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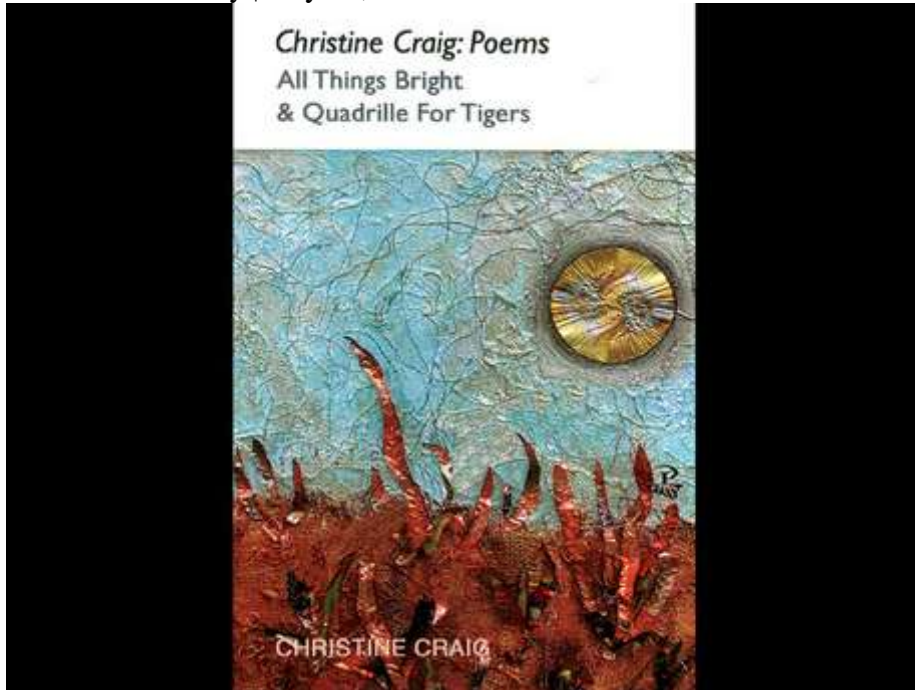
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**Christine Craig's *All Things Bright:*
TWO REVIEWS¹**

¹ The following two articles are reprints.

BOOK REVIEW: 'ALL THINGS BRIGHT', WONDERFUL IN CONTRASTS

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Mel Cooke, Gleaner Writer

Christine Craig's **Poems** is a double serving from Peepal [Tree](#) Press, the more recent collection, 'All Things Bright', getting first billing, and 'Quadrille for Tigers' (first published in 1984) reprinted to make for a solid 161-page tome.

Reading through 'All Things Bright'—the focus of this review as, hopefully, the 17-year-old 'Quadrille for Tigers' has been given its due attention at that stage of Craig's development—the contrasts leap out immediately. For, while her talent is indisputable, Craig's consistent juxtaposition of vantage points and penchant of making striking transitions between the Jamaican English and its undisturbed British co-parent, gives 'All Things Bright' a distinctive tone.

In 'Kingston', the third poem from the collection's first section, 'Sweet Fruit', the contrasts in perspective and expression congeal in that most persistently insidious aspect of Jamaican life—classism.

'Kingston' starts:

"In a chic apartment high over the waterfront

*an irritable intellectual looks over
 the streets of Kingston, labels them definitively
 Dante's Inferno. His book-lined walls stand
 An army of soldiers to protect his troubled
 sleep, yet he plans another flight."*

In the next stanza, though, the vantage point is totally different as we are moved from intellectual to one with more pressing concerns, literally:

*"Estelle irons khaki and navy
 blue for [school](#) tomorrow.
 Need a school shoes for Rosie.
 A which part Sam gone? Dem
 so sweet when dem a hunt you
 down and swift as chicken hawk
 fe gone when dem get you."*

And in the closing stanza, where the poet asserts her voice after moving through the poem's three characters, predominantly Estelle's, Craig stands in the void between Kingston's social classes and observes their offspring:

*"Weep, weep for us women on the streets
 of Kingston. Weep for our children
 hungry, angry in this town that blooms
 large houses, [smooth](#) lawns where other
 children play computer games and plan
 the next trip to Miami"*

It all makes for very strong writing. The thread of contrasts apart, Craig puts down some superb lines. Also in the 'Sweet Fruit' segment, in which she locates her poems in various areas of Jamaica (in addition to 'Kingston' there are 'St Thomas', 'St Ann

Saturday’—an easy walk in a funeral procession, filled with pithy conversation—and ‘Discovery Bay’). In ‘Portland Morning’ she makes a statement about the transitory nature of life in a country which, for all practical purposes, marks its beginnings with the conquerors’ arrival and, it seems, people are always coming and going. And, at the same time, there is that contrast in voice as Craig writes:

“Islands are every shape, every

colour of goodbye.

Walk good. See you next year

if life spare.”

And, speaking of “if life spare”, we cannot leave ‘Sweet Fruit’ without imbibing some of the grim humour in ‘St Ann Saturday’ which begins with the double play on clothing and flesh as the funeral procession slow-steps down the street:

“Saturday afternoon, so many shades

of black swinging down the road.

Funeral time.

Nice afternoon she get, eh!”

