



# Authorgraph No.82: John Agard

Article Author:

[Morag Styles](#) [1]

[82](#) [2]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

**John Agard** interviewed by **Morag Styles**.

**John Agard** interviewed by **Morag Styles**

<!--break-->

*?Take the mountain*

*off your tired mind*

*Come unwind*

*in the arms of a rhyme.*

A stone?s throw from the Embankment

Why not risk enchantment??

(from **Happy Birthday Poetry Library [Find your way to Level 5]** )

Enchantment is what I got when I went to visit John Agard as Writer-in-Residence at the South Bank Centre. The enchantment reflected in his enthusiasm for all the events and people associated with the place, from the music-making that happens daily in the Royal Festival Hall foyer, to the dancers working with the disabled; the young artist whose work is currently on display, to the people who serve in the cafes and bars; the Gamelan instrument session he took part in, to the avant-garde sculpture where celebrities, including John, who were not sculptors, were invited to give a lunch-time talk on their favourite exhibit (in John?s case the exhibit included a live parrot who turned his back pointedly on the audience!); the current Aboriginal exhibition, to the Doisneau photographs of last month. The latter provoked a poem based on Doisneau?s famous photograph of a couple kissing passionately in a public place. John homed in on the man in the background who appears to be taking no notice at all:

*I am the man in the beret*

*sternly walking past the kiss.*

*No spring in my step, no bouquet*

*borne in the vase of my fist.?*

Sitting over a sandwich together, we exchange many greetings and it?s clear that John has already established himself as a very popular part of the South Bank. One reason for this is simply that he?s excellent company ? amusing, modest, kind, thoughtful and deeply interested in all that?s going on around. He has the easy gift of friendship ? everyone likes him. Working in a multi-media environment like the South Bank is John Agard?s natural metier, because he believes in cross-fertilization of the arts: it?s the most exciting part of the job... ?instead of doing a workshop in a vacuum, I can relate to other art forms?. His poetry has always had strong links with music, drama and performance. Now he writes a poem based on Caroline Lee?s photograph of her sculpture of glazed stoneware shoes.

*?In shoes of twigs and shard of clay  
We made our steps in the caterpillar?s tracks  
and followed the hedgehog?s footprint of wonder  
See, we have left you  
our shoes in enchanting circles.?*

?Enchanting? again. Later we watch the workshop where the same photograph is used as the basis of a beautiful dance accompanied by haunting music, performed by mentally disabled people whose bodies are vivid with expression.

I try not to weep, being moved by brilliant teaching and the responsiveness of the group, while John is greeted with affection by the dancers. Already they know him well and he takes a keen interest in the progress of their work, penning a few lines to accompany their movements:

*?the wind is blowing  
I am a seed growing  
a bird calling  
the rain falling?*

which matches perfectly the artlessness of the dancers.

Apart from these activities, John?s job involves poetry with children and teachers: he had also run four writing workshops for retired people in the previous weeks. When you invite John Agard to be Writer-in-Residence, clearly anything can happen! And he has certainly earned his distinction. After coming to Britain from Guyana in 1977, he worked for the Commonwealth Institute for eight years, travelling the length and breadth of the country, ?and the better part of 2000 schools?, to promote understanding of the culture of the Caribbean. He realised then that dry talks did nothing to foster children?s understanding or enthusiasm for a different culture, and used poetry, music, and genuine artefacts to bring the Caribbean experience alive in countless classrooms.

As a published author in a small way in Guyana, John began his writing career with two books: one a collection of poetry, **Shoot Me With Flowers**, the other a picture book for small children. Since then he has continued to pursue the parallel tracks of writing for adults and children. His range is wide and includes poetry which can be provocative, political and passionate, as well as entertaining. (**Lovelines for a Goat-born Lady** is his latest.) He has never returned to Guyana, but the ?distance lends enchantment to the view? and he frequently draws on memories of his homeland. ?My appreciation of the language, Creole, and the rich culture of Guyana was heightened by moving away from it... the wonderful mixture of races with the African, Asian and European connection, our folklore, the hinterland with its forests and rivers...?

In fact, John grew up in Georgetown, an only child, where he spent many happy hours devouring the books in its excellent public library. His memories include paying overdue fines, being told to ?wait a minute ? don?t rush? and looking longingly to see if there was a new Enid Blyton or Hardy Boys adventure. He loved cricket and was charmed by John Arlott?s commentaries which he used to improvise on his own. ??It?s a wonderful day in the West Indies and a glorious breeze is blowing... here?s Boycott... a marvellous boundary... magnificent hooking action... a wonderful delivery... the West Indies 900 without loss! It was all to do with words.? At the same period he was an altar boy who longed to be a priest; dressed in a white sheet, he used to get his cousin to pour out a cheap version of communion wine while he declaimed the Latin of the service.

At school John was an academic pupil, but even he got fed up with exams. He was nearly thrown out when he penned an Ode to Wordsworth and Byron, instead of answering the literature question.

*?Imprisoned in my classroom cell  
I chew my pen, as words come tumbling down  
on printed lines  
before my eyes.  
Oh Wordsworth, why were you born  
to rack my brains with songs of praise  
to lifelong nature??*

After leaving school, John began work as a pupil-teacher, then a librarian, before working as a sub-editor and feature writer on the **Guyana Sunday Chronicle**. Later he followed his father who had emigrated to Britain, but Guyana still features strongly in his poetry.

**I Din Do Nuttin?** (his first book of poetry for children published in Britain) is a mixture of Caribbean and black British experience. **Say It Again, Granny!** is a book of Caribbean proverbs in Creole for children; **The Calypso Alphabet** offers a taste of the Caribbean in John's words and Jennifer Bent's illustrations ?

