



Ramabai Espinet

“

He [...] had to include Gainer in our family history, my great-grandmother who bore Grandma Lil, who produced five children not counting the stillborn Daisy, Grandma Lil who bore Muddie who bore me and Babsie and Kello and Johnnie. . . . and I made up my mind that when I went to Trinidad I would search for her songs until I found them. Gainer, the name of the humble yellow marigold, used in Hindu rituals of worship.

— The Swinging Bridge

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1948
- * Indo-Caribbean-Canadian writer, teacher, and activist
- * First published book of poetry was *Nuclear Seasons* (1991)

Biography

Ramabai Espinet is an Indo-Caribbean-Canadian writer. The “Indo” came first, through the remote history of the arrival of her ancestors from India to the island of Trinidad, along with thousands of others who were brought to Trinidad as indentured servants. Generations later, Ramabai Espinet was born in 1948 in San Fernando on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. She grew up on the island before being displaced across the seas like her ancestors, only this time northward. In the 1960s Ramabai’s family immigrated to Canada. Since that time her life has been shared between Canada and the Caribbean. She dreamed of becoming a writer since the age of 12, however, “the road to achieving that was very winding.”

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Ramabai Espinet

Biography continued

In this context, she always considered her literary career an ever-changing journey, which really began when she married another writer. Together they spent some time at a hippy commune on Vancouver Island. Espinet was hoping that the simplicity of such a lifestyle would allow her the freedom to write. They also searched for this freedom by moving back to Trinidad. On Espinet's native island she gave birth to her first child, a son. Divorce later presented Espinet, a self-proclaimed feminist, with some challenging situations as she balanced taking care of her children and herself with writing. Espinet's second child, a daughter, seems to be following in her mother's footsteps as a writer.

Espinet attended York University in Toronto. She considers herself one of the first people to do research on the Caribbean. Although Espinet never returned to her native island to live full time, she has returned for long stays twice. The first was a sojourn at home with her ex-husband. The second time was to complete her doctoral dissertation for which she received a Ph.D. in English from the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine, Trinidad.

Espinet was first established on the literary scene as a poet. Her book of poetry, *Nuclear Seasons*, was published in 1991. She also became well known as a children's book author after her two books were published, *The Princess of Spadina* and *Ninja's Carnival*, in 1992 and 1993, respectively.

Espinet's ageless, angry, and poetic writing weaves the idea of the Asian Diaspora with the struggles and lifestyles of the modern Indo-Caribbean woman. Ramabai Espinet is a woman who writes with the clarity and wisdom of someone who has lived her stories. One example of this is the short story "Barred," in which she describes an Indian woman living in Trinidad and Tobago. The protagonist of the story is trying to make enough money to sustain herself and her child despite an abusive and alcoholic husband. Her first novel, *The Swinging Bridge*, was shortlisted for the Regional Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2004. The acclaimed novel carries the reader from nineteenth-century India across the sea to the cane fields of Trinidad and then to modern-day Canada.



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Biography continued

Espinet writes mostly from the perspective of a culturally displaced woman trying to balance the ideas of identity and home. Her writing recalls the work of Jamaica Kincaid. Kincaid herself commented on *The Swinging Bridge*: “Beautiful, luminous and an utter pleasure to read. A writer as necessary as Ramabai Espinet should be treasured by us for her unique voice and the unique world she shares with us.” The main goal of that unique voice is to introduce Indio-Caribbean women into the popular body of knowledge, especially art and literature. In her essay, “Representation and the Indo-Caribbean Woman in Trinidad and Tobago,” Espinet writes:

“The presence of Indo-Caribbean women has not been felt, in the public sphere. . . . absent from art, from literature, as scholars and thinkers, as doers. . . . They are functionally equipped to operate in the world of work, but once that is done, they revert to the seclusion of the patriarchal culture which has always kept them in women’s quarters.”

Espinet currently teaches English and Caribbean Studies at York University and Seneca College. “I adore teaching-at every level,” she confesses. Ramabai Espinet is politically active in women’s and social movements in both Canada and the Caribbean.



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Selected Bibliography

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