

Travellin' woman

Joshua Jelly-Schapiro on Paule Marshall's coming of age and the "third migration" of African-American literature



Brooklyn brownstones. Photograph by Drew Spencer

At a small book party in a Harlem storefront in the fall of 1959, it would have taken a lot to distract attention from the guest of honour, a striking thirty-year-old woman, eight months pregnant at the time, who was celebrating the publication of her debut novel. The arrival of Langston Hughes, though, certainly did the trick. The party was just getting under way when he appeared in the doorway. His arrival awed everyone — including the writer being feted, whom Hughes had never met before deigning to toast the release of her “somewhat standard coming-of-age story,” as Paule Marshall too modestly describes her first novel today, “about a girl not unlike myself born and raised in a Brooklyn community that was both African-American and West Indian.”

Hughes was famously generous to younger writers, and he later arranged for this one to accompany him on a State Department–sponsored tour of Europe. Taking a fond interest in Marshall and her career, he continued, until his death in 1967, to offer her encouragement in the form of postcards penned in his trademark green ink, and regular late-night phone calls entreating her to hurry up and finish her second novel (“I have a book out for every year you’ve been alive!” he’d crow).

He wasn't alone in admiring *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, a *bildungsroman* that mines its author's experience to tell the story of Selina Boyce, a child of immigrant parents from Barbados, whose self-realisation entails transcending the insular mores of her mother's home and a tight-knit West Indian community in Brooklyn. *The New York Times* dubbed it "fine." Sidney Poitier bought the film rights; its young author won a Guggenheim Fellowship to write her next book.

Today, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* — which fell out of print shortly after its first appearance, only to be rescued from obscurity by the Feminist Press in the 1970s — is a staple of North American university courses on black and immigrant literature, roundly hailed as a landmark: one of the first novels to make the voice of a brown-skinned immigrant on New York's outer orbit matter as literature to its Manhattan publishers and prize committees. New York City and its nation have always gained a life-giving energy from those immigrants who have made the borough of Queens, for example, home to speakers of more languages than any comparably sized bit of the earth's skin; but it is only recently — in celebrated novels by writers like Edwidge Danticat and Junot Díaz, Francisco Goldman, Kiran Desai, and Joseph O'Neill — that the experiences and pasts of those immigrants have assumed a due place in its literature. The story of how this has come to pass is, of course, not attributable to one author alone. But no account of that history can be complete without acknowledging a novel about whose protagonist Danticat, writing in her foreword to the current edition of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, terms "one of the most fascinating and memorable female characters in American fiction."

"Paule Marshall's work wasn't, for me, just restricted to her splendid novels," says Hilton Als, the writer and *New Yorker* critic, who grew up in the Brooklyn home of a Barbadian mother whose well-loved copy of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* she gave her son to read when he was eleven. "She was a [first generation] West Indian American — like my mother — who was able to transform her experience and get out. Not many women of her generation managed to do that — to find an art that exposed them to the larger world. So doing, Marshall inspired other people like myself to do the same." In his memoir-cum-novel *The Women*, Als recounts looking Marshall up in the Manhattan phonebook to tell her, when she picked up the phone, how he and his mother lived not far from where Selina grew up.

The young novelist feted and pushed by Hughes is now eighty, and she has gone on — in five well-received novels published over the past five decades, plus two story collections and a memoir, *Triangular Road*, published in 2009 — to enjoy a career as distinguished as any industrious writer of non-genre fiction can reasonably hope to have. That her lauded debut, though, quickly fell out of print — and didn't much figure in the rise of interest in "black literature" that attended the rise of Black Power and Black Studies during the 1960s — perhaps relates to the same reason she has never attained anything like the notoriety of a Langston Hughes. Quite apart from its female protagonist and largely female cast, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* was a book written "to make the immigrant story applicable to blacks," as Marshall recently told the *New York Times*. Its central concerns lie largely outside the defining themes of the "African-American literary tradition" exemplified by her mentor: the United States' core drama of race as it looks from the vantage point of the descendents of slaves in the old Confederacy.

