

RUSSELL BANKS: INTERVIEWS

Interview with the Guadeloupe Association of English Teachers (APAG)

Suzy Roche

We are pleased to be here this afternoon and welcoming Russell Banks. We are the Association of the English teachers. So, here are a few words about the association, which has been existing since 1973, so celebrating this year the 40th anniversary, in December. We have been through many activities and this sort of activities- that is to say welcoming writers- is part of the activities APAG (Association des professeurs d'anglais de la Guadeloupe) has had since the beginning: welcoming writers from the Caribbean and from abroad. And also, among the activities, the association has always had a purpose to develop relationship in the Caribbean to allow people in Guadeloupe to know more about the Caribbean and the different islands. That is the reason why many trades have been organized so far and also writers from the Caribbean have been invited. And we were very pleased to see writers who have been there before coming over and say "we recognize some of the members of the association".

We are very short in time this afternoon so I know that roughly, you have understood that this is in keeping with this sort of activities, that APAG has always been glad and pleased to take part in this. What we are going to have this afternoon first is to have a few questions with our guest of honor: Russell Banks.

So we have been through the different books he has written so far because he still has a lot of books to write and this afternoon we are going to ask a few questions, to ask him to tell us more about the different ideas and so on. Not many of them. Of course, we will be frustrated because we have so many questions and we have been reminded that the time is very short. So that is the reason why you are thinking that I am speaking too much so I will try to make it short. So just a few questions - leaving aside, probably, the most interesting ones - that you may have to ask to Russell Banks.



Probably, I will have the privilege and the honor to ask this first question and I will tell you why: we know the subject of the symposium. We know that we are focusing on the Caribbean and I was lucky to focus precisely on one of the main Caribbean contribution. Russell Banks makes contributions to Caribbean literature, which leads us to a first question. My question is: in *Book of Jamaica*, the narrator is an outsider, experiencing life in Jamaica and observing the people there. You have been trying hard to strike this narrator, trying hard to use the right tone and behavior to respect, not to objectify the people of his observations; even claiming to be ultimate liver, actual object of the observations. You have come here to know yourself. So my question, to the author you are, is: what actually is the audience you had in mind when you wrote *Book of Jamaica*? To what purpose? I wonder if the observations of the Jamaican and their history were to some extent meant to allow America to learn or to understand more about itself?

Russell Banks

First, before I try to answer – I cannot say I can answer but I will try to answer your questions – let me thank you all for being here today. I am grateful for having been invited here and been able to spend time – good and useful time for me – with my colleagues, my fellow writers from all over the Caribbean and discuss with them and listen to them discuss very important issues with each other. So now, I will try to answer this question with regard to *Book of Jamaica*.

I think the start of the answer is to confess that when I am writing, in the process of writing, I do not have any audience in mind at all. I am not writing for someone out there. I once told a story about “Who are you writing for?” and I recounted something that a teacher did in a small school near where I live in the United States. She had troubles with her third grade students: they were very poor readers. She knew they were bright but she could not understand it so she brought her dog into class. And she asked the students to read to the dog. They came around the dog with their books and once they started reading to the dog, they were liberated and they became brilliant readers. And the best readers in the class were jealous of these kids reading to the dog because they wanted to read to the dog. So before long, everybody in the class was always reading to the dog. I say that because I write to my dogs. I have two dogs and they stay with me all day while I work and I feel as though I am writing to the dogs; and I think if they get restless, the audience stand up and walk out of the room, I look down to see what are the mistakes I have made somewhere. The point is, I do not consider the reader until after the book is finished and in the process of being published. Then I think: “what does this mean to somebody else?” and I get concerned. To be specific, with regard to your question and this particular text: I was aware that I was writing

