



The Year in San Fernando

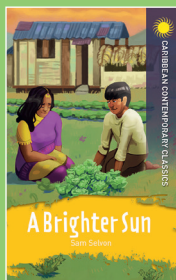
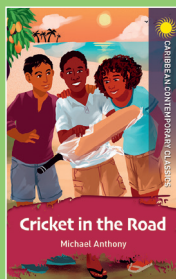
CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

Twelve-year-old Francis has never left his home in Mayaro, Trinidad, before he goes to San Fernando, to work as a servant-companion to the aged Mrs Chandles.

This luminous book is recounted through the experiencing consciousness of the young boy. Over the course of one year, through his eyes, we see the cycle of natural change and progression; the daily round of the market showing the fruits of different seasons, the passage of dry season to rainy and back again to dry and the cane fires as the crop comes to an end, all symbolising the progression of the boy's year. Weaving in among these mundane but intense experiences, Francis feels his way toward some understanding of adulthood. As his initial confusion gives way to increasing confidence and maturity, the open consciousness of the boy allows different times, events and places to co-exist. With Francis, the reader seeks a 'meaning' in his experiences, amidst the sometimes sordid actions of the adults.

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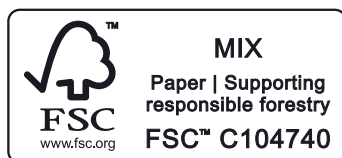
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To Jennifer, Keith and Yvette

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 Trinidad



Key	
-----	Regions
■	Capital city
•	Towns
~	Rivers
▬	Sea
—	Main roads
▲	Mountains



0 10 km





CHAPTER 1

WE HAD HEARD only very little about Mr Chandles. The little we had heard were whispers and we didn't gather much, but we saw him sometimes leaning over the banister of the Forestry Office, and indeed he was as aristocratic as they said he was. He looked tidy and elegant and he always wore jacket and tie, unusual under the blazing sun. These things confirmed that he was well off, and his manner and bearing, and the condescending look he gave everything about him, made us feel that he had gained high honours in life.

Mrs Samuels of the Forestry Office must have been sure of this. She seemed to consider his week-ends under her roof very flattering to her. She seemed to have had no hesitation in approving the friendship between Mr Chandles and her precious Marva.

It was the whispers about Mr Chandles and Marva that we heard so often in our house. Ma worked for Mrs Samuels so it was expected she would know a great deal. She was cook, maid, butler, and even washerwoman, and therefore had opportunities to see and hear almost everything. Besides, she was Marva's close friend. It was surprising to know that Marva could have a close friend at all, or could confide in anyone, for she was vain beyond the telling. But she had fine looks – people said that about her. And now that a gentleman was visiting the Forestry Office, they said a lot more about her.

But Ma, who was without malice, thought the friendship a very nice thing indeed. Ma thought at last some person worthy of Marva had come along. Someone of Marva's high culture and education. Ma talked in that fashion all the time.

We often listened to this, and detesting Marva as we did, we often accused Ma of being more interested in the affairs of these two than they themselves were. Whenever anyone came home for a gossip the talk inevitably went on to Marva, and Ma always boasted about being Marva's close friend, and about what a fine girl she was, and about the costly things she had, and she talked about Mr Chandles' position at the Great Asphalt Company in La Brea, and about the loads of money he was making every month. This always made a great impression on the person she was talking to.

Sometimes it impressed us also. Indeed, this status of Mr Chandles must have been what was causing Mrs Samuels such elation. She had always, when she went walking, stepped out of the Forestry Office with decorum, but now this decorum was grossly overdone, and the way she swung her umbrella and held her head to one side offended the people a great deal.

So now there was no enjoyment in watching her pass. She had had the reputation of being the most elegant lady in the village – after Marva – and people had always made mention of her among themselves, and we had been proud that Ma was working for her and that we could go over to the Forestry Office whenever we wanted; not only to the office itself, where people went for passes to fell timber or cut thatcher leaves or on other forestry business, but to the house proper, and to the kitchen, where Ma always was. Mrs Samuels had always been glad of us. That is, until Mr Chandles came along.

