

# “A growth to understanding”: An interview with Caryl Phillips about biographical fiction

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/jcl](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jcl)**Bénédicte Ledent**

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**Abstract**

Starting from the recognition of a biographical impulse in the work of Caryl Phillips, this interview focuses on his practice of biographical fiction. Among the issues raised are the increased popularity of life writing, the tension between fact and fiction at the heart of biographical narratives, the linguistic exactitude involved in focusing on historical characters, the role of research in the exploration of human lives, and the importance of emotional truth in novels that deal with famous individuals. This conversation sheds light on Phillips's specific approach to biofiction, particularly in his novels *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) and *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018), while also providing readers with a more general reflection on the genre in the postcolonial field.

**Keywords**

Caryl Phillips, biographical fiction, fact and fiction, Jean Rhys, Bert Williams, *Dancing in the Dark*, *A View of the Empire at Sunset*

Anglo-Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips is the author of 11 novels and numerous essays and dramatic pieces. His work, whether fiction or nonfiction, has always displayed a keen interest in biography. This trend is certainly most obvious in books such as *Dancing*

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*in the Dark* (2005), *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), and *The Lost Child* (2015), which fictionalize the personal histories of various real-life figures, respectively Broadway artiste Bert Williams; Dr Johnson's Jamaican servant Francis Barber, British boxing champion Randolph Turpin, and Nigerian illegal immigrant David Oluwale; and English novelist Emily Brontë. In view of this, it is not surprising that the main character of Phillips's latest novel, *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018), is none other than Jean Rhys, the author of the Caribbean classic *Wide Sargasso Sea* (2000/1966). But beyond this gallery of well-known yet marginalized figures that haunt Phillips's oeuvre, the biographical also pervades his entire writing as his work repeatedly imagines the lives of more obscure subjects who, because of their class, gender, or race, were sidelined by traditional Western historiography. This is the case, for example, of his novel set in the nineteenth century, *Cambridge* (1991), which focuses on an English woman and an African slave, but also of *A Distant Shore* (2003), whose protagonists are a retired English woman and a refugee from Africa. This biographical impulse testifies, on Phillips's part, to an empathetic approach to individuals whose lost dignity is restored through a complex narrative process geared not towards judgement but towards understanding.

The following interview was conducted in New York on 5 January 2018.

**BL:** Your work has always been characterized by a biographical impulse, in the sense that some of your earlier fiction often relied, sometimes obliquely, on historical figures, for example Anne Frank in *The Nature of Blood* (1997), Olaudah Equiano in *Cambridge* and *A Distant Shore*, or even John Newton in *Crossing the River* (1993). However, while your earlier work fictionalized these figures, using different names for them (that's what we mean by fictionalizing), your more recent work tends to overtly use real names, whether Bert Williams, Emily Brontë, or Jean Rhys (aka Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams). Would you identify this change as a development in your writing? Or, to put it differently, do you have any idea why it appears to have become important for you to mention the names of the figures that inspire you and that you write about?

**CP:** When you write fiction over a relatively long period of time, you begin to question fiction after a while. Certain issues become more urgent. You see this, for instance, in Vidiya Naipaul, whose work, as he got to a certain stage in his career, displayed a biographical, or to some extent autobiographical, impulse, almost as if there was a failure of belief in fiction. I'm not saying that I'm doing the same thing, but I recognize this self-questioning. The other thing is, I have begun to think a bit more about what fiction can do in the early twenty-first century. There are other narrative forms now, particularly visual — such as television series. They are doing things in terms of narrative, both historical narratives of reclamation and contemporary narratives, that remind me so much of what fiction was doing 100 years ago. So, leaning heavily upon fiction and fictionalizing things has become slightly less important to me. Maybe that's why the real names are creeping in a little more, as an attempt to try something different. These real names may be a way of suggesting that I am feeling slightly restless with the form.

**BL: Do you feel that people need more of the biographical today than in the past?**

**CP:** That is a good point. It's hard to say whether this is a good or a bad thing, but I do think that people have become increasingly curious about what is called "life writing". For years I literally had no idea what this phrase meant exactly. Then I realized that it encompasses both biographical writing and perhaps more pertinently autobiographical writing. People are very concerned with the narrative arc of life, usually their own, whether it emerges from Facebook or other social media. People are just much more interested in biography/autobiography. There has been a change in the culture, and the emergence of a phrase like "life writing" suggests to me that fiction has somehow been nudged into the shadows.

