

# CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

BY LYNN METZGER



It's time to move past the luxury resorts and the palm-tree-lined ports filled with cruise ships, where tropical breezes carry the syncopated rhythms of steel drum bands. There is a side to this enchanting vacation spot that tourists never see.

The Caribbean has long been viewed as a politically, ethnically, and linguistically fragmented region, but its 7,000 islands, islets, cays, and reefs share a woeful past. Christopher Columbus's legendary 1492 landfall in what is now the Bahamas ushered in nearly 500 years of Old World rule, and, whether Spanish, British, French, or Dutch, the colonies were united by the hallmarks of colonialism: subjugation and slavery. The 1.5 million African slaves imported between the 15th and the 19th centuries preserved their beliefs and customs by handing them down orally from generation to generation, giving rise to the rich storytelling traditions that characterize Caribbean culture today. Although slavery was abolished in the 1800s, it spawned deep-rooted prejudices and rigid class systems that persisted long after the empires had crumbled.

Early Caribbean authors mimicked the literary genres (i.e., poetry and autobiography) and the languages of Europe. However, these influences were cast aside in the 1920s when writers from French- and Spanish-speaking islands began to experiment with new models that emphasized their African heritage and celebrated a common black identity, the *Négritude* movement. This epic shift was soon followed by *Créolité* ("Creoleness"), which stressed the unique aspects of Caribbean identity—a product of European, Indian, Asian, African, and native cultures. In the years following World War II, Anglophone writers joined their neighbors in questioning conventional European notions of beauty, art, and virtue, replacing them with new Caribbean archetypes and dialects.

Today, Caribbean writers are increasingly celebrated for their insight and their ability to craft rich tales. Although most island nations gained their independence in the 1960s, the region is still plagued by poverty and repression, and it is this potent fusion of social and political turmoil—the legacy of colonialism—that has proven to be an



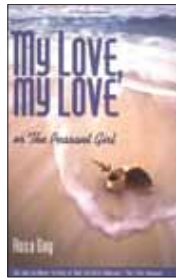
unusually fertile ground for literature. Mirroring the everyday concerns of their fellow citizens, Caribbean authors struggle with complex questions of domination, rebellion, liberation, ethnic and cultural identity, alienation, and exile. Poised stubbornly between the opulent First World and the neglected, disadvantaged Third, Caribbean literature will continue to evolve, and its distinct voice will undoubtedly take its rightful place in world literature.

## FOLKLORE & STORYTELLING

### My Love, My Love

Or, *The Peasant Girl*

By Rosa Guy (1985)



The basis for the Broadway musical *Once on This Island*, this captivating young adult novel introduces readers to Ti Moune, a beautiful peasant girl who tenderly nurses a

wealthy Creole boy, Daniel Beauxhomme, back to health after he is injured in a car accident. Although the two fall in love, the couple are separated when Daniel is forced to return to his family.

Ti Moune, convinced that their bond has been sanctioned by the gods, will risk her life to be reunited with her sweetheart. A distinctly Caribbean take on the story “The Little Mermaid,” this charming fairy tale by Trinidadian-American author Rosa Guy celebrates the power of love and the human spirit.

### The New Moon’s Arms

By Nalo Hopkinson (2007)



Hot-tempered, foul-mouthed, menopausal Chastity “Calamity” Lambkin has just buried her father when she discovers that her hot flashes are accompanied by a long-lost ability to locate missing items. Suddenly, objects from her childhood begin to appear. Books and toys drop from the sky, and an orchard that her father planted on another island materializes in her backyard overnight. She also discovers Agway,

a peculiar toddler washed up on the shore near her home on the fictional island of Cayaba. Intertwining folklore with the finest Caribbean storytelling, Jamaican science fiction and fantasy writer Nalo Hopkinson paints a vibrant portrait of people caught between tradition and modernization, between the fantastic and the prosaic, in this enchanting and mesmerizing novel.

## SLAVERY AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

### At the Full and Change of the Moon

By Dionne Brand (2000)



It is 1824, and Marie-Ursule, a rebellious Trinidadian slave, and her followers are about to embark on a last, desperate act of defiance—mass suicide. Before taking her life, however, Marie-Ursule arranges for her young daughter Bola’s escape.

