitated because there's no other person who I've ever met who is a writer who has been as important to me. I think that this is partly because at the time when I met him I was a sort of "wanna-be" writer. To meet a real and a great writer, I was incredibly lucky. He was also incredibly generous with his time.

The novel seems to have a firm hold on you. Would you ever consider writing another play?

Oh yes, I'm probably going to write another play next year or later this year. I prefer the theatre to film. There are just too many people involved in television and film. I have worked in both mediums, and I don't particularly enjoy them that much.

Have you ever been approached by anyone about adapting one of your novels for the screen?

I have often been approached by people who have wanted to do that. I'm afraid that I'm not usually very good at replying. I get my agent to speak to them, but it's not a world that I feel particularly comfortable in anymore. A number of my friends have had bad experiences having their novels adapted or even adapting them themselves. I'll tell you the truth. I look upon adaptations of my work for the screen as something that I would like to be involved in and I would like to see happen at a time when I don't feel quite so fertile about producing original work. There may be a time down the line, whether it's in 5 or 25 years' time, when I just feel I don't have anything else to say, or I dry up, then it would be fun to go back and look at some of the early work and try to find new ways of saying that stuff and working on the screen. But right now, I'm too keen and eager and hungry to write prose, so I don't want to waste time on screen work.