

Building a Literary Bridge to the Caribbean: An Interview with Key West Literary Seminar Executive Director, Arlo Haskell

Arlo Haskell has been executive director of the Key West Literary Seminar since 2015 and in 2017 published his first work of nonfiction, ["The Jews of Key West: Smugglers, Cigar Makers, and Revolutionaries \(1823-1969\)"](#). He is also the author of "Joker", a poetry collection, and editor of poetry volumes by Harry Mathews and Héctor Viel Temperley. Born and raised in Key West, Arlo lives in Old Town with his wife, Ashley, and their daughter, Aviva. POTENT spoke with him about the 2018 Seminar: Writers of the Caribbean, held from January 10-14.

Interview by Dorothy Potter Snyder

POTENT: What is the Caribbean to you?

AH: Obviously it's the region, all of these islands bound primarily by the Caribbean Sea, and a few that touch the Caribbean and the Atlantic on the other. But it's a place made up of many small places, many islands, many nations, all with a different history, political tradition, cultural tradition, all fundamentally shaped by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and by ... the history of colonialism. So, I think it's a place of resilience and great strength and innovation ... The hurricanes are part of that, too. You get these dramatic weather events that sweep through the region, pretty much yearly. But just about every year somewhere in the Caribbean is affected by it, whether it's just boarding up and not getting it ... or a really devastating blow like this year. So, it's a beautiful place that's visited by lots of people who are seeking

out a beautiful place and only see the surface and not the history behind it, a tourist view of it.

POTENT: I felt (Jamaican) [Nicole Dennis Benn](#)’s book ([Here Comes the Sun](#)) in my soul when we landed here, and the pilot said, “Welcome to paradise!” I thought, uh-oh! (laughter) Does the Caribbean influence your work; and am I in the Caribbean right now, or is Key West more of a transitional space between the Caribbean and continental America?

AH: Tourist marketers will say things like, Key West is America’s Caribbean. And it’s certainly been called a bridge to the Caribbean. I don’t like to claim Key West as part of the Caribbean myself because of the profoundly historical context. Key West has always been American even if it’s been one step removed. But then again, Key West has been intimately involved in the affairs of Cuba, particularly since Cuba’s founding as an independent state, so there’s certainly that. I mean, Key West was the base for José Martí and the revolutionaries that overthrew the Spanish in Cuba, and essentially ended that last stage of colonialism in the Americas.

POTENT: As a poet, does (Cuban revolutionary and writer) [José Martí](#) have particular influence on you?

AH: His poetry doesn’t have much an influence on me, but his advocacy, his journalism, his essays, his letters, his commitment to putting thought into action: yes, that’s very inspiring. His ... work is impressive. Another Caribbean poet, (St. Lucian) Derek Walcott, whom we’re paying tribute to on Saturday night, is huge, is a lion and a great influence on me.

I want to circle back on the question, is Key West the Caribbean. When I came across Derek Walcott’s work for the first time, I was actually living in St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands after college. I came across his book in a

bookstore, and it was the first time I had read a perspective of a place and part of the world that I fully identified with. So, in that sense, Key West is part of the Caribbean. As a student, you're reading primarily a New England viewpoint, a northeastern viewpoint. If you grow up here, [your experience] is more like Derek Walcott's version of the world.

POTENT: Can you define that version?

AH: Well, it's giving power just to the facts of the landscape: to the sunshine, to the ocean and to the palm trees, rather than to rivers and lakes and fall and springtime. You know, seasons that don't really exist for us. So ... that's what it was for me. It was reading this very powerful verse that was set in a landscape that I knew, and was plugged into these much older ... Homeric traditions, these classical forms. So, that was powerful to me ... I felt like when I read his work, it just, felt like, oh wow! This can come out of this place. You don't have to pretend to be from somewhere else.

POTENT: How did you go about gathering these Caribbean writers for the Seminar?