**BL: Despite the need for some historical accuracy in biographical fiction, it is also the novelist's task to imagine or perhaps even alter historical facts, if necessary. Virginia Woolf famously resisted this mixture of fact and fiction, saying that the combination was unworkable. As someone who has written biographical fiction, you have shown that the two can be combined, but would you say that there is a tension between them? If so, is this something that you need to negotiate when you write biographical fiction? Or, conversely, would you say that facts feed the imagination?**

**CP:** Facts do feed the imagination sometimes, because a lot of things that I have written, whether they have had biographical characters or not, have been based on historical facts, which can be an extremely powerful bedrock for fiction. We know this from the history of the novel; it is how it has always been. In my own work, for instance, in my latest novel, *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, there is one passage called "South of the River" where Jean Rhys goes with a man in a carriage to a pub in South London. This might have actually happened but, in my own mind, it is imaginative. What interests me is the emotional texture of how she was feeling at that stage in her life. That's much more important than whether or not she went in a carriage, late at night, with a guy to a pub south of the river and had a pint of beer. To me what really matters is that she felt vulnerable enough yet desperate enough to go on a date with a guy she did not like particularly but who offered her companionship. When she realized that she was being patronized, she had the strength to say no. I absolutely believe this happened in her life. The surrounding details do not really matter to me. I don't want her to go to the wrong kind of pub or travel in a way that was impossible for her to do in 1914, because that is just leaving the door open for criticism from people who position themselves as so-called gatekeepers of Rhys's life. What you are really trying to get right is the psychological temperature, the psychological barometer, of that person. Sometimes the truth can be supported by absolute concrete facts. At other moments this is not the case. There is another passage in the novel where Rhys wakes up with the guy she fell in love with in 1910. She wakes up in his house, having slept with him for the first time, and she does not really know what to do when he goes to the bathroom. Is she supposed to leave or is it impolite to stay there waiting for him to come out? Now, again, I don't know what actually happened, but I do know the guy

that she slept with, I know the address of the house, I know what the house looks like and the scene in the novel is set exactly there. But what is really important to me in that scene, as in the “South of the River” scene, is what she is thinking, how vulnerable and confused she feels. That is more important than the fact that I can tell you that the address is 30 Charles Street, London W1. This is a very long-winded way of saying that facts do not really matter. The one thing I’m absolutely sure about is what she felt, and to me that is the hardest part of writing fiction. What makes compelling fiction is the truth of the emotional context in which you are placing the person.

**DT: You have just mentioned examples of scenes which you imaginatively created. Do you set yourself limits as to what you might invent? Is there any self-censorship involved? Are there liberties that you cannot take? If so, would these liberties be moral or legal?**

**CP:** I would not want to take a character and, for instance, put them in a place that I know for sure they had never been, just because it was convenient for me to illustrate a state of mind. So if I wanted to suggest that a character had been particularly desperate and depressed but I knew for a fact that they were not big drinkers, I wouldn’t want to put them in a pub or a club with a lot of dancing and noise. The cliché of the person bent double over a glass of whiskey in a bar by themselves might illustrate a state of depression, but if I knew that they would never set foot in such a place, then it would be wrong of me to try to serve the imaginative state by actually doing something that I knew was factually incorrect. I just wouldn’t want to do that to try to get at the greater truth, which is their psychological state. There are certain facts, such as encounters with people, that I would not want to make up if I didn’t think there was a germ of truth or possibility to it. I believe in sticking to facts, if I can.

**DT: You have said elsewhere that you did not want to introduce linguistic anachronisms into your work. What would you say about the possible danger of “imposing” contemporary values on historical material? Is this something that you struggle with? Or, would you say that, conversely, it is desirable to view the past in a contemporary light, to make your reader understand something that is only possible through a retrospective lens?**

**CP:** I want to try as much as possible to keep a perspective that would be applicable to that particular time, which is not always easy to do. You don’t want to be writing in 2018 about somebody who lived in 1818 and imposing, for instance if it is a woman character, notions of feminism or post-feminism that just were not even part of the vocabulary in 1918, let alone in 1818. That’s not something that I think serves anybody. Similarly, if you are writing about a black person who was living in a racist society, you’ve got to try and understand the mindset of that particular time, pre-civil rights, pre-emancipation, probably pre-abolition. There are certain modes of self-expression, certain confident postures, ways of walking and talking, that are definitely of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. So if you are writing a character in the seventeenth century, there would be a kind of nervous hesitancy that would characterize the way in which they would navigate their way in the world. You have got to try as much as possible to maintain that.

