

# *Christened with Snow: A Conversation with Sam Selvon*

KEVIN ROBERTS AND ANDRA THAKUR

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This is an abbreviated version of a conversation that took place in Calgary, August 1994. The full text is published in the monograph, Christened with Snow: A Conversation with Samuel Selvon (Nanaimo: Eletheria Press, 1995).*

*ROBERTS: Sam, we appreciate very much the opportunity to talk to you. We can start off by mentioning something that happened to us some years ago when we were at a conference [CACLALS], at the University of British Columbia, I think, and a West Indian academic came up to you and said he wanted you to do for the West Indians in Canada what you had done for the West Indians in England. And you were rather short in your reply to him. What do you think your answer would be now?*

Well, I did mention to him that there had already been a writer from the Caribbean who had been living in Toronto for a number of years, and this is Austin Clarke. Do you remember that? Austin had written a fair amount about the Caribbeans in Canada, almost as much as I did about the West Indians living in London. One of the other things, of course, was that I hadn't been in the country very long when he had asked me that question, and I didn't want to get involved in writing something that wasn't a bit familiar.

*ROBERTS: So do you feel more comfortable in Canada—that you've adjusted to this place?*

Well, I feel I've adjusted, yes; but I think the basis for a question like that is that people feel that you've moved out of one country and you're living in another, and as soon as you arrive people say to you, well, now you're going to write about Canada; you've written about England, and London, and it's good that you'll be

writing about Canada. What they seem to forget, really, is that a writer—at least I do, I have a whole backlog of ideas and thoughts that I have written notes about, and things like that, so that when I came I had enough work to take me four or five years into the future; so the question of landing here in Canada isn't as if I'd arrived as a person who was just starting to write and who was going to write about things Canadian right away. I had a lot of things still to write about the Caribbean and London, and in fact, while I was here in Canada, the novel, *Moses Migrating*, was one that I finished off here in Canada.

*ROBERTS: There is this tension between the West Indians and the British in your work. I think you did it very tolerantly, but a lot of these characters are lost in that world. Do you think the same things apply to West Indians in Canada, in terms of how you perceive it, or is there a difference in the cultural mix here?*

I think there is a difference. You see, England is Europe, and the culture there is in the eastern hemisphere, and we are over here in the western hemisphere, and to me that has always made a difference—the Americas as against European countries. I think, for instance, that people from the Caribbean who migrated to England would have had a harder time than those who migrated into say the United States and Canada, purely because of their Western customs and fashions. They assimilated much more easily in the Americas than they would into European culture. This is one of the things that I found. When I, for instance, shifted work from London into Canada, I found myself completely at ease living in Canada.

*ROBERTS: If that's true, then, is there some possibility of a different kind of writing emanating from a different kind of tension rather than the clash of cultures?*

I would think so, and I think it is a different story of the movement of people from one country to another. I think it is a different story here in the Americas than it was to those who moved to England. In the first place, people from the Caribbean are much more at ease with North American culture than European-English culture. They feel much more at home. They

have an easier time here. England is a different place, a different country entirely, and the problems that one would have in England are not problems that one really faces here in Canada as a black person.

*ROBERTS: So in terms of the writing, you think there's a difference because there's not as much tension and conflict here.*

I'm not saying that there isn't any tension, and even antagonism. As you yourself know, Kevin, we had an experience in Victoria. If you can remind me of it—remember, we were having a drink one day—

*ROBERTS: We never got one.*

Yeah, we got thrown out.

*ROBERTS: What happened was we went into at least three bars, I think, and they wouldn't serve us, and that was because of you, because of the colour thing. And I got angry as hell and was causing all kinds of problems, and you pulled me out of there and calmed me down and told me not to be stupid. And I was wondering how you felt about what I was doing, being so righteously indignant on my behalf and your behalf, I suppose. You're smiling, aren't you?*

Well, I think that you were righteously indignant on my behalf, but I wasn't really disturbed by that incident. We weren't really doing anything at all that occasioned that incident, but the way I look at these things is really through ignorance, that people don't know, and the person or persons who started the trouble are probably more to be sympathized with than me myself or you. This is how I look at it, and this is the way that I face up to most of these problems, because I have had very few racial conflicts that I wasn't able to exit. I didn't have any problem.

*THAKUR: Sam, I would like to come back to that point about having an easier time in the Americas rather than in Europe. Is that because of the rigid class system that existed in places like Britain as compared to Canada? Did you find that the class system is so rigid that it makes it more difficult for the West Indians to adjust?*

That's one of the things. The other thing, one other thing could be the ignorance of the English. The English are, what would be

the word, provincial? Provincial in their thinking, England is their culture, England is the world. And they don't know very much about other parts. Over here, people know the Caribbean. People go down to the Caribbean much more than people from England do. So that there is already, even before the immigrant leaves Trinidad, there is already the kind of relationship—a type of affinity, a type of knowledge of the ways through American films, through tourism, through having met North Americans; it is something more immediate that they feel more comfortable and at ease with than to be travelling in a place like London, in the underground there, with the stuffy English atmosphere, and the way that—as you say, the class division there that the English themselves have to contend with, that they come across.