about a material that was politically and historically loaded. I mean resonant with history and racism – the history of racism – both in the Caribbean and in the United States. And as a white American man, this was written in the 1970's and coming into this world and trying to understand it, trying in a way to penetrate what was essentially mysterious to me was going to be difficult because I was going to have to avoid the usual prejudices, assumptions and stereotyping that accompany that kind of investigations. And may I say, especially in the Caribbean. I knew all about that of course but I was also very interested in describing the journey of a well-intentioned liberal white citizen of the United States, trying to transcend, in a sense, his cultural, historical and racial limitations and see how far I could go in the eyes of the protagonists of this novel. And I think what he discovers over the course of the entire novel – I think I am trying to get to your question exactly – he – some of you may be familiar with it – identifies with Errol Flynn who actually is a murderer in the story and was in fact, historically, as well. He identifies with him at first because he is an American and he is white, he is powerful and he has money and so on in a poor country. And then he rejects that identity and tries to identify with the people of the island. And he gets very close to it but he comes up against the wall at the very end and the novel ends with him committing an act of violence with a machete and recreating, in an ironic and paradoxical sense, a very violent act that Errol Flynn commits early on in the novel. So he runs up against the barrier of his own skin color and the limitations of penetrating the mystery of the other or another human being. In this case, it has to be racial but it could be gender as well. It could simply be the other. So I was trying to raise these questions and understand these mysteries in the novel.

Antoine Toumson

When one reads *Cloudsplitter*, one is struck by the fact that the Bible is present all through. And I felt that you displayed an intimate knowledge that very few people can talk of. I was very sensitive to this as a francophone reader because we are not used to using the bible as much as you do. And so, my question was: how do you explain the presence of the Bible and what purpose does it serve? Don't you use the bible as some kind of prompt or prone in this complex and very long novel?

Russell Banks

First of all I want to thank you for reading that novel because it is about a thousand pages long. Anyone who manages to read that novel has my eternal gratitude.

It is an interesting question I think with regard of the use and the presence of the Bible in that novel. And it does run through as you say and in some ways it can be seen as a way to understand these characters. Because these characters – who were the two main characters – are John Brown, the 19th century abolitionist and terrorist who attacked Harpers Ferry in a very important way responsible for setting off the Civil War and he attacked to liberate slaves in the South. And it is his story that I am trying to tell through the eyes of his beloved son who was with him throughout his life and every crossing he has been right up into his father's execution. But these are people of a particular era in the United States – Brown was born in 1800, his son was born in 1825 – whose lives were imaginations, whose view of themselves and of the larger world around them was formed by the Bible and their relationship to the Bible. In some ways they are very typical of that era and especially of Protestants in the United States, which they were.

Brown himself was a profoundly believing Christian who in fact felt that the Bible was prophetic and predicted the events that were unfolding in front of him in the years leading up to the Civil War. His son is a more modern man in some ways and he is looking at these events with a greater skepticism than his father has in a more, let us say, realistic but perhaps more modern perspective on the events. So there is a tension between the two in terms of how they read the Bible. In another way, it is also an underlying structure to the story because this is in an important way, to me at least, the *Abraham and Isaac* story, told from the point of view of Isaac. When I was a child in Sunday school, and we were told the story of Abraham and Isaac, I always identified myself with Isaac. And it is a frightening story, a terrifying story. What if my father decided to sacrifice me to his God and I had to count on an Angel appearing at the last minute and save me? And I was glad to tell that story. It is a father and son story from the son's point of view. And the Bible points to it in a dramatic fashion I think. So there were these multiple reasons. Part of it was textual, historical and part of it was dealing with the characters and trying to make them plausible given the world that they live in, and part of it was thematic as well.

Guy Lubeth

My question will be in the continuation of Tony's who was talking about the foundations. We all got very emotional when you said that the Americas were born on the Goree Island. I used to think that the America was born with the Founding Fathers who came over from England, precisely with the Bible. We gave you a standing ovation because we thought that it was the first time somebody had tried to integrate the African American element into the very Constitution of the country. And the second thing I noticed, reading your work, is that you say it is a great store by the American

It is an interesting question I think with regard of the use and the presence of the Bible in that novel. And it does run through as you say and in some ways it can be seen as a way to understand these characters. Because these characters – who were the two main characters – are John Brown, the 19th century abolitionist and terrorist who attacked Harpers Ferry in a very important way responsible for setting off the Civil War and he attacked to liberate slaves in the South. And it is his story that I am trying to tell through the eyes of his beloved son who was with him throughout his life and every crossing he has been right up into his father's execution. But these are people of a particular era in the United States – Brown was born in 1800, his son was born in 1825 – whose lives were imaginations, whose view of themselves and of the larger world around them was formed by the Bible and their relationship to the Bible. In some ways they are very typical of that era and especially of Protestants in the United States, which they were.