*?S is for sugarcane  
It gives sugar and sweet to chew.  
T for tanty.  
She?s your aunty. You don?t hear her calling you??*

**No Hickory, No Dickory, No Dock** is a collection of Caribbean nursery rhymes, some new, some from the oral tradition, written with his partner, Grace Nichols. John and Grace travelled together to Britain and have established themselves with fine reputations as poets for adults and children. One impetus for the latter may be their daughter, Kalera, who is four years old.

John is, indeed, interested in 'the bridging of the two worlds', the two formative places in his life, Guyana and Britain. He misses the easy spontaneity of life in the Caribbean. 'Quite simple things in England require a bit of thought. Do I need my cardigan? Should I phone the people I plan to visit first? But even the weather has its appeal. People here are physically affected by the weather... it's sensual... you can see them opening up, almost like flowers in the summer... September comes and they withdraw again. People here are much more attuned to the cyclic rhythms of nature?it's a pagan type of ecstasy about the weather that has its own charm.?

He is, however, conscious of himself as a Caribbean writer. 'I can't be indifferent to racism, although it hasn't happened to me personally. I'm aware of the danger of becoming bitter ? it can cripple your creativity. You can't make it the whole obsession of your life or your writing gets ghetto-ised. If you shut yourself up from what is positive, you narrow your life. I write about a wide range of things... something that touches you... maybe the River Thames... there's a lot of different streams that feed things inside you. I want to deal with injustice and cruelty, but without a dead-end feeling. In fairy tales there's cruelty, but there's still delight.?' This is one of John's great talents: in poetry for children and adults alike, he makes you face injustice, but rarely with anger.

*?My birthday cards say,  
Happy Birthday, Dilroy!  
But, Mummy, tell me why  
they don?t put a little boy  
that looks a bit like me.  
Why the boy on the card so white??*

(from 'Happy Birthday, Dilroy' in **I Din Do Nuttin?** .)

*?Dem tell me bout Lord Nelson and Waterloo  
But dem never tell me about Shaka de great Zulu  
Dem tell me bout Columbus and 1492  
but what happen to de Caribs and de Arawaks too?  
Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me  
By now I checking out me own history  
I carving out me identity.?  
(from ?Checking out me History? in **Life Doesn?t Frighten Me At All** .)*

Acting was John?s first great love: as a schoolboy he played Bottom in **A Midsummer Night?s Dream** , the White Rabbit in **Alice** and Captain Hook in **Peter Pan** , continuing his amateur dramatics as a young man in Guyana. When the Little Angel Marionette Theatre at Islington recently asked him to write a play for them, it was an opportunity to combine poetry and drama and he is revelling in the experience. ?I looked at the puppets to see how I could weave a story involving them and I fell in love with them... there?s a lovely spirit about these African puppets... they have their own personalities... you want to keep shaking their hands.? The end result is a play called **Odessa and the Magic Goat** which will be performed at the South Bank in September and will tour with the Little Angel Theatre later.

John?s birthday is 21st June, Midsummer Day itself, on the cusp of Gemini, the sign of communication, with Leo rising. It?s difficult to imagine a more apt horoscope. One of my greatest memories of John Agard is a vision of him on stage performing to a couple of hundred schoolchildren, after three exhausting weeks as poetry ?animateur? for the 1985 Cambridge Children?s Poetry Festival. He had made up new verses of ?Poetry Jump-Up? featuring Helen Cook, the festival co-ordinator, and me which had us laughing hysterically. A moment later he had the entire audience on its feet, dancing to the poem.

*?dis is poetry carnival  
dis is poetry bacchanal  
when inspiration call  
take yu pen in yu hand  
if you don?t have a pen  
take yu pencil in yu hand  
if you don?t have a pencil  
what the hell  
so long de feeling start to swell  
just shout de poem out?*

?My granny always told me, "that tall man, he?ll die with a horse?. The man stayed indoors, but one day he fell over a clothes-horse, had to have his leg amputated and then he died. You can?t escape your destiny.?

John is fulfilling his. Who knows how far Leo will rise?

Photographs by Richard Mewton.

The Poetry Library is situated at Level 5 of The Royal Festival Hall, South Bank Centre, London, SE1. For a programme of events, send an s.a.e. to that address. The Library is open daily between 11.00 am and 8.00 pm.

### **Some of John Agard?s books:**

**I Din Do Nuttin?** , ill. Susanna Gretz, Red Fox, 0 09 918451 6, £2.99 pbk

**Say It Again, Granny!** , Mammoth, 0 7497 0747 X, £2.99 pbk

**The Calypso Alphabet** , ill. Jennifer Bent, Picture Lion, 0 00 663676 4, £3.99 pbk

**No Hickory, No Dickory, No Dock** , Viking, 0 670 826618, £7.99; Puffin, 0 14 034027 0, £2.99 pbk

**Life Doesn?t Frighten Me At All** , Heinemann, 0 434 92523 3, £7.95

**Laughter Is An Egg**

, Viking, 0 670 82730 4, £7.99; Puffin, 0 14 034072 6, £2.99 pbk (tape also available with music by Keith Waithe, known as the 'poet of the flute?', HarperCollins, 0 00 101734 9, £4.25)

**The Great Snakeskin** (a play in verse), Ginn (pack of 4 books), 0 602 25710 7, £10.80

John's adult book **Lovelines for a Goat-born Lady** is published by Serpent's Tail, 1 85242 201 7, at £7.99.



[John Agard who gave a performance of his work at the conference.jpg](#) [3]

Page Number:

14

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Feb '20):** <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/82/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no82-john-agard>

**Links:**

[1] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/morag-styles>

[2] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/82>

[3] [http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/John Agard who gave a performance of his work at the conference.jpg](http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/John%20Agard%20who%20gave%20a%20performance%20of%20his%20work%20at%20the%20conference.jpg)