*ROBERTS: You know the general cliché of critics about Sam Selvon's work is the strength of the dialect. That's what everybody says. I'm going to ask you a question about your play writing, and I'd like to know when you started that. Were you writing fiction at the same time you were writing plays? And as such, as a writer, could you tell us a little bit about how that dialogue works between the two forms. Do you think there is a sort of correlation between dialogue that is vivid in fiction and dialogue that works in plays? How did you come to that?*

Well, let me tell you first how I came to terms with play-writing. This was for economic reasons. There wasn't a demand, but it was easier, for instance, to get plays accepted by the BBC than fiction . . . I offered to adapt some of my short stories to be used as plays, and the idea caught on, and I did write and then I got in with the BBC, and I started to write a number of plays for them. I didn't find the transition very difficult, because the story idea was there already, and I just had to really adapt it for the radio drama. As far as the language form went, there were enough Caribbean actors and actresses around who really wanted work, and this was a good space for them, and I got into writing plays. . . .

*ROBERTS: In terms of writing dialogue for plays and dialogue for fiction, what's the difference?*

I think there is a difference here, because you can't "dilly-dally" with the dialogue in radio drama as you possibly could in fiction.

In radio drama, you have a listener, and not a reader, so that the person who is listening to the radio play has to be able to follow the story line clearly and to hear everything distinctly in order to keep up with what is happening. Whereas with fiction you can break up the dialogue a bit, turn around, do something, and treat it in a different way. I found that the way I did it was that I imagined myself to be a listener, rather than a reader. This is one of the things you have to do to have that transition. . . . You need to use your own imagination a great deal more when you are just listening; and I found this fascinating; this is one of the things that drew me into writing for radio too.

*THAKUR: When you went to Britain first, your early contact with the BBC, did you find that there was a niche there, or as a pioneer did you have to create that niche for the West Indian community?*

Well, there already existed on the BBC a programme called *Caribbean Voices*, which was broadcast to the West Indies and to some other parts of the world. And this program used short stories and poetry from writers from the Caribbean. When I was still in Trinidad, I had contributed to that particular programme, and had had some stories and poems broadcast, so that I had a little niche there that I could fit into when I first went to England, and in fact it helped me out a great deal in those early days, because that was one of the ways I could earn some money was to write for the program for the BBC.

*ROBERTS: As a writer, I would like to ask you what you think your relationship is with academics and academic life. I have a sort of schizophrenic world myself. I teach this stuff, and then I have to turn my head around and try and write. But you are more of a populist, someone who fits fairly well into the larger society. Do you find that? How do you deal with academics? The MA's and PhD's written about your work.*

Well, you know, Kevin, I never thought that my work would ever reach this level, when I first started to write. And eventually, when my work got to that level that literary critics and academic people were interested in it, it was really something that I wasn't really quite equipped or prepared for, but I guess I just got into it. I remember, for instance, when I had written *The Lonely Londoners*,

one of the things that got me into academia was that Oxford University called me up to talk about the type of English that I had written this book in, the dialect form and things like that. And one critic had put it that it was injecting new blood into the English language, and I suppose this got them off to asking, well, come up here and tell us something about it. And this is one of my very early experiences with Oxford University, because I myself have never been through a university education, so it was entirely strange and new to me.

*ROBERTS: So how do you feel when you read these things about your work? Are they talking about the book that you wrote, or some other person's book?*

You know, Kevin, sometimes I think it is somebody else's, because in a way, I suppose, I don't even remember some of the things I have written, and I have to go back and have a look at it a second time, because I move on from one thing to another, and sometimes when they are offering some criticism or asking some question, I have to check for myself the text to say oh, yeah, I did say that, because I don't offhand remember it exactly, what it is they're talking about.

*ROBERTS: Have they ever said anything, or written anything, that you think has been very useful to you in writing the next book? Have they made any points at all that help you write?*

I've been fairly lucky, Kevin, you know. I've had fairly favourable criticism for most of my work. So it's always been encouraging in a way for me, but it tended to slow me down somewhat, because it was a milieu that I hadn't considered as part of my work. I just sit at home and I write. And when people start to look at your work, and it becomes recognized, and they start to ask you questions about it, you yourself, as the writer, have to take a different look at your work and say, oh well, they see something here that I didn't really think about when I was writing the book, so I have to look at this again and say, oh yeah, did I think of it, or did it come subconsciously through the processes of creation—and is it there through this mystic quality they say that writers have, that sometimes they are blessed with; call it what you like—inspira-

tion or what-not—that they just write and the thing is done. So I myself had to take a subjective view of my objective work, as it were.

*THAKUR: Sam, George Lamming made some comments on your work, and said that you are a folk hero among West Indians, and pointed out that the strength of your characters lies in the use of your language. Now I don't want to overplay the use of your language, but it seems like every time your characters open their mouths, they come alive. And maybe people like myself can identify with them quite readily because I know them. What they are saying is part of me. Can you comment a little on what people like Lamming say about this and other aspects of your work?*

Well, I think the reason for that is really that I stayed and remained a Trinidadian, a person from the Caribbean. I set myself certain limitations to what I could handle professionally and expertly. I know people from the Caribbean. I was born there. I know how they would react in any given situation. So that when I write about them, I epitomize the area and the people. I know I can do that, and I can still do it without any feeling that I have moved away from that, have moved out of my element into something else. I know these people. I know how they behave. I know how they think. In fact, in writing the books, this is how I reverted eventually to using the language, because I tried to write *The Lonely Londoners*, for instance, in standard English and it didn't work at all. I had to give it up. For weeks and weeks I tried, months, and I just couldn't. Suddenly I said to myself, let me write this thing like one of the boys—here we are in England—and I started to write it like that. Believe you me, it was as if I'd really got on the right vehicle, and the thing just shot along. I couldn't stop writing until it was finished. In six months, wham! the complete novel was finished. No hesitation at all. So that I felt that I had created something. I didn't care. It didn't occur to me to say, I wonder how my publisher and English audience are going to react to this kind of thing, to what I have done with the English language. But this is how it worked. I felt good about it, and I sent it off, and as you know, the response was good.

