



# The 70s? An Interview with Caryl Phillips

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## The '70's? "This Was a Tough Time": An Interview with Caryl Phillips<sup>1</sup>

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Caryl Phillips was born in 1958 in St. Kitts and Nevis, then still a British island, and was brought by his parents as an infant to Leeds, in Yorkshire, Great Britain, where he grew up. After reading English Literature at Oxford, he embraced a writing career and has now written ten novels, two non-fiction books, four plays, three collections of essays, along with radio plays and screenplays for the cinema. He is currently a Professor of English at Yale University.

Caryl Phillips kindly accepted to answer my questions regarding his first three plays: *Strange Fruit* (1981), *Where There Is Darkness* (1982), *The Shelter* (1984), and their links with the political atmosphere of the '70's and the '80's. I was particularly interested in knowing whether *Strange Fruit* was related in any way with *Pressure* (1976), a film by Horace Ové, the first feature film by a Black British filmmaker. "Pressure" is also the name of the credit song written by Horace Ové that is played along a series of drawings narrating the canonical story of the generation of British nationals hailing from the Caribbean who came to Britain to do their share of the reconstruction effort, the Windrush generation. Their hope for a brighter life in Britain was quickly shattered as the effect of the postwar shortage of housing and jobs, combined with the fear of miscegenation, made it difficult for British Caribbean newcomers to feel at home in the country they had been made to believe was their motherland. The protest initiated against institutional racism in Britain by the Anglo-Caribbean youth from the following generation is depicted both in Caryl Phillips's play and Horace Ové's film. Caryl Phillips went back to this period in novels such as *The Final Passage* (1985) and *In the Falling Snow* (2009). *Pressure* was kept on the shelves for two years before being eventually released by the British Film Institute because of the scenes showing violent police behavior towards second-generation British Caribbean youths during arrests under the "Sus Law."

British society and its approach to race relations, as well as the notion of family which is also discussed through its depiction in *The Lost Child* (2015), Caryl Phillips's latest novel, are other topics discussed by the writer.

Since the word "pressure" is recurrent in *Strange Fruit*, I wondered whether the film had been an influence on the play.

CP: I did not see the film in 1975. I saw the film in 1981, something

like that. The book that I read that was quite influential on *Strange Fruit* was a sociology book by a man called Ken Pryce: *Endless Pressure*. It's about the city of Bristol, it's about the West Indian community, the Caribbean community in the city of Bristol. So, I'm surprised that you saw the word "pressure" in *Strange Fruit* because I don't remember, but I'm not surprised because, actually, that book was quite influential upon me. As I said, it's a sociology book, and it's an interview with a lot of disaffected second-generation West-Indian kids, which is, you know, what *Pressure* is about, the movie. So, I think if you saw the word pressure popping up, it maybe has a little more to do with that book than Horace's film. The first proper job I had when I left university was as a writer in residence in an art center in Paddington, West London, which was multicultural, Black, basically. That's where I saw the film first because I arranged for a screening of the film one evening because I knew it was an important film. This is before I knew Horace. What I remember liking about the film when I first saw it was the fact that it has passages in it that are kind of surrealistic and speak to European cinema—by that I mean continental European cinema—rather than the tradition kind of gritty realism, kitchen sink cinema. I thought it was really interesting the way in which the director ... I knew that there was a special sensibility informing this film made by a Trinidadian director I did not yet know at that stage. To be honest with you, the actual alienation of the youth, the main character and his difficult relationship with Britain, did not surprise me. That was not a revelation. The form was a revelation. The style was a revelation.

JR: Horace Ové worked in Italy, in Cinecittà, and fell in love with Italian cinema, and particularly Fellini.

CP: Subsequently, I worked with Horace, and spent hours with Horace talking about cinema. He loves and romanticizes Italian cinema, but he is basically a product of British cinema. Horace went off to Italy to be a small-part-actor in a lot of bad Italian films.

JR: Mainly sword-and-sandal films, he said.