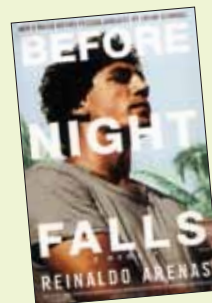
Many years later, Bola’s descendants, including a great-granddaughter who bears her name, will be scattered to the four corners of the world, but the formidable influence of their family line and the lasting ravages of slavery will haunt and provoke them for generations in this lyrical, character-driven novel. Brand, an award-winning poet and novelist from Trinidad, is currently an English professor at the University of Guelph in Canada.

## CONTEMPORARY AUTHOR

### REINALDO ARENAS (1943–1990)

A Cuban poet and novelist, Reinaldo Arenas initially supported Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution but later denounced the government when his writing was officially rejected because of his subject matter and

his homosexuality. Convicted of “ideological deviation,” Arenas was imprisoned between 1973 to 1976 and forced to renounce his work. In 1980, he made a daring escape to the United States, where he continued to write until, weak from his battle with AIDS and unable to work, he committed suicide. Arenas is best known for his powerful and harrowing memoir, *Before Night Falls* (1993), and the semiautobiographical *Pentagonia*



(“five agonies”), a series of five novels describing the lives of dissident writers in postrevolutionary Cuba.

## Texaco

By Patrick Chamoiseau (1998)



The winner of the 1992 Prix Goncourt, this dense, sprawling epic reimagines 150 years of Martinican history as it traces three generations of the Laborieux (“hardworking”) family—from the slave quarters of a mid-19th century sugar cane plantation to the shantytown of Texaco, named after the defunct oil refinery on which it was built. When Texaco is dubbed an eyesore by its more affluent neighbors, its aging founder and protector, Marie-Sophie Laborieux, confronts the urban planner sent to condemn her community. In *Texaco*, Chamoiseau, whose contributions to the French Caribbean *créolité* movement include ten novels and six collections of essays, celebrates the unique and richly textured history and culture of his native Martinique.

## Unburnable

By Marie-Elena John (2006)

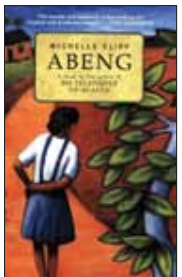


Nominated for the International IMPAC DUBLIN Award, this suspenseful and atmospheric novel marks the debut of a promising new author. Born and raised in Antigua, Marie-Elena John tells the story of Lillian Baptiste, a Washington, D.C., activist who, at the age of 14, fled her home in Dominica after making the shocking discovery that her mother was a beautiful but insane prostitute and her grandmother a murderer. Twenty years later, Lillian returns to unravel the complicated history of her family and, hopefully, to make peace with the past. Nimble interweaving modern times with those from long ago, *Unburnable* immerses readers in the rich traditions of Afro-Caribbean mythology and culture.

## THE COLONIAL ERA

### Abeng

By Michelle Cliff (1980)



Persuasive and thought-provoking, *Abeng* introduces readers to Clare Savage, a young girl who must navigate the ethnically divisive world of 1950s British-ruled Jamaica while attempting to reconcile herself with her own mixed heritage as the descendant of Maroons (runaway slaves) and a brutal white landowner who murdered his slaves before the government could set them free. Through Clare’s struggle, Jamaican-born novelist Cliff highlights the brutal nature

## CONTEMPORARY AUTHOR

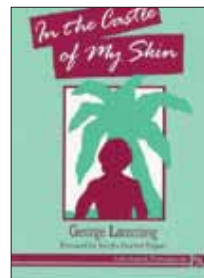
### EDWIDGE DANTICAT (1969– )

Born in rural Haiti, Danticat left the home of her aunt and uncle, where she had lived since she was a toddler, to join her immigrant parents in New York City at the age of 12. However, the traumatic experience and her unfamiliar new surroundings propelled her into a solitary world of reading. An essay she wrote for a student publication later evolved into her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), in which four generations of Haitian women struggle to overcome adversity. Danticat’s 2004 novel *The Dew Breaker* spins a series of tales around a Haitian immigrant with a shadowy past, and *Brother, I’m Dying* (2007), a poignant and disturbing memoir, won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

of imperialism and the devastating effects that persist for generations. Cliff continues Clare’s story in the critically acclaimed *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), which recounts her immigration to the United States and England before finally returning to Jamaica.

