Uptown and Downtown

A CONVERSATION ON CLASS STRATIFICATION WITH DIANA MCCAULAY

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Diana McCaulay may not yet be a familiar name to non-Jamaicans when it comes to Caribbean novelists, but her burgeoning oeuvre, which attests to both her talent and zeal for writing, will very soon gain her a space in the Caribbean canon. Perhaps best known for her weekly column that appeared for nearly a decade in the Jamaican newspaper the *Gleaner*, McCaulay recently decided to try her hand at writing novels. Already, she has two published novels, *Dog-Heart* and *Huracan* (published by Peepal Tree Press in 2010 and 2012 respectively), with a third, *The Dolphin Catcher* (based on her 2012 Regional Commonwealth prizewinning short story), on the way. A native and lifelong resident of Jamaica, McCaulay also is not shy about addressing the many controversial issues of Jamaican society within her narratives. Her debut novel *Dog-Heart* is a prime example, as it boldly tackles class prejudice and the very real gap between uptown and downtown or the so-called two Jamaicas.

The winner of a gold medal from the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission, *Dog-Heart* is set in Kingston, Jamaica, and chronicles the interactions between a middle-class woman, Sahara, and an inner-city youth, Dexter. The two meet in a car park after Dexter begs for money, and eventually Sahara decides to help Dexter's family and find sponsors for his educational expenses. Readers see a clear juxtaposition between the worlds of Sahara, who is a single mother raising a teenage son, and Arleen, who is a single mother raising Dexter and his two younger siblings. Without a doubt, class is the elephant in the room that distinguishes the two family units. Their relationship invites critique of the many misunderstandings that often hinder the growth of productive cross-class relationships. Though the interactions between the two families are eye-opening, they are also uncomfortable at times, as McCaulay is brutally honest in her portrayals of Sahara's thoughts towards Arleen and her family. Likewise, she is straightforward in her depiction of Dexter's downward spiral. Despite Sahara's (haphazard) efforts to help Dexter live a crime-free life, the novel moves towards its close with Dexter assisting in the kidnapping of Sahara as part of a gang initiation. Thankfully, however, Dexter rebels against his accomplices and refuses to kill Sahara, allowing her to go free. *Dog-Heart* leaves readers with a number of questions to ponder.

To help readers unpack the narrative, McCaulay elaborated on many of the key issues in *Dog-Heart* during my interview with her. Besides issues of class, we discussed other themes that appear in the narrative such as education, parent-child relationships and colour privilege. I met up with McCaulay at her office, which serves as the headquarters for the Jamaican Environment Trust, an organisation McCaulay founded in 1991 to promote environmental activism.

Thank you for taking time out to speak with me. First, I would like to know who was your intended audience for *Dog-Heart*?
First of all, Jamaicans who would not normally pick up a Caribbean novel. I wanted to write something about a collision between what has been famously called the Two Jamaicas, although I think there are far more than two. I wanted to do justice to the Jamaican language. And I also wanted to write about urban life – there's been lots of literature about rural Jamaica. My own experience is urban. Despite being an environmental activist, I have lived my whole life in the city of Kingston. So I wanted to write about urban space and about an encounter that happens to a very, very great number of people, regardless of their economic background or their social class, where somebody asks you for help. And the struggle that you then go through: Should you help? In what way? What are the pitfalls and the obstacles? And why is it that some of our problems are so incredibly intractable? And the reason I chose the first-person viewpoint for both characters was because . . . if you were a middle-class person reading the book, I wanted you to understand how the boy felt. And if you were a boy, I wanted you to understand how the woman felt. I wanted the reader to understand both points of view.