CP: He ended up back in England because he wanted to have a career making films. He never really studied films, but he has definitely a very good eye. Among the directors we talked about, we talked the most about Luis Buñuel. He worships Buñuel. I love Buñuel too. Full surrealism. We made a film together in 1983, a surrealist film called *The Record*. It's me and Horace trying surrealism. It is about a West Indian second-generation girl who sings in a church and wants to be a pop singer. There are moments in that film that I wrote that come out of conversations about loving works of Luis Buñuel. It's an hour long. There is music in it, but it's very formally and structurally weird.

JR: This is really news to me and makes me very interested in seeing that film. To go back to *Pressure*, and the Black British in the '70's,

your vision of the integration of Anglo-Caribbean families within Britain, as described in the television version of *The Final Passage* (1996) seems more optimistic than the portraits made in *Pressure* or your early plays. Your characters in the following novels appear less strident. Is it because things were quieter in the mid-'80's than in the 70's on the social front?

CP: I don't think things were quieter in 1985. If anything, I think they were more socially urgent. You see, 1975 was only the beginning of the emergence of a disaffected second generation. I tend to mark the emergence of second-generation disaffection—you know there were street riots in 1976 and 1977—but the real articulation was Linton [Kwesi Johnson]'s *Dread Beat an' Blood* which was released in 1978. To me, it's the moment when the second generation found their voice. So I think *Pressure* kind of anticipated what was going to happen. *Pressure* was a couple of years ahead and remember *Pressure* was made by Horace, and Sam Selvon wrote it, and neither of these guys are second-generation. They are both first-generation guys. Eventually Sam Selvon left England. *Pressure* was his last screenplay. He left because he could not understand the second generation. He could not understand what the problem with the kids was. Horace is slightly more empathetic with the second generation. But the second generation speaking for themselves with a bit more of a nuance, and a bit more subtlety, did not happen until after Linton wrote *Dread Beat an' blood*, which was 1978. So to me when I look and think about *Pressure*, it's a first-generation director and a first-generation writer trying to imagine the disaffection of the second generation.

JR: Do they imagine well?

CP: Yes, they do. And you know what, it's great that they made even the attempt to imagine it, but they don't imagine it, I think, with the subtlety and the insight that those who have lived it can imagine it. You have to live it and you have to feel it as a second-generation kid, to really understand what it's really about. I'm delighted, happy that Horace and Sam Selvon did that film, but there are moments when I think that it does feel to me like it's an older generation trying to understand what the kids feel like.

And there is another film made in that same period, a film named *Babylon* (1980) by Franco Rosso. *Babylon* is really a film about second-generation disaffection. It's made by a white director, but again, he is one step removed from the reality of what's going on. So, to me, *Pressure* is a film, if anything, more in conversation with a film like *Babylon* than it is with anything that happened in the eighties or the nineties. It's slightly detached from the real second-generation anxiety.

JR: I would like to go back to the radio play *The Wasted Years* (1984) and the question of raising second-generation children. Roy, a member of the Windrush generation, wants to pressure his wife into undergoing

an abortion, saying: “And it’s just as wrong to bring a colored child into this damn world as it is at the moment” (115). The question of having and raising children is also present in *The Lost Child* (2015). Are these different texts condoning the idea that bringing more Black children into the world is the wrong answer?

CP: It’s not wrong, it’s difficult. And I don’t think it was wrong then either. It’s always difficult because you have to explain more, you have to be more vigilant. And you know when people say things when they are tired and fed up, as these characters are sometimes tired, and ...

JR: and desperate...

CP: Yes, desperate—they overstate. It’s never wrong. It’s always difficult. Today, in 2015, it’s not wrong, it’s just more difficult.

JR: Another question concerning the period is the question of second-generation activism. You mentioned the Black Front in *Strange Fruit* (1981) and the Black Panther Party in the David Oluwale section of *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007) titled “Northern Lights.” Are these mentions biographical? Did you attend such meetings?

