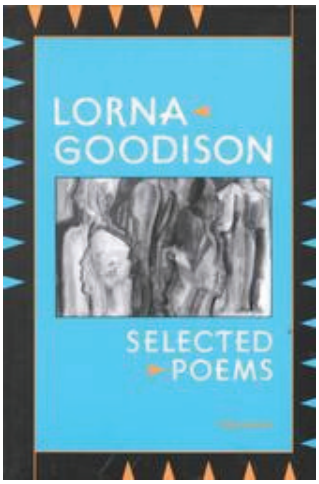
Voices from the Gaps

Selected Poems Lorna Goodison

Selected Poems is deeply engaging. The poems afford many moments of clarity and give an opportunity for the reader to enjoy Goodison's remarkable use of Jamaican language, images, and rhythm to describe ordinary and important moments and reflections in a way that is purely Goodison's trait.



Publisher: University of Michigan Press, 1992

The reader may enjoy these poems on one level for their language and rhythm, or the reader may actively participate in these themes by using them as spring boards to uncover both the historical and current state of Jamaica.

However the reader reacts, the poems are deeply affecting, containing much purpose, strength and hope within the lines and in the silence surrounding them.

This selection gives insight to her initial work as well as a glimpse of her poetry over time. Of the seventy-seven poems included in this selection, many remarkable works center around the themes of womanhood, and feminine energy. Often it is the restrictive quality or the necessary distance from the natural instinct of woman that is explored. In the poem entitled "On Houses," the speaker is at first happy in her femininity as described by her willingness to make "warm smells" in kitchens that, by the last stanza, turn into "calm smells." "Farewell Wild Woman (I)" expresses the internal struggle of a woman's temptation to submit to the animalistic sexual desire she feels. The reader male or female can understand the emotion conveyed from this internal struggle, the battle of self-control over physical gratification.

I seemed to have put distance
between me and the wild woman
she being certified bad company. Always inviting me to drink
bloody wine from clay cups

Reviewed by Ayme Almendarez

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Lorna Goodison

Many of Goodison's poems express a deep connection to Jamaica with all of its open wounds and beauty scars. They relate the realities of colonization, and the struggles of a people. The book begins with the poem entitled "To Us, All Flowers Are Roses." This poem sets the tone for the entire collection as it distances the reader from the speaker of the poems. Unless the reader is Jamaican or has studied Jamaican history the first few lines will be challenging though beautiful.

Accompong is Ashanti, root, Nyamekopon
appropriate name Accompong, meaning
warrior or lone one. Accompong

With some research the reader may interpret these poems on a level that is deeper than the language itself. But to do so means to enter the wounds Goodison exposes in her writing. And these are sores and blisters that are hundreds of years old, festering and filled with puss. The reader then, has only the beauty of Goodison's language, the rhythm and the beat for comfort.

Goodison expresses the utility of her work in the poem entitled "Some of My Worst Wounds." In this poem she explains the curative properties of her poetry. And in a sense her poetry can speak to a healing of her people and of her readers too.

Generally Goodison's poetry here is free-verse with the use of such poetic devices as internal and end stopped rhyme. When there is rhyme, it is typically an a-b scheme but not usually a drawn out pattern. The language here is often vernacular using mostly one and two syllable words. The use of words in other languages with no translation or footnote also occurs in Goodison's work. And the reader may begin to wonder why, though it is not usually an encumbering distraction and with some research the reader can mine these poems for deeper meanings. In fact, one might argue that this is a possible reason for Goodison's decision to exclude translations. Goodison also uses the Jamaican dialect in her poems, which gives those sections/poems a voice, thus giving Jamaicans a voice. As the reader sees the lines written in dialect he or she might even be able to hear with great clarity the voice of the Jamaican people. The images Goodison offers here are generally related to the flora and fauna of Jamaica. We see the red of "hibiscus," and though we may not know "Chainey root, fever grass & vervain," we get a sense of these images and may still enjoy the sounds of these words.

Lorna Goodison is one of the best known poets of the Caribbean region, she has written seven volumes of poetry. Selected Poems consists of works included in three of those volumes. She has received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for North and South America.

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