Brown himself was a profoundly believing Christian who in fact felt that the Bible was prophetic and predicted the events that were unfolding in front of him in the years leading up to the Civil War. His son is a more modern man in some ways and he is looking at these events with a greater skepticism than his father has in a more, let us say, realistic but perhaps more modern perspective on the events. So there is a tension between the two in terms of how they read the Bible. In another way, it is also an underlying structure to the story because this is in an important way, to me at least, the *Abraham and Isaac* story, told from the point of view of Isaac. When I was a child in Sunday school, and we were told the story of Abraham and Isaac, I always identified myself with Isaac. And it is a frightening story, a terrifying story. What if my father decided to sacrifice me to his God and I had to count on an Angel appearing at the last minute and save me? And I was glad to tell that story. It is a father and son story from the son's point of view. And the Bible points to it in a dramatic fashion I think. So there were these multiple reasons. Part of it was textual, historical and part of it was dealing with the characters and trying to make them plausible given the world that they live in, and part of it was thematic as well.

Guy Lubeth

My question will be in the continuation of Tony's who was talking about the foundations. We all got very emotional when you said that the Americas were born on the Goree Island. I used to think that the America was born with the Founding Fathers who came over from England, precisely with the Bible. We gave you a standing ovation because we thought that it was the first time somebody had tried to integrate the African American element into the very Constitution of the country. And the second thing I noticed, reading your work, is that you say it is a great store by the American

Constitution. You call it a sacred document. And this constitution is obviously the basis for the American dream, which makes America such a magnet to millions of people from all around the world. But at the same time, you mention the atrocities that were committed in building nation. So my question is: how do you reconcile the sacredness of the American Constitution and all the founding values with the violence, the inequities of its construction?

Russell Banks

Well, you know, the Bible did not make us good. And the US Constitution does not make us good citizens either. And also the Constitution, despite it being a sacred document, in my mind, I take that phrase from the African American Novelist Ralph Ellison. He was, to my knowledge at least, the first to say that. The declaration of Independence and the Constitution were his sacred documents and I began to think about them from his point of view. An African American man saying this in 1950 before the Civil Rights Movements began. We were still dealing with reconstruction in a sense and apartheid throughout the Southern United States, and racism – legitimized and institutionalized racism throughout the United States. But he could still feel that. And I think he was feeling it because he thought these are our ideals, these are not our laws that bind, and that we live by. These are our stated ideas and we have to constantly try to live up to them, and most of the time, fail to live up to them. But I think that is what I was trying to get to. One cannot forget that originally the Constitution legitimized slavery, legalized slavery and then institutionalized it. Our slaves were regarded as a three fifths of the human beings in the Constitution, until the thirteenth amendment, until Abraham Lincoln. It is a flawed document, it might be sacred but it is flawed and it is constantly, not reinvented but amended. Over the generations it has been amended many times: it finally allowed women to vote, for instance. It is a continuing, ongoing process.

But I think that what you are asking me is how can I point to the ideals of the United States and, at the same time, account for our failure to live up to those ideals, because my work describes our failures much more than they describe our successes. And, I think, part of that is just my temperament and the temperament of most of novelists is to regard failure with greater interest than we regard success. I think, while he writes about happy families and said happy families are all alike, in some way I feel the same: why don't you write about the good things in the United States? And I do occasionally get that complaint, especially from book reviews: they all Russell Banks really depressing books, even if it is wrong in the United States. French people love that of course, they are very happy to see that. I sometimes think that my popularity in France is due to

the fact that I criticize the United States so aggressively. I hope that is not true but... It is the case. As a human being, as a citizen of the United States, I look at our failures with anguish and sometimes anger, much more than I do look at our achievement or success. I am very aware of how many of our people are left out of the American dream. And then I am aware of the people who realize the American dream. I know that it is there and know this due to its presence in my life. I am the first person in my family to go to university, I am the first person in my family to own two homes, I am actually the first person to own one home, I am the first to be able to send my children to college. So in a sense, I have realized the American dream but I am not interested in it and I am not hurt by the achievements of the American dream, so much as I am angered by and anguished over the millions and millions of Americans who do not realize it. And it is what I end up writing about. You write out of pain and you write out of anger more often than satisfaction or pleasure. And this is what causes me pain and anger. It is the best answer I think I can give you.