Concerning points of view, I would like to hear a little bit more about the process of writing for you. Did you do any research to get into Dexter's mindset?
I didn't so much research as observe. Because, I think in Jamaica, these things are very close. They're very there. But, if you live here and you've lived here all your life, you tend not to see them. So, for a period of time, I changed the way I went about my daily life – you know, zoned out thinking of my work, or my family or any of the things that occupy our minds. For a time, I consciously observed children. Where they lived. What they were like in school. In my environmental work, we do quite a bit of work in schools. So, I was often in an inner-city school environment. But I didn't walk around with a clipboard. It was more an exercise in empathy. It was more an exercise in imagining, if I was a twelve-year-old boy and every morning I had to get up and go get water – because this is an experience I have never had – what would that be like? What might happen?

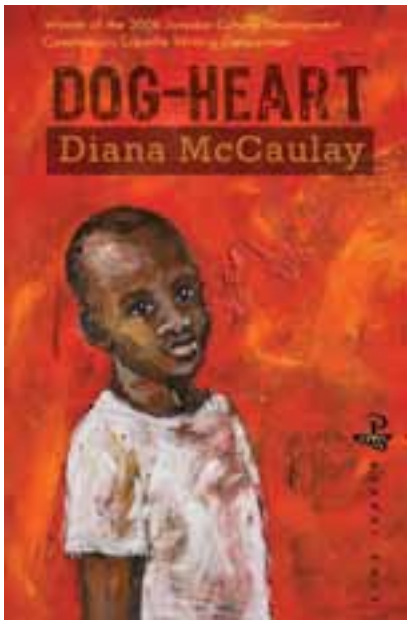
At one point in *Dog-Heart*, the teenage character Carl says, "It's nothing to do with those children being black. It's to do with where they are from, their class, their attitudes" (89). Also, throughout the novel, there is a juxtaposition of Sahara and Carl's life with Arleen and Dexter's life. I want to know, do you intentionally engage issues of class?
Yes. Because in Jamaica, there's quite a bit of discussion that there's no race prejudice, but there's class prejudice. Which, actually, I think is not true, because race and class are very strongly correlated. But there are these enormous divisions in the society based on social class. They go right through to where you live, what your address is, how you dress, how you speak, and the attitudes that you have. There's a scene in *Dog-Heart* where Sahara is upset because Arleen has bought a piece of

furniture and Sahara thinks this is not a good use of money. But she doesn't understand the pressures that are coming Arleen's way or the way status is acquired in her social class. So, yes, I explicitly wanted to write about class, about the way we misunderstand each other across classes.

So, with Dexter, most people would identify him as poor or working-class.
Right. Inner-city, I would say.

Okay, inner-city. How do you identify Sahara? What would be her class background?
She would be a solid middle-class person. I've played with the locations a bit. I located Sahara in Mona, and Mona is, by definition, a middle-class address. Middle-class, professional. In the case of Dexter, I did not want to use an actual, inner-city community because I did not want to stigmatise that community. I wanted to be free to say whatever I wanted to say about it, without thinking about the real people who live there or people saying, well, you're describing my sewage and my garbage and my violence. So, that's why I used imaginary place names for the inner-city communities.

What about the name of the novel? Lasco and Merciless are both described as being dog-hearted. From where does the title *Dog-Heart* come?
It's a Jamaican term which basically means ruthless, without conscience, without a heart. I can't tell you the origin of it – many people have asked me; I think it's an investigation for linguists. But every Jamaican knows what the term 'dog-heart' means. And you hear it used to describe an unusually brutal murder; you'll hear men are dog-hearted. The book was originally called *Car-Park Boy*, and it was never the right title. And, one day when I was writing, somebody in the book says, so-and-so is dog-hearted. I thought, that is the right title. We have this belief in Jamaica that there are such things as dog-hearted men. That they are evil, to use a religious term; I mean, they're beyond redemption. They just need to be killed. We need



capital punishment, they need to be mowed down by the police. That kind of argument. I don't believe in dog-heartedness; I believe much of the violence we see in Jamaica is a combination of not only people's genetics, but their experiences. The way they are nurtured. The way they are socialised, whether or not they have ever been shown love – that eventually results in dog-heartedness. But it's not some inherent trait in such people, and there's nothing to be done except get rid of them. Of course there are people who are mentally ill as well. I'm trying to say it's a complicated picture.