**BL:** You've written a lot of about celebrity — for example, in relation to Bert Williams, but also James Baldwin, Billie Holiday, Marvin Gaye, or Luther Vandross. Is your meditation on fame aided by the biographical dimension of these texts? Why did you choose to write about these people?

**CP:** In the current times, celebrity is embraced; it's not regarded with any suspicion. It is sought after without an understanding that it is actually corrosive: it can be a really destructive agent in a person's life and a destructive element in a society. I mean, we are sitting in the United States of America now — where we have overwhelming evidence of what a certain kind of celebrity can do. Earlier this afternoon I walked past Trump Tower. Your heart sinks: you just think, how did this happen? It happened, in part, because of a love of celebrity, a kind of uncritical admiration for celebrity. I became aware of the corrosive power of celebrity as a young writer when I first met James Baldwin, and saw close up somebody who had been incredibly famous and had struggled with what it meant to be famous and how you could attempt to balance fame or celebrity with your work. Even in the midst of dealing with the public, artistic people do need inner contemplation, stillness, solitude. How do you balance that with a world which is increasingly trying to encourage you to put your head above the parapet, rewarding you for doing so, and in the last ten or 20 years, actually suggesting that it's the right thing to do? I'm struggling with this right now with my own publisher, who recently asked: "Would you make a video about yourself talking about Jean Rhys and put it on YouTube?" No, I would rather kill myself. But to the publisher it's a completely legitimate question; to me it's an absurdity.

**BL:** You have written both biofictional pieces and nonfictional texts dealing with celebrity. Do you feel that, in some cases, fiction can do something that nonfiction can't, or the other way around?

**CP:** The thing that fiction can do that nonfiction can't do is take you into the heart and soul of the person, take you into the deep interior of a person; in other words, introduce you to their nightmares. When I think about the essay that I wrote about Marvin Gaye (Phillips, 2001/2000) all those years ago, there is no real interiority about what Marvin Gaye is feeling. But were I to attempt to write it as a piece of fiction, I would have to dwell deeply on what he was feeling in Ostend when he was running on the beach, what was he feeling in Ostend when he met this strange Belgian guy who wanted to take him in and introduce him to his family, what was he feeling when he went into a bar in Ostend and they asked him to sing. I'd have to go into the interior of him. Fiction can take you into a very dark place, basically a very uncomfortable place where I don't think nonfiction can take you... Hopefully nonfiction can be still illuminating about the life and about the times but it's not going to take you into what its subjects dream about at night and what woke them up at four in the morning, because that's what only fiction can tell you.

**DT:** We also wanted to discuss the idea of voice. We have mentioned linguistic verisimilitude earlier, but at the same time you seem to create for your subjects voices that rely more on emotional truth than factuality, in the sense that a character's literary voice is going to be stylistically more elaborate than the historical

**person's actual voice — we see this as a trace of the writer leaving his mark. How do you negotiate this particular aspect of the interface between reality and art?**

**CP:** I have to have a pretty good notion of how a character sounds and of what their vocabulary would be, and I try to be true to that. I'll give you an example. I know that Jean Rhys never used the term "mirror". She hated the word; she always used "looking glass". But I noticed I had left one "mirror" in the novel and I took it out and changed it to something else. So I'm generally trying to be truthful. She also hated the word "perfume". She would always say "scent". So the word "perfume" is never in there. I'm trying to be true to how they would speak, not just in terms of vocabulary but also in terms of rhythm and tone. However, what is of paramount importance is the characters' vulnerability. Going back to the example I gave you of Rhys waking up that morning in 30 Charles Street, I struggled for a long time to try and find the right word that she would use to describe the bathroom that the man she had slept with was in. I think I called the bathroom "splendid" for a while but I was not comfortable with that because I didn't think she would say that. Then I realized the scene was not working for me because I could not find the word that would give her the right feeling of vulnerability. "Splendid" suggested too much control and understanding of the situation. Then I found the word she would use: it is a word people don't use now, which is "plush", a word that has an entirely different feeling. There is no ownership to "plush". There is something slightly terrified about her reaction to the strange opulence of Charles Street. Even if you are doing interiority, you are trying to find the right word that will suggest the right degree of vulnerability of the person. That's really what I'm trying to find. Sometimes the right word has to have historical accuracy too. Nobody says "plush" these days, but in 1910 it would have been a much more common word.