CP: I did not, but I was aware of the literature. The Black Front is fictional, there was no such thing. The Black Front is basically the Black Panther Party. You see, the years when the Black Panther Party was most active in London with the second generation was the second half of the 1970s. I was a university student. So, I was not active really. I was trying to get a degree.

JR: Yes, that’s what you wrote in *The New World Order* (2001). You were not among those throwing bricks.

CP: I was aware and I read the material, and I used to go down to London to Ladbroke Grove, Notting Hill, and go to the bookshops, the record shops, reggae concerts and everything, but I was never a member because, as pathetic as it sounds, I was trying to get a degree in English literature and finish school. My good and dear friend Linton Kwesi Johnson, who is six years older than I am, had already graduated and he was already out in the world working. So, in the late seventies, he had a job. He had done his degree in sociology, and therefore he was able to go to the meetings and do the things. Linton was very much a part of the Black Panther movement, and I kind of learned about it through becoming friends with him. He is the one who would tell me this is what’s happening. But he knew I was never gonna be involved.

JR: You describe in *A New World Order* (2001) how he reacted when he saw a young Anglo-Caribbean youth being brutalized by the police under the “Sus Law.” He had been trained by the Black Panthers.

CP: Yes, he knew what to do, and he knew exactly how to respond to that. You know, that kind of street knowledge I did not have. He had that because the Black Panthers movement gave him that. As I said throughout the '80's we became as we are now, very close friends. His experiences of how he grew up and his consciousness as a Black person had very much to do with the Black Panther movement and the activism, the sense of confidence and identity that this gave him. And I was just maybe a bit too young to get that.

JR: You refer to it in *Foreigners* (2007). Is it something important?

CP: I reckon this is important because there was no narrative of belonging in British society if you were Black. You couldn't belong to the Caribbean because you grew up in an urban environment. You did not know what a mango tree was. You did not know what a palm tree was. You could not belong to the Caribbean because you had never seen the Caribbean. So, to whom were you going to belong? Obviously you could not belong to Britain either, because as far as Britain was concerned, you were just a nigger who should go home. So who are you going to belong to? Well, the Black Panther Party gave you a sense of identity that was kind of refracted through the United States of America. And one of the interesting things that has happened on many occasions when I have sat and done public presentations with Linton is that people are always shocked to the degree that we both read Black American literature before we read Caribbean literature. We both read, read, read, read those Black Americans because that was the legacy of the Panther movement.

JR: Because they were the most vocal.

CP: The most vocal and the most confident. They made you feel safe. There was no equivalent in the Caribbean. The situation in Britain was so urgent that the sense of a cultural identity, Caribbean identity, was not going to be enough. This was a tough time.

JR: The CRE [Commission for Racial Equality] and the Race Relation Act were among the socio-political advances gained through the activism developed during the sixties and seventies. You are critical of these advances, but the fact is that they have come to light, which is not the case in some countries, like France for example.

CP: I am critical of these governmental organizations because they do not do enough. But you're right. The fact that they exist is to be put down to the activism and pressure that happened during that period. Basically, if people had not fought, then nothing would have happened. Now you have nailed down the idea: it's more than you would have had if you had done nothing. It's like the old saying, you know: a well-behaved Black person never achieves any change. If you behave nicely, nothing ever happens. You sometimes have to behave badly, you know, so they will begin to see you.

JR: There is a lot of anger in *Strange Fruit* (1981), particularly in Errol, one of the two brothers who plans violent actions to further the Black cause. Did you see terrorism as the next step for an angry youth?

CP: No, not at all. I had no idea, not a clue as to this development.

JR: What about his plans to blow up a bank?

CP: You know, there is this American film *Dog Day Afternoon* (1976). So, I was aware through my understanding of American popular culture. And then there was also in the 1970s the German Baader-Meinhof gang. So I was aware of certain supposedly crazy extremist people who would do things like that to get money. In the context of the times, we already had everything, from hijacking to bank robbery, as a way of getting your political end.

JR: I was thinking of the young Caribbean-British man with Jamaican roots who helped plant bombs in London buses in 2005.

