



Baby Mother and the King of Swords by Lorna Goodison

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Lorna Goodison's only collection of short stories, *Baby Mother and the King of Swords*, navigates the affairs of characters whose lives have become emotionally enveloped in situations such as poverty, marriage, pregnancy, and love. The ensemble of stories reflects life as a struggle and with a philosopher's reflection bound in a poet's touch, Goodison illustrates the difficulties and opportunities many Jamaicans experience. Whether Goodison's characters are young and learning the facts of life, or old and dealing with those cold hard facts, she crafts her characters in such a way that reading them is believing them.

Life is tough and Goodison's characters often confront this. Her narrators mirror the trials and tribulations of common experiences that Jamaicans face everyday. These hardships, packed tightly in stories that depict situations such as broken households, deteriorating relationships, dwindling finances, and fading childhood ideals, abound the book and carry the stories while building on a ray of hope. And whether Goodison takes the reader through the shanty towns of Kingston, the rich filled hills of the island, or even to America where the land of opportunity is sent home as financial support, she sculpts an image of Jamaican life in such a way that the reader can follow the flow of emptiness, hope, and happiness.

The struggles the characters face are pure and unfiltered, and Goodison's imitative basis of Jamaican life gives the stories a natural feel as they end on a note of optimism. For example, Sylvie is six months pregnant, her husband, George, who is now in jail on a false count of robbery, has no money to give her for food or clothes, and when things seem their worst, Goodison adds more to the trauma. The story "Follow Your Mind" journeys with Sylvie as she confronts two of the many themes that traverse this book, pregnancy and poverty. During the story, Gatta, Sylvie's one friend, worsens the situation by persuading Sylvie to take handouts from the local church. As it is her turn to accept the donations, Sylvie acknowledges the importance of the reverend's sermon – "Remember, God helps those who help themselves" – by walking out. The tale of Sylvie closes with the message of freedom that in the "future she really was going to always try and follow her mind".



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Goodison's first story of the collection, "The King of Swords", follows a female narrator as she reflects on the disappointments of living in poverty and the struggle of growing up as a woman in both the past and present. The story progresses and unravels as the narrator discovers the power and exhilaration of speaking her mind. For example, living with the scornful, hate filled "Aunt B" is not easy, failing to impress the boyfriend, who is also known as "the King of Swords", because of "those shoes" is not easy, and being ashamed of living in poverty is not easy, yet, the narrator does all this and more. With every critical remark by the boyfriend and "Aunt B", with every obstacle faced due to poverty and sexism, with every slice of the sword's blade, the narrator's shield becomes stronger. At the end of the story, the narrator frees herself from these chains of oppression by fighting off "the hold over" her by the "King of Swords".

However, the pinnacle of Goodison's craft comes with the tale of "By Love Possessed". This story involves the drunkard, narcissistic Mr. Frenchie and the absentminded, loving, Dottie. Opening on a high note, the story begins with Mr. Frenchie and Dottie falling in love and getting married. Although each character has their shortcomings (instead of working, Mr. Frenchie goes to the bar and drinks rum all day and unfortunately, Dottie is physically unattractive) their relationship seems to be honest. However, as their relationship progresses Frenchie becomes increasingly unattached to Dottie and even more conceited about his appearances juxtaposed to hers. It becomes apparent that the only reason Mr. Frenchie is with Dottie is for financial support. The story contains everything beautiful and destructive in Lorna Goodison's writings such as marriage, romance, poverty, and domestic abuse. The characters are identifiable, they are unique, and they are strong. The plot's linear arrangement is simple yet it effectively grasps one's attention. The story allows for an emotional attachment to the characters, especially Dottie who struggles to handle the downward spiral that is her relationship with Mr. Frenchie. And although the story ends with Dottie surrounded by the destruction of Frenchie's selfish arrogance, there is a trace of sanguinity as she starts to rebuild.

Goodison's compilation of short stories merges the everyday lives of people consumed by failed marriages, poverty, unwanted pregnancies, and disparity. However, each story sheds a glimmer of hope as the narrators find their way in the world. Often, after having faced some staggering situation, the characters rise above their problems that society, family, and friendships place upon them. Goodison's characters do not dwell nor run away from their misery. And as Goodison breaks her characters down, it is only to build them up.



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Although the scope of the collection varies and gives readers many insightful perspectives, the stories seem to end too soon, and as a character's life is just beginning to be charted, it is interrupted by the conclusion. While still hanging on to the last narrator it is difficult to want to move on to the next. However, Goodison's structure of short stories does have its merit. The stories are quick and exciting; they create expectations but also overturn them. The collection allows correlations to be made as one story wraps up and the other begins.

As an internationally acclaimed poet, Lorna Goodison's transition from poetry to prose segues smoothly. Lorna Goodison was born in Kingston, Jamaica and there she found herself immersed in the surroundings of her art. However, she also spent time crafting her skills as a student in both Jamaica and New York. In 1980, Goodison's first collection of poetry, *Tamarind Season*, was published. She has since followed up with many other publications such as *I Am Becoming My Mother*, *Heartease*, *To Us All Flowers Are Roses*, and *Turn Thanks*.

Baby Mother and the King of Swords is not for the faint of heart. The stories' themes are gut wrenching, heart filled, and truthful. There is no magic, no witchcraft, and no suspenseful mystery in these stories, but there are miracles. Miracles that the characters manage to stay alive with the problems life deals them.

Reviewed by Jason Hubbard