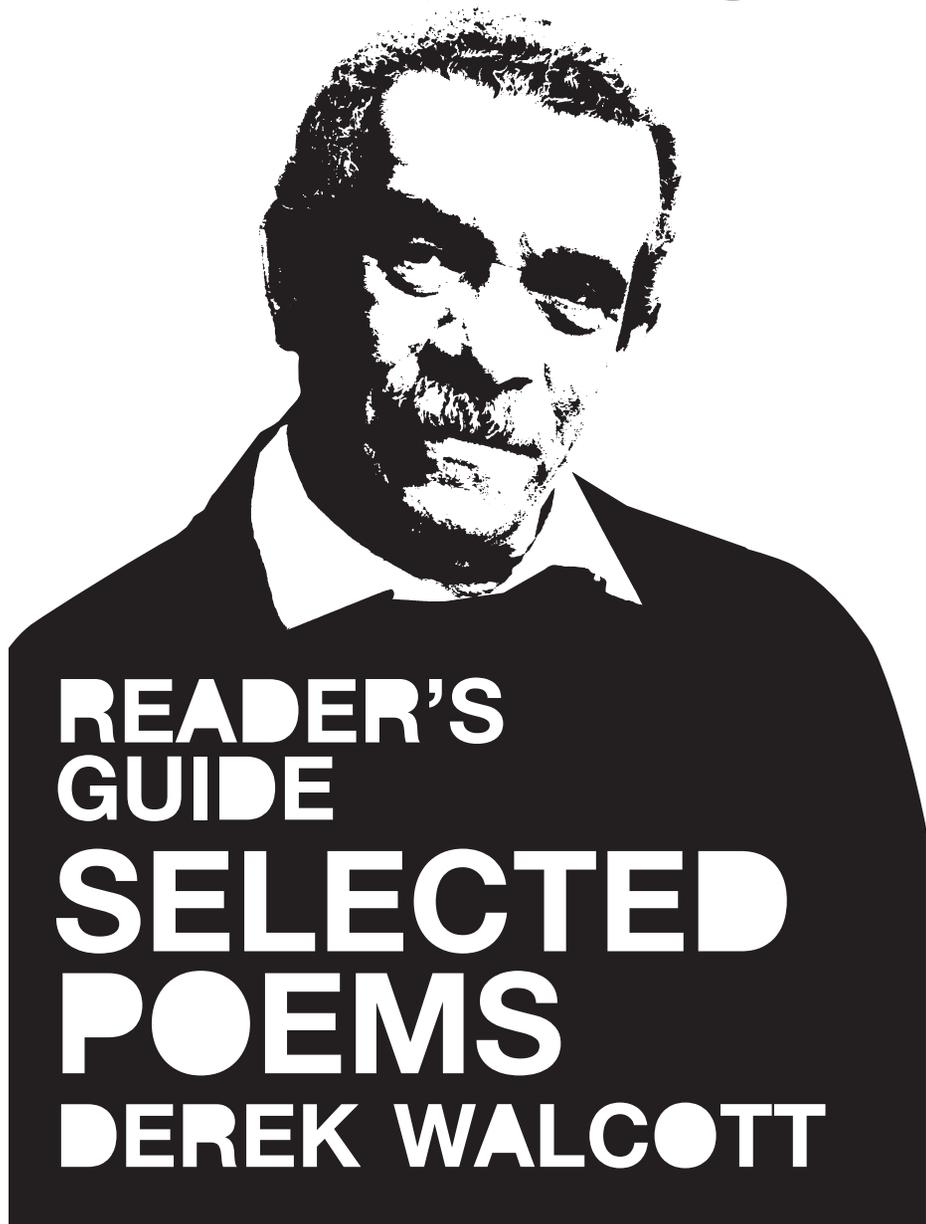
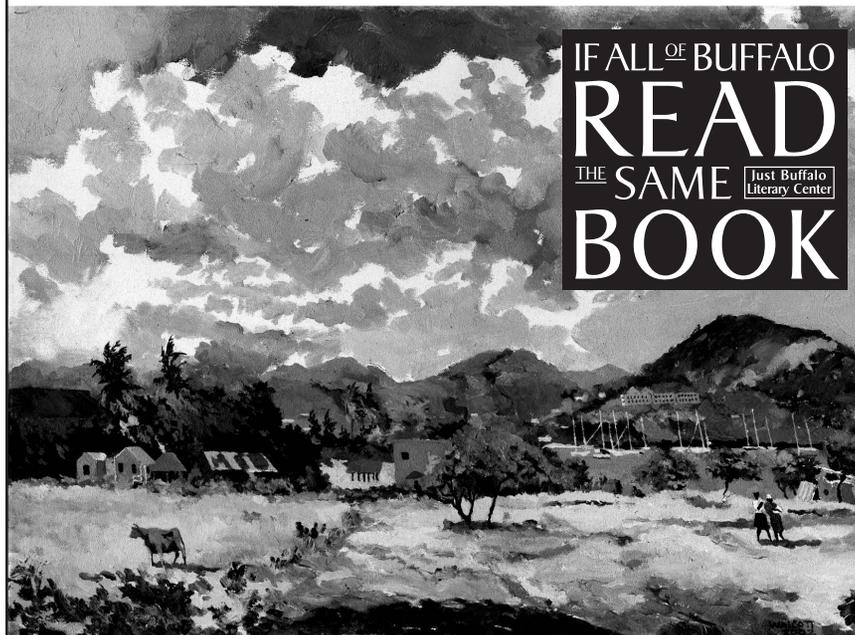