*ROBERTS: These characters are, to use a contemporary term, marginalized. I mean they're misfits, a lot of them, aren't they? You know,*

*they're displaced, homeless, screwed up guys for the most part. Is this conscious choice, or is it something that happened because you saw them around you?*

These are basically the people from the Caribbean. These are the immigrant types. I'm not talking about the students or the professionals who move to and fro, from one country to another.

*ROBERTS: They've got it easy?*

They've got it as they want to have it. The immigrants are the people I was really concerned with, because to tell you the truth, I myself, when I moved from Trinidad, I had a feeling that I would work for a newspaper, I would be able to work in some sort of journalism at least, or something like that. When I lived in England, I lived like an ordinary immigrant. I never lived like a writer, on a different plane. I had trouble finding a place to live. I had doors slammed in my face. I had difficulties finding a job, odd jobs here and there, because of my colour, because the prejudice and discrimination against this "invasion," as they called it in England, of Third World people coming into the country, and taking up jobs, and looking for accommodation, and things like that. I had my share of that, you know, and I reacted with both—I reacted as an immigrant and as a writer. I had to write something about this. I saw it happening around me all the time. Like I kept in company with these people. The people I write about are the people that I moved around with in London. I used to "lime" with the boys, and most of the stories I've written about are their experiences, perhaps, rather than mine personally, because after I had started to write, of course, I moved on a different level. I mean, I went into the BBC. But I wouldn't expect to meet somebody like Moses or Galahad or one of my characters in the BBC. I would say, what are you doing here? Are you sweeping, or are you cleaning up here? But I was with them, and I knew them, and I went around with them, so it wasn't very difficult for me, because I stayed on that level.

*ROBERTS: In The Lonely Londoners, the one moderately sane person, Moses—he's a kind of touchstone. All the abnormalities and things bounce off him, and he seems to be more or less a moral centre—is this a fair comment?*



My character Moses actually was an actual person, an actual immigrant who stayed an immigrant and never rose above that level, although he himself had aspirations towards being a writer because he felt these things, you know, and he was one of my dearest friends while he lived in England.

*THAKUR: I'd like to ask you about one of my favourite concepts of Moses—his cultural marginality. You've mentioned somewhere you do not know if you are an East Indian, a Trinidadian, or a West Indian. How do you feel now, moving among being an Indo-West Indian, or an Indo-Trinidadian, a Trinidadian, and West Indian, a Londoner, and now a Canadian. How do you feel about this concept of marginality?*

Well, how I feel about it is how I think Trinidadians feel. That is to say, we are a nation that is made up of so many varieties of nationalities that we have a kind of concept of not having a basic one for ourselves, even though we are termed East Indian. I like to think of myself as a Caribbean person, because to me that has some merit. In fact, I've actually written about that in my second novel, you know, *An Island is a World*, which incidentally is being reprinted and will be out later this year. . . . The Caribbean person has the disadvantage that he is free to choose and to look at all these different races and these different cultures, cultural marginality or whatever you call them, and pick and choose all of them to make himself a product out of them all. And I consider myself, for instance, first and foremost a person from the Caribbean. I am also what at one time was considered to be a man of the world. Do you remember some years ago there was a citizen of the world campaign and so on? This was a big thing for me when it started; I said, gee, you know, I could fit into that. I'm a citizen of the world. I don't belong to any particular part, but I could fit into any culture, and things like that. So for me the Caribbean person has this—mark you, in a way, he loses a kind of national identity that people like to feel, and a pride in being what they are, and to me this is one of the reasons that has kept the whole, all the Caribbean nations, slightly apart from one another, that they haven't had this feeling of oneness.

*THAKUR: I see this marginality, this cultural marginality as being my strength, and maybe you see it as being your strength: other people are saying that that is a weakness because of the lack of rootedness.*

I agree with you, you know, and I would say, for instance, my roots should be in India too, but although I have written books about the East Indians living in the Caribbean, I don't really identify as one of those who feel that my roots belong to India. I feel my roots belong to the world. First and foremost, I could never forsake Trinidad as the place I was born, that's my birth-right. That's where I started from.

*ROBERTS: One of the things that strikes me is that a lot of these characters you write about are on a kind of blind journey; they don't know where the hell they are going; they're struggling, and they are always puzzled by what happens to them. And this quest, this journey, seems to suggest that one can't really take charge of life, that life does it to you, that you are not really in charge of things.*

Well, you're right to some extent. You are talking about differences of culture now. . . . I think that what people from the Caribbean are after basically is a chance to earn a living, to live comfortably. They are after the basics of life first, and then later on, they might think about things like culture, or the arts, or all that. But what they want first is money to pay their rent, money to buy food, money to support their family, to send their children to school, give the children a chance to get those things called culture, arts, and so on.

*ROBERTS: But your characters seem to get lost in their journey.*

Well, they get lost, they get dissipated, they get frustrated, in a different element, a different social atmosphere. They come across certain problems which are cultural barriers that they are not equipped to overcome. They haven't been, perhaps, educated enough or have had the experience of being able to cope with some of these differences that they meet in other countries.