### In the Castle of My Skin

By George Lamming (1953)

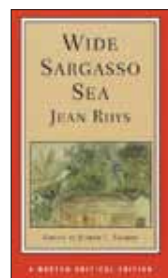


In this gritty and realistic portrait of Barbados under British colonial rule, G, a precocious teen from a poor black family, tries to make sense of—and find his place in—an adult world characterized by social, racial, and political discord. Set against the race riots of the 1930s, this vibrant and sophisticated coming-of-age tale—widely considered a masterpiece of Caribbean literature—provides unique insight into the modern history of this turbulent and troubled region. Born in Barbados in 1927, Lamming, a visiting professor and writer-in-residence at Brown University, based this poignant and compelling chronicle on his own early life.

### Wide Sargasso Sea

By Jean Rhys (1966)

◆ #94, MODERN LIBRARY’S 100 BEST NOVELS



A prequel of sorts to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wide Sargasso Sea* introduces readers to the *first* Mrs. Rochester, the madwoman in the attic. A Jamaican Creole, Antoinette Cosway (aka Bertha Mason) is a woman caught between two worlds—scorned by purist European colonists and vilified by the island’s former slaves. An arranged marriage with an un-

## CONTEMPORARY AUTHOR

### JAMAICA KINCAID (1949– )

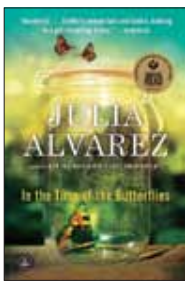
Jamaica Kincaid, a native of the island of Antigua, immigrated to New York at the age of 16 and served as an au pair before landing a job as a staff writer for the *New Yorker*. Her debut collection of short stories, *At the Bottom of the River* (1984), was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award, and subsequent works, including *Annie John* (1985), *A Small Place* (1988), *Lucy* (1990), and *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1995), have received widespread critical acclaim. Kincaid's poems and short stories have also appeared in the *New Yorker* and the *Paris Review*. Kincaid frequently explores the complexities of mother-daughter relationships and anticolonial themes in her essays, short fiction, and novels.

named Englishman holds out the promise of happiness but soon devolves into hostility and paranoia, wreaking havoc on Antoinette's already precarious mental state. Rhys, who was herself from the island of Dominica, puts a human face on the power struggles and culture clashes central to the colonial era in this critically acclaimed classic.

## INDEPENDENCE AND THE LEGACY OF DOMINATION

### In the Time of the Butterflies

By Julia Alvarez (1994)

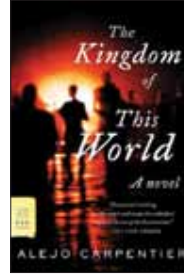


Middlebury College writer-in-residence Julia Alvarez, who fled the Dominican Republic with her family at the age of 10, reimagines the true story of the three Mirabal sisters—Minerva, Patria, and Maria Teresa—who were murdered in 1960 for their role in a plot to overthrow the regime of Gen. Rafael Trujillo. Through flashbacks, diary entries, and

the reminiscences of their only surviving sister, Dedé, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, a nominee for the National Book Critics Circle Award, follows the siblings from childhood through marriage and motherhood to their gradual transformation into revolutionaries, underscoring the far-reaching consequences of tyranny and bringing the atrocities of life in a police state terrifyingly to light.

### The Kingdom of This World

By Alejo Carpentier (1957)



What happens when the oppressed become the oppressors? Influential Cuban novelist and musicologist Alejo Carpentier explores this issue and more in this sweeping saga of the St. Domingue Slave Revolt and Haiti's subsequent liberation from the French, when Haiti became the second country in history (after the United States) to win independence from colonial rule. Ti Noel, an elderly slave, narrates the strange but true rise and fall of King Henri-Christophe, whose precipitous ascent from slave to monarch unleashed a brutal and despotic reign rivaling that of the French. Carpentier seamlessly intertwines historical fact with gripping fiction in this spellbinding exploration of the nature of revolution and the chaos left behind when governments crumble.

### Flickering Shadows

By Kwadwo Agymah Kamau (1996)



This stark and unexpectedly humorous debut novel, narrated by a cantankerous ghost, poses some grave questions about the lasting legacy of oppression. In a village known simply as the Hill on an unspecified Caribbean island, the poor farmers and laborers who fought for independence are shocked to discover that their democratically elected prime minister is even more corrupt and tyrannical than the colonial government. In a rhythmic and lilting patois, award-winning Barbadian novelist Kamau, who teaches creative writing at the University of Oklahoma, gracefully blurs the lines between reality and reverie, between the living and the dead, in this captivating example of Caribbean storytelling at its best.