Well, thank you for clarifying the title because I was not sure if you were trying to say Dexter was dog-hearted. One other topic that is very popular when it comes to studying class and the Caribbean is colourism or shadeism. I noticed you would describe the characters as white-white, browning, black-black, et cetera. What is the significance of you giving those kinds of descriptions?
Because both class and race in Jamaica are so complex. In my lifetime, those lines between black and white have blurred completely. Now we have this shadeism, or shadeocracy, where it really matters how light-skinned you are. We have an identifiable physical type, the browning, who is light-skinned with light-coloured eyes, straight hair, but not so light-skinned as to be white, and they are our physical ideal. Brownings win beauty contests. If you spent time in the school system, which I have done, you start to see these correlations between the shade of the children and the facilities of the schools. So, if it's a very badly equipped school, the kids are going to be very dark-skinned. If it's an uptown school with every amenity – air-conditioned classrooms, labs, everybody has a computer – they're going to be white or light-skinned. And that bothered me. It bothers me and we don't want to talk about it, but I think we should talk about it.

Do you think that currently in Jamaica, in this contemporary period, that skin colour is still something that is closely linked to a person's class level?
Yes, I do. If you're middle-class, you're more likely to be light-skinned. It's not a perfect correlation, of course, but if you walk around a downtown Kingston community, most people are going to be dark-skinned. You would almost never find a white child at an inner-city school, although you will find a minority of very dark-skinned children in an uptown school. It's changing, but I think there's still a strong correlation between race and social class. There's also still a strong correlation between social class and speech. One of the reasons I use the Jamaican language is because there is still prejudice concerning the failure to speak good standard English. If you speak only Jamaican, that's going to slam a lot of doors for you.

Your response links to one of my questions about the oral dimensions in your work. I see you purposely used patois and identified it with Dexter or Dexter's environment.
Right. And I was faced with the challenge of rendering Dexter's speech in a way that would be authentic to the way he might speak, without making it impossible for a non-Jamaican reader to understand. There has been a codification of Jamaican [the language]

and it exists in big reference books, but the spelling is all changed up, so it's phonetic, and I find it, myself, very difficult to read, it would have to be studied. So, I was trying to find this middle ground where a reader would understand that this is how a Jamaican boy would speak, without making it too difficult to read. I think the jury is out about how well I did that. Some people think it was well done, others no.

Do middle-class, upper-middle-class, or upper-class Jamaicans ever speak Jamaican?
They do. When I was a child, I was told this was 'talking bad'. You use it in talking to the maid or the gardener, but you would never use it in polite company. And that's a change, a welcome change, that has happened in my life. Many more people switch between the two languages. They'll speak to their friends in Jamaican and then they'll speak English in a more formal setting, say at work. Still, recently, there was somebody in Parliament who made a response in Jamaican and the Speaker of the House said, no, that speech was not acceptable. So . . . we do use Jamaican, but it's still considered, I think, identifiable with lower social classes and lack of education.

