

 This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0

John Thieme

In Memoriam: Wilson Harris

Sir Wilson Harris' passing at the age of 96 represents the loss of the most famous Guyanese writer of his generation, an author whose dazzlingly original expansion of the boundaries of the novel form made his work seem opaque to some, inspirational to others. In an early essay, he expressed the view that the 'West Indian' novel 'belongs – in the main – to the conventional mode', a mode that he associated with nineteenth-century realism and which he considered inappropriate to convey the realities of Caribbean and South American societies, fractured by the legacies of colonialism. He also came to believe that such realism was an inadequate medium for representing twentieth-century experience more generally and his lifelong pursuit of cross-cultural ideals had much in common with the goals of Udine's Partnership Studies Group.

Theodore Wilson Harris was born into a mixed-race family on 24 March 1921 in New Amsterdam, the second city of what was then British Guiana. He was educated in the capital, Georgetown, where he attended the country's leading secondary school, Queen's College, from 1934 to 1939. One of his school contemporaries remembered him as 'not like us others'. Harris' individuality was to find a channel, when, after leaving school, he studied land surveying. Subsequently, between 1942 and 1953 as a government surveyor, he made numerous expeditions into the Guyanese interior, a region little known to most of the country's inhabitants, who live on its narrow coastal littoral. He was deeply influenced by his experience in the largely untouched rainforest landscape, a location that introduced him to the cultures of Guyana's indigenous Amerindian peoples. As well as providing the setting for much of his fiction, the interior sparked a vision of consciousness that was a world away from the values of the late colonial culture in which he had grown up and convinced him that he needed to find a different language in order to convey its atmosphere.

By the early 1950s, Wilson Harris was writing poetry and developing an interest in world mythologies. Several of the poems in his early collection *Eternity to Season* (1954) took their subjects from Greek myth, anticipating Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) in finding parallels between Homeric figures and everyday Caribbean life. He was, however, yet to discover his real métier as a novelist and produced three drafts of his first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), before he arrived at the revolutionary technique, which, with variations, would characterise all his subsequent fiction. It was a technique heavily reliant on layers of metaphor, in which a dream-like logic blurs the distinction between actual and imagined events, in which past and present are merged and in which the dead can return to life. In *Palace of the Peacock* a multi-racial crew, representative of the various ancestral strands of Guyanese society, travels into the country's heartland, a journey into a psychic as well as a physical interior. It culminates in a mystical vision, in which deaths usher in a resurrection and Christian symbolism is fused with Amerindian myth.

Palace of the Peacock was followed by three novels with similar settings and themes: *The Far Journey of Oudin* (1961), *The Whole Armour* (1962) and *The Secret Ladder* (1963). The four novels were later published together as *The Guyana Quartet*. Subsequently Harris wrote nineteen more novels, all published by Faber and two collections of 'fables' that drew on Amerindian mythologies. The novels included *Heartland* (1964), *Carnival* (1985), *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987) and *The Dark Jester* (2001). Increasingly, his fiction stressed the cross-cultural nature of all experience and he set novels in a variety of locations, including England, Scotland and Mexico. *Jonestown* (1996) took the People's Temple massacre, which occurred in the Guyanese interior in 1978, as its departure-point and moved between Guyana and California. Its emphasis on metaphorical transformations was a world away from the documentary-like reportage of other accounts of the Jonestown tragedy. Occupying characteristic Wilson Harris territory, it suggested that psychic renewal offers the only real hope for human fulfilment. In addition to his fiction, Harris also published an innovative body of critical work that also challenged the conventions of Western rationalism. His critical books include *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (1967) and *The Womb of Space* (1983).

In 1959, Harris emigrated to Britain, settling with his second wife Margaret (née Burns), a Scottish lyricist and writer, in the Holland Park area of London, which also became part of his fictional territory, first providing a backdrop for his 1977 novel, *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*. The Harrises lived there until they moved to Chelmsford in 1986.

An aura of other-worldly intelligence surrounded Wilson Harris in life, mirroring the hermetic aspects of his fiction. Always kind and never pretentious, he nonetheless had the reputation of having mystical powers. Before my first visit to the Harris' Holland Park flat, I had heard several stories about his supposedly preternatural gifts, which I had listened to with a degree of cautious scepticism. Over the phone, Wilson insisted I received directions from Margaret, whose practicality was the perfect foil to his own more ethereal flights. Born in London, I dutifully took the directions down, thinking that I never got lost in London and besides I would be going armed with an A-Z street guide. Perhaps predictably, I couldn't locate their flat and had to phone from nearby to ask to be found. Like a spirit-guide from his fiction, Wilson was with me in two minutes. Inside the flat, his apparently paranormal powers were further in evidence. He told me that I had published two articles on V. S. Naipaul. I replied only one. Wilson then gave me the details of a second, which I recognised as a piece sent to a journal that had subsequently denied having received it, though they had actually published it three years previously. There was a perfectly logical explanation. Wilson had come across the article in one of his favourite haunts, the nearby Commonwealth Institute library, but for me it was an experience that resonated with other stories of Harris' uncanny gifts.

Wilson Harris was knighted in the Queen's Birthday Honours list in 2010 and was the recipient of numerous awards and accolades, including the Guyana Prize for Literature and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature on a number of occasions. In 1945, he married Cecily Carew, whom he divorced in the late 1950s. In 1959, he married Margaret Burns, who predeceased him in 2010. He is survived by his four children from his first marriage, who include the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, Professor Eon Nigel Harris. He passed away on March 8 2018.

John Thieme is a Senior Fellow at the University of East Anglia. He previously held various appointments at UEA and Chairs at the University of Hull and London South Bank University. He has also taught at the Universities of Guyana and North London. His books include *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*, *The Arnold Anthology of Postcolonial Literatures*, *Postcolonial Studies: The Essential Glossary*, *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place* and studies of *Derek Walcott*, *V. S. Naipaul* and *R. K. Narayan*. He was Editor of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* from 1992 to 2011 and is General Editor of the Manchester University Press Contemporary World Writers Series. His creative writing includes *Paco's Atlas and Other Poems*, and the novel, *The Book of Francis Barber: A Legatee's Journal*.

J.Thieme@uea.ac.uk