•

Born in Brooklyn in 1929, Valenza Pauline Burke was a child of what she calls the West Indian wing of the Great Migration: those three hundred thousand souls who fled England's old plantation colonies during the twentieth century's first decades, arriving on America's shores "like a dark sea nudging its way onto a white beach and staining the sand," as she writes at the start of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Both her parents were from Barbados. Her mother Adriana had made the voyage north by steamship at age eighteen, her \$50 "show money" at Ellis Island (then required in cash of all black immigrants granted entrance there) provided by a brother who'd been one of the legion of Anglo-Caribbean men recruited by US contractors to build the Panama Canal. Her father was a hustling charmer who'd first escaped the "damn little two-by-four island" by enlisting as a contract labourer to cut sugar cane in Cuba, and then made his way to Brooklyn by stowing away on a freighter bound for the Domino Sugar Refinery on New York harbour. Sam Burke was a charismatic figure who departed his wife's home when their girls were still young, first for one of his many mistresses, and then by joining the flock of a faith huckster in Harlem called Father Divine, whose cult, his once-worshipful daughter has written, "delivered him at last from the long futile search for a vocation worthy of his still undefined talents."

If black literature in the United States has been largely about two migrations — from Africa to America, and from the Old South to the New North — Marshall's work evinces an equally important but frequently overlooked migration — that of people of colour from the southern Americas and elsewhere to the United States. In recent years, that migration has figured centrally in Junot Díaz's portrayal, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, of the legacies of Caribbean violence among Dominicans in New Jersey; in Edwidge Danticat's writings looking at the same among Haitians in Brooklyn — and even in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, which, though nominally about a Dutchman in New York, gains its vivid texture from its depictions of West Indian life in the city. No less a bestseller than Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, whose author recently praised O'Neill's novel from the Oval Office, exemplifies the recent shift in "African-American literature": the move beyond the two migrations that have long defined it, to make the experience of immigrants from abroad central to the texture of black life in America.

Many of these books are set in households dominated by women, like many contemporary immigrant families. Marshall was raised in one such, her home run by a woman with such force of personality that her fictional analogue is called simply "the mother," her kitchen overflowing, at weekends, with cousins and friends filling its air with the smells of codfish and souse and with the tuneful, cutting speech of an island to which they'd never return. "It was always the mother and the others," she describes them in her novel, "for they were alike — those watchful, wrathful women whose eyes seared and searched and laid bare, whose tongue lashed the world in unremitting distrust." Rising early each morning to take the subway to Flatbush or Sheepshead Bay with their aprons and working shoes under their arms, the lucky ones had steady madams for whom they cooked and cleaned; the others

wandered the avenues in search of a day's work. All aimed, one day, to save up the "few raw mout' pennies" that would "buy house." "Lord, lemme do better than this! Lemme rise!" cries Selina's mother Silla, down on her knees scrubbing "the Jew floor."

Tensions between Brooklyn's West Indians and its Jews have long been one of the borough's defining narratives — at least from the outside: mixed Jewish and West Indian neighborhoods like Crown Heights rarely make the Manhattan news except as settings for "ethnic violence." But the views of West Indians like Marshall's mother, as Marshall makes plain in *Triangular Road*, her tersely elegant memoir, were less about ethnic animus than admiration: if the Jews had arrived penniless to "the City of the Almighty Dollar" but now owned the brownstones where her people rented rooms and the shops where they bought milk and meat, why couldn't they do the same? Bajans were the self-described "Jews of the West Indies," and they condescended as such to other dark-skinned arrivants to New York like Jamaicans ("disgraced the King's English by dropping their "h's," as Marshall's mother put it); Trinidadians ("lived only for their yearly carnival"); and worst of all, black Americans from the South ("needed to stand up more to the white man") — "keepbacks" all, who striving Bajans blamed for slowing their efforts to seize a piece of "this man country."

For a bright, brown-skinned girl in war-era Brooklyn, for whom growing up meant becoming a New Yorker and a Negro, the immigrant ways of Marshall's mother — her prejudice and penny-pinching, her provincialism and Barbadian Business Association — were naturally appalling. The plot of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* turns on Silla's acting behind her husband's back to sell his inheritance — a cherished plot of land back home — to buy the Brooklyn home that is both setting and engine for the book's plot. Blaming Silla for driving her father from their lives, Selina bucks and deceives her mother at every turn. First searching after other models of how to be a woman in the world — a promiscuous Bajan boarder called Suggie, who stands as a reminder of the pleasure-loving islands, and who Silla boots from their home for her wickedness; a black American hairdresser who guides Selina into a broader sense of blackness despised by her mother — she eventually determines to leave Silla's home. Matriculating to City College, her mother's words ring in her ears as she goes: "G'long! You was always too much woman for me anyway, soul. And my own mother did say two head-bulls can't reign in a flock."