Suzy Roche

As we have the time for another question, we will shift to a more technical one. And if I have more time I will ask another one. Again: the *Book of Jamaica*. Focusing on the narrative mode, which seems original to me, it refers to something I have never seen before. First, you start with a first person narrative and then, another person narrative and in the end you have a third person narrative, with a name which is not the real name, which is kept a secret. And this reminds me of what you also did in *Lost Memory of Skin*. You never have the name of the character. Just tell us what was the purpose of that.

Russell Banks

You are right: the story, the novel proceeds in stages of change of points of view. You are quite alert too. It does move from first person present tense into second and third person and then finally in the third person past tense. So it is very distant. It is an attempt to go from a complete sense of self that he has at the beginning of the story when he arrives in Jamaica. He is centered in an existential way, completely in himself and defining the world around him in terms of himself. He gradually becomes deeper subtilized and objectified to himself. He begins to see himself through the eyes of others toward the end. In the end, he can almost see himself in an objectified way: a third person way. So I was trying to track the evolution of his consciousness with regard to

his own personal identity by moving though that. I was taking liberties. I knew it was unconventional and it is the sort of things I would discourage my students from doing when I was teaching. I would have said: "No, no! It has to be a consistent point of view, you cannot keep moving from the point of view". But rules, I think, exist to be broken and I did break them but I had a purpose in mind. If I did not think it would work, I would have changed it. But I think there was also a narrative structure to that book – that I was trying to quiet – that is closer to the narrative structure of a long meditating poem and so I was trying to move through perspectives which fiction does not always invite. It is certainly – actually writers do it much more today than they did back in the 1970's when I was writing that book. You know, it is a book I have not looked back since 1978 so you are much more familiar with that book than I am.

Suzy Roche

And what is the purpose of not having the real name of the character?

Russell Banks

I did not have a real developed reason for not naming that character. In the end, he is given a name by the Jamaican people. He was living with them and they start to call him Jonny and it is a kind of generic name for a white man. He takes that name on and begins to believe he is a different person than the one that he was when he began. But I did not have a specific reason for not giving him a name. Sometimes you start writing and you do not really know the name of your characters, so your 30 or 40 or 50 pages in and you are in a situation where you have to give the characters a name because someone is addressing to them. In his case, I went for probably 30 or 40 pages without having an incident that required me to give him a name. And then I realized I would rather like him not having a name. Somehow, it made him seem sort of lost in the world in a way I was attracted to and that I wanted to develop more. So once I saw the tone it gave to the story, I was reluctant to change that.

Antoine Toumson

At the beginning of *Cloudsplitter*, you wrote a disclaimer in which you were strongly insistent that the work should be viewed as purely fictional and not as historical. By writing a novel, I feel that you masterfully gave flesh to the character of John Brown.

You brought back to life that prerecession war period, which is deeply essential to understanding the history of The United States, a period when Blacks and Whites were experiencing one of those dual storages you talked about, in your Wednesday evening address. My question is: is fiction a means to keep heroic figures like John Brown from falling into caricature and if it is not, what is it?

