

Book Review – ‘Were Mama’s Tears in Vain?’

Dr. Richard Cox speaks his heart out

The Vincentian

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Richard Cox has started out his writing career with a history of his people bang on target, and near to the top.

The presentation of the five stories which appear at first to be unconnected and disparate, with little discernment reveals a common thread running through them all, carrying the focus of a simple message, the ultimate triumph of the indomitable spirit of man over attendant adversities.

In a way, it is reminiscent of the first shot fired by the young Orlando Patterson writing of the plight of the Jamaican folk in similar historical circumstances in ‘The Children of Sisyphus’. But there is this difference: whereas in Jamaica the authority on slavery left his subjects wallowing in misery, Cox pointed the way to final escape, permanent victory.

Perhaps it is the expression of this faith and hope, without a false dependence on charity that commends Cox’s work to countless Blacks the world over. I have little doubt that the rousing reception with which our new writer has been greeted universally, has ensured his sustained flight into higher regions, attaining the higher heights, ultimately it so happens that I was born mid -1938, smack in the middle of the period of which Richard writes. And my memory bank harks back to the beginning of the era through the related experiences of my parents and exchanges with siblings, of which I was the last of ten!

Furthermore, Bottom Town being my own birthplace, I was familiar with the circumstances and personalities of the author’s own extended family, which doubtlessly formed the backdrop and provided the impulse to this most beautiful happening.

Finally, I have toiled somewhat in Richard’s own vineyard. I have treated with our love of nick-names, our rich store of folk-sayings, the place of the vernacular, our overbearing Britishness, the religiosity of our people led by the shakers-the lot.

In his stories, Richard upped the ante somewhat, demonstrating what positives can be made by the proper use of our heritage in fleshing out the real Caribbean personality and offering a strategy for survival.

The notion of the verbal culture is, of course, the most famous trait handed down from the tea-meeting which aped and caricatured Massa on the plantation .It dominates Caribbean life in general and, naturally, finds perhaps its greatest expression in the calypso tent which is a miniature version of an important aspect of our being.

Lord Orator, the calypso king, is in so many ways the lord and master of all he surveys, His palace may be located in some cinema or the other, but his kingdom stretches way beyond in time and space, and the range of his influence is Catholic. The cinema as described by Cox, is divided into physical sections, which are reflective of different patterns of behavior linked to a rigidly stratified class system. Simply put, there is the spontaneous ribaldry of the lower class in spite of the pretence and evidence of a feeling of “betweenity” in the middle class patrons of House, and the starchy affectations and lifeless artificiality of the occupants of Balcony and Box.

The author could have gone further and mentioned that Box-Balcony was situated upstairs, to ascend which, one had to be appropriately attired in jacket and tie!

But, strange that carnival itself is classless, with the nation fused as one. More often than not, it is at the level of the least common denominator of which we hear so much these days .I attended a tent performance as late as the 1970s, when Lord Temple reigned supreme. In cleaning out his fowl-pen he advised to “Hold your cock and pull it!” And that brought the house and class system down, sparing only the under-wear!

The opening story significantly dealt with the otherworldly. It is beautifully told. In it, the author displayed his facility to telling effective, impeccable English, flowing style, periods of gripping suspense: these were the tools deftly utilized in his narrative.

The content fitted into the familiar family gathering, with story-telling featuring the occult, ghost, superstition and the rest, to try and understand the incomprehensible, to come to terms with blatant injustice or simply a ploy to titillate the mind or provide a level of entertainment in another wise drab and joyless existence.

Two or three of the stories faithfully follow the path of West Indian-African tradition involving witty verbal exchanges and pranks of sibling to add spice, and incidentally shows the consistency of characterization in the author.

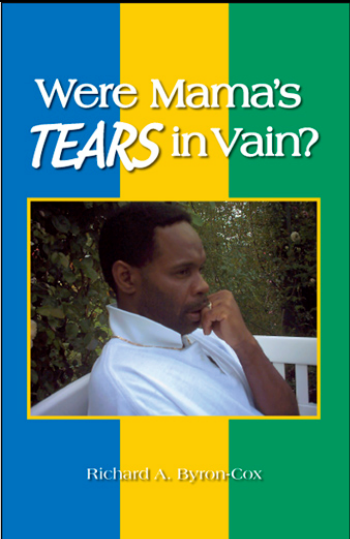
Naturally, there are the subtle stories that generally underpin the colonial brainwashing process as the pictures of the Royal Family and vacuous questions, which go with it. I recall in the 1950s in the Grammar School, my form was asked what M .B. E. stood for, and most of the form got a dressing-down for omitting to mention “the most excellent order” of the British Empire.

Readers can identify readily with the script, for just about every family has had at least one Japhert, the bad egg, spoil-brat, which brought shame to the family. Or an uncle Sattou who roamed the world looking for adventure and an elusive truth.

The last story about Mamma’s Tears is powerfully written .In it is posed the eternal struggle between good and evil in the argument of a reasonable job offer in an abusive, dehumanizing environment as against gaining, albeit with sacrifice, an education which prepares for a future of true Independence .The author’s view finds expression through the mouth of Sam Brown.

Education is indeed the key to the future. The message is proclaimed; true education is neglected at your own peril.

The shortcomings, if any few and far-between, and for them there is an abundant recompense. Perhaps this offering signals Richard Cox’s air-borne take off into the stratosphere of writers.

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