Marshall's own mother may never have done anything quite so craven as Silla Boyce. But it seems clear that the main tension at the heart of Marshall's first novel — between a mother's first-generation ambitions and the differing ones of her equally strong-willed daughter — were very much drawn from life. These are the tensions that have long governed the internal dynamics of immigrant families. And they are certainly the tensions, in the case of a West Indian girl like Marshall — whose forging of her identity as a writer entailed discovering her kinship with black people everywhere, and with members of the Republic of Letters worldwide — that informed her need to escape her mother's immigrant world, in order to write about it. Of course, separation from one's mother, as Marshall and her fiction keenly know, is only separation of a kind. And it is the tension between these felt truths — the need to separate from her mother and her community in order to write about them, and her guiding interest, as a writer, in exploring possibilities for new

community and the unmatched human bond between mothers and daughters — that animate much of her work.

•

In *Triangular Road*, Marshall explores that work's nurturing themes. Her memoir — based on a series of lectures she delivered at Harvard University in 2005 — is divided into four sections: an opening homage to Hughes, in which she recounts (beginning with his appearance at her first book party) her friendship with him, followed by three sections which aim to explore, in sequence, the three parts of her “tripartite self,” described by North America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Each section is organised around an incantatory phrase reminiscent of her mentor: “I’ve Known Rivers” (on her current home by the James River in Richmond, Virginia); “I’ve Known Seas” (on the Caribbean; her family’s past and her efforts to discover it); and, finally, “I’ve Known Oceans” (on the Atlantic, and a trip taken to the continent from which came her ancestors). The device befits a writer for whom the theme of migration has always been so central — and in whose mind the vocations of writing and travel, as she recalls in her memoir, have always been closely linked (even before she found that earning a living as a writer would entail moving among a series of teaching positions accepted to “support her habit”). After reading books like Hughes’s *Big Sea* in high school, she writes, it was her dream “not only [to] become a writer, but a ‘travellin woman’ as well.”

In “I’ve Known Rivers”, Marshall recounts a recent walk by the James. She describes scrambling down the forested bank of the wide stream called “the riv-ah” by locals, and what has brought her to the shore of “America’s most historic river” (a temporary teaching position at Virginia Commonwealth University which became a permanent gig). Watching the James flow past — its polluted waters roiling over “ante-Diluvian rocks” and carrying, on this Labour Day weekend, a passel of white twenty-somethings floating by in inner tubes drinking beer — she allows the “runaway part of her mind” to wend its way, with the river, towards the sea. Marshall recalls that the James not only provided the site of England’s first North American colony in 1607 at its mouth; it also became, after the building of that colony’s capital of Richmond on its banks, the principal artery of entry for enslaved Africans brought to North America — and thus a river also deeply linked to the small coral island where her parents were born. Barbados, lying off to the east of the volcanic Antilles in the Atlantic, functioned for centuries as the first stop for slavers crossing the water from Africa, and a key transshipment point for human chattel thence distributed up and down the hemisphere.

The scene sets the stage for the memoir’s next chapters, which take Marshall’s “runaway mind” from the James’s mouth to the Caribbean, and finally to Africa. Composed in the same easy, forthright voice as her novels, her memoir is marked by the same evocative bits of “beautiful-ugly” Bajan speech (“Soully-gal, you sure is a real-real mout’ king!”) and gift for description (“a flotilla of several large bright-blue rubber rafts can be seen performing a bouncy dance”) that accent her fiction. Here, though, the memoir-form serves less as a means of plumbing the inner life of Marshall’s protagonist — herself — than as a means of explicating the histories and ideas informing her work.