Russell Banks

That is a very interesting perception and thought with regard to the function of fiction and dealing with characters in history like John Brown who can become caricatures very quickly and folkloric figures as well. But I did not set out to do that. If it happened to be the case I would be grateful and would accept it. One of the things that drew me to John Brown originally was that African Americans regard him as a hero of the very first order, even above Abraham Lincoln. And I am not saying the average African Americans but also intellectuals, artists, like James Baldwin, W.E.B. Du Bois, people like to have historically regarded Brown at the very top. White Americans, by a large, viewed John Brown as a mad man. What is interesting to me is that nobody disagrees about the facts. The facts of John Brown's life have been known since the day he was executed. He was really famous at his own life time, and Harpers Ferry was a huge illustration of it. He had been famous for a decade before that. Anybody that is standing, especially a white man, at that racial divide and is viewed so differently by two groups of citizens of the United States depending upon their racial heritage has really got to be saying something important. He must represent something important in our history as a figure. That was very moving to me and this is what drew me to him initially. Another thing that drew me to him was that when I was at the university in the 1960's, J. Brown was a figure that was invoked by the radical left. I was one of them. In the Civil Rights Movement and in the Anti War Movement, Brown was a historical figure that was invoked all the time so that you might even see a poster on a college dormitory wall or something. Twenty years later, fast forward to the 1980's, Brown becomes an emblem for the radical right. The radical anti abortionists who were blowing up abortion clinics and killing doctors who were performing abortions, among others, are invoking John Brown too. So that anybody who can become an emblem for the radical left and then, twenty years later, be an emblem for the radical right has got to be at the center of the Americans' imagination. It is where religion and violence cross over. And in principle violence is something that is central to our history. It is one of the reasons why someone like Martin Luther King is important, because he steps out that trap, he does not stay caught in that trap. He is the first figure of great importance in our history to be able to do that. So that is the mystery I was

trying to penetrate in this book, mystery I was trying to penetrate through John Brown as a figure. And I was not trying to save him, to preserve him from being a caricature or a folkloric figure although he has already become one in a way as much as I was trying to see the world through his eyes and through the eyes of his son. And as it turned out unintentionally, I came to understand terrorism in a way I was incapable of before writing that book. So that when 9/11 occurred and the terrorism that followed occurred, I began to see it differently that I would have, have I not written a book about a man who was denounced as a terrorist in 1859.

Guy Lubeth

So this is now about the paradoxes: you mentioned the idea that America is built on a dream and on a certain group of people that recall captains of industry: the Vanderbilt's, the Morgan's, or the Rockefeller's. Once more, you are pretty hard on them in your writings. You even put Steve Jobs and Bill Gates in the same bag so to speak. That is surprising to me because I would expect that modern American capitalism would have corrected the mistakes of the past and also, considering that the American economic model is now the inspiration behind the Chinese momentum. How would you account for that? You are still criticizing so severely free market capitalism and at the same time it has been so successful around the world and at the same time people like Bill Gates are heroes for some people.

Russell Banks

Oh no! I am definitely continuing my work as a critic of the free market capitalism. No question about it! I am not dissuaded in the slightest by the apparent success of the American economy because I am very aware of several other consequences of that market. And, there is now a greater gap between the one percent at the top and the ninety nine percent of the rest of the population that ever has existed even in the era of those industrials capitalists of the nineteenth century. It is only a cosmetic appearance of success of that economy. It is in many ways an abject failure: it is very successful at making a small number of people extremely wealthy. There is no question about that. But it is also at an extremely high price, a terribly high price. We are the worst educational system and the worst medical system of any industrialized nations. We are now, I think, fourteenth in rank with regard to higher education in the West and I think we are lower than that with regard to our medical system. We have the largest amount of people in prison in the world, higher than China, North Korea and Cuba.

Seventy percent of our people in prison are African American. There is a lot to criticize here. There are few things to praise and a lot more to criticize. In the end, you are asking me a political question as if I was a politician or a journalist and I am merely a storyteller and I want to affirm that. But what I do love is that about French audiences (I know you are English teachers but I think you are a French audience by a large margin) they always get to politics. You are supposed to be here to talk about the aesthetic and you would rather talk politics!

A speaker takes the floor

I object to being frustrated concerning the notion of terrorism you alluded to a few minutes ago. You said that working on the character of John Brown you were able to understand terrorism in a better way you would ever have been able to understand. You understood, in a particular way after 9/11, and then you stopped. You did not go further. So could you tell us a few words about this?

Russell Banks

I did not mean to suggest that I became suddenly sympathetic to terrorism or endorsed it as a means of affecting American policy abroad or at home, in any way whatsoever. But it helped me not to join the rush to demonize that followed 9/11 in the United States. The dehumanization of the terrorists that took place, starting on the 12th of September 2001, led a charge led by George W. Bush and his minions in Washington DC and picked up by the American media, normally not hysterical but totally hysterical in this case. It allowed me to drag my heels and not be rushed into a kind of a demonstration. As I said, I did not mean to suggest that suddenly terrorism was a good thing. I knew human beings did this and not devils, not demons but human beings who were misguided. They were not all mad. There was something else going on, something very complicated, something more buried in history and in hundreds of years of fear, and desperation. It just made me examine the world surrounding us during 9/11 very carefully. Thank you for following up on that.