The poem closes with the image of the mourners, one with an especially caustic tongue (“Still an’ all, dem neva come/when she was hearty,/so no mek sense dem come/when she direckly dead.”), ambling towards the inevitability of death themselves:

“Nuh Granny Bailey dat from Retreat?

Well, I neva. Tink sey she dead

long time. Time passing chile,

we all moving down de line weself.

True word.”

That sense of humour sparkles in ‘Captive Audience’, in the collection's second segment, ‘Lithographs’. Craig rants about those who genteelly rave about themselves:

“Lord I hate volubility

especially in the ‘learned’,

*streams of talk, great users
of parenthesis, repetitions
like a faded Mexican blanket
worn of its colour, symbols
no longer radiant with meaning”*

In the final stanza, Craig leaps onto the soapbox and one cannot help but guffaw at:

*“Listeners of the world unite!
Cast off the shackles of lingual oppression!
Strike now and establish your right
not to be bored to death.”*

In this segment, Craig expands her physical distances while retaining the sense of contrast (in ‘Diary of a Disturbance’ she closes with “The Caribbean writer muses over/wet landscapes. The English writer/plays with foreign dreams”), writing about incredible suffering in ‘Ivory Beads’:

*“Ivory beads from Ethiopia
Children’s teeth rot in the drought
Mother’s tears glisten among the flies
the continent of all resources sends
precious trinkets to the West.”*

Craig also moves from observation to the personal in ‘Ofrenda’ (“I am making an ofrenda for you, my sister/for the thief who stole your smile”) and ‘Poems for Two Daughters’. Part II, for Rebecca, is especially beautiful:

*“My daughter lends me her boots
it will be cold she says.
I slip my feet in and feel
the square, sure foot,*

leather worn soft

at the instep.

Once her foot fit in my palm.

Oh, my lovely grown girl,

How warmed I am by you.”

And the section closes with the connection between women, this time strangers, as Craig takes us to a smiling flash of an encounter in ‘Islands’ where “In that flash/of love and homage we know/it is sweet to be female.”

There are three more segments in the excellent ‘All Things Bright’—‘The Stranger’, ‘Origami’ and ‘Florida Blues’. The first is a single poem, which speaks in part to manhood (“what blighted our men that/they cannot love, that sex is/a hoe for planting seeds left/untended, to straggle up like/weeds till they too seek their/manhood in loveless couplings?”), but also to migration, that hoped-for escape:

“We are smiling, successful, degreed,

nestled softly in our homes in famous cities,”

Craig is at her most consistently personal in ‘Origami’ and closes with another relatively short segment, ‘Florida Blues’, which treats with the angst of the resettled in an increasingly concrete place. In ‘Mallory Square—Key West’, Craig writes:

“The sun fell into the sea

at the end of America. No flags,

soldiers, no bugle-call of Taps,

but a Scotts man playing a bagpipe”

And, at the very end of ‘All Things Bright’, we find the title at the close of the personal statement ‘Coda’:

“This is all I have

all that beats in my veins

to seek, to walk, to lift up hands

to touch each dazzling note

all things bright and beautiful.”

It is a strong, appropriate end to a collection where Christine Craig’s voice of contrasts and striking imagery, with a couple dollops of Marley and Calypso Rose, sings.

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All Things Bright
By Christine Craig

By: Heather Russell Ph.D.
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Christine Craig, daughter of the Jamaican dust, reminds us in her collection, *All Things Bright*, why she remains one of our most talented, powerful, and relevant poets. The poems in this collection travel. Some demanding, some coercing, some entreating, some coyly teasing us—Craig’s poems take us on journeys deep, deep into the realms of national belonging, nation language, memory, history, myth, tradition, family, culture, exile, life, pain, injustice, and too, in the best possible sense of the word, into righteousness.

Moving dynamically and evocatively across geographies of nation, place and time, nostalgic African “ancestral roamings” commingle with and ground in evocative ways, contemporary Kingston’s dread realities of unemployment, struggle, exploitation, resistance. “We weep” for “women on the streets of Kingston” and with and for her children, even as we sway to the rhythms of gospel, reggae, blues, and stop short at the sharp, abrupt, familiarity of dominos, banging—urgent reminders of our rituals of survival, and of our cultural wealth.

In her collection, Craig pays homage to the literary forbearers that help to shape our understandings of ourselves, even as she presents this her latest installment reminding us of how much we have missed her own poetic wisdom. Resisting simplified, nostalgic portrayures of home, the poems are infused with the laughter, philosophy, resilience and complexity of everyday folk—a cultural grounding as it were for those of us who often feel we have traveled too far away.

And yet, there is nostalgia here too—as in the poignant recurrence of the phrase: “we should not have been allowed to leave.” Here however, the painful reality of exilic existence is given full expression and nuanced articulation as nostalgia quickly gives over to the wonderment of standing at the U.S.’s Southernmost point—the Florida Keys—the poet contemplating if this is “the end of America,” or “her beginning.” Migration is a beginning too, a beginning albeit marked by the painful legacies of slavery, indenture, colonialism, but a beginning nonetheless of the possibility and promise that is diaspora community.

In the end, *All Things Bright* achieves the promise its title portends, to give poetic voice to: the great, the small, the wise, the wonderful, to creation ... and it is... beautiful!!