



JAMES BERRY

The poetry page this issue is, in the main, a salute to James Berry in his eighty-eighth year. Bloodaxe have published an exemplary selection of his poetry *A Story I am In* which is, as they say, not just his life in poetry but a book of all the lives he has witnessed or been part of – a book of life itself. He came to Britain in 1948, in the first postwar wave of

Jamaican emigration, later becoming one of the first black writers in Britain to achieve wider recognition. He rose to prominence in 1981 when he won the National Poetry Competition. His five collections of poetry and his stories and poems for children have been widely acclaimed. He won the Smarties Prize and the Signal Poetry Award and was awarded an OBE in 1990.

James Berry writes in both West Indian dialect and standard English. Bloodaxe have chosen to include a goodly selection of his poems for children:

*I know you like me
because you know I like to be tossed up
in the air and caught
and I know you're best
at making laughs.
You know it's great
when you coo and coo on me in smiles
with hugs and tickles and teases.*

His poems celebrate what he calls the Everyday Music of village life – the sounds of birds and farmyard animals, the wind and rain of tropical storms, the laughter of family and friends and, above all, the songs and stories he heard all around him. He also deals with difficult subjects. The racism he has seen in Jamaica, in the USA and in this country. In this extract the well-meaning ignorance:

THE POETRY ARCHIVE

This archive exists to help make poetry accessible, relevant and enjoyable to a wide audience. It came into being as a result of a meeting, in a recording studio, between Andrew Motion, soon after he became the Poet Laureate in 1999, and the recording producer, Richard Carrington. They agreed how enjoyable and illuminating it is to hear poets reading their own work and about how regrettable it was that, even in the recent past, many important poets had not been properly recorded.

The archive will never be complete. A panel chooses the poets for inclusion and the choices are determined by several factors: the wish to demonstrate the variety of poetry being published, by the wish to make a selection which demonstrates the excellence of every kind of that variety, and by the availability of the necessary funding.

On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria 1955

*Where are you from? She said.
Jamaica I said.
What part of Africa is Jamaica? She said.
Where Ireland is near Lapland I said.*

And in another extract a stop and search operation:

In-a Brixtan Markit

*I walk in-a Brixtan markit,
believin I a respectable man,
you know. An wha happn?
Policeman come straight up
an search mi bag!
Man – straight to me.
Like them did a-wait fi me.
Come search mi bag, man.*

I remember him at the University of East Anglia, a quiet, dignified gentleman talking and reading his poems and memorably saying “You cannot grant independence, you can only take it away.”

Finally, James Berry’s many books of poetry and stories, for both adults and children, focus on the joy of living.

Extract from *When I Dance*

*When I dance it isn't merely
That music absorbs my shyness,
My laughter settles in my eyes,
My swings of arms convert my frills
As timing tunes my feet with floor
As if I never just looked on.*

If you can't find a copy of his selected poems in your local bookshop the publishers Bloodaxe operate a bookclub which keeps readers up to date with publications and information about authors tours and other news. To join the bookclub (no fee) just email sales@bloodaxebooks.com.

Most of the contemporary recordings are new, specially made for the Poetry Archive. Many were made in recording studios; some were made in the poets' homes. You can buy copies of all the recordings by visiting the online Poetry Bookshop. James Berry is amongst the poets recording their poems for children. You can also hear Jackie Kay, Judith Nicholls, Adrian Mitchell, Allan Ahlberg, Kevin Crossley-Holland, Michael Rosen, Ian McMillan, Roald Dahl, Valerie Bloom, Charles Causley and Ted Hughes.

Enid Stephenson

A story I am In: Selected Poems by James Berry Bloodaxe 978-1852249175 £10.95
Poetry archive website: www.poetryarchive.org