CP: It never occurred to me that things would become so desperate for a young person that they would resort to that. The thing in *Strange Fruit*, reading the play, or watching the play, is it's all talk. It's never going to come to anything. It's not as serious as if you did it now. Now, we actually know that it's absolutely possible. And yes, I would love to put it back on the stage.

JR: I saw an allusion to the biblical question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" in the description of siblings in *The Wasted Years*, a radio play, where the older brother looks out for the younger one, they joke together and their relationship is good. Yet, in *A State of Independence* (1986) the older brother leaves the island for Europe, fails, and comes back to learn that his younger brother has been killed. In *Strange Fruit*, the brothers fight and their paths diverge, and in *The Lost Child*, the big brother is unable to look out for his sibling who eventually dies. Is doing nothing a way to protect themselves? What about solidarity between brothers or, more broadly, between Black people?

CP: It is the most painful problem, you know. You want to be able to protect somebody as close to you as your brother, and if you can't protect them, that's the most painful emotional damage. I am interested and I have always been interested in the way in which these social questions of race, belonging and identity play out in the family because I think that family is a perfect laboratory for really seeing the damage that society does to individuals because you bring it back into the family. If the damage is so profound that brothers are turning on each other, and I say this to you, Josiane, I have two sons, and nothing would cause me more pain if those two boys fell out, because I expect them to support each other for the rest of their lives. They are very small so, I'm gonna be dead and gone by the time they grow up but I want to imagine ... because I love them both, and I will support them

both, and they are both my children with equal love, the idea that society could cause a problem between them, that's the most painful thing I can imagine. You know, breaking up with a girlfriend or a boyfriend, or a husband, or a wife, ah, that happens all the time, we deal with that, but there's something elementally, fundamentally painful in imagining that your children turn on each other because of something in society.

So, as a child—I have brothers, I don't have sisters, we grew up with brothers—it was stressful in my family because we didn't all have the same attitude towards British society. Some of us were more accommodating than others, shall we say. I was always the stubborn one who didn't take any shit from the police, didn't take any shit from teachers, and a couple of my brothers are slightly more civilized than I am. But as a Dad, I can't imagine anything more painful than my two boys falling out, and falling out because of some nonsense that is societally imposed. And that's what we see in some of the examples you just have given. To me it's very painful and very dramatic.

JR: What about Black people?

CP: Of course we should support each other but the problem is that Black people are people as well. And people are unreliable, they are not always supportive of one another. I'm interested in it not because I think that suggests a failure in Black people. It merely re-inscribes Black people as the same as everybody else. There are idiots in the world who are Black, and there are people you don't trust. I expect better, that's what I would say. I expect a higher standard of behavior, and responsibility, and social awareness from Black people than I might from a white person in certain situations, and I am disappointed if I don't get that.

JR: I would like to go back to your approach to the CRE since both Albert in *Where There is Darkness* (1982) and Keith in *In the Falling Snow* (2009), for example, berate the social treatment of race by governmental agencies. Keith calls it a "circus" when the problems of the disabled and single women are put on the same level as problems due to racism. Are you criticizing the fact that racism is not understood as being a crime but as being a social issue?

CP: I am, and I am criticizing the fact that — specifically, because in both instances, we are talking about Britain — one of the ways in which the British avoid taking any kind of responsibility, for issues to do with race, and racism, and their history inscribed into this problem and into society, is by, in a very patronizing and disgusting way, reducing it to a department where it's also disability, and women, and blah. It's a way of not seeing it. You just put it over there, with all the other so-called problems.

JR: It's not a disability.



CP: Being Black is not a disability, that's why it is so offensive. There is inequality in society because of your history and your historical practice, so face up to your history and change your practice. Don't put it over there as if it's something you are born with as a taint, and that you are not able to get rid of. You would not be in that department if you could somehow become white.

JR: Yet, being French, I find it difficult to criticize.

