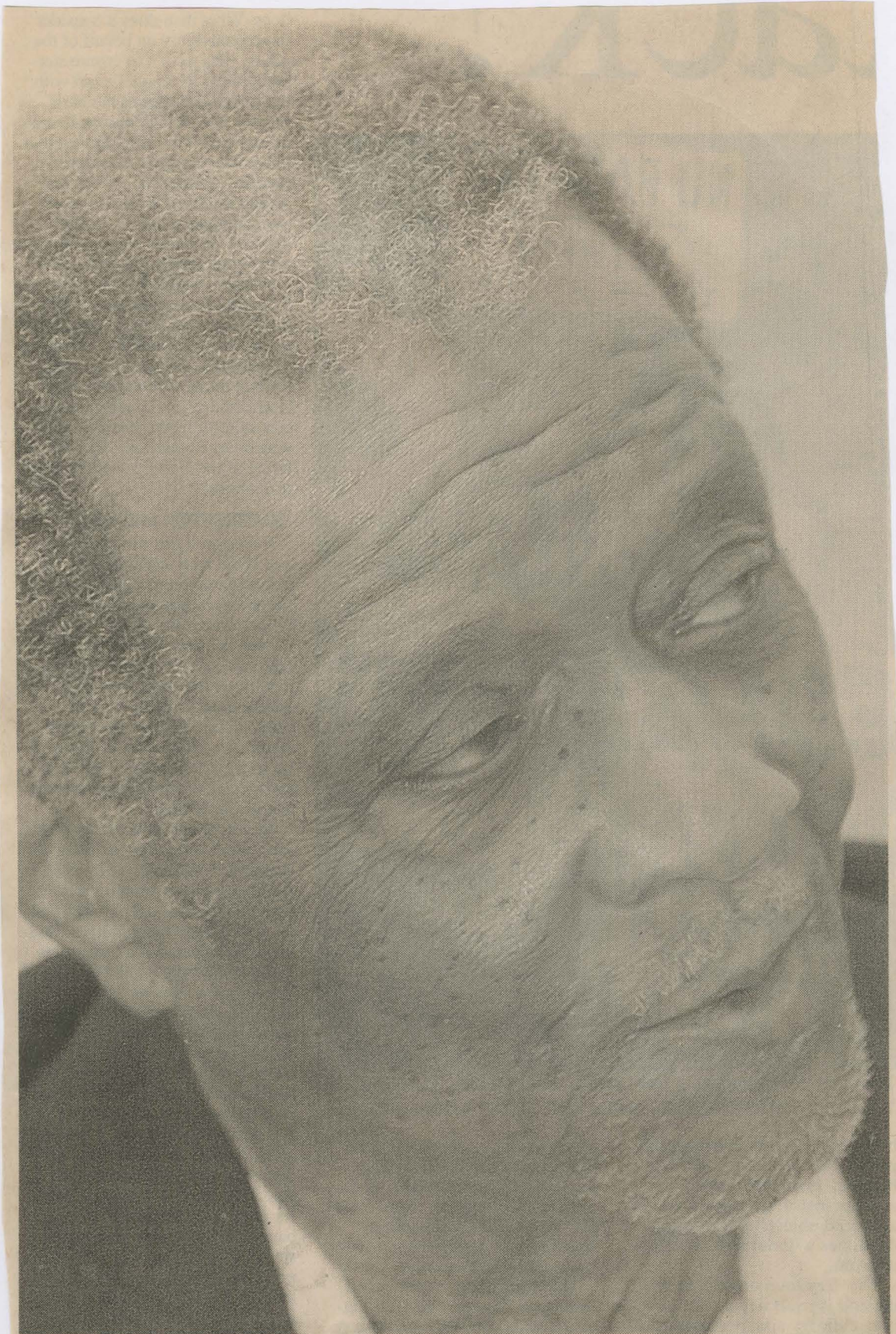


H/N Literature, Ja - Palmer, C. Everard

New challenges for C Everard Palmer



C. Everard Palmer

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SMOKEY HILLSIDES set in acres and acres of dew-covered vegetation, and generously dotted with fruit trees and loveable farm animals were the backdrop for many of his stories about life in rural Jamaica.