## RESILIENCE & SURVIVAL

### Bruised Hibiscus

By Elizabeth Nunez (2000)



After the mutilated body of a woman washes ashore on the island of Trinidad in 1954, Rosa and Zuela, long-separated childhood friends who witnessed a terrible crime many years before, reconnect unexpectedly. The rumors and speculation triggered by the murder begin to rake up the island's troubled past, threatening the delicately balanced

social systems that govern Trinidadian society, and the two women, trapped in violent relationships, must find the courage to change if they are to survive. Born in Trinidad, Nunez, an award-winning novelist and provost at Medgar Evers College-CUNY, has crafted a spellbinding exploration of friendship, love, and the refusal to accept one's fate.

## Ruins

By Achy Obejas (2009)

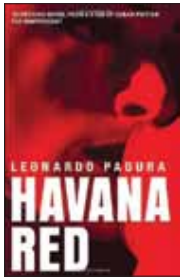


Still fervently devoted to the Revolution while his comrades flee to the United States, 54-year-old Usnavy Martin Leyva, a Cuban grocery store manager regrettably named after the ships in Guantanamo Bay, finds himself increasingly isolated and at odds with his wife and daughter, who dream of a better life somewhere else. When

he stumbles across an ornate but broken stained glass lamp, he unearths long-buried family secrets that may hold the key to a brighter future. Cuban-born novelist and *Chicago Tribune* contributor Achy Obejas translated Junot Diaz's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* into Spanish.

## Havana Red

By Leonardo Padura (2005)



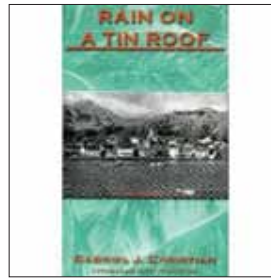
In this first title from Padura's award-winning Havana Quartet to be translated into English (followed by *Havana Black*, *Havana Blue*, and *Havana Gold*), Inspector Mario Conde investigates the brutal murder of a young transvestite in 1989. Because the victim is the son of a prominent government official, Conde must carefully navigate the stifling society of

postrevolutionary Cuba and its increasingly maligned and marginalized homosexual community. An award-winning Cuban novelist and journalist, Padura paints a vivid picture of contemporary Havana—its sights, sounds, smells, and, above all, its unrelenting heat—in this articulate, character-driven exploration of human nature, “a metaphor for life in Cuba.”

## CULTURE & IDENTITY

### Rain on a Tin Roof

By Gabriel J. Christian (1999)



In these dazzling and frequently humorous interconnected short stories, Gabriel Christian relates the experiences of a young boy growing up in 1970s Dominica, transporting readers to this lush tropical locale while exploring the history, culture, and mindset of the island he left years

before. Engaging tales of Carnival and Hurricane David espouse the importance of family and community, as well as universal themes of tolerance and social responsibility. Christian, a master of honing in on small but illuminating details, lovingly evokes the pleasures and ordeals of childhood and the pulsating rhythms of island life in this extraordinary debut.

### Crossing the Mangrove

By Maryse Conde (1995)



A handsome and mysterious stranger dies suddenly during a visit to a small village in Guadeloupe, leaving behind two pregnant women and a throng of questions. As the villagers gather for his funeral, they brood over his identity, their private ruminations revealing a tangled web of family secrets, illicit affairs, rumors, superstitions, and prejudices. In this

sumptuous tribute to her exotic island homeland, Conde, a retired academic who has taught at Columbia University, UCLA, and the Sorbonne, colorfully evokes the uniquely diverse culture and history of this precariously balanced society, creating a radiant portrait of a community and, largely, of the region as a whole.