CP: I am glad that there is something in Britain. I'm glad it exists but that does not mean that we have to feel grateful. We fought for it, people got beaten up by the police, so it's not like they gave it to us. They would not have given it to us if we had not actually gone out there and actually demanded it. And now that they have given it to us, I'm telling you, it's broken. It's not good enough. We need better.

JR: The next question bears on *The Shelter* (1984). Can you tell me more about the cover? It's a Black man's hands with his fingers crossed on a white woman's brow. What is the origin of the picture?

CP: I saw the picture in a shop in Paris. I had just finished writing the play, I was in Paris, I saw the postcard, and I thought this would make a great cover. It's so striking. So I bought the postcard in Paris and I took it back and gave it to the publisher and said I would like to put it on the cover of the book. It relates to the content of the play.

JR: Is it telling anything about the relationship between Black men and white women? Was it about a representation of *Othello*?

CP: No, I would have remembered that. I think if it had been *Othello*, I would not have used it because I would have thought that's too obvious, you know. It is about a relationship between a man and a woman that is strained by race. In this case, it happens to be a Black guy and a white woman, but it could equally, to my mind, be a white guy and a Black woman, or it could be a Chinese guy and a white woman. To me it's symbolic of what happens when love tries to transcend race in a society that is stupid enough to introduce race as some kind of judgmental defining factor of your value. In this case, it just happens to be a Black guy and a white woman.

JR: To go back to *A New World Order* (2001) and the idea of race, I wanted to ask you about the way you evoke the fact that you discover your East Indian ancestry when you see a photograph of your grandmother on your first trip to the Caribbean as a young adult: "I was shocked to discern traces of East India in her face" (130). What kind of a shock was it?

CP: It's the first time I was in the Caribbean and if anything, it was a shock of recognition. I spent time in India, and India is very racist. I don't care what anybody says. They are racist as hell, because they are

so obsessed with color, and shade, and class, and everything. One of the things that surprised me when I was in India was how people, particularly in the South, thought I was Indian, as they are dark. I could not understand why there were people, occasionally, not very often, and certainly mostly in the South, people that thought that I might be an Indian. When I saw the picture, it was not a nasty shock, it was just the shock that nobody had said this to me. It was a revelation. If somebody had said to me... I have nothing against having Indian blood. It just would have helped me to understand who I am. Why didn't anyone talk to me about it? Why didn't my parents talk to me? It makes a rupture. I have no problem, in fact, that one of my grandparents had East Indian blood because another of my grandparents is Jewish and white. And all of this is fine. I can deal with it all, I can deal with it all. I don't have to be like from... I don't have to be pure Mandingo. I can deal with the complexity and the confluence of races. That is what the Caribbean is. I think it's fantastic. I just wish people were not ashamed and had just talked, because it's fine.

JR: You also write in *A New World Order* (2001): "The old static order in which one people speaks down to another, lesser, people is dead. The colonial, or postcolonial, model has collapsed. In its place, we have a new world order in which there will soon be one global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none. In this new world order, nobody will feel fully at home." Is it a blessing for everyone to be placed on the same footing and experience unsettlement?

CP: Everybody wants to feel rooted. Everybody would like to be rooted, at home and safe and have a sense of ... you return to a place, they recognize you, you recognize them, and there is no need for conversation which involves explanation, because they know you. It's like going into a bar, and they say: "Josiane, we're having a drink for you." because it's safe, they know you, you know them, you don't have to say anything, you're safe. Everybody likes to feel that way in terms of a society. Everybody. But I don't think most people these days do feel that way, I think, increasingly. Black people, people of African origin, have for nearly 300 years understood what it means to not be at home in your home. What's changing now is that large numbers of people, who are not Black, are feeling the same. I was talking to a speaker at this conference I had never met before who wanted to interview me and ask me some questions. And I said to her: "Where were you born?" "Rome." "When did you come to Belgium?" "At age seven." "How difficult was it?" "Terribly difficult." "What language did you speak?" "Italian." "You had to learn French." "Yes, I had to learn French, and I am still not that confident about some ..." Welcome to my world! There are lots of people in this world who you might look at and think they fit perfectly, they don't have any problems of belonging, but actually, they do. What I hope, as this change takes place, is that it means that people

will become more and more empathetic and sensitive to the situation of those of us who clearly are having problems with belonging and identity; that they will extend themselves and realize that their lives too are being disrupted by this modern phenomenon of globalisation.

