



Letters Home

CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

Empire Windrush has long had an iconic status in British and Caribbean history.

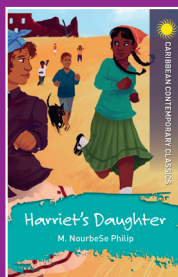
This book, largely told in the form of diary entries and letters home, reveals the day-to-day experience of the first immigrants and the far-reaching effects on their lives and relationships.

Jen has left a young daughter, Sunshine, in Jamaica, and in these letters to her daughter, she attempts to make sense of the dislocation and displacement she experiences, her response, and the effect on those close to her.

A penetrating and devastating study of the immigrant experience in 1960s Britain, and its long-lasting consequences.

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Paulette Ramsay

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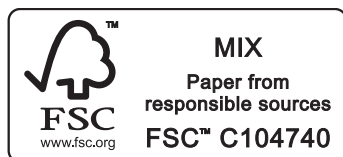
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*For Audrey Williams (Miss Gayle) and
Manzie Guthrie, Leila Guthrie*

Caribbean Contemporary Classics





Introduction

Over the last century, Caribbean authors, overflowing with stories about the life and society around them, have written many great and enduring works of literature. The Caribbean novels in this *Caribbean Contemporary Classics* collection were written from around the mid-1900s to the present day, and we are proud to publish them. They serve as unique and personal records and are also works of art, running parallel to what historians say about the region, and revealing to wider audiences the depth and brilliancy of generations of Caribbean writers.

The novels in this collection are re-issued in their original forms even though some words and phrases may seem derogatory in the eyes of modern readers. Some words have been partially redacted, but none have been removed. We acknowledge the sensitivities of persons who have experienced discrimination especially in the verbal form and would like to state without reservation that the publisher in no way supports discrimination against any persons or groups of persons by the publication of these works. As in all works of literature, the language used in these novels reflects the authors' experiences and insights and forms an integral part of the text they set out to produce.

As the publisher, we have followed a number of principles in bringing these works to a wider audience. First, it is important to us to allow readers to interpret the authors' words in the context of the story as a whole, reflected through the readers' own experience, but without trying to dictate what that interpretation should be. Second, we respect the authors' integrity and their intellectual property. Third, we believe it to be important to experience works of art from specific geographic and historical contexts in their original form. The choice, as we see it, is whether to publish the book or not, rather than whether to change its language or not. In the present series, we have opted to publish a series of books which we believe to be significant, valued and important parts of the canon. They are rich, engaging and luminous works, in the authors' authentic voices, and we offer them to readers in the hope that they will delight, entertain and inform.

Map of Jamaica

Key	
	Regions
	Capital city
	Towns
	Rivers
	Sea
	Main roads
	Mountains

Caribbean Sea



0 20 km

Caribbean Sea



APRIL'S FIRST NOTE

.....

1 February 2019

Dear Madam Sunshine (My Stoic Mother),

I feel like someone who has found a big chest of treasures that I am now happily sharing with you. I hope you will accept this package of wonderful finds because I am very excited about it. I am sending it by express mail to you so that you will get it very quickly. I will certainly feel better when I know that it is in your hands. As you know, I travelled to England to the funeral service for my Grandmother Jen, your mother as you may remember. We have been good friends (sort of) and we have had a fairly good relationship since I was ten and decided to write to her. You may recall that you were not in agreement with me writing to her at the time, and thought I was setting myself up for hurt and disappointment as you said some years before. Interestingly, she was very happy to receive my letter and we had a steady exchange of notes over the years. They were not very long, so I refer to them as notes. They were not really done very frequently but we kept them going between us maybe three or four times every year and I like to think we sort of became friends. From her notes I could tell that she had a good sense of humour and could even laugh at herself.

I was very happy to hear from her and to read about her birthday celebrations – she seemed to enjoy celebrating each additional year. She said the last fifteen years of her life were the best, so she made sure to enjoy them. ‘My early days in England were rough,’ she said several times. She had fabulous tea parties, by

her account, with her friends and the members of her Natter Club (Old People's Club) at her church in Birmingham. I was always amazed that as old people they seemed to eat so many sweet treats at these parties, based on what she reported. Cakes, cookies, tarts and despite her diabetes, she seemed to delight in serving herself generous portions of these delectable sweet things. I have now concluded that I inherited her terrible sweet tooth, but I am still very mindful that I need to be careful and eat sweets sparingly. I doubt I will be as lucky as she has been to live to a ripe old age of eighty-five, while still indulging in chocolate cakes, ice-cream, sweet potato pudding and apple pies. My mouth waters when she describes the cakes and scones and candied fruits and how she just readily bites into them because she feels that at her age she has earned the right to throw all concerns to the wind and simply eat the foods she likes. But they say that diabetes is a family sickness so I have to be careful. Over the years, she sent me a few photographs which, you may remember, you told me you had no interest in seeing. She had beautiful skin and a face that was wrinkle-free (another thing I envy her for). I wish you would understand that you missed a lot by not getting to know her.