**BL: You have said about Bert Williams that "my job is not to judge him"; "my job is to understand him" (McLeod, 2009/2005: 146). But how difficult is this? As a person, you must have an opinion about him (and the same would go for the other characters you have written about); but as a writer, you set yourself a different task. Is there something schizophrenic about this? Or can the process of writing get rid of any prior judgement that you might have held about the person?**

**CP:** I think you can change your judgement. Certainly in the case of Bert Williams, almost from day to day, I went from thinking he was an idiot to thinking he was incredibly brave and humane. At the end, I think, I got a better understanding of what he'd gone through, but he frustrated me some days. The same happened with Jean Rhys. Some days, I would just think, she is so mean. Then on other days I would think, well, if I had gone through what she'd gone through, I might not have trusted people either. "Schizophrenic" is not a bad word for it. You have to suspend your judgement, but you are only human. You try to empathize with these people. The main thing is that at the end you sort of understand them, whereas at the beginning you did not; you don't really think this person would have much to say to you, and vice versa, and you understand why that is the case. I think that about Marvin Gaye, to be honest. I was listening to somebody talking about him on television only this afternoon

— Sheila E., a woman who had been a drummer for Prince and for Marvin Gaye. I was half listening but the thought occurred to me: I don't think I would have got on with him. I think he would have irritated me, and probably vice versa. But this doesn't mean that I don't have tremendous empathy for what he went through. So, it's not really about friendship, companionship, liking them, or disliking them. It really is about understanding them. That frees you up to judge them, in a way, frees you up to have opinions about them because you have understood them.

**DT:** It is a common observation among scholars of biographical fiction that the biographical is always, in some sense, autobiographical. Do you agree? We can't help noticing that there are many artist figures among your chosen subjects for biographical fiction. Would you say that there is something autobiographical about them?

**CP:** To be perfectly honest, I understand artists and I'm more interested in them than I am in bank managers or politicians. A lot of people write very well about politicians, or about people in business, or about captains of industry. People write books about Henry Ford or Randolph Hearst. I'm not really interested in such people. I'm interested in creative people whose lives almost necessarily tend to be messy. Basically, if you are an artist, you're trying to make order out of disorder. Sometimes that disorder is your life; there is a sort of compulsion to try to make sense of it. But you are not making any sense of your life; the only thing you are making any sense of is the work. Whether you are a musician, a painter, a sculptor, a writer, a dancer, you are trying to make order out of something. But often the life that is informing this push to order is messy and full of contradiction. I'm interested in that. By the way, the disorder does not have to be like Norman Mailer, with six wives or anything crazy. Disorder can be migration, it can be two languages, it can be ending up in Ostend running on a beach when you are a black American soul singer, it can be like Luther Vandross, living in the closet as a gay man for many years. It's all sorts of disorder, all sorts of confusion that informs that impulse to produce a piece of work, a canvas, a three-minute single, an album that is ordered and structured. So the autobiographical? I understand what it means to have disorder in your life. I'm a migrant. I get it. Yesterday I was talking to my editor, emailing him because he writes about this poet who I have just recently discovered and whose work I love, Elizabeth Bishop. I have just read this poem of hers, "Questions of Travel". The last stanza reads:

*Continent, city, country, society:*

*The choice is never wide and never free.*

*And here or there, ... No. Should we have stayed at home  
wherever that may be? (2008: 75; emphasis in original)*

I totally understand her, this crazy, wonderful American poet, who lived in Brazil for 15 years and came back and taught at Harvard. People like her, who understand disorder and who are trying to make order, I'm finding them everywhere. They fascinate me even without understanding. I didn't know that she was gay too and I didn't know that she lived in Brazil for 15 years. And all the things I discovered about her life are sort of taking me off-key a bit. I think that's just part of understanding the



companionship of other writers, other artists, and being interested in what I describe as messiness. You just recognize the disorder, even without knowing it. I recognize it immediately.