*ROBERTS: Sam, I'm also thinking of another time when you said something like I'd rather have written one minute of Beethoven than everything else I've written. I'd rather have written this one minute of music—take all my books away, and written that. Do you still think that?*

Well, I love music, and I think music is one of the things that has always sustained me. Some philosopher said that music is the

greatest philosophy, and this is how I feel about it. You know, in my earlier days, I wanted to write music, but I didn't, and it's one of the things I still feel that maybe if I'd turned my creativity towards writing music instead of words, I might have had more satisfaction.

*ROBERTS: Did you have any musical training?*

No, not really, but I—I don't know what you'd call musical training—we used to have a piano at home, my sister used to play, I used to sing. I had an ear for music. I used to listen to the hit parade tunes on American radio, things like that, and gradually I got into classical music and found myself listening to it and trying to understand it, and it did certain things for me in my own mind and in my own philosophy. . . .

*ROBERTS: There is a dramatic quality of your writing. Everybody talks about the dialogue, but you've got this inner energy in the characters you create. They have this energy that comes out in their body language and in the way they walk and so on; so they're so very energetic, and I would guess that is the play element coming into the fiction.*

Well, it is part of communication, the body language that more Third World people still have and use than other peoples, than Europeans or white Americans. It's part of their language, the body movement is like a language, a shake of the head, an expression, or a wave; it's all language. Boy, I'm feeling too bad today, you know. And that is all you have to say, and then you have to sort of crumple up. You have to act.

*ROBERTS: . . . in terms of putting people's faces into the picture, the shape of the faces, that's probably not as important as giving those qualities that we were talking about, the whole body movement.*

I don't think so. I don't think that it's the faces or description, or even the clothing, or anything; it's what they're saying and what their body is doing. If you look at my work, Kevin, you would see that I don't go into very much elaborate description of my characters. You know, they could be tall or short or whatever. It's what they say and what they do that becomes very, very important. . . .

*ROBERTS: When we were talking about writing some years ago, I think you said something to me that what you have to find in writing is something that's easy, something that comes naturally. Can you explain that? Is this what the lonely Londoners are? I think you said earlier they came easily, naturally. Do you think people struggle to write things that are not right for them?*

Yes, I think so. As a writer myself I would feel that if there was any element that came into the text of anything I was writing that I didn't know anything about, that I would somehow make this pretty apparent to the reader. Like here in Canada, I still don't think I know enough about the Canadian to really write about him or her. I'd better mention that here, with a sense of ease, complete ease, because I haven't lived here long enough, and I don't like writing about something that I'm just giving a superficial view of. So that if I have to incorporate them into my work, or anything Canadian, I would make sure that I am writing about it from the point of view of someone who is from the Caribbean, who is making a comment on a situation. I'm not a dogmatic writer. If you read my work, I always leave it—at the ending of all my works, you would see that one can take it one way or the other. I'm not the sort of writer who would say here it is, there it is, this is what life is all about, because I don't know what the fuck life is all about. Nobody knows. And I always feels this element of uncertainty is what keeps me writing and exploring and trying to find out what it is.

*ROBERTS: You know, we were talking just before this tape began about your books that are being taught in East London schools. You said something about the reaction of some academics to that. Can you clarify that?*

Well, of course, the parents of the school children in England felt that they should be doing Shakespeare and Dickens and other English writers, and when my work was put forward on the curriculum, there was a national outcry in the press about it, about myself, and one or two other hitherto "unknown" writers, whose work appeared on the curriculum. Why this should be? They should be doing more of the English writers and so on. But I think there is a general trend to expand this now, and I was glad

in a way. I was pleased personally that my work, one of my works, was chosen; but it could have been the works of any other writer other than an English-born writer.

*ROBERTS: British people are still having trouble accepting the fact that literature is written in various forms of English outside of Britain.*

That is true, I think, and this is a move towards trying to obviate that feeling, you know, that there are other writers whose works should be included in their study of what composes English literature. The English, the British people, are very smart, you know. They . . . are looking ahead and seeing how best they can use the situation to their advantage, and one of the things would be to accept that there are other cultures that would be coming into theirs, and other artistic forms, writing, dancing, calypso music, whatever you like, reggae, or whatever, that would infiltrate into their society, that they have to take into account.

*ROBERTS: You know, on another level, let's look at the last few Nobel Prize winners and I think there may be one British or maybe two—but then there are Derek Walcott from the West Indies and Patrick White from Australia and Michael Ondaatje, the Canadian who won the Booker Prize last time, the big English prize. So the whole business of literature being written now is so diverse it's counter-productive to resist this notion that the British Canon alone should be taught in school. Did you get any reaction from the students or teachers? Did anybody write to you about this? Do you get any feedback on how they react to these books in the schools?*

The kind of reaction I have had is favourable. I have had letters from teachers in schools in England, who have written me here in Canada to tell me that students have been studying my work, and how they have reacted to it . . . and they ask could there be any time when I could come over to England to talk to them in the schools and things like that. And in fact, let me answer that question in another way: since I left England in 1978 and came over here, I find that this process has been developing in education and in schools in England; they have been more or less including and bringing in Third World writers into their curriculum. I have been going over to England from Canada since I left in 1978, about seven or eight times . . .