JR: Let's speak now of African Americans in Europe. You wrote about Marvin Gaye and his stay in Belgium in the early 1980s in *The New World Order* (2001): "And why was such a man living in Europe - in Belgium, of all places?" (37), and "The creases of worry on his forehead suggest that he knows what he is in Belgium. He is simply a Black man" (49). Is it a reflection on being Black in Europe?

CP: We don't usually associate Belgium with, you know, maybe we do slightly more now, because there has been a slight change in Belgium in the last ten years, but certainly back in the eighties you did not associate Belgium with Black American music or with Black music at all. Really. You associated Belgium with Jacques Brel, you know. France is slightly different because in France you have the feed from the Caribbean, you have the Antillean music feed, you have the West African feed. You have the North Africans. So you do associate music that is not Edith Piaf. In Britain too, you do associate Britain with music that is not just the Beatles. You have a Black tradition of music. But I didn't know of a Black tradition of music in Belgium, so, why would a guy like Marvin Gaye come to Belgium, you know... There was not there a tradition you could see that he might fit into.

JR: And what about France? You wrote in *The European Tribe* (1987) that you could never live in France.

CP: It's exhausting in France dealing with what Naipaul called "the French colonial monkey-game." It's exhausting dealing with French categorization and all that "Je suis Charlie" stuff. Give me a break, you know.

JR: The "Je suis Charlie" mood did not last that long.

CP: Good. I was not too keen on that. It's more sensitive than that. As an outsider I think it is a more sensitive debate. It's more sensitive than just saying, these are just a bunch of murdering Islamic buffoons. Yes, they are murdering Islamic buffoons, but it's a more nuanced debate, I think. But anyway, that's another subject. I could live in France. I could definitely live in France. It's not that different from Britain.

JR: There is less protection.

CP: Sure, here is the other thing, you know. When I first started to go to France regularly, it was to visit Baldwin in St. Paul de Vence. And you know, I have another vision now. I'm fifty-seven, I'm not twenty-seven any more. I am not regarded as a threat. I am an exotic... I am a writer. It would be easy now, because I am not looking for a job. I am

an outsider, like Baldwin was. I would sit in Saint Paul, talk to Jimmy...

JR: You wrote a bit sadly that he was like in a golden cage.

CP: Exactly. He was in “The World of Jimmy Baldwin”: celebrity world. He was not in France. I hate celebrity bullshit, so I would not ever sit like he did because I find this not “a bit,” but profoundly sad. I find it very disturbing seeing the kind of bullshit celebrity stuff, like Montand... he was interested in. It suited him particularly down there. But I could live in France, and just be private and not be bothered by this system, because I do not need this system.

I am old enough to know that Jimmy was not writing while he was living in France. He thought he was writing but he was not writing. If you are a writer, you have to see, you have to be aware of what is going on around you, so if you are still working, and you are still hungry, and you are still eager, then in any society you are living in, you cannot live in a golden cage.

JR: You will read from your latest novel *The Lost Child* (2015) later this afternoon and I would like to evoke the last words of the child in the final lines of the novel: “*Please, don’t hurt me!*” I have noticed that your novels often highlight the painful stories of children who are mistreated or abused by the very ones who are supposed to protect them: Sheila, Dorothy’s sister in *A Distant Shore* (2003), or Monica, in *The Lost Child*, are the objects of the unwelcome attention of their own fathers, and one of Monica’s sons will be preyed upon by Monica’s boyfriend, Derek.