And so Mr Chandles seemed to have suddenly changed all her grace and her simplicity and now we felt she was really complicated. Life, on the whole, became a little more complicated. The Forestry Office grounds had been fenced off with tiger-wire, and we often watched Mr Chandles leaning against the veranda rails, looking over the tiger-wire fence

into our yard. Our yard was always untidy and the lime trees were untrimmed, and since Pa had died the grass in the yard was uncut, and around the mango tree it had grown rather tall without our bothering about it. We could see the look on Mr Chandles' face as he gazed over into our yard and somehow we felt rather small. He was so different by comparison. He was so tidy-looking and neat. It was impossible not to admire him. Really, it seemed wrong that people should speak so ill of him. As Mrs Samuels had said, they didn't know anything about him and they were nothing but a pack of gossip-mongers. She had said they were simply jealous of Marva. She told Ma several times that they were *jealous, jealous* of Marva, because Marva was not of their class and did not associate with them. Marva had nothing in common with them, she said. That was why they hated her.

To my own mind this seemed true enough. Of all the people in the village only Ma really cared for Marva. And of course, Mrs Samuels. And certainly, Mr Chandles. Mostly, people said they couldn't stomach her. She dressed, not extravagantly, but a little too well, and she spoke an English far beyond the range of us all. Indeed, she had nothing in common with the villagers and it was not only Mrs Samuels who knew it. Maybe it was true they were all jealous of her in some way. Now mischief flourished. Everybody knew what time of night Mr Chandles arrived in the village and how Marva went down to the bus-stop to meet him and how they walked up the road hugging up in the dark. Ma said as far as she knew Mr Chandles had never arrived in the night. Anyway that did not stop the gossips, and whenever the women went to the Forestry Office they looked at Marva in a very knowing way.

Mr Chandles was seeming to come more frequently as the days wore by and at home now there was much talk from Ma about the wedding to come.

Christmas just past and Mr Chandles had stayed a little while over the holidays. Looking towards the veranda of the Forestry Office we had seen quite a lot of him. Sometimes on going over to the Office on errands for the neighbours, we would see him behind the counter helping to sort out applications or talking to Marva. Those were the few times when we saw him near up.

But Ma saw him near up all the time. It even appeared that he was getting sociable with Ma. And it was just about now that the first big thing happened.

Ma rushed home from work one evening, very excited. Usually she'd walk out into the main road at the front and then come home, but this evening she just held the tiger-wire apart and slipped through.

'You know what happen?' she said, almost out of breath. 'You know what happen?'

We waited in suspense to hear, and my brother Felix said, 'What happen, Ma?'

'Hush up,' she said, 'I talking. Listen to me!' She did not say this unkindly but it was very irritating.

'You all know what happen?' she said.

We said nothing.

'Francis going to live in San Fernando.'

There was shock all round and all eyes turned on me. I was flabbergasted. I did not know what it was all about. And then Ma began to explain. She started by saying that Mr Chandles had plenty of money and a big house in San Fernando. She said that some time towards the end of the year – the new year had just come in – he was going to marry Marva. But they were not going to live in San Fernando, she said. For the reason that Mr Chandles had a big job at the Great Asphalt Company in La Brea, they would live at La Brea, and only his mother would be in the big house in San Fernando. The mother was old and lonely and

wanted someone to stay with her. She was a kind dear soul and just wanted someone to go to the shops and do little errands and everything else would be very nice. Ma said I was the lucky one because Mr Chandles could have got hundreds of little boys to go but he had asked for me, specially. She thanked God that I had come into such good fortune.