*THAKUR: The strength of your characters is that they are West Indians. Their language is West Indian, and because of that you are able to bring them to life, but I want to go a little beyond that. I lived in Nigeria, and I am impressed with this African character Cap you created [in The Lonely Londoners]. Maybe he is real and maybe he is not. Do you want to comment on Cap for me? It seems as though I know him. And yet at the same time you claim that your strength is West Indian. Here is an African you are writing about—*

Well, why not? He happens to be from Africa, but he is black. He identifies. He is a man of the world. He knows what the scene is like, and certainly I have met Africans, particularly from the West Coast of Africa, who are as hip, or who are as with it, as black people from the Caribbean, who know what is happening and who can fall into that pattern, so that, well, let me put it this way: Cap is a true character, so he is a true-to-life instance of a man who was able to—even though he came from Africa, he was almost like one of my Trinidadian characters. He behaved as such and accepted everything; he didn't talk like a Trinidadian, but he was one of the boys.

*ROBERTS: This is a question that everybody asks writers, I suppose, and I might as well ask you too. Do you have a notion of character or plot or setting in the initial stages of this thing, when you're starting to write something?*

Not really. What I start with is a conception—an idea—and I walk around with it for a time, let it gestate and think about it, and when it's ready to go, I don't really know how I'm going to proceed except that I know what the idea is, and I know how I am going to finish the idea off to make it a rounded kind of work. Actually how I'm going to begin, or what the middle is going to be like, I have no idea until I actually start to write—and then it creates itself as it goes along. This has happened with a lot of my work. As I said, I know at the back of my mind, I have an idea of what I am trying to do, where I am going. I have an idea of my destination, but I don't really know how I am going to reach there. . . . The beginning isn't important to me. What is important to me is the ending. What you conceive of, the conclusion that you would come to at the end of the story. How it begins could be any old way, really.

*THAKUR: Sam, somewhere I've read that you don't like to be compared with other writers and maybe other West Indian writers, but the thing is that people out there are reading and making comparisons. But is there anybody in particular that you would like to be compared with, or why is it that you don't want to be compared, when the audience out there—? Do you compare yourself with any other writer in the Caribbean, or for that matter with any other writer?*

I don't really, because I've never been a very great reader. I did do a certain amount of reading when I was a much younger man, but I don't really think any writer influenced me, except one or two, and those who did, I don't write after their fashion at all. I don't think so. For instance, I can tell you that I read Richard Jeffries, who is an English writer. He wrote some novels that never did anything at all. He wrote a great deal about the English countryside. He was a naturalist; he was a person who wrote about and described the whole scenery of the English countryside, and I liked his work very much. I also became a bit infatuated with T. S. Eliot's work and read a lot of it. But then again, no writer compares me to Richard Jeffries. No writer compares me to T. S. Eliot, so why do I mention those two? Well, this is an actual fact. When you ask me who influenced me, I would say that these two writers did, who are in two different categories entirely. And I just feel that anything I write ought to stem and come out of my own work, so that I wouldn't feel that I would have patterned after any other writer. I have found, for instance, that sometimes I have an idea, and I say to myself, that this is completely original; and I've written about it and found afterwards that other writers have done the same thing—and then I feel a bit disappointed and say, oh gee, you know, I thought this was my idea, but I guess some other writer's done the same thing. This is just the way I feel about my own work—it isn't that the comparison could not come from critics, but I myself don't try to pattern myself after any other writer or try to follow any particular line of stylistic points in my writing.

*THAKUR: Beside the language that brings out your character, I sense that the environment makes your character very strong, also—like Tiger and his wife Urmilla and Joe and his wife Rita in their rural setting [in*

Turn Again Tiger]—that your characters are very powerful in their rural setting. Is that partly because of your own background? What influenced you to create this strength in your characters?

Well the background is always important—the scenery, the place, the landscape. The landscape is very important. The landscape is what makes the character. A person like Tiger who grows up on the land—he must be living there with it. He creates his images out of the things that he sees around him: the physical aspect of the land, vegetation, the mountains, sky, sun. These are things that he lives with and that he associates with his own experiences, and the landscape becomes a very important thing. This is why the characters in my work who go abroad to live—this is some of the difficulty that they have—they cannot associate with the landscape until they have lived in it for a number of years, before they cannot have their own emotional feelings about a place until they become accustomed to what the climate is like and the atmosphere and the landscape.

*ROBERTS: In the early fiction that you wrote, there are a lot of macho males running around, and they talk about women as “skin” and “stroke” and so on. Then later, it seems, when you get to a story like A Housing Lark, which I think is interesting is that Tina the female character becomes a much more dominant character in that particular piece, slowly but surely taking over from these hopeless males. Do you think there’s been a bit of a change in the way you’ve written about women?*

I don’t think, Kevin, that there’s been any change. I think that what has happened is that since the feminist movement came into vogue, as it were, that there has been criticism flung at me, that I haven’t written about women. But as you rightly point out, in *The Housing Lark* especially, the women there are more dominant than the men, and I have made references to this before to other women who have been critical of my work and saying that I have not handled women in my work and I don’t write very much about women. But I think that I have handled women carefully and treated them well, if my work is looked at in some detail. As you rightly point out, that particular book, in fact quite recently I had to make reference to it. In London, I was talking to some women, and they were making the remark, well, where are the



women in your work, and so on. In *The Lonely Londoners*, for instance, there were no women characters but you've got to remember that the time I am writing about, this is when the men went to England before, to look for jobs, and to settle down before they sent for their women and their families to come and join them, so there weren't very many women about then. So to write about later on, like in the *The Housing Lark* as I say, they come into play, and I have written about them.