Bridging over to the role of education in this novel, it appears that access to higher-quality education is not always possible. After Sahara gets Dexter and Marlon into the uptown school, Dexter says, "This education thing is like a race on sports day, with all the other runner one whole lap ahead . . ." (108). What do you think the relationship is between class and education here in Jamaica?
The whole question of education is an example of the class divide, in that for the middle-class person, for Sahara, education is the answer. That's her paradigm – if we can just get education to poor people, that will solve their problems. They will get better jobs, they will have fewer children, everything will be better. Dexter's paradigm, though, is that the people who are successful in his community – in the sense that they have greater material comforts – are not necessarily people who are educated. So, he doesn't share Sahara's paradigm. In fact, his experience of school is this very unpleasant, unfair place. My own feeling about education is that we lose sight of how much parental support goes into a child doing well in school. By the time an upper- or middle-class child goes to 'formal' school at seven, they've already been three years in some kind of nursery school or kindergarten. They've had their parents reading storybooks to them from when they were very young. They've had this huge range of stimulation and connection with the written word, with stories, with the spoken word, with pictures, with every possible thing that you would need to stimulate a child's brain. An inner-city child, on the other hand, is coming from a very materially deprived environment, probably an absent father, a mother who's working two or three jobs, who's just struggling to feed them, and she has absolutely no time for these niceties. She, herself, has a poor education. She has no time to get them ready for their experience in even a good school. Even when your children are in school, it's not like your responsibilities end. There are all kinds of interaction with the school, with homework, with school projects, with an enormous range of things that need parental involvement, if the child is to be successful. When you have materially deprived children with not very functional family relationships, because everybody in the family is engaged in only one struggle – survival – then, of course, the children flounder in school. I wanted to say in the book that it's not a problem that you can necessarily solve by throwing money at it. Even if you provided a good school, and the school fees, and even the food so the kids weren't hungry when they went there, there would still be all of these other problems of acceptance, of missing parental support, of starting so far behind the other kids who have had all these prep years of storybooks and whatever. So, no matter how talented you are, how smart, no matter how much potential you have, you're too far behind from the beginning.

Yes, and there were a number of references throughout the novel concerning Arleen's lack of communication with her children's school. She had been to the school only once. How would you describe the character of Arleen?
She too has her own story. I'd thought about it and knew what her background was, and it too was materially deprived and unjust. Now she's an adult and she's had these children, she's hoped by having them with different men this was going to bring their support. I wanted her to really irritate Sahara, because I wanted Sahara to fail to understand why she was not a better mother. But, I also wanted Dexter to say that he knew she was a good mother, she was as good as was possible. She didn't eat so he and his siblings could eat. She was looking after his needs as best she could. And she knew what would await him in a good school. When Arleen eventually does go to school with Sahara over Dexter's problems, later down in the novel, she does encounter the prejudice she knows is there. She's not properly dressed. She cannot really speak to the people, and they look down on her. She has the mindset that, if she can just get the kids through the front gate, that's the end of her involvement, the school will take it from there.

How would you describe or compare Arleen's parenting with Sahara's parenting?
Well, they're very, very different. But, remember, the stakes are so different. That's what I wanted to show. I wanted to show the different level of the things that mattered to my characters. What matters to Dexter are food and shelter and safety. His circumstances are dangerous and filled with violence and bullying and unfairness and material deprivation. Carl's concern is his Walkman, he's going away to college in another country and his mother goes with him. They have a completely different set of concerns and available support. I did not want to make a judgement on Arleen's mothering, but I wanted to say, considering the circumstances, she was doing the best she could.

I agree with the assessment that she is doing the best she can, and I wanted to go back to the statement you made about Arleen and the children's fathers. All three of her children have different fathers. Also, Sahara's dad leaves her life when she is eleven and Carl's dad is absent for most of his life. What is your commentary about fatherhood in Jamaican society?
First, I want to draw the parallels between two single mothers. In a way, they're sisters under the skin. But, they're not, because their circumstances are so different. Sahara starts way ahead in the race because she's well educated, she's able to get a job, and so forth. She's better able to provide for her child; she has only one child, whereas Arleen has three – needing much larger resources. Both fathers are absent fathers. In the case of Carl, I was unsure whether his father should come back into his life at all. I decided to include Carl's father, because I want to say it's never too late. I want to say that relationships with your kids are possible at every stage of life, and once these two had some kind of common goal, they were able to reach across a gap of years.

Okay, I didn't think about it that way. Yes, and Carl's father came back at a pivotal time, too.
Yes, and I want to say, as well, something about money. That often, fathering in Jamaica is seen as a transaction – [fathers] provide school fees, money for bus fare. And that's Arleen's motivation. She figures if she has children for different men, they will support those children. Sahara, on the other hand, at first resists the idea that she should ask Carl's father for money. Independence and autonomy are important to her. But, in the end, she is persuaded.