CP: There are two sections in this book *The Lost Child*, one section is called “Family” and the other section is called “The Family.” That’s where you see that all the most difficult social issues played out in the most profound and disturbing way is within the body of the family. We can talk as we have been talking about social ills and difficulties: the police, Black Panther party, politics, and so on, but actually, the real drama is what happens when these pressures are internalized and begin to corrupt relationships that should be protected: the relationship between a parent and a child, or the relationship between a brother and a brother, or the relationship between a husband and a wife. These are bonds that require a tremendous amount of energy to maintain and to keep healthy and open and honest. But as soon as you start to import problems from society these bonds are corrupted and I don’t always—I don’t judge anybody when I am writing, I am not judging any of the characters as I am just trying to understand them but, part of the reason that enables me to have patience with people like Derek in *The Lost Child* or Dorothy’s father in *A Distant Shore* who do terrible things, is because I am trying to understand their weakness, the way in which they were not able to survive social pressures, they were not able to cope with their own weakness. I’m not condoning and supporting or agree with the way in which they turn on their children or they turn on

their spouses. I'm trying to understand why people behave like that. And it's because of what's going on outside the house and they bring it in.

One of the classic images of immigrant fathers which you see in Italian immigrants to New York, in West Indian immigrants to New York, in any immigrant, is a father who is emasculated at work, called "boy" treated badly, who is not given the promotion at work, who then comes home and becomes a dictator in his own house. This is the most dramatic, even melodramatic example of what I'm trying to say which is you import into the family pressures from outside and if you look closely at the family, you're often able to work out and understand the nonsense that's out there. So... because I'm always interested in what's going on in society beyond the family, I'm always not painting or depicting or drawing healthy relationships. They're not always healthy because they're corrupted.

JR: Can you explain further the difference between "family" and "the family"?

CP: You see, my editor, my writing editor where the book was edited crossed them out or put a question mark... He thought I had made a mistake. You know: "This fool has not realized he has used 'family' before."... "The family" in this book is the Brontës, which is supposed to be the coherent family with no problem since they're white, and they're middle-class, and they're talented and successful. So, I'm trying to be more ironic when I use the term "family." I think actually I have something in the eighth section which is *not* called "family." Yes, it's on page 233. A social worker asks Monica in the car about family when she is taking her to the home. Monica says: "And this woman in her ridiculous frilly white blouse wants to know about family?" you know... In other words, there's "the family" which suggests coherence and structure and stability, which is what we think of the Brontës, although we know when we read that it's not like that, and then there is "family" which is itself ridiculous. Monica is basically saying: "Are you kidding me? You want to know about family? How am I supposed to maintain a family dealing with this crap?" That's the difference in which I'm using it. So, I'm trying to say: whether you are trying to see it as a stable union, I think as in "the family," or whether you are trying to bring a broader and more ironic sense as "family," it does not work. Either way, it's infused with serious problems and serious confusion.

JR: What about Monica's father? Is he overbearing or has he done something wrong?

CP: I had more about him. I took it out.

JR: Because she hates him.

CP: She does. There is a suggestion in the novel which you are picking

up, but I just wanted it to be a suggestion, that he has been accused of interfering with her friend. She has a friend who comes round to visit, and the friend stops coming round. So there is the suggestion that her father is rather sexually frustrated because we can't imagine he has sex with his wife. And he's also a little bit too interested in Monica, but it's no more than a suggestion. You know, ambiguity is good. I do not have to fill everything out for the reader but ... she does not know. He is in a kind of denial about it but we know that something awkward and strange happened, but we don't quite know what it is. And it's often the case with these things: "he said ..." "she said ..." but it was enough to make a sensitive young girl feel that there is something about her father that she does not quite trust and by extension there is something about men that leaves her quite vulnerable. She does not really know about men.

JR: Is the downward path that she takes a form of punishment, or self-punishment?

CP: Of self-punishment. I don't think she had any confidence from when she was very young. I think her childhood has been one long traumatic process for her.

JR : She is a highly performing student until she is around fifteen. She goes to Oxford. She manages to get in. It takes some confidence.