We, the children, were much too surprised to speak. Ma asked me wasn't I glad to go. I did not know what to say. Leaving home had never entered my mind. I had thought of almost everything, but not this. I had heard of San Fernando, the great town on the other side. I had never had to think of it very much. I had thought of it as I thought of many other things. I had never imagined living in it.

I was surprised to hear that Mr Chandles had asked for me, specially. I would never have believed it hadn't Ma said so. He had often caught me stoning the guava tree, and the way his eyes had fallen upon me I would never have thought he'd ask for me to live in his big house.

Anyway, when Ma had spoken, she stood there waiting for me to answer. She looked impatient and surprised that I did not jump at the great news. 'You want to go or not?' she said, 'Mr Chandles want to know.'

I looked at Sil then. You could never tell what Sil was thinking. He was my small brother but he was mostly sensible but now I could not read anything on his face.

Felix and Anna were all for my going. I could see that. They looked at me as if to say I was stupid and that Mr Chandles should change his mind, and that if I didn't want to go *they* knew of others who would.

While I sat there, my thoughts confused, Ma began praising Mr Chandles again. No one would have believed there was so much good in one man, but Ma went on talking. Then she changed to the subject of our own father, and how he died out and left

her with four starving children and how God alone knew how hard she was fighting to raise us. That was true. I knew that, for one thing. When Ma talked like that I knew how hard she was fighting. Mrs Samuels was very kind but nobody would believe it if you said how much she was paying Ma to do almost everything in that big house – to wash, starch, iron, cook, sweep-up and to run errands – people would not believe it if you told them. But her money was keeping us from starvation. No one knew about the pay but people could not help seeing how Ma slaved. They said she would run her blood to water. Hearing this so often I seriously feared it would happen. I always thought, if it *could* happen, would it happen one of these days? I looked at Ma now and she gazed back anxiously, hungry for the word. I said, yes. She was almost beside herself with joy. She hurried down the steps and made for the Forestry Office.

Again, she did not go out into the road and enter the building from the front, but instead she ran towards the tiger-wire fence and held the spiky wires apart and eased through, then disappeared towards the back of the building. Her sprightliness amazed us.



I felt strange for most of that night and when I awoke the next morning I still felt strange. It seemed as though I was suddenly changed without and within. I could not be the same because I was going to San Fernando. I kept thinking about this and mostly I wanted to be myself. Every morning now, during the holidays, Sil, Felix and I played cricket in the road, but this morning I did not feel like playing any cricket, and I went to the back of the house looking down at the bushes. Somehow, the knowledge that I was going away made Mayaro look very strange. The lime trees

looked greener, for one thing, and the sudden down-sweep of the land towards the ravine, rising again at the far, grassy hills, seemed to make the place look unusual this morning, and rare.

I did not know why this was so. I was sure it was I who was unusual for I was feeling that way inside me. Nearby, close to our pea trees, stood the giant guava tree, just on the other side of the tiger-wire. A great many of its branches hung over to our side, and they were laden with ripe fruit, and it was these that I often stoned, standing almost concealed between the pea trees.

I just didn't feel like stoning the guavas, this morning. I saw them and they meant little to me, and this was very unusual. Standing there I could hear the voices of Sil and Felix in the road, arguing as to who should bat first. Sil was always arguing about that. I was not even stirred to go and play cricket. I suddenly remembered school and how I would not be going back and I became alarmed. What would Mr Guilden say? Perhaps he would come home to see Ma about it. I wondered what the class would say. Then I remembered the term test. At the Christmas break-up we had not got any results. I wondered if Mr Guilden would send the results home to Ma, and I wondered what place I had made in the test.

And now, slowly, my thoughts shifted to the big house in San Fernando. I wished I had some idea of what it looked like. I wondered if it was as fine a building as this Forestry Office here. This was really a huge, great building. Terrific. As I turned my head to take in again the vastness of the Forestry Office, my heart almost leaped to my mouth. Just on the other side of the tiger-wire was Mr Chandles. He smiled with me.