Let's stay on the subject of gender roles and differences for a moment. Your book zooms in on black male youths, without a doubt. At one point, Sahara wonders if Dexter will live to age eighteen. What are your thoughts about young black men in Jamaican society and the conditions they face?
They're highly at risk. They're highly at risk because of the material conditions we've already talked about. But, also, because of attitudes about the roles of men and women that are very persistent, and this idea that girls are protected. Do you know the saying, tie the heifer and loose the bull? It's a [Caribbean] saying, basically, tie the female cow and let the bull go. And that's still the way we raise girls and boys. Girls are supposed to come home after school, they're supposed to be neat and tidy, and they're supposed to be obedient to authority. Boys, on the other hand, are given much more freedom – their domain is the street. The domain of women is the home. Boys are given a completely different set of messages. The type of education that we deliver is very suited to the messages girls get, which is, sit still, study hard, be obedient to authority. Boys get a completely different set of messages – the type of teaching we use does not conform to the learning styles of boys or the messages they receive about masculinity. And they're largely without positive male role models. So they're at very, very great risk, like Lasco in the book.

What are some of those external influences that put them at risk?
Well, Jamaica is now a very materialistic society; those who are admired are those who have money. If you've come from a very materially deprived background, you do think money is going to solve your problems. If your problem is, you don't have enough to eat, then yes, money is going to solve that problem. If you don't have housing, money is going to solve that problem. Who has money in an inner-city community? The local don or somebody who's selling drugs or another illegal activity. In the case of this novel, it's somebody who's doing illegal sand mining. Male role models tend to be people who are outside the formal system. They're probably breaking the law. What does a young boy get sucked into? Probably there are only two alternatives – church, or the kind of work Dexter gets into – lookout work on a construction site. A young boy ends up hanging out with some very malign influences. [These boys'] role models are in jail, selling drugs, committing crimes large and small. And such boys see a lot. They witness violence from an extremely young age. They see violent interactions between men and women. When asked if he misses his father, Dexter says, no, because he beat everybody the whole time. So, boys often do not experience adult males in a positive way. In school, there are very few male teachers. Sports would be another way out for an inner-city boy. But if you go to a prep school, it's very likely not going to have a good sporting programme and a boy like Dexter is going to fall through the cracks.

Yes, Dexter definitely did not see the prep school as the answer to his problems. And concerning the educational experience at the prep school, what was the purpose of putting Marlon and Dexter in a Special Ed class?
I needed a way to show Dexter's heart, getting back to this question of dog-heartedness and evil. In the book there are two episodes that show Dex's heart – the first one is his relationship to Felix. I needed to find someone that he could feel sorry for, that he could feel better than, that he could initially reject and then understand and become close to. Then the second time, later on in the novel – where, remember, [there is] the girl who is also a bit slow and some big boys want to rape her in the bathroom? Dexter intervenes again. Hopefully the reader sees into his heart and knows he is not dog-hearted.

Oh, okay, I understand now. At first, I was very confused about why Dexter and Marlon were thrown in with these kids who definitely had different types of disabilities.
No, that would not be an unusual thing for a prep school to do if they have children who are well behind the others. They would put them in the Special Ed class because they would have a very high ratio of teacher-to-student. In a normal class at a prep

school, they might have thirty-five kids and if they put Dexter and Marlon in the regular class, they would have continued to flounder. Put them in the Special Ed class, and there's probably five teachers to five kids. That way they could get the individual attention that they needed.

Even though it's different types of disabilities.
Even though it's different types of disabilities. Because you have such a high ratio of teachers, they can set different work, they can deal with each child individually. They have Special Ed classes for children with a range of disabilities, including those without physical disabilities, but needing remedial work.

