

## **Bishop, Jaqueline (2015). *The Gymnast and Other Positions*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd, pp. 201**

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Born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, surrounded by an extended family, aunts, uncles, cousins, her own siblings, grandparents and great-grandparents, Jacqueline Bishop spent her early years with her father, while her mother had emigrated to the United States. After finishing high school, she joined her mother and continued her studies in New York.

Founder of *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*, a literary and visual arts magazine, Jacqueline Bishop now teaches in the Liberal Studies Program at New York University. She is a poet and a novelist, but also a photographer, a painter, a filmmaker and a producer.

She published two collections of poems, *Fauna* (2006) and *Snapshots from Istanbul* (2009); a novel, *The River's Song* (2007); an art book, *Writers Who Paint, Painters Who Write*, (2007); a collection of oral histories from Jamaican women living in New York, *My Mother Who Is Me: Life Stories from Jamaican Women in New York* (2006); photography series, among which *Childhood Memories*; an amazing collection of both poems and drawings, *The Tempest Poems* (2014), which is a testimony of her interest in the connection between the visual arts and the written word, for the 9th Annual Liberal Studies Colloquium, *Shakespeare's Globe*, to celebrate the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth.

*The Gymnast and Other Positions*, winner of the 2016 Bocas Prize for Caribbean literature, non-fiction category, is the latest stirring and satisfyingly disturbing work to be offered to us by Ms Bishop. It is a three-part book; there are short stories, essays, and interviews with Bishop by other writers and journalists. This division, though seemingly plain and obvious, is in fact quite misleading since the parts transcend their genre, crossing, overlapping, and intersecting one another – quite an unconventional way of assembling a book.

Readers of Bishop's work, her affectionate reading public, will find themselves in a familiar territory, recognising landscapes, situations, atmospheres; others, who would encounter her work for the first time, will be entranced by the richness of her prose, her imagery and insight, but perhaps shocked by the reality they will be exposed to.

Usually an introductory story is designed to grant a collection its tone, to set the pace, or to provide the reader with a key to the understanding of the narra-

tive. Here, however, the beginning confirms the unconventional way in which this whole collection was constructed. The title story, with its erotic tone and allusive suggestiveness, would seem to lead us to an earthly paradise of the senses, but it actually takes us to a paradise lost or to an earthly hell. Whether that paradise would ever be regained, only Bishop's next endeavour will tell.

Jamaica and its inhabitants are an ever-present entity in her works. Fictionalised autobiographical details and biographies of other women and girls are so closely knitted that it is difficult to discern the boundaries between the personal and the recounted experiences.

The book, through most of the short stories, is perhaps Bishop's strongest and most devastating statement on sexual abuse and on the sacredness of a woman's body. It is actually a testimony of a battle fought on and for women's bodies.

Layer after layer, sentence after sentence, the stories begin with a whisper and proceed, as in a crime story, by unearthing revelations that lead to epiphanies.

Echoes of her previous works can be heard in both short stories and essays.

The vicissitudes of the girls who inhabit *The Gymnast* are new versions of a pivotal short story, «Brown Girl in the Ring», one of Bishop's earliest published stories. We hear the same voice, though now it has taken on a universal dimension, which surfaces in the different parts of the book.

This 'conversation' between and within works is a characteristic she shares with other Caribbean writers and visual artists whose works tends to engage in an endless conversation.

The short story «Oleander», about the encounter between a tattoo artist and a woman whose entire body is covered by a tattoo of a giant oleander, takes its title from a poem in *Fauna*. In that poem a girl is abused by the Master, in a house where she was *supposed* to be protected, while here we have a girl abused by those she is *supposed* to consider as family.

It is indeed within the family that most horrors take place. In stressing how her poems, her prose and her art are closely connected, we should also mention that the word 'family' is the same word that comes to the mind of the little girl in the poem «Snakes» (*Fauna*) after she has been raped by her grandfather:

I did not know how to name  
 what my mother and my grandfather had done to me,  
 until that day at the zoo when I saw them, a family,  
 curled around each other, saw the venomous tongues that darted  
 and flickered, the evil intent in their glowing red eyes.

The 'positions' of the story's title are also reflections on the position of the author in the relationship with her characters. These characters have been haunting Bishop, as she herself mentions in one of the interviews

(«Writing Across the Diaspora», 151), so relentlessly to force her to bring them to the page, to let them tell their stories, in their own words.

Bishop becomes the means through which to voice the pain of separation, abandonment and abuse these characters have suffered.

We have a mother, who is exposed to the brutal reality of her lover's betrayal with her own adoptive daughter («Tall Tale»); a girl, who devises a way to heal her scars, looking for love where she cannot get it («Terra Nova»); but we also have stories that highlight the power of spirituality to overcome pain («Effigy») or introduce the idea of resurrection and rebirth («Flamboyant Tree»).

Absent fathers, mothers who are forced to emigrate to provide for their children, abusive grandfathers and step-fathers - balanced and juxtaposed by positive grandmothers and great-grandmothers, the saviours, who are also repositories of culture and memory: they help us to focus on issues that are very dear to Bishop, and recur in her entire oeuvre, such as belonging, identity, cultural heritage, the feeling of being out of place in one's own country, of being torn between places, of living in exile. Ancestors become, then, our spiritual guides. Ancestors, Bishop suggests, are the fabric we are made of.

The transition from the stories (Part 1) to the essays (Part 2) is so natural we almost do not notice it. We find again characters and images we have just left in the previous pages.

In «Sailing with Wayne Brown», about a much admired writer and Bishop's mentor, we learn about the genesis of the short story «Flamboyant Tree». The essay deals with the "dilemma of belonging" (81) and the fictional rendering of biographical details. Brown's influence is increasingly more evident throughout many of the interviews.

There is not one single thread connecting the various sections of the book, but rather a complex network of threads, like a spider's web, with many threads intersecting each other.

It is in the interviews and essays that the visual element of Bishop's work is thoroughly explored and self-referencing becomes more evident.

What I have noticed about my visual art is that I seem to almost always work in a series and in that way it is very similar to storytelling. It is almost as if I am telling little stories in the three major visual art works that I have completed to date. There is a strong narrative element. (124)

Her stories derive from the lives of Jamaican women and men, who then find their way into her paintings, drawings and photographs, to be then discussed in her essays. This process is well analysed in «Photographs on the Mantelpiece», where we follow Bishop as she walks through her "grandmother's house looking at the photographs that decorate her house" (75), and delving deeper into her feelings of displacement, her need to belong and at the same time fear of not belonging.

One of these photographs, reproduced alongside the essay, is of Bishop herself, her wide opened eyes looking almost frightened.

These photographs will be given new life, first through the essay, where they lead the writer to discuss how images of past lives shape our own memory, then in the interviews, mainly in «The Haunted Self», where she discusses her photography series, *Childhood Memories*, where her aim was, she says, “to reconstruct a childhood that was part real, part mythologised” (159).

Some of these photographs are also reproduced here; images of Jamaica are merged, superimposed on images of New York. Bishop discusses how the images in her *Childhood Memories* have reached their final version: at first, she just tried to group them in a collage; then, to pile film on top of film and, finally, to use digital formats that allowed the merging of reality with imagination.

Closing the book, we realise it has embarked us on a journey of reflection on the role of the artist, exploration of how memory and imagination are used by the artist to *show* us, with words and images, that the past is what informs us, what shapes us and also makes us understand where we are heading.