CP: And then there is the whole question of what kind of happened around fifteen. We don't really know, but we are getting a sense that as she became more aware of herself as a woman, she became more aware of her father. And there is a scene when her father comes to see her, he says something horrible. He says: "It never occurred to me that my daughter was loose." which is an awful thing to say about your own daughter for a father. I mean ... based on what? The fact that she is having a relationship. How can you say then "loose"...

JR: and close the door.

CP: and close the door. So you're getting the idea that there is a terrible trauma that has happened to her around questions of her own attractiveness, self-worth and belonging, and of course, when she goes to that night-club and meets Derek, it becomes even worse.

JR: Yet, she is functioning when she gets to Oxford.

CP: She is functioning, but she does not socially function very well, because in that first year, remember, even Julius describes her as strange-looking when he first meets her, at a dance. So we see her through his eyes for a moment, and he thinks she's functioning because she's turned up, she has figured it out, but she still looks a little odd. She looks kind of what I imagine Emily Brontë would look like because Emily Brontë looked odd but she was functioning. But if

you look at it too long, I think there is something there, something that is not quite...

JR: Reading *The Lost Child* (2015) was for me a harrowing experience because it relentlessly follows a downward spiral towards annihilation. There is a “réaliste,” naturalistic inspiration to the novel. Benjamin is the only glimmer of hope, because he seems to have an integrated personality. He is in a relationship and will probably resume links with his grandfather.

CP: The hope is him. I was talking to somebody the other day, in England, who said to me... She said: “You know, when I finished the book, I was devastated.” And she said: “There was one moment when I thought: ‘He will be OK.’ And I was so glad she said this, because she was right. It’s the moment when Ben is in bed with his girlfriend after his grandfather has come to visit. It’s a single bed and he deliberately decides to go next to the wall to give her more space in the bed. And I wanted to try to suggest he’s really well balanced, sensitive enough as a guy not to make her squeeze next to the wall. He is very un-guy-like. He’s actually chosen to squeeze against the wall to give her some space, and I just wanted that to be, amongst other things, to be a suggestion that actually it’s gonna be O.K. He’s come through hell, this kid, with his mother, and his brother, and this rather strange grandfather, but, you know what, he has a healthy relationship, he is sensitive, he cares, and I think he’ll be O.K. I think things will be O.K. with him going forward. And she said to me: “That’s when I thought I could breathe. I just thought, if I hang on to that it will be O.K.” And I told her, and I said: “Yeah, that’s what I thought, too.” I thought if he can get to the end of this particular book with that degree of sensitivity, and that degree of common sense, then there’s some hope.

JR: What about naturalism then? Characters like Monica seem to experience the world as a constant menace, a weight. The world is weighty, and they are crushed by it.

CP: That pretty much describes what’s going on. A moment of devastation for me, as a kid reading, is when Anna Karenina kills herself. A moment of devastation is in Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* when she shoots herself. These are moments when the world crushed them. They cannot deal with societal pressure and they have to take a terrible way out. These are great nineteenth-century naturalistic texts which shake my consciousness. I am a very conventional naturalistic narrator, but I am not a naturalistic orchestrator. In terms of structure, I am much more of a modernist, in terms of different time-frames, and so on... Within the individual passages themselves, I am definitely, deeply influenced by naturalism. But the overall structure is not naturalistic.

JR: Talking about influence, could you tell me about the films that you have found having an impact on you? You mentioned *Casablanca* in *The European Tribe* (1987) and the title, *Island in the Sun*, is quoted

derisively by Alvin in *Strange Fruit* (1981).

CP: The most important film for me as a young man watching film is Claude Goretta's *The Lacemaker*.

JR: *La Dentellière*.

CP: That film had a huge effect upon me, and I still have the film. I have the DVD. I watch the film regularly. It is the desolation of a young girl. There are some other films which have had a big effect. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali, Fear Eats the Soul*. That film had a big effect upon me in the seventies. There are a few films that I have on a shelf, that are as important to me as novels.

## Notes

1. Interview conducted in Liège, Belgium on April 24, 2015.

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