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**READER'S
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SELECTED
POEMS
DEREK WALCOTT**

Selected Poems



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DEREK WALCOTT

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

Edited by Edward Baugh

DEREK WALCOTT

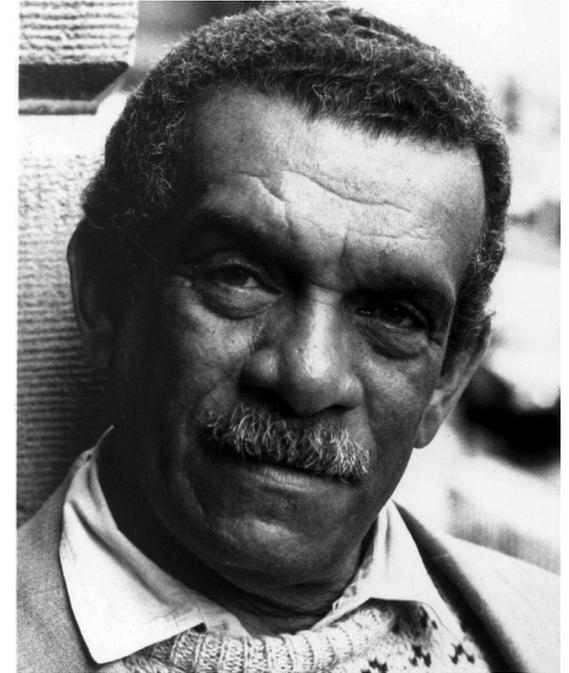
Derek Walcott is from an island where things are named vividly, spoken musically, and rarely written down. He has remembered being eighteen, standing on a hill on his home island, St. Lucia, one of the Windward Islands in the Lesser Antilles, and realizing no one had ever written about this “sea and the sky and the town.” “It was exhilarating to know that I was privileged to be the first one to put down the name of a certain town, or fisherman, or road—a privilege very few writers ever have.”

It didn't hurt that the landscape was filled with such rich names. St. Lucia was a British colony from 1814 until 1979, but trees and insects were rechristened in the French patois of most island residents with what Walcott calls a “metaphoric power:” A bird was not a “martin” or “tern” but “ciseau la mer”—“scissor of the sea.”

Walcott was born a twin in Castries, St. Lucia in 1930. His father was a court clerk, the son of a white Englishman and a black St. Lucian; his mother was a teacher, the daughter of a white Dutch estate owner and a black woman from the island of St. Maarten. Walcott's father, who was devoted to literature and painting, died of an ear infection when Derek and his brother Roderick were one.

Walcott studied painting and the English literary tradition; he published his first book of poems, *25 Poems*, when he was 18 by borrowing \$200 his mother had scraped together as a teacher and seamstress. At 20, he founded a theater company called the St. Lucia Arts Guild, which produced his play *Henri-Christophe*. That year, he went to the University College of the West Indies, in Jamaica. He stayed in Jamaica after he graduated in 1954, married Faye Moyston, and had a son, Peter (Walcott has been married three times—to Moyston, Margaret Mailard, and Norline Metivier—and has two daughters, Elizabeth and Anna). After his first marriage ended he settled in Trinidad and, in 1959, founded the Trinidad Theater Workshop, for which he wrote and directed plays.

Walcott had his international debut with *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*, which was published in England in 1962. The American poet Robert Lowell



read the book and encouraged U.S. publisher Farrar, Straus & Giroux to print Walcott's *Selected Poems* in 1964.

Walcott continued to garner attention throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with five more books of poetry in those decades. He also began living more in the U.S. and teaching at American universities. In 1981, he received a MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship. The next year, he began teaching creative writing at Boston University, where he has taught part-time ever since. Despite his journeys and homes elsewhere, he has remained rooted in the West Indies. He has said he sees himself as a “castaway”: a “person who has to work out his destiny on an island.”

In 1990, Walcott produced what is considered his masterpiece, the book-long *Omeros*, a Homeric epic peopled with St. Lucians. Two years later, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. With the prize money, he bought a complex of houses on St. Lucia, where he has continued to live part-time. Throughout his career, Walcott has produced 17 books of poetry, eight books of plays, and two essay collections. All if it, he has said, is aimed at “finishing” the “unfinished society” of the Caribbean. “I have lived,” he has said, “among the almost great, among the almost true, among the almost honest. That allows me to describe the anguish.”