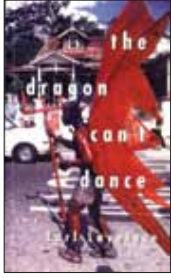
## CONTEMPORARY AUTHOR

### V. S. NAIPAUL (1932– )

Best known for his colonial novels, V. S. Naipaul, a descendant of indentured servants from India, left his native Trinidad for Great Britain and Oxford in 1950. He is noted for humorous, unsentimental portrayals of colonial culture, including *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *Miguel Street* (1959), and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). In awarding Naipaul the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, the Swedish Academy named him “Conrad’s heir as the annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human beings. His authority as a narrator is grounded in his memory of what others have forgotten, the history of the vanquished.”

## The Dragon Can't Dance

By Earl Lovelace (1979)



Aldrick Prospect, an unemployed hustler living in a hilltop shantytown, begins work on the intricate dragon king costume he'll wear for Carnival—two glorious days when the poverty-stricken residents of Calvary Hill can forget their worries and lose themselves in the revelry. But this year, changes are afoot. A younger generation doesn't seem to fully realize the significance of the celebration, and corporate sponsors want to eliminate time-honored traditions in favor of more tourist-friendly festivities. In this classic novel set in his native Trinidad, award-winning author Earl Lovelace deftly portrays the powerful and at times frantic desire to achieve meaning and recognition within a society simmering with racial and ethnic tensions.

## EMIGRATION & EXILE

### The True History of Paradise

By Margaret Cézair-Thompson (1999)



As she drives across the island towards the plane that will take her away forever, Jean Landing reflects on her past and the motives behind her decision to flee the political unrest and violence of 1980s Jamaica, the seeds of which can be found in the country's turbulent history. Intermingled with the voices of the past, *The True History of Paradise*, the ambitious debut novel of Jamaican author and screenwriter Margaret Cézair-Thompson, vibrantly juxtaposes the region's verdant natural beauty with the terrifying brutality and bloodshed of the era in a detailed and beautifully rendered account of this small island nation.

### The Final Passage

By Caryl Phillips (1985)



It is 1958, and 19-year-old Leila leaves her island home in the British West Indies for England with the intentions of providing a better life for her young son, saving her deteriorating marriage, and reuniting with her ailing mother, who immigrated to London for medical treatment. But Leila's idealistic hopes are soon crushed by the realities of racism and poverty, and she finds herself increasingly isolated in this strange new land. Originally from St. Kitts, British novelist Caryl Phillips, whose novel *Crossing the River* (1993) was

short-listed for the Booker Prize, spins a compelling and emotionally resonant tale of immigration and disillusionment.

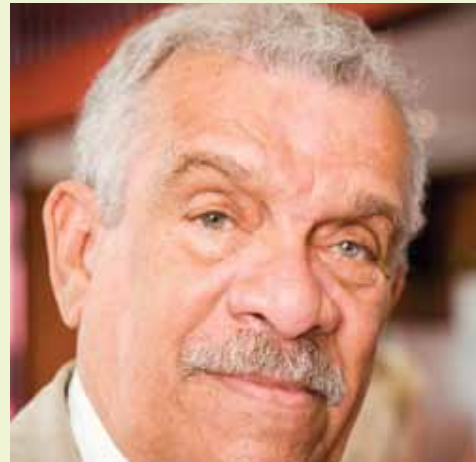
### The Lonely Londoners

By Samuel Selvon (1956)



An exceptionally astute exploration of immigrant life in 1950s London, *The Lonely Londoners* follows several members of the "Windrush Generation," West Indian immigrants who arrived in England aboard the ship *Empire Windrush* after Parliament granted its colonial subjects full citizenship in 1948. As the former Jamaicans and Trinidadians become accustomed to the bustle and sprawl of city life, they find themselves beleaguered by bigotry, exploitation, poverty, hunger, loneliness, and homesickness. By turns comic and tragic, this unsettling and persuasive portrait by Trinidadian-Canadian author Samuel Selvon compellingly depicts the Caribbean expatriate community in a rhythmic West Indian dialect. ■

## CONTEMPORARY AUTHOR



### DEREK WALCOTT (1930– )

St. Lucian poet, playwright, and artist Derek Walcott, a direct descendant of slaves, became, in 1992, the first Caribbean writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature—"for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment." He launched his literary career at the age of 18 with *25 Poems* (1948) but solidified his literary reputation with later collections, *In a Green Night: Poems 1948–60* (1962), *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), and *The Bounty* (1997). His epic poem, *Omeros* (1990), widely considered to be his masterpiece, is a loose, modern reworking of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* set in 20th-century St. Lucia.