Marshall begins her chapter on the Caribbean (which takes up more than half of this meandering volume) with a long section tracing her parents' migration story. She then recounts a literary coming-of-age which delves into the same themes of self-realisation she limns in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Writing of the escape that a neighbourhood branch of the Brooklyn Public Library provided from her mother's home, she then recalls how, inspired by Paul Laurence Dunbar's "way of capturing the Southern black dialect as poetry," she separated from her mother by changing her own name to "Paule" at thirteen; and also of how, as she would later realise, it was the klatch of women in that home from whom she gained her primary love for stories and language ("What I had been hearing in the kitchen of that brownstone house," she'd write, "was a kind of poetry in their West Indian dialect"). Readers looking to understand the inner contours of Marshall's young life may do much better to look to *Brown Girl, Brownstones* than to her memoir. But the coming-of-age traced in her memoir shares not a few core similarities with her bildungsroman and larger oeuvre — beginning with the ultimately central role, in each, played by women.

•

When *Brown Girl, Brownstones* first appeared in 1959, there existed precious few novels based around a black woman protagonist with a complexly full interior life (Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maude Martha* and a few others). It is easy to see why, in the 1970s, those celebrants who rescued Marshall's debut from obscurity held her up as a feminist pioneer. She donned the mantle proudly. "I'm concerned about letting [women] speak their piece," she told *Essence* in 1979, "letting them be central figures, actors, activists in fiction rather than just backdrop or background figures . . . My feminism takes its expression through my work. Women are central for me. They can as easily embody the power principles as a man."

In Marshall's fiction, men are certainly present; often they are as fully and perceptively drawn as her women. But rarely are they characters in whom one could say the "power principles" live. Even the initially likeable men in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* — Selina's gentle boy-man of a father, driven to grief by her bullying mother; Clive, the garrulous artist with whom she finds her sexual awakening — are not, in the end, figures with more to offer their loved ones than fleeting pleasure and lasting pain. Like the boyfriend we glimpse for a final time prostrate and mumbling on his couch, they are, in the last analysis, weak. In Marshall's work, such men always read less as political gestures than as people drawn from life. This, one suspects, is perhaps for much the same reason that mainstream white feminists who spoke in the 1970s of "subverting the patriarchy" so often failed to connect with black women — women, that is, who'd grown up in matriarchal homes where the notion of "strong women" vested with power-in-the-family was less wishful ideal than matter of course.

Given her core and defining interest in women, Marshall's second book has long stood out from her oeuvre. A volume of four novellas keyed by its epigraph from Yeats ("An aged man is but a paltry thing / A tattered coat upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hands and

sing”), *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* — which revolves around four aging men confronting their own senescence — explores a surprising theme for a young “ethnic writer” who — in 1961 as today — would have been expected to continue writing about characters nearer her own experience. The stories included do feel like a young artist’s effort to prove, not least to herself, that she could write empathic prose about characters not intuitively sympathetic. That Marshall succeeds — for the most part: the schematic moralism at play in these stories about men outwardly successful but inwardly empty does, at times, threaten to overwhelm their art — is testament to her gifts. And yet, especially in reading these stories in light of what followed, it’s hard not to feel as though the character in whom Marshall — and in turn, we — are most interested is not the male protagonist at its heart but the female antagonist around whose rejection of that man each story is built.

In the book’s finest story, an aging Jewish professor of French in Brooklyn lures a female student to his country home upstate, “to discuss her paper on Gide.” After Max Berman spends a wary day with Miss Williams — a pretty black schoolteacher who has come here to satisfy a curiosity about white folks and books, but leaves confirming what she knows of men — she ultimately rejects his advances. He drops her at the train back to the city and offers a final bow, “acknowledging with that gesture his responsibility for her rage, which went deeper than his, and for her anger, which would spur her finally to live.” Watching Miss Williams stride away from her sad professor, “her head lifted as though she carried life as lightly there as if it were a hat made of tulle,” it’s easy to imagine her riding the train off into one of Marshall’s novels to come, and joining there with women engaged in just the kind of quest on which Selina parts at the end of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

As critics like Mary Helen Washington have argued, one can read Marshall’s entire oeuvre as a series of explorations into the questions augured by that book’s climactic scene, which finds Selina, once she’s made it out of Brooklyn and to the Upper East Side, being put violently in her place as a coloured girl by a white classmate’s mother. The experience prompts in her a new feeling of racial connection — a kinship not merely with “the whores, the flashy men, and the blues rising sacredly above the plain of neon lights and ruined houses” but also, more strikingly for this headstrong teen, with “the mother and the Bajan women, who had lived each day what she had come to know” — and inspires her, at the novel’s close, to travel to her mother’s home island. We don’t follow on her trip. But all Marshall’s novels to follow — from *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), set in an out-of-the-way West Indian island, to *Praise Song for the Widow* (1983), which follows a middle-aged black woman on a search for authentic life in the Caribbean, to *Daughters* (1991), a tale of West Indian women in New York and the islands which hinges on travel between the two locales — enact Selina’s quest to reconnect with her past and her people. Each has, at its centre, a woman seeking after an identity affirmative and whole, in a world run by men and sundered by history.