ST. LUCIA

Most often, in literature and life, Derek Walcott has returned to St. Lucia. Early inhabitants called it Iouanalao, the island of the iguanas. The island was first populated by the Arawak tribe, which was wiped out by the year 800 in part by an encroaching tribe the Spanish called Carib, “the fierce people.” The island was discovered by Europeans around 1500 and a hundred years later the Dutch had built a base at Vieux Fort on the island’s southern tip.

The earliest British settlers arrived in 1605, but were forced off the island by the Caribs. By the middle of the 17th century, both the British and French had established settlements and began a century-and-a-half long battle for control of the island (the earliest towns were French, which explains the prevalence of French culture there; 90 percent of the islanders speak French Creole). The two countries went to war over St. Lucia fourteen times, enough that it was referred to as the Helen of the Caribbean in reference to the battles fought over Helen of Troy. In 1814, the British won control of the island.

St. Lucia remained a British colony until its independence in 1979. For much of its early colonial history, the island was used as a major sugar producer dependent on slave labor from Africa. After emancipation in 1838, former slaves made up nearly 90 percent of the population. Today, more than 82 percent of the population of 170,000 are black, and nearly 12 percent are mixed race. According to a 2004 *New Yorker* article about Walcott, colonialism on St. Lucia persists in the form of a strong class system based, in part, on race: “Brown is better than black, and almost white is, if not better than brown, a bit more interesting, raffine. The lighter one’s skin, the closer one’s ties to Britain, Europe, ‘real’ civilization.”

Now, the country subsists on tourism—the tourist website for St. Lucia is breathlessly called “St. Lucia, tropical islands Caribbean vacation paradise”—and a declining banana industry. The island is divided into eleven quarters, the names of which recur in Walcott’s poems: Anse la Raye, Canaries, Castries, Choiseul, Dennery, Forest, Gros Islet, Laborie, Micoud, Soufrière, Vieux Fort.

But Walcott’s islands are many. Although he was born and lives on St. Lucia, he is most often called a “Caribbean poet” or a “West Indian poet,” rarely simply a



St. Lucian. He has lived, taught, or painted on Trinidad, Jamaica, Barbados, St. Thomas, and Genada; he has written about Haiti and Puerto Rico. “Many of us in the Caribbean still hold the ideal of the archipelago,” he has written. Throughout his lifetime, he has seen the area “fragmented into nations.”

“Even if I get very bitter and despondent about the politics, the changes in the Caribbean—the fact that there has been a profound political betrayal of a people—I always go back,” he said, decades ago. “I try to return not with a sense of desolation, but with a sense of participating in something collective. The only possible realization in the West Indies is art. I see no possibility of the country becoming unified and having its own strengths except in its art. Because there is no economic power, there is no political power. Art is lasting. It will outlast these things.”

QUESTIONS

1. The introduction to Walcott's *Selected Poems* notes that the role of religion and the Church are "a recurrent theme in Walcott's work, complicating his deep religious instinct." What are some examples of this theme? Is the "religious instinct" that is evident in the poems constrained to discussions of Church and religion?
2. One of the conflicts that reemerges in Walcott's poems is a compulsion to stay and record the islands and a need to leave and grow elsewhere. Where do you see that conflict and, in your example, which side seems to win? As Walcott writes in "Homecoming: Anse la Raye," do you think "there are homecomings without home"?
3. What does the crumbling estate in "Ruins of a Great House" represent? How does Walcott articulate his conflicted allegiance to both the slave in the lake and the "ancestral murderers and poets"? What kind of colonial legacy does he uncover in these ruins?
4. Describe each of the characters and voices Walcott writes in "Tales of the Islands." How does each person's heritage and behavior shape his or her role on the island? What kinds of myths appear in their stories?
5. In "Islands," Walcott writes, "I seek,/ As climate seeks its style, to write/ Verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight,/ Cold as a curled wave, ordinary/ As a tumbler of island water." What is his goal? Does he achieve it in this and other poems? How does he create a style to match the "climate" of his islands?
6. Walcott's narrator climbs up into a slum in "Laventille," "the height of poverty for the desperate and the black." How do directions—up and down, climbing and falling—conflict in this poem? What event is he climbing to attend? What other opposites appear?
7. How much about Walcott's biography do you learn from his autobiographical poem, "Another Life"? What do you learn about his study of visual art? Who is Harry and how is he described in Chapter 1 and again in Chapter 20? Why would Walcott use the same phrases across so much space in the poem?

8. Discuss the importance of names—of places, objects, people—and languages in "Saint Lucie." Which names are inherited or borrowed and which are turned into something new by the island's residents?
9. Why does Shabine in "The Schooner Flight" say he has "no nation now but the imagination"? What is his ancestry? How would you describe his voice?
10. In "The Arkansas Testament," Walcott writes about the remnants of slavery in the American south: he refers to the U.S. flag as one that "must heal the stripes and the scars." Discuss the narrator's perspective as a black outsider in the state. How is he treated by the locals? How does he view them in return? Where does the past encroach on the present?



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