**BL: What kind of research is involved in writing biographical fiction?**

**CP:** There is a lot of reading of historical material. It's territorial, to be honest. I can begin by thinking about an individual, but I begin to read about the territory, not just the individual. Sometimes there is not much material on an individual. It's the territory that's important and you just try to figure out if there is something there. Let me give you a very specific example. Earlier this week I read a book called *Harlem in Montmartre* (Shack, 2001), which is about the jazz scene in Paris between 1920 and 1940. I had bought this book because I have always thought there was a story somewhere about those black Americans who did not go back to the United States in 1918 and who stayed in Europe between 1918 and 1940, when the Germans walked into Paris. There, around Pigalle, were all sorts of black clubs playing jazz and featuring jazz musicians. Not just Josephine Baker, Brick Top, and the famous people. There was a whole scene of jazz in Paris during those 20-odd years. I don't know what the story is. But it's the territory. I'm looking and I'm reading. And if nobody comes out of that milieu, then I just know a bit more about a fascinating topic. In this case, one man caught my attention, and I started to read about him: a Senegalese boxer called Battling Siki, who beat the French champion around 1920, was feted, was walking on the Champs-Élysées with a lion on a leash, and then died in New York, aged 28, stabbed to death, on 41st Street at 9th Avenue, a few years later. Fascinating story. Is it enough? Probably not, but that's research to me. Will it become something? Probably not, but I'm just reading. So it's just reading and thinking. You begin to think and then maybe your characters emerge.

**BL: Your research does not just consist in reading, but also in visiting places, doesn't it?**

**CP:** Visiting places, reading, seeing films, listening to music. I would say mainly reading, but it's not just reading, it's pictures as well, it's photographs. It's all sorts of things.

**BL: In the specific case of Jean Rhys, you had a lot of material written by her, too. Did it make a difference? Was it important for you to re-read that work? Did you read or listen to interviews with her?**

**CP:** No, there is too much material by her. That's the biggest challenge: her voice is so pervasive in her novels, in her autobiography, in the interviews — I had to just switch off. So, I read everything again, but not to find her voice, because I had to find her voice myself. I read to just get a flavour of the period, to get the right words, to find the right vocabulary. But there's too much material. I didn't read her autobiography. I read it years ago, but I didn't reread it. The key with her was going to Dominica, actually seeing her house, seeing where her father met her mother, seeing her school, and seeing the library she learnt to read in. That's what opened up the whole book for me, imaginatively — not the reading so much.



**DT: To stay on the subject of research: has the discovery of facts that you didn't know ever altered your writing? Has such a discovery ever changed preconceived ideas that you might have had about your subjects?**

**CP:** I think so. I mean, I imagine it must have. Let me just give you a specific answer. For example, the fact that Marvin Gaye was a cross-dresser made me think really hard about what his life must have been like in America, where people's notion of sexuality and race, particularly back in the 60s and 70s, was a little prehistoric. So it made me understand Gaye's flight out of America. At the time, people were not aware of the fact that he was experimenting sexually. So that was something which really opened up the narrative for me and gave me a way to really understand who this guy was and what was going on. It was more than just Gaye thinking, "I want to go to Ostend for the weather". It was an escape from something, as opposed to a journey *to* something. Like Baldwin always used to say, "I didn't go to Paris, I left America". It helped me to understand why Marvin Gaye left America. With all of the people I wrote about, I'm sure there have been moments where I discovered a fact that I didn't know before that made me really rethink them. With Rhys? This is really dumb, but it never occurred to me how much of a reader she was as a young girl. And I say it's dumb because it's very hard to meet any writer who wasn't a voracious reader as a youngster. But it was actually seeing the library in Dominica, a very modest little place, that made me think, "Oh, this is who she is". Not the drunk, staggering around London and Paris and getting into all sorts of mischief with various men and dancing on the stage... No, she's a girl who loved to read, that's who she is. That's just a fact that changed my thinking about her, from framing her within the Edwardian music hall tradition or bohemian Paris, which is the common vision that people have of Jean Rhys. They think her life began when she got off the ship in England. They don't realize that, actually, she had 16 and a half years living in this tropical paradise where she learnt to read. So I began to reconfigure her and rethink her once I saw that library.