That Marshall, as a young coloured girl, could even contemplate embarking on such a quest herself, as both writer and “travellin’ woman,” was by dint of belonging to the second generation. Adriana Burke — who, by the end of Marshall’s teens, was suffering the “ultimate humiliation” of renting a cramped apartment owned by a fellow Bajan — certainly had no time for such silliness. About all she does have time for, her no-good

husband long gone, was warning her daughters against his kind and her fate. She spelled out the consequences of what would happen should Marshall or her sister become “little wring-tail concubines caterwauling about the streets looking for men.” Or worse, should we ever come before her with our stomachs “tumbling big with wild-dog puppy.” Again shaming her before every Bajan in Brooklyn. Oh, no, we would have to pack our little “georgie bundles” (Elizabethan for suitcases), take our wild-dog puppy and “Get from out my eyesight!”

It may have been the voices of “the mother and the others” in her childhood kitchen whom Marshall came to credit with instilling her love for stories. But it was also, by her late teens, the timbre of Adriana’s “Xanthippe voice that by now had become a force greater than herself” which drove her beyond that kitchen to seek and make the stories, in the wider world, by which she might explain and salve that bitterness.

•

As any immigrant’s child knows, there are few career paths so perplexing to a first-generation parent as that of a struggling artist — particularly, it would seem, when that parent is a West Indian in Brooklyn at a time when “Telephone company hiring coloured!” In the narrative Marshall traces, in *Triangular Road*, of becoming a writer, her relationship with her mother (to whom she dedicated *Brown Girl, Brownstones* in 1959) naturally figures prominently. Perhaps more interesting here, though, are chapters tied to the more grown-up question of how, once become a writer, to earn a living writing books of which one can be proud. Here, too, the themes and obsessions of her childhood have a way of recurring.

While working at the Manhattan offices of the magazine *Our World* after university, Marshall managed to sell her first novel to Random House. She describes, in her memoir, meeting with the august head of that storied firm. Slowly pushing her six-hundred-page manuscript across his desk to the young writer, Hiram Haydn offers his felicitations on the contract she’s just signed — and then, patting the thick sheaf of paper, declares that it’s now time for her to get back to work. “And the work, dear author,” the Brahmin editor says, “is for you to take this swollen, overwritten baby tome of yours and to extricate from it the slender, impressive first novel that’s buried there.” Counselling to take her advance someplace cheaper than Manhattan to buy the needful time for revising, Marshall seizes on the idea of going to the Caribbean. Leaving her publisher’s midtown offices, she takes the subway directly to the Lower East Side, where she buys, from the Orthodox shopkeepers in their yarmulkes and fedoras, the two extra-large leather suitcases she’ll take with her to the land of her parents, to try to gain, in finishing her novel there, the understanding needed to forgive them.

This anecdote speaks, on the one hand, to how Marshall met the challenges of getting work done (at a time before the advent of mass tourism to the Caribbean, when the US dollar went a very long way in Barbados). It also introduces a fact of Marshall’s writing life that would come to be such a recurrent theme in her fiction: that of travel as a means of both discovering the past and forging new syntheses. Marshall’s trip to Barbados (where she

would remain for a year) was partly undertaken to better understand the characters about whom she was writing. What her journey's initial routing through the Jewish blocks of New York's Lower East Side also suggests is another shared fixation with her mother. As Hilton Als has written of his youthful predilections in West Indian Brooklyn: "I felt that Jews, unlike Negroes, had made something out of their suffering — something distinct, rich, and literary, to which I wanted to belong." If the dreams of immigrant parents involved emulating Delancey Street's merchants, those of their writer-children accorded with those merchants' bookish cousins on nearby blocks.