Anyway, I went to her funeral because apparently she had written her instructions years ago about who to inform about her passing and who would be allowed to speak, or sing, or read a scripture passage. I was at the top of the list, so I was called by one of her closest friends, and Uncle Roy also called me with the news. I'm sure he told you because I know you still have a very close relationship with him. I have to say, as your daughter, that I still find it difficult to understand your unrelenting unforgiveness and your determination to keep her 'shut out'. I will not have another debate with you about the matter but I couldn't resist the temptation to mention your obstinate

unforgiveness. I do not believe that your attitude is replicated anywhere else in the world. It is just unbelievable, and it does not make sense. You are truly hard.

Anyway, let's talk about the package that has me so excited. I'm sending you a box of my precious precious letters and writings. There are two sets. The set that's tied with yellow ribbon are her writings. Some are obviously letters to you, and some are just writings, as if she wrote her thoughts or entries for a diary but there was really no diary. I sat and read all of them – some twice, some three times, and I have learnt so much about her and about some of the missing pieces in her life and in both your lives. I hope you will read them. They might make you change your mind about a lot of things that you did not understand or that you assumed about her and her life in England. Pity you will be learning them too late. I also learned a lot of history from them. There is so much that I did not know about what happened to West Indians who went to England after the War and faced so many problems – racism, poverty, hunger, loneliness. So many of them have not really talked much about their experiences. You should read them because you may realise that a lot of things were beyond her control, and some affected the way she related to you, or as you prefer to say, chose not to relate to you in the early days. You really are too self-absorbed.

The second set of writings, the ones tied with a black ribbon, were really written by your Uncle Albert. He was the first of your mother's siblings to go to England. He went in the first Windrush group. Apparently, he was writing letters to his family in Jamaica but he never mailed them. Some of his writings just seem like rambling, but you can read them yourself. They say he went off his mind in England – maybe that is the reason your parents, my grandparents, did not talk about him very much. Apparently he

died in an asylum. Please read them. I have made copies of them for myself because I fear that in a moment of irrationality, you may destroy them. Yes, I know what you are capable of doing in your insistence on leaving the past alone. And in being spiteful.

Once or twice she mentioned him to me, but she said his life was tough and ended tragically. He met a terrible death at the hands of *Teddy Boys*. She did not say much about them, these *Teddy Boys*, but I have managed to pick up a few things here and there from her writing and his writing, as well as from Uncle Roy himself about them.

This package is an amazing amount of history that's being sent to you. English history, the history of West Indian migration to England. Personal history, your family's history ... Your mother and her brothers and sister did not all go on the same ship to England. Her oldest brother went on the *Windrush*, all the others went on the *SS Auriga* but your mother went on the *SS Irpinia*.

I remember once when I phoned her on her birthday and asked her to tell me in a few words how she would sum up her life in England after more than sixty years. She said, 'April, usually I don't say, but since it's you, I will tell you that I had sixty years of hard life, tough times and some good times too, and now I am at peace with myself. I am fine. There's no pain or sorrow or struggle that can scare me now. I have seen it all, fought all the fights, won some, lost some and now I am fine. There is nothing that a little port or bourbon or Jamaican full proof white cannot handle. Yes mi dear ah so it go. Same so.'

When I said, 'What's the best memory you have of your sixty-odd years in England?' she chuckled and said, 'I tell you, Crown and Cushion ... *Shubin* ... *Nine Night* ... and finding Jamaican breadfruit in the market to go home and roast and sit and eat with roast pork.'

‘And your worst memories?’

‘House sharing and Teddy Boys.’

She promised that on another occasion she would tell me about them. We never got around to that conversation, but I believe that these letters and notes that I am sending to you will help you to find out about them for yourself. So let me stop talking on and on. This should really be a very brief cover note. You get to your scissors and cut the ribbons now. I am not sure it matters which ones you pull and read first. Just read!

Love,

April

PS: The letters and notes were given to me by Uncle Roy who said that he found them in Grandma Jen’s suitcase in her house, and when he started reading them he thought that I was the best person to get them and decide what to do with them. I read all of them in one night. I remember I just could not put them down. Then I realised that the letters and notes were written by two different persons, she and someone else. I did my best to separate the ones that had got mixed up. She had done a fairly good job of categorising them so that her own were separate, but it seems they got mixed up again. Thankfully, the two handwritings are very different – hers is a sort of lazy cursive and the other person’s is a firm, deliberate and strong lettering, in a kind of script. I hope they are all separated but in case there is one or a few not properly placed, please put them in the right group. If you can figure it out.

Letters tied with red ribbon are my notes to you.

Best,

Your daughter April, who loves family.