*ROBERTS: Do you feel that some of your writing is being judged by 1990s standards of political correctness, as opposed to when you wrote it? Do you feel that there is a bit of unfairness about that?*

I think so, because if you look at all my books carefully, in my very first novel, Tiger's wife Urmilla is written about very sympathetically, and her point of view and her realistic situation in what she had to deal with is put down there; and even in the sequel to that book, *Turn Again Tiger*, she comes very much into the forefront there, and wherever I have had women characters I have used them to some advantage, I think. I think now, though, in what I am trying to write now, would involve them a great deal more.

*ROBERTS: Why?*

I don't know why. I guess because of the whole feminist movement, and women feel who that they have been left out, and things like that. I think that this is true to some extent, perhaps, but I would like to involve them more in my future work. In the book I'm working on now, women take a great deal more of an active part than in the previous ones.

*ROBERTS: I was interested in asking you what religious elements operate in your life.*

I don't think religion comes into my work except in a general sense. I was Christianized. I remember my first experience with religion. It was through my parents and being indoctrinated into the Presbyterian religion via the Canadian missionaries.

*ROBERTS: Canadians?*

Yes, well, you know the Canadian missionaries went down to Trinidad in the early twenties, and they spent a lot of time among

the East Indian population, spreading the Gospel, trying to convert people to religion, to Christian religion. This is how I guess I got hooked into it myself eventually. In fact, a great many of the East Indians from Trinidad whom you would come across here in Canada probably would have had some experience with the Canadian missionaries either through education or religion. This is one of the first ties that was established between Canada and Trinidad.

*ROBERTS: It doesn't seem to have much influence on you now.*

No, not really. As a child it probably did, but I sort of eased out of that, I guess, and no, I don't follow any particular religion. I'm not an atheist. I have my own way of coming to grips with religious problems.

*ROBERTS: Do you want to give us a hint what that is?*

Well, I use my own philosophy and sense of belief.

*ROBERTS: So did you go to one of these [Canadian Presbyterian Mission] schools?*

Yeah, I went to CM schools when I was a child. The first one was near to my home Estaelle CM school, Canadian Mission School, and the other one was the San Fernando Canadian Mission School.

*ROBERTS: So was there a conflict . . .*

And then I moved on after that and went to college, Naparima College, which was again highly influenced [by the CM]. In fact, most of the teachers were Canadian missionaries.

*ROBERTS: So was there any conflict between what you were taught in school and what was going on in the world around you?*

Not any conflict as such. At that time, I feel my thinking was purely insular. I hadn't started to broaden my vision to think of the things that were happening around me—what will be happening in later years or anything like that. I went to the schools and I went to the college, and—mark you, when I say it wasn't a question of being particularly indoctrinated into the religion, it

was just a fact that they were the ones that supported the education of the Indian population.

*ROBERTS: So you see this as a positive force in your life?*

I think so. In terms of my writing, for instance, it was in those schools, and in college later on, that I was encouraged to continue with writing essays and writing compositions, and things like that. . . .

*ROBERTS: Did you find, in the literature they taught you there, that experience that I had in university, where we were studying almost exclusively British literature in Australia, and yet there was a world and a landscape out there that had so little to do with “daffodils dancing in the breeze.” I was wondering if you had that sense that if you were to write, you would have to write in a kind of British mode, and the struggle to find a voice there. I think that when I was at the University of Adelaide, we never touched Australian literature until we finally demanded that they put a book on the curriculum, so they hemmed and hawed, and they put on D. H. Lawrence’s Kangaroo. So I wonder if you had that experience.*

Yes. At that time we never did any books by Caribbean writers at all or even Indian writers or any other writers at all but English, you know—Shakespeare, Dickens, Keats, that sort of thing you were taught. I must say, I agree with you; I thought that this was the pattern of writing to follow. It was only in later years, and on reflection, that I could see how much I was missing by not developing a Caribbean individuality as a writer. It was later—in my later years, after the war, when I started to work for a newspaper, that I began a little to exploit the local atmosphere, and the local flora and fauna—and write about the people themselves.

*ROBERTS: Did you have that feeling that what was around you was nothing as important as what was in Britain?*

That’s true. That’s something that we all grew up with, I think. The feeling was that the outside world is always better—you’re going to have to get out of the very small parochial feeling of being tied down into a small island and this tended to—this kind of feeling tended to extend to the rest of the population as a

whole, so that you didn't get very much encouragement, and you wanted to get out and to go abroad, and my feeling was always England through that indoctrination. I felt that if I had to go abroad, I would go to England.

*THAKUR: This concept of "making it." All of us in the West Indies, growing up in those years, felt that if you want to make it, you have to go overseas, and . . . it seemed like our world was there, and yet it was not there.*

This is quite true, but mark you, I think things have changed through the years. You wouldn't find that situation very much existing still. For instance, after people—like you say, like myself—had been abroad and established ourselves, you find that now there are certain individuals who remain in the Caribbean and make their names right there on the spot. One that comes into mind readily is Derek Walcott, the Nobel Prize winner. I mean, Derek never went abroad; Derek stayed there and established, made his name, and it was the outside world that pulled him out of the Caribbean to come—you know, we want you to come out to us, to let us see what you've got to say. And it was only then that Derek started to travel out of the Caribbean; but he remained there, and he wrote there; he established himself there and came to be the great poet that he is. And later there are some writers like that. Take Earl Lovelace, for instance. Earl got recognized not through living abroad and writing abroad, but through staying at home and writing.