**DT: You mentioned Marvin Gaye and sexuality a few minutes ago. In *Dancing in the Dark* as well, there are veiled suggestions about Bert Williams's sexuality, more specifically that he might have been homosexual. As far as we know, there is no historical material confirming this. So we were wondering where this idea came from, and why it mattered to the story that you wanted to tell?**

**CP:** Well, first of all, I'm not the only person that has speculated on this. But there are three things about Williams that made me think more and more about this. First of all, he always called his wife "Mother". Clearly he had some kind of Oedipus complex, which doesn't necessarily mean he was gay, obviously, but there was some suggestion that the marriage was celibate. That's one thing that appealed to my imagination. Secondly, George Walker was anything but homosexual and his kind of rapacious behaviour, his womanizing is something that Bert Williams was very judgemental about, as far as we know. He was — how can we put this? — clearly perturbed by it. This much we definitely do know. And again, it made me speculate about why he would be so disturbed by George Walker's behaviour, which was not any different from what was going on in the whole musical theatre scene. And I guess the last aspect about him is that he was so secretive. He was so closeted in every aspect of his

life that it didn't seem to me beyond the realm of possibility that the closeted nature of his life might include his sexuality as well. Why not? So, there's no evidence, but it seemed to me to be wrong not to at least speculate, because speculation was always in the air about him.

**DT: At the same time, the speculation is very oblique in the book, to the extent that many readers actually miss the clues altogether.**

**CP:** Yes. I think to make it more overt would not be true to who he was, because the epigraph to the book says, "Nobody in America knows my real name and, if I can prevent it, nobody ever will". Because we're never going to know who he is, it would be wrong of me, then, as an author, to tell you who he is. I'm going to speculate, but I'm going to leave it ambiguous and oblique, which is in the right tradition of how Williams lived his life. He was not a guy who ever nailed his colours to the mast, for example about his drinking — because he was probably an alcoholic. Again, I never say as much, but it becomes sort of clear that he's spending a bit too much time in bars. So, when looking at a life that is so lived behind the veil, as it were, it's wrong to take that person and put them centre stage and slap a label on them that says "alcoholic" or "homosexual". You can't do that, but at the same time, if you're going to examine that life, you have to at least try and shine a light, however briefly, in some of those dark corners too.

**DT: Do you ever wonder what your subjects would think about the pieces you write about them? Are they a factor at all in your writing? Obviously they are dead, but, for example, in "Northern Lights", your narrative alter ego speaks to David Oluwale. Is there any form of imaginary dialogue going on as you write?**

**CP:** Yes, with him, because I was trying to become more visible in that story. I just felt deeply involved, because, literally, the shop doorways he was sleeping in, I walked past those doorways as a kid, going to school. One of the things that Andrew Warnes from the University of Leeds sent me when he was helping me by doing research for the book was the front page of the *Yorkshire Evening Post* during the Oluwale trial. I noticed that they had the results of the Harrogate Music Festival recorder competition on the same page — and I was there, second place. I just kept thinking, my life has intersected with his, not just geographically, but there it was, on the front page of the newspaper, and I just kept feeling that there had to be more. There is a sort of impulse to have some narrative conversation with this guy because we were that close in many respects. So, what would he think? Well, it's the same as I feel about a lot of people who fascinate me: I'm not sure that we would have had much to say to each other. So I never really worry about what my subjects would think, because I don't really care what they would think, to be honest. I'm more interested in trying to frame their lives, to give them a presence, to give them complexity, to give them dignity, hopefully, and to give voice to who they were. As for my own personal relationship with them, there's no romance about it. I have no romance about Jean Rhys whatsoever. I have no doubt that she wouldn't give me the time of day. Jean Rhys didn't like black people; she's completely on record about that. The man who

was my main guide when I went to Dominica, Lennox Honychurch, used to be the cultural minister there, and did his doctorate at Oxford in anthropology. He went to Devon to see her. Lennox keeps the Jean Rhys website and knows everything about her. He went on a pilgrimage to see her, to her bungalow. She knew he was coming... but he's black. She didn't want to see him. She stayed in the kitchen. He stayed at the door. He said he got a little glimpse of her in the distance... and once she'd realized, she was like, no, I don't want to know. So, there's no romance about it — she wouldn't say, "Oh, thank you, Caz, you've done a tremendous job". I'd be on the doorstep!

**BL:** The first clearly biographical novel that you wrote was *Dancing in the Dark* about Bert Williams, and your latest, *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, is about Jean Rhys. These books are separated by more than a decade, and their subjects are also separated by factors such as gender and race. Do you think that Williams and Rhys are mainly marked by these differences, or do they have similarities? And also, how would you compare these two figures and your own projects about them?