There were stories of young boyish exploits, simple childhood fears, and the dreams of a village or its heroes. Today the scenes have changed for 73-year-old retired schoolteacher and renowned author, Cyril Everard Palmer but he says the Jamaica of his earlier visions is still as fresh.

"The agricultural nature of the island has changed. Where we use to have a lot of fields in some of the areas, all that has passed. There is not much there in terms of farming areas, just bush," says the tall, gentle-mannered Palmer. "And the young people have left," he says sadly of the focus and audience of many of his tales, which have become required reading in local schools.

But the change has not been all bad.

"In 2001, when I came back one of the things that really impressed me was the return of the big buses," he recalls with a mischievous glint in his eyes. His visit to the island after 25 years in Canada was marked by week-long homecoming celebrations in his honour in his homeparish of Hanover, and a gala tribute put on by the Hanover Museum.

"It was great, it was like a prodigal returning, in one way and also a prophet getting recognition in his own country in the other," he said of the event which attracted throngs of schoolchildren, friends and literature lovers.

C. Everard Palmer's foray into the world of short story writing for children started during his days as a crime reporter for the Gleaner Company when he made regular submissions of short stories for the daily newspaper.

His first story 'Broken Vessel' was later followed by 'Spanish Treasure', with many more in later years.

"I really wanted to write adult stories," he said. "But the Ministry of Education had approached me after seeing my work in the paper.

They wanted me to start a series of stories about Jamaican life in which the children could 'see themselves'."

His submissions however took several years before they were eventually published through the Ministry, which was discouraging for the young Palmer.

Today Palmer is famous for novels like **A Cow Called Boy**, **My Father Sun-Sun Johnson** and **Cloud With a Silver Lining** among many others. He was in the island recently for the launch of his latest novel, **Full Circle** and spoke with **The Sunday Gleaner** about the motivation for the work.

"There's nothing personal about the novel **Full Circle**, it's just that after Sun-Sun's death in the fire some persons were disappointed that he died like that and I thought too that the story was left hanging a bit."

NOVEL

The novel is a sequel to his earlier work and takes up the story following the death of Sun-Sun Johnson.

"I felt that maybe I should let his son continue on with some of the things that he had wanted to do, and really carry on his dreams."

In the earlier novel, Rami Johnson is the eldest son of a once-wealthy Jamaican landowner, Sun-Sun Johnson, who loses his money and eventually his house and land to a ruthless rival businessman, Jake Hibbertson. His parent's marriage breaks up under the strain and his mother, Arlene, marries Jake and gives birth to a son. The couple move back into the family home of Robin Hill.

Tragedy strikes one night when a fire breaks out. Sun-Sun and Rami race to rescue Arlene and baby Jake but after saving them both it is too late for Sun-Sun to get back outside and he perishes in the flames, one publishing house sums up.

But generally the novels have always been driven by Palmer's

love for rural folk and country life. "The books are based mainly on personal memories. Sometimes its things I remember as a boy. **A Cow Called Boy**, for example was based on one of four cows we had named Mongoose, who was really mischievous... and very different from the others, and I thought to myself ... what if she had a calf with some of the same characteristics, and so the story developed around that idea."

"The stories speak a lot about the past and simple things we did back then as children. Taking care of the animals, things like that. I like to bring back all of that because children nowadays don't remember," he said.

Still, he said until recently he had no idea of the impact of his work.

"The other day one little boy who was asked to give the vote of thanks at a ceremony said to me, 'Thank you Mr. Palmer for letting us know that we should fight for what we believe'. When he said that I was really moved because I never saw that when I wrote the stories. I didn't know they would have affected so many persons."

But this attraction to children and literature was not unusual for the young man born in Kendal, Hanover who later moved to Kingston to be trained as a teacher at the Mico Teachers College. He taught for several years at Happy Grove High School in Portland, then later migrated to Canada where he again taught grade school before retiring in 1995.

This year he has plans for research into the idyllic yet fast changing social life of Port Royal in Kingston. He smiles at the question of a possible book on the area, and how the story will shape up.

"We'll just have to do the research first and see where it takes us."

Mr. Palmer now lives in Canada with his wife and three grown children.