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## Oranges and Mangoes and the 2014 OCM Bocas Prize

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Robert Antoni (PHOTO: MARLON JAMES, BOCAS LIT FEST PHOTOGRAPHER)

By Stephanie McKenzie

The NGC Bocas Lit Fest, which took place in Port of Spain, Trinidad, April 23-April 27, was an impeccably organised affair which brought together top Caribbean writers and thinkers. What could be called the climax of the event took place Saturday evening at Trinidad's Academy for the Performing Arts when the prestigious OCM Bocas Prize (and Hollick Arvon Prize) was awarded.

The OCM Bocas Prize includes an award of US\$10,000 and has two stages. First, panels of distinguished judges vet three genres separately - poetry, fiction, and non-fiction - and determine the best books in each category. Next, the chairs of the poetry, fiction, and non-fiction panels,

joined by the overall chair and vice-chair of the prize, form a final prize jury to select the overall winner from the three genre winners. If it sounds confusing, it is.

The announcement of the award was preceded by short pre-recorded videos by the three winners. Poetry winner Lorna Goodison spoke about her book of poetry, *Oracabessa*, saying that "a lot of the poems are informed by an engagement with fine art" (Goodison is also a painter) and with outsiders, "people who don't really belong". Robert Antoni discussed his novel *As Flies to Whatless Boys*, noting that he didn't wish to write a strict historical novel but, rather, an intimate family portrait. Further, he said, "it's up to us to take our place on the world stage," meaning, as he explained later, that Caribbean writers have to continue raising the bar, to demand the best of themselves and of each other. "It's the only way our art will grow," Antoni later commented. Speaking of his award-winning and nominated non-fiction work *Writing Down the Vision: Essays and Prophecies*, Kei Miller indicated he would always think of himself as a Caribbean writer and said "that's where my imagination resides". Miller's recording ended with beautiful lines that appear in a powerful reflection on homophobic violence in Jamaica, a piece he later read from on the last day of the festival.

The presenter of the OCM Bocas, no less than Linton Kwesi Johnson, indicated "the selection was no easy task" and said he had been a judge only once before, for the Whitbread award. He described Antoni's novel as a "humouress and poignant tall tale" and Goodison's *Oracabessa* as a "fine accomplished collection of poems which was written at the height of her craft and which complements her memoir *Harvey River*. He underscored the power and importance of Kei Miller's writing and vision.

When Antoni was called to the stage as winner, he thanked his publisher, Johnny Temple of Akashic Books, as well as fellow writers Goodison and Miller. He recounted that Goodison had told him the day before "you can't compare oranges and mangos." Antoni's acceptance speech was brief. He then announced he would split the award money between all three writers.

Antoni's decision was unprecedented but seemed to make perfect sense. What poet in the Caribbean, or anywhere else for that matter, could go up against Goodison at this point? Fittingly, perhaps, *Oracabessa* is dedicated to maybe the only person who could, Derek Walcott, who was the inaugural OCM Bocas Prize winner in 2011 and in attendance at the ceremony, as were former winners Earl Lovelace and Monique Roffey. And who has surpassed Miller for challenging the damaging silence around untold stories and truths?

In a later interview with me, Antoni claimed that Bocas is the best thing to have happened to Trinidad. Attendance at the festival makes quick sense of his claim. The festival is full of workshops, interviews, readings, and lectures, and includes a wide range of considerations and topics - from the literary to historical to sociological and much more. Certainly much of the

festival's success is due to the work of the festival's programme director, Nicholas Laughlin, who creates, with the work of many others, a tightly penetrating schedule of some of the best minds. This year, the programme included options as diverse as a stimulating interview conducted by scholar Gabrielle Hosein with Guyanese-American writer Gaiutra Bahadur, author of *Coolie Woman* (a groundbreaking work about social history and family which focuses on Bahadur's great-grandmother who came to Guyana from India in 1903), just recently nominated for the George Orwell Prize, and a debate on crime and violence in Trinidad.

However, Antoni also made it clear again that three genres can't be put together in the same prize category and suggested maybe Bocas could perhaps rethink how and also when it gives the award. His ideas prompted a reflection of Samantha John's words, host of the Bocas announcement ceremony, who indicated that the Bocas prizes are not national prizes but prizes which seek to recognise the Caribbean as a family.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Antoni's *As Flies to Whatless Boys* focuses on and grows out of a consideration of family. The backdrop of the novel is 19th-century German inventor John Adolphus Etzler who created a Tropical Emigration Society (TES), circa 1845, in London and travelled to Trinidad with poor families and idealists in the hope of setting up a socialist utopian community.

Antoni referred in interview to Etzler as a great visionary but indicated that not much had been written about the man who attempted to invent machines run by Mother Nature. Antoni spent 15 years researching and writing the novel and accumulated much information about Etzler, though it is the William Tucker family (part of Antoni's own ancestry) who emigrates to Trinidad with other members of the TES which provides the real core of the work.

When asked about his own background and upbringing, Antoni offered one word: "confused". He said he was born in Detroit by mistake to parents originally from Trinidad. When Antoni was two, he moved back to Trinidad and, then, to the Bahamas. Around the age of 14, Antoni started returning to Trinidad, where he still has family, and, at one point, lived there for a couple of years. He was educated in the US, lived in Barcelona for several years, as well as Miami, and presently resides in New York. When asked if he felt if he were part of the writing community in Trinidad, Antoni was definite. "Yes. Certainly. They are my community." He recalled that Earl Lovelace, who introduced him at the launch of *As Flies to Whatless Boys* in Trinidad, has always insisted on Antoni's Caribbeanness. Antoni claimed his major influences are William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, James Joyce, Shakespeare, Toni Morrison and Jean Rhys.

Amongst other publications and literary accomplishments, in 1991, Antoni published his first novel, *Divina Trace*, for which he was awarded, in 1992, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first novel. In 1997, he published his second novel, *Blessed is the Fruit*, and in 2005, his

third, Carnival. When asked what he was working on at the moment, Antoni replied, "Not a thing."

Attending this year's NGC Bocas Lit Fest, including the ceremony which announced the OCM Bocas Prize, revealed not only the wealth of talent but also the vibrant interlocking arts of the Caribbean. I often wonder if people normalise what is presented at great Caribbean festivals, because this does not happen the world over. Maybe the Caribbean is simply a place of extremes and part of this means that there is an astonishing and disproportionate number of extremely fine writers, artists and intellectuals.

Only in such a fine family, could such fine fruit be judged for such sport.

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