**CP:** What I think they have in common is a good and complicated question but, just off the top of my head, what they have in common is they're both misunderstood, and they're both vulnerable characters; they're both incredibly lonely and incredibly isolated characters. Bert Williams's relationship with the outside world was really troubled, and he turned in on himself; he turned to drink. People misunderstood who he was — assuming, because he was famous, that he would be able to talk to them, that he would want to talk to them. Jean Rhys has a little bit of that too, an inability to deal with the world, turning in on her herself, drinking, not really being social in any way, yet putting herself in a social position, being a dancer, a performer, then a model. And then, there is a performative element to being a writer too. In a sense, the vocation pushes against who they are. They've in some sense chosen the worst possible thing for who they are, and the tension drove them to the same thing. So, I think they have a lot in common despite, as you rightly point out, the differences in gender, race, and time period. But at the core, there is a vulnerability, and there is a vocational choice that militates against what's probably in their best interests in terms of being happy, well-balanced human beings, whatever that may mean.

**BL:** Both were born in the Caribbean. Does that matter?

**CP:** Yes, it matters because, like most people born in the Caribbean who want to achieve in the world, as it were, they have to migrate. Maybe a temporary migration, but there is a migration that brings them out of what might be called a zone of potential happiness. It's complicated, because remaining in the Caribbean was not going to work for Jean Rhys, even though she had a great desire to do so; it wasn't going to work for her because of rising black nationalism — it's what drove her mother out. You can't romanticize staying there. The same with Bert Williams. He couldn't stay in the Caribbean because educationally, career-wise, he wasn't going to be able to do anything there apart from being a labourer. You have to leave and come out into the world. So it's almost as if you've been expelled by your home, and Rhys and Williams

have that in common too. But again, that loss of home, of a place in the world, is a difficulty for so many people from the Caribbean. Elizabeth Bishop would say, who knows what home is? She said it's an ongoing question. For Caribbean people, it's a particularly pertinent question because there's a deep tension between that zone of belonging — safety, love, lushness, however you wish to describe it — and the necessity to get on in the world. There's almost always a schism between the two places, and Rhys and Williams both suffered from that.

**BL: You've spoken about emotional truth earlier in the interview. What kind of emotional truth do you think your novel on Jean Rhys has allowed you to uncover? Are there things that you know and understand now about her, that you didn't before embarking on the project of writing that novel?**

**CP:** Well, I know her better than I did. When I started out, I had an idea of who she was, but I didn't *know* her. But I know her now. I mean, I imaginatively know her, I understand her; I think I could predict what she might do in most situations, and I think I understand what she did. So, honestly, whether I'm writing an entirely fictional character, or a character who has one foot in reality, or a character like Jean Rhys who has two feet in reality, for me it's always a growth to understanding of the character. Take for instance Emily in *Cambridge*, who has no feet in reality, or the Cambridge character who, you could say, has one foot in reality if you look at him through the prism of Equiano, or Rhys or Bert Williams, who have both feet in reality — their fictionality or not doesn't really matter to me because I understand why they did certain things, how they felt about things that happened to them, why they responded in a particular way to particular matters. And it's the same with Rhys: the fact that she lived doesn't matter to me. It still feels like the same growth to understanding. If I hadn't written the novel, I wouldn't have any understanding of the anxiety, the nervousness, the insecurity that she felt on being introduced to the mother of her first lover, the man she loved more than anybody else. I wouldn't have understood how damaged and distraught she felt at being patronized by this man's mother, unless I imagined it. You know, she fell in love with a man who after a year and a bit basically dumped her because he was just messing around with her. She was a mongrel, she was never going to fit into his family; his father was the governor of the Bank of England, for God's sake; he was a government adviser, he lived in this townhouse in Mayfair. She was never going to fit into his life, but how did she discover this, and at what point? When did she know? Was there an incident, was it by degrees? I have an idea of how it happened now; beforehand I was just stuck, like everybody else, saying "He was an aristocrat, she was a chorus girl — it *is* like the plotline of a bad musical". But it's painful to be rejected. It's really painful when somebody you love doesn't want you. And that's what I was trying to find out. I didn't know that before, but I do know how it was for her now. I *think* I know how it was for her. She's no longer a mystery to me. If she were, I wouldn't have finished the book; I'd still have to write more.

**BL: Thank you so much for answering our questions.**

**DT: Thank you.**

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