

Michela A. Calderaro

LORNA GOODISON AND OUR GARDEN OF EDEN



From Harvey River: A Memoir of My Mother and Her Island, Lorna Goodison's new book offers a keen, unsentimental, yet heart-wrenching look upon her extended family – a merciful and loving narration of strength and defiance against fate.

Winner of the BC National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction, one of Canada's most distinguished prizes, the book celebrates the glories and despairs of Lorna Goodison's ancestors.

In the beginning there was a river with no name – or maybe the name was simply forgotten. And along the river, on a small “verdant green” clearing, two young brothers set up their home and gave their name to the river. Over time the clearing would be home to a growing community and become a village, the Harvey River Village.

The two brothers were John and William Harvey, originally from England. William would become Lorna Goodison's great-grandfather. He was “one of the few Englishmen in his time to legally marry a black Jamaican woman [...] after his English wife died and left him with six children.” His large family would grow with six more children from Frances Ann Duhaney, called Nana. One of their children would be named David.

The branches of the Harvey brothers' family tree intertwined with those of Irish sailor George O'Brian Wilson, Lorna Goodison's other great-grandfather, who desperately fell in love with Leanna – the Guinea woman we often meet in Lorna Goodison's poems – and fathered Margaret.

Margaret and David built their house on twenty acres of land along Harvey River. She was eighteen and he was nineteen; one of their eight children, Doris (“Dorice”), was Lorna

Goodison's mother.

Caribbean art transcends a single, well defined categorization, and Caribbean artists usually express themselves in more than a single art form – they are poets and performers, painters and writers, historians and novelists. Lorna Goodison is all of these, and her many talents partake in the composition of her latest oeuvre.

In her painter's hands the sheet of paper becomes a canvas on which she draws the portrait of four generations of women and men, at times with bold strokes of colorful oil paint, at others with the delicacy of water-colors.

Like a medieval troubadour she transforms her characters' lives into eternal myths to be sung and remembered by future, spellbound generations. We too are mesmerized by this song of endurance and resilience which chronicles the lives of strong women and men we come to care about, rooting for them to fulfill their dreams. However, the troubadour's song is a true story, not fiction, a story of real people (most of whom we've already met in Goodison's poems). The troubadour merely chronicles their fortunes with no authorial intervention to change the course of the story.

We can only witness the unfolding of their lives, admiring Doris's courage and strength in her journey from Harvey River to Malvern and down to "hard-life Kingston"; understanding George O'Brian Wilson's longing for the "rim of light" from Leanna's soul, sharing his pain at the hopelessness of his dream; and weeping at Howard's death as we sit next to Margaret "by the window in the front room of the house."

The task Lorna Goodison had set for herself was paramount, yet everything is controlled with such lightness and mastery, that never once do we get confused by the frequent time-shifts that transport us back and forth through generations, or by the multitude of characters who people the story, each with her or his own distinct qualities. Like a skillful weaver Goodison interlaces the dozens of threads that make up the lives of her family members together with ancient river tales and African legends. Thanks to her powerful and magnificent prose, a mix of Creole and Standard English, an enchanted tapestry takes shape and comes to life in front of our eyes. All senses participate in this feast, we savor the sweet raisins, the currants, the prunes and cherries of Jamaica, we quench our thirst and get drunk on rum and wine, we spice our food with garlic, pimento and onion, then relish the yam, the cassava and the breadfruit. Flora and fauna, birds and flowers are summoned by Goodison's evoking power as we are surrounded by the sounds

and scents of the Garden of Eden.

Reverberations of her previous works shine through the narration, interlaced with historical facts, description of how the towns, the streets, the tenement yards were laid and shaped. We become familiar with the names of each place, and feel, almost *remember*, that we've been there once and long to go back.

Here and there names of great poets, artists, and historical figures and events pop up from the pages, mixed with detailed geographical references to different places. We move from Ireland to England, to Africa, to Canada, to Jamaica – Harvey River, Malvern, Kingston... The finely and accurately painted backdrop against which all characters move and act reflects the enormous research work that Goodison has undertaken in writing this memoir.

Indeed, this is more than a mere family memoir, more than a journey, more than a novel based on real lives – it is a pilgrimage from the personal to the universal, a throbbing, moving piece of history.

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