Marshall has described how, in writing *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, she aimed "to make the immigrant story applicable to blacks." In a city where Jews had long given to that "immigrant story" its exemplary fiction — from Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) and Anzia Yezierska's *The Bread Givers* (1925) to Henry Roth and Bernard Malamud and beyond — this was tantamount to identifying her experience with that of those books' Jewish characters and creators. And so is it borne out in the novel. "Her house was alive to Selina" is how we meet the skinny ten-year-old with bangles on her arms whose story Marshall presents, from the start, as aligning closely with that of the daughters of Dutch and Scots and Jews whose ghosts still linger in this brownstone "behind [whose] grim facades . . . bodies crouched in the postures of love at night, children burst from the womb's thick shell, and death, when it came, shuffled through the halls."

Part of what separates a Selina Boyce and her progeny from a David Levinsky and his, of course, is race: whereas the longue durée fate of striving Jewish immigrants in the US has been about "becoming white," for brown-skinned West Indians that particular possibility was always closed. To Marshall, an aware black writer coming of age in the era of Civil Rights in America and decolonisation across Africa and the Caribbean, the recognition of this truth — and the aim of positing essential bonds among black people battling white supremacy worldwide — would become the key facet of her work. Yet in her writing in this vein, too, the idiomatic traditions of the Jews — from the very concept of "diaspora" to her description, in *Triangular Road*, of the Atlantic as a "whole sea permanently sitting shivah" — continue to shape the yearnings and diction of the female descendents of enslaved Africans who are her great subject.

•

Long before Marshall titled her memoir *Triangular Road*, the implicit geography of her work has been of a kind of Middle Passage in reverse. Reaching back from Brooklyn to the Caribbean, her characters' traversal of space is always also a movement back in time. Her work may be most distinctive, in the African-American literary tradition, for emplacing in its corpus a "third migration," from the Caribbean to America. But Marshall has also long been preoccupied — like many members of the generation that arrived after Countee Cullen asked "What is Africa to me?" — with the redemptive prospects of one migration more.

In her novels, Marshall has never travelled all the way back to Africa. But it is perhaps only predictable that her own return to "the third part of her tripartite self" should figure, in

Triangular Road, as a moment of redemption. That journey — which Marshall undertook as a member of an American delegation to a 1977 Pan-African arts exposition in Nigeria — takes up the book’s short final chapter. Reading her account of “Omawale” (“The child has returned” in Yoruba), one might feel glad that Marshall hasn’t ventured back there in her fiction. Confronted with the place that has long resided in her characters’ minds as the locus of a whole and rooted identity, much of the nuance with which this exemplary chronicler of the New World condition — that nourishing muddiness of identity, possessed by all of us not indigenous to this hemisphere — has always suffused her fiction, is supplanted with something like essentialism.

Far be it, though, to begrudge a great elder her belief. Especially when that belief is part and parcel with the human pathos with which she has always vested a body of work whose virtues put her near the front rank of postwar American novelists, and give Marshall a prideful place in the ongoing story of how the voices of persons from more and more parts of our polyglot polity have entered American literature. Perhaps what one should see as more crucial than these achievements, though — especially after reading *Triangular Road*, which raises as many questions as it answers — is the model she has always offered in her fiction to those paddling the waters she helped chart.

In the memoir she describes how she struggled, in a beautiful house in the Caribbean rented with the Guggenheim money garnered from *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, to write a second novel equal to her ambition. In trying to craft, from reams of historical research on the people of her mother’s home island, the book that would become *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, a terrible block descends. The block, she recalls, only lifted when she allows herself to fully know that as

a novelist, a storyteller, a fabulist, as it were, my responsibility first and foremost was to the story, the story above all else: the old verities of people, plot, and place; a story that if honestly told and well crafted would resonate with the historical truths contained in the steno pads.

“All of it,” she continues, “would be there for those capable of reading in depth.” And so, indeed, it is, in all the best novels of a writer distinguished above all by her mastery of those “old verities.” At the end of her homage to Langston Hughes, Marshall quotes from her mentor: “The poem ends, soft as it began.” So one might also say of a memoir whose final lines find Marshall, at the start of her ninth decade, looking forward to returning to “my primary love: the novel, the short story.”

•••

The Caribbean Review of Books, May 2010

Joshua Jelly-Schapiro is a doctoral student in geography at the University of California, Berkeley. He has written on Caribbean arts and history for publications including *The Believer*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Review of Books*.