AH: Our planning process is a long and roundabout one. It starts about two years in advance of the event, and we pull together a committee of board members, sometimes outside community members, and essentially, we're a group of readers setting out on some kind of exploratory journey to figure out what it's going to be. So, we've already said, okay, we want to do something with a geographic focus, we've never really focused on this region that's so close to us. Let's do that. Who are a handful of writers that we would want if we did something like this? And a few come to mind right away. Edwige Danticat (Haiti) was an immediate, obvious person to invite. Derek Walcott, who was still alive at that time, and ... Marlon James (Jamaica) was a big Caribbean name that we wanted to get. ... From there, we start to explore and

read ... and we discover lots of great new writers along the way. I wasn't familiar with Nicole Dennis-Benn (Jamaica) or Ishion Hutchinson (Jamaica) before. When it comes to programming and putting them onstage, I try to take a very light touch. I start by having a conversation with each person and saying, this is the sort of thing we do. What do you want to do? Are you comfortable in this format or that format? What are some ideas that you'd like to talk about? ... To me still, it's still a mystery what the program will be until we start. ... I just trust that these writers are good.

POTENT: Has your view of Caribbean literature expanded from organizing this event?

AH: Yes, I mean, one of the questions that I have going into this event is: is there a Caribbean literature? Would these writers use that phrase as the collective for what they're doing? I mean it seems like it's literature written by people who are influenced by the Caribbean. But I certainly discovered some people ... Ishion Hutchinson is the one that comes to mind, because as a poet, too, I didn't know his name coming in and I picked up *House of Lords and Commons*, and I was just floored by it.

POTENT: I'm interested in (Antiguan author) [Jamaica Kincaid](#)'s keynote speech: *You appropriate me, I'll appropriate you*. A title designed to be aggressively provocative.

AH: (Laughs) Yes, it is. The working title for it was *Take Anything You Want*, which I thought was like what you say to the robber that breaks in just to sort of save yourself!

Award-winning Antiguan novelist Jamaica Kincaid gives the John Hersey Memorial Address, "Let Me Appropriate You ... And You Can Appropriate Me, Too." (Photo: Nick Doll)

2018 John Hersey Memorial Address: Jamaica Kincaid



POTENT: The title made me think about (Trinidadian author) V.S. Naipaul and his *Mimic Men*, and how Walcott responded to him, saying in his fabulous way, how dare you? Since the beginning, people have been finding a mirror to look into to find themselves. Caribbean artists are not mere imitators! I'm curious about what seems to be a new attempt to go beneath colonial culture.

AH: That's something I'm excited to get into this weekend and to discover in the presence of these writers in conversation. I think, in particular, the conversation tomorrow morning with Nicole Dennis-Benn, Edwige Danticat and (Derek Walcott's daughter) Elizabeth Hackshaw-Walcott (St. Lucia): the title is *Unpacking Paradise*. They've been talking together about exploring cracks in the surface and whether, exactly as you say, there's a sort of

generational shift [among Caribbean writers], and how that is perceived and presented.

POTENT: That moves toward the next thing: the purpose of the seminar. What do you hope attendees leave with?

AH: I hope that they leave feeling like they've learned something they didn't know; they've discovered something they weren't looking for. They're buying books by writers they've never heard of ... At the Seminar I've always been surprised most, it seems, by the person that I wasn't really like expecting to be blown away by. It's like when you read a book: you look at the cover, you open the first page. At the end of the book you've hopefully learned something new and discovered something you weren't looking for. That's really what I hope people come away from it with.

POTENT: You came up with this theme, and then there were terrible hurricanes. Puerto Rico is still devastated. They're arguing about how many people died there. And US Virgin Islands is devastated. It's an important time to have this event. I'm curious if you have a message to the Caribbean diaspora about this event and about the sense that, with global warming, the Caribbean is in peril.

AH: Yes, absolutely. The hurricanes and the political climate as well give a timeliness [to this]. We're living in a time in this country of rising nationalism and xenophobia. So, I think it's an important time to focus on stories of migration, and stories of people have migrated ... and to hear lots of voices telling their stories, and not buy into the rhetoric that increasingly is trying to divide people from one another in this country. That seems fundamentally as important to me as the sympathy and relief efforts around the hurricane, for sure.

POTENT: Absolutely. That's the role of culture.

AH: Yes.

This interview was condensed and edited for clarity.

For audio, photos and more information about the authors who presented at The Key West Literary Seminar: Writers of the Caribbean, please visit the organization's [website](#).

[Dorothy Potter Snyder](#) is a journalist, short story writer and literary translator who specializes in Caribbean and Central American women's fiction. Her work has appeared in The Sewanee Review, Surreal Poetics, and Public Seminar. She is currently translating a collection of short stories, "Uno no sabe y otras sabidurías" by award-winning Mexican writer, Mónica Lavín.