*ROBERTS: To some extent you were a pioneer, if I may use this phrase, in naming the place. I mean you validated the place where you came from by naming it, by keeping its value, and then others came along—*

Yes, you can put it that way, Kevin, because in fact, to tell you the truth, this is one of the things that I felt that I was doing, that I was conscious of doing. You know, that we must establish ourselves, let people know who we are, and in fact this was the sort of reception that the first novel got *A Brighter Sun* right at the start. People became interested in finding out more about the Caribbean. This is how the development started.

*THAKUR: But it seems, Sam, there is still this thing about it—that you have to gain recognition outside, that the outside world must recognize you before it is seen that you have made it.*

I agree with you, but I also would stipulate that I think that that is changing, and that we ourselves now, we who are abroad, are doing our best to keep the change going so that people can stay at home and establish themselves there. . . .

*ROBERTS: I've got to ask you one other big broad question. What do you think your political position is; left, right, backwards, frontwards?*

I'm very suspicious of the words political and politicians. I think it's something that I still haven't shrugged off yet. I just have a feeling that politicians are not to be trusted, and I grew up with this feeling, and I never wanted to have anything to do with politics.

*ROBERTS: I see in your work people who don't have money or power, very often it seems to me, I don't see people in there that are actually rulers or controllers of lives in your work.*

In that sense, yes, if you define those elements as being political, yes, of course, but—I don't know. When you talk about am I left, right or centre, or whatever, my feeling is really much more, may I say philanthropic? I don't know. My feeling is anything that would be best for the people is what I am after, and it doesn't matter what political party, or whether it is left or right, or goes up or down, and I think my attitude is much more generalized and philosophical about political questions.

*THAKUR: You lived in England during the fifties. The fifties were a heyday of political activity among the colonial students studying [in London], whether they were from Africa, India, or the West Indies . . . and they were very vibrant and sometimes very violent. How did you stay aloof from all of this? People like Eric Williams and so on were coming out, and people like Cheddi Jagan in Guyana and people like Bustamante from Jamaica, and in Africa you have the Kenyattas and the Nkrumahs. How did you stay above all that?*

Well, I was conscious that these things were happening, but you see, in London during those years you've got to realize that for

the first time, West Indians were really getting together. In my day in Trinidad, I never knew people from Barbados and Guyana and Jamaica and Grenada, and those other islands. We were so widely separated that we never knew one another. In London, the great thing to me is that suddenly all these West Indians from the various Caribbean territories found themselves grouped together for the first time in their lives, exchanging ideas and talking to one another, and getting to know one another, and trying to build up some kind of feeling for the Caribbean area as a whole, rather than as individual islands, saying I am a Jamaican, and you are Trinidadian, and we are completely different. These things were engendered by the fact that we were all facing the same problems and having the same difficulties in living in an alien society.

*THAKUR: Sam, let me push you a little bit further on this apolitical position. . . . Your position on this seems to come out in Moses. . . . I sense here that you are talking, that Moses is talking through you, or rather the other way around—*

Yes, well, that's quite true. I think what Moses represents is really what I think to be a typical, normal human desire. It isn't everybody who wants to go into politics. If you ask the majority of people, nobody wants to have anything to do with politics. They just want to be left alone, to have a nice job, a nice house, maybe a car to drive, and to live comfortably. These are universal desires. It has nothing to do with being a black man, or being a man from the Caribbean. This is the kind of character Moses is. . . . what I am trying to bring out is that although he keeps on saying it is his desire to be left alone, he cannot help it, as he himself admits. He says, well, these are my people, and, you know, what can I do? If I've got to do anything, it's for them I've got to do it.

*THAKUR: He's part of it, and at the same time he doesn't want to be part of it.*

Exactly. Isn't that the kind of situation that most people find themselves in during their lives? To be involved in something that you don't want to really get trapped into? . . . You've got to realize that this is how I, as a writer, use my character Moses, that

he is able—I don't think that he is aloof in that sense, that he keeps away from it, but then it is through him that everything is being recorded and everything is being seen, and he sees it and he comments on it and he talks about it, and he exposes it, so this is how I use my character. . . . I think of Moses as a Caribbean composite of every man. Every man faces up to the same kind of problems that Moses faces up to. The fact that he is Caribbean and that he is black is there. That, he cannot escape from. Even if he tries to keep away from it, he is involved. That is a constant thing, and I think this is very human, and in fact even up to today there are certain situations I don't want to be involved in at all. I keep myself aloof as Moses did, away from many things that I don't want to become involved with, that I have other things I am involved with, and other matters that I want to attend to. I am not bothered about that.

*ROBERTS: There's not an awful lot of violence in [your writings]. Do you have some awareness of why or how that has happened?*

Well, I don't know how to answer that question. Maybe I've never felt the need to bring in any violent element like that—although I have suggested it I think in certain books—but what are you really up to with this question?

*ROBERTS: Well, I think you are a very gentle man.*

Well, it probably comes out in my work. I guess you can say that. "Gentle man" might be the word, but then I am also a very mixed-up man, and one who is still probing and trying to find out what everything is all about.

