

*Samuel Dickson Selvon*  
(1923-1994)

IT PLEASED Sam Selvon, the distinguished International English novelist (native of Trinidad and resident of England [1950-78] and Canada [1978-94]), that critics regarded him as a pioneering and talented practitioner of demotic English (the West Indian creole version, in his case). He was also gratified that they placed him among the first to render in fiction the experiences of colonial immigrants in Britain, in particular working-class West Indians. Yet he was concerned that the preoccupation of many readers and critics with these two features of his writing led them to neglect others of equal importance—for instance, his versatility in various forms of language (not least of which was West Indian Standard English, the language of more than half his fiction) and his engagement with aspects of West Indian experiences other than those of his lonely Londoners.

Selvon was particularly fond of his second novel, *An Island Is a World* (1955). He felt that this work, which he regarded as germinal, as exhibiting many of the ideas that informed his early and late writing, had not received the critical attention it deserved. At the time of his death, he was actually considering reworking and incorporating sections of it in his novel-in-progress. Written primarily in West Indian Standard English (the language of West Indian/Trinidadian academic publications, newspapers, and most popular magazines), *An Island Is a World* depicts—in ways that anticipate the interests of postcolonialists—the search for national and individual identity by a group of young Trinidadians in the colonial world of the 1930s and 1940s. Selvon saw to it that this novel was reissued (with a fine introduction by Kenneth Ramchand) in 1993, evidently hoping that readers and

critics unfamiliar with his canon would come to see in this novel that his skills and interests extend beyond his brilliant use of West Indian creole (or West Indian dialect, as it was known) and his scintillating portrayal of the émigré's life in London.

The commemorative cluster of articles on Selvon in this issue of *ARIEL* makes a start in extending the critical perspective on his writing and in recognizing the wider extent of his achievement. One of the articles looks at Selvon's love "poetry"; others at his affinity with the English Romantic poets and T. S. Eliot, at the Bakhtinian complexity of his narrative voices, and at his influence on other writers in and outside the West Indies. And the contributions discuss works by Selvon that merit but have not yet attracted much critical attention: his early poems, published in the 1940s in Trinidad newspapers and magazines (still to be collected and published), his early essays and stories (some of which are included in *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose 1946-1986* [1989]), *An Island Is a World* (1955), *I Hear Thunder* (1963), and his more recent short stories.

Selvon's own voice is heard here in two extracts (from his unfinished novel and his unfinished autobiography) and in an interview. He had planned the novel as his "big" novel, the work that would tie together all he had done before, encompassing Trinidadian life from the turn of the century to the present. At the time of his death, he had hand-written just a draft of fewer than a hundred foolscap pages. And he had barely begun his autobiography. The two extracts, taken from the opening pages of the novel and the autobiography, hint—if barely—at how the completed manuscripts might have unfolded. The interview, given just a year before his death, was free-wheeling, relaxed, and informal (which the editing of the transcript for publication tried to retain). Some of Selvon's comments are reiterations and elaborations of what he has said elsewhere; others address matters not mentioned in previous interviews, including some of his early experiences as an immigrant to Canada, and specific comments on his art, politics, education, and philosophy.

Many of the contributors (academics, critics, fellow writers) knew Selvon as writer and friend, and their poems, essays, reviews, and commentaries in this issue are as much an apprecia-

tion of his work as an expression of respect and affection for, and celebration of, the man—sentiments that I share and attempted to convey in my eulogy delivered at a memorial service for him (Calgary, May 1994), which I reproduce here:

I was not surprised when I learnt some years ago that Sam, as a young man, before he turned to writing fiction, had wanted to become a philosopher. In all his works, even his lightest humorous sketches, and in his daily life with family and friends, we saw the philosopher in him. But he was not just any philosopher; he was a philosopher whose contemplation led him to look at the bright side of things, to see beauty and goodness and glory even in moments of deepest sadness; and this gave him an infinite capacity for resilience and optimism and good cheer.

I met Sam in person in 1971 and came to know him as a friend since 1978, when he and the family moved to Calgary. But I think I have known him since my teenage days in the Caribbean, when I began reading his novels, the first of which he published in 1952, when he was twenty-nine years old. Sam, as writer and friend, always has been for me and always will be remembered by me as the laughing philosopher, touched by the sad lot of humans but not overwhelmed by it.

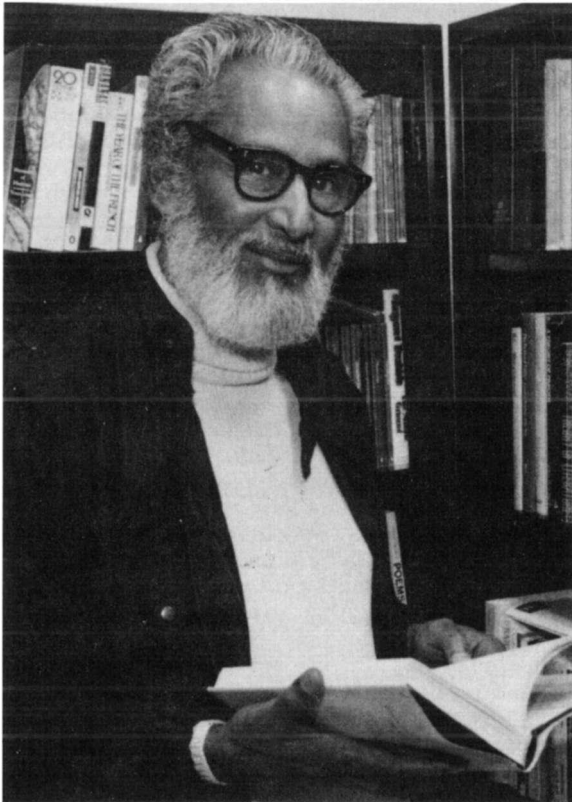
Like . . . his many relatives, friends, and colleagues, I feel a deep sense of loss at the passing of this warm and generous man. Yet I think that he would want us not to grieve his passing but to celebrate his life and remember the happy moments we shared with him: in my case, the endless hours of lively discussions; of idly chatting; of playing Password and Scrabble; of solving cryptic crossword puzzles; of over-indulging in gourmet meals he delighted in preparing; and of visiting the Clubhouse at Stampede Park.

We shall all miss him in our own particular ways. I shall miss him when I stand in my garden and look at the green onions he planted one year. I shall miss him as I walk to the Faculty Club, picturing him beside me, hobbling slightly because of his arthritic knee. I shall miss him in the classroom when I am teaching his novels and shall no longer be able to promise that he will visit my class and talk to my students, who through the years have all responded to him with enthusiasm. I shall miss him on a summer day when I am out on Nose Hill Park and recall that we never did get a chance to walk there together as we often had planned.

But my sense of loss—like that of all of us here today—is assuaged by the belief that he is still with us, and if we should doubt that, we just have to turn to his books. I know that I shall always find him there and he will always speak to me, as he does now in this closing passage from “My Girl and the City.” In this story, written for his wife, Althea, thirty-eight years ago, in 1956, he portrays an old man in terms that make

the perfect epitaph for himself: “At last I think I know what it is all about. I move around in a world of words. Everything that happens is words. But pure expression is nothing. One must build on the things that happen. . . . So now I weave, I say there was an old man on whose face wrinkles rivered, whose hands were shapeful with arthritis but when he spoke, oddly enough, his voice was young and gay.”

VICTOR J. RAMRAJ



Sam Selvon in his office at the University of Calgary,  
October 1985 COURTESY LARRY MAC DOUGAL, *Calgary Herald*