Well, that makes a lot more sense to me now. I also wondered about some of Sahara's thoughts. At the meeting with Arleen and the school counsellor Mrs Darby, Sahara mentions "the black smell". The novel reads, "I could smell the two women – Arleen, metallic and poor, Mrs Darby powdered and perfumed, but the black smell was there underneath" (190). Earlier in the novel, Sahara is described as despising the racist and prejudiced attitudes of her aunt. So, what was the significance of including this particular passage of Sahara's inner thoughts?
Well, because I want to say that we all still hold on to prejudices in our unconscious mind even when we think we are not prejudiced, even when we behave as if we are not. In fact, Sahara does have racist views. The way she behaves in some instances is racist, dismissive and condescending. I didn't want her to be a saint or a saviour. She's just a regular person. She's a regular person with regular prejudices from her upbringing and from living in a place like Jamaica where such notions are, I don't know, part of the air, permeating everything. Sahara's trying to overcome these messages, but she's not conscious of some of the ways in which she's still prejudiced. She's not conscious of these beliefs that she still has.

Yes, when I read that passage, I had to pause, go back, and read it again. I was taken aback.
And she finds it easier to empathise and be nice to the children because she's a mother facing her only child leaving. Her motivations are a bit cloudy, but she's able to empathise with the children. She's not able to empathise with Arleen.

Thank you for clarifying. I understand now that you were *purposely* trying to show Sahara's prejudices. Do you aim to call people to action with your writing?
I aim to call people to feeling. A lot of people have said to me that they've looked at boys cleaning windscreens differently after they've read the novel. And that's what my aim was. A few people have emailed me and asked if there were children's charities they could donate to and I have sent them the names of several. I mean a few, though, under five. But I never consciously intended that. What I did want to do, was to take an experience we've all had, whether it is at home, in the case of someone who lives in a place like Jamaica, or [when] travelling; so, an American might travel somewhere and encounter a child begging. I wanted to challenge a reader to think about all that is there behind that brief experience of a child asking for money. And to ask, what's the right thing to do? What are our responsibilities to someone less fortunate, especially a child? Can we actually do more harm than good? What are the obstacles to understanding each other, to reaching across gaps of background, social and economic class, race, belief systems?

And those definitely are not easy questions to answer. Is there anything else you want readers to leave with after reading this novel?
I think the book ends on a slightly hopeful note. We've seen a lot of tragedy and waste by the time we get to the end of the book and we understand what's at stake – a nation's children, our future, our potential. This is what we're sacrificing, what's at risk. But, in the end, you get the feeling that maybe Dexter does get a job as a cook somewhere, and does have a different life in a different part of Jamaica. He's changed by his time with Sahara, and she's changed by her time with him because she's been forced to really think about some of these attitudes that she has. She has not overcome them all and she's heartbroken that she wasn't able to fix the problem she saw. But Dexter saves her life in the end. He's not dog-hearted. When he was faced with decisions about right and wrong, he chose right.

My final question: In general, how would you describe Jamaican society currently in terms of class stratification?
I think it's as is in the book. The book is a picture of contemporary Jamaica. There are little things throughout the book that have been reported in the newspapers in the last four or five years. And, I think urban Jamaica is as described in *Dog-Heart*; there are parts of Kingston where poverty is extreme, where the obstacles to having a regular life, a life that's free from violence and the threat of violence, and of reasonable material plenty, are formidable. Some children face really severe difficulties just getting to school, staying in school, and getting a good education. There are still these divisions in Jamaican society, despite efforts to reach across them – well-intentioned efforts. Sahara's not a bad person, she's trying to help, but her efforts are clumsy and they're thoughtless. I don't have answers. People ask me all the time, so, what's the answer? What should we do? I don't know; I just want to raise these questions. I want to hold up a mirror to Jamaican society and say, look. Please look. Are we really seeing what's happening around us?

And that's the role of a great writer, to bring an issue to us, the readers. It's not supposed to be all on the writer to contemplate what we can do to solve problems. We all have to work together to decide what is the best way to approach these various issues. Thank you so much for your time.
You're welcome. ❖