*THAKUR: I would like to bring you back to . . . the landscape. How much would you say that has allowed you . . . how much that has influenced you, in terms of your characters and the strength you bring out in your characters?*

Oh, this has had the greatest influence of anything at all. Those are the things that have really influenced me, and still draw me back to the islands. I grew up in that kind of environment, and my first, some of my very early writing, and some of the things that inspired me to writing was to describe the landscape, to look

at the landscape. This is why I say I first started to write as a poet, and I wanted to write poetry about the trees and the birds and the mountains and the sea. And it's always remained with me, and it's always been very important. In fact, even abroad, I so love the English countryside, and if you look at my work carefully you will see that one of the first things that I wrote when I went to London was, I went out into the countryside and I wrote a piece that was broadcast by the BBC, and it had to do with this love of, or affinity with the landscape, and what attracted me to England too was again the descriptions that I had of the English countryside and so on, that I looked for when I went there and discovered for myself and wrote something about it. (In fact, it was published in *Foreday Morning* . . . my collection of essays.) When you talk about influence, yes, those—I don't know what to call them—material? What would you call them? Real, natural influences coming out of nature—there's the land, and the people working on the land and so on, and the people must, perforce, be attached to it. That element, yes, that has always been a great influence with me. . . . Some people don't care about that at all, but to me it is vital and it is very, very important. I don't think I could be a city man for very many years. I'd feel tied down. I want to go out where there are mountains and trees and the sea, and get there where I can expand my thoughts and my vision.

*ROBERTS: How does Calgary fit into this?*

Well, Canada is massive for me—like this is one of those things I wish I could write in poetry. . . . Perhaps it has been over-written, but I still think I can write of the prairie, the endless landscape. . . . And then I could talk about the mountains. Here in Calgary, where I can look about and see the Rockies . . . I feel . . . when I stand up next to these big mountains, that this mountain is too big, that my thoughts cannot encompass it. It should be a certain size that I could appreciate and understand as a human being. . . . The whole feeling here is of a bigness, of an expansion that I am awed by, living here in Calgary, living in Canada. Away, so far away from Trinidad and feeling myself thinking as myself on the globe and the world's surface, and looking at myself on a map way up there in the north, and getting a feeling of this as a world you're



really living in and the island as just a small part of it, way down there, where you were born, and yet expanding your vision and your feeling in a way that only the outer experience could bring about. You can tell people about it, but they have to experience it themselves.

*ROBERTS: Do you sense it's a violent landscape?*

It's an awesome one.

*THAKUR: Is it alienating? Do you find the landscape alienating?*

As opposed to Trinidad, which is so small, you get—not really alienated. I find it very powerful, I find it—I don't find it friendly—I don't find it alienating. That's not the right word, really. I think I'd use awesome—I find it expanding, in that sense of—it's like being flung out onto the surface of the world for the first time, really, and feeling the vastness of it. On a small island you feel that this is the world, but here you—I don't know if it's through the prairies or what, but there's a feeling here that this is a big world that you don't know very much about, yet.

*THAKUR: Earlier, in response to Kevin's question on religiosity, you were kind of hedging on the question . . . but when you talk about land, there is a spiritual affinity that you seem to have with these things. You brighten up, you lighten up when you talk about them.*

Well, I suppose I do, because as I said, these are the things that influence me. If I want to become political, I am very much concerned about the environment, about what is happening nowadays with the pollution and things like that. Those are things I am very much concerned about. If there was anything I could do besides folding my newspapers and making sure they get back to be recycled, and things like that—if there was anything bigger I could do about it, I think I might become involved, but these things are very important to me. It's as if we seem to fail to realize how much these things really and truly not only influence us, but how much control they have over our very lives. You're here, for instance, you're right here and there's a high wind, and there's a tornado, and it wipes away a whole village or something, and that's it. It's gone. And no one seems to think of

that high wind, and what's happening in the atmosphere, the world, in the natural world, that are causing these things. It just goes by. Nobody seems to pause and give a thought and say, Jesus, you know, where did that wind come from? And they look up at the sky, and the trouble comes peeling down. I don't think peeling is the word—comes crashing down.

*ROBERTS: What about the snow?*

I think that snow is gentle. Snow is gentle. Snow is never alive, animated. It just drops, stays there, and it covers everything. Snow is christened. . . . I'm not talking about a blizzard or something like that.

*ROBERTS: You and I have a similarity. I never saw snow until I got over here, and I guess you saw snow perhaps in London, but the first time I saw snow over here, it was amazing. It was just amazing.*

I never saw very much snow in England. It doesn't snow very much there. I saw snow in Scotland, and I saw—but to me here, now in Canada, in Calgary, this is what snow truly is, and I like it. As I say, I think my word for it would be "christened." It falls gently and covers the land and there's a promise of things to come after it melts and goes away. . . .

*ROBERTS: I know you are still writing, and you will continue to write for many years, but I'd like to know what you would like posterity to say about Sam Selvon.*

I don't know. You know, this would sound so coy. This is a heavy question. I can see people thinking themselves to death about a question like that. I would tell you quite openly, Kevin, that even this writer—I wish I were a philosopher, really; I wish that I could be remembered as a philosopher, and of course that might even sound absurd, but this is—to me the highest philosophy is philosophy, or even music for that matter. This is how I wish my creativity had expanded into—and I mean, I never studied the craft of writing as such, you know; it's something—maybe I had a way with words, or what, and it was about the only thing I could do. I can't do math. I'm not a mathematician—algebra is still Greek to me. I don't know if  $x^2 + 0 - y$  is equal

to nought plus four—my mind is a complete blank; I would never be able to figure that out. I've never spent any of my time trying to work that sort of thing out. But I love literature and I love reading and I love writing. When I say I love writing, I hate having to do it, but it's a hate/love relationship I have with writing, that I still feel that I haven't really written my best work, that it's still there, and will there be enough time for me to finish at least one more big novel that I've been working on for about three or four years? People keep asking me about it, and I try to say something about it, and I hate doing that. I don't want to talk about it until it's done.