Bernard Phipps

Sorry for being late because we were together this morning with Russell Banks and students at Camp Jacob and we took two different ways. We took the wrong

I have two questions. The first one: Guy tells me that this question has already been answered but as you say that stories are about questions, I will still ask the question. In the presentation of your novel *Lost Memory Of The Skin*, at the library of Congress, you talked about the reading disabilities of third graders and you said that someone had the idea to make them read stories to dogs and it worked wonderfully. The reading skills dramatically improved then you suppose that you could do likewise to write that novel because the stumbling blocks affecting the kids were basically the same that would stand in the way of liberty and bravery that the act of writing requires. What the writer that you are needs is to silence the potential reader way in his shoulder. In other words, the only way for you to write for the reader is first murder the reader and this, you say, is because ultimately – and probably in the first place – you do not write for the reader, you write for your dogs. So my question is: how much from the dog do you expect the ideal reader to be?

Russell Banks

Actually I have two extremely intelligent dogs. My dogs are little Scottish border collies, which is supposed to be the most intelligent dog of all. They know many words and really have a very large vocabulary. I expect my readers - at least I hope they are - to be intelligent and patient with me. When you decide to publish a book or you given the opportunity to publish a book, it is a scary moment because it is going out into the world and you have gone from your secret inner life and now you are going to go out in an attempt to enter the secret inner life of a stranger. Sometimes not even in the original language that you wrote. So it is a kind of a frightening moment that a person may reject you, reject your offer to join you in this intimacy. So I try to postpone that moment as long as possible in the actual process of writing and to eliminate any way, anything, imagined or real person who might censor me in any way, or make me insecure, or defensive or fearful in any way. When I began to write in my early 20's - now over half a century ago - I had no problems with that because I had no reader and no publisher. Nobody cared about what I wrote so it did not matter, I could lie all day, all night, I could write wonderfully crazy things. And then after a few years I began to publish works and I became conscious of myself as a writer and conscious of readers being out there and I had to begin to find ways to get back to where I was when I did not know what I was doing and when I was only doing it for myself. As I grown older, it has become a more conscious process trying to get back to where I was when I was in my early 20's. I think you have to not know what you are doing if you are a novelist and a true artist. You have to trust your conscious, your subconscious, your vaguely remembered images that pop up and your intuitions and you cannot really do this if

you know too much about what you are doing. But the older you get and the more you think you know what you are doing and that becomes a tricky operation. My mentor, a man who was an older famous writer back in the 1950's and 60's, a Chicago novelist named Nelson Algren used to say: "A writer who knows what he is doing does not know very much". And I think that is true, you have got to know more than you can consciously know and that means you have got to not know what you are doing. I do not know if that answers your question.

Bernard Phipps

Yes it is exactly what I was expecting. Now, the second question. So, in the same presentation you say you do not know what you are doing when you are writing fictions most of the time, you only dimly know what you have done after you have done it. So we can compare, you know, a fiction writing to some sort of sleep walking. And you go and refer to a writer who was one of your mentors and whose name slips my mind and you quote him. Is it to say that writing is like dreaming? The writer goes to sleep for a couple of years, because writing a book takes an average of three years, and wakes up with a story that sometimes he cannot make head or tail off, leaving that job to the critics shrink.

Russell Banks

The critics can shrink it if they want to and reduce it to psychoanalysis. I have no control. But I do like your analogy to dreaming. The novelist John Gardner once described writing fiction, (he was quite a wonderful writer), as basically a controlled sustained hallucination. I think that comes fairly close to the experience of it. I might also call it auditory and visual hallucination. When I am writing dialogues, for instance, for me it is an auditory hallucination. I am literally hearing voices. And when I am writing descriptions or expositions I am seeing things that are not there. At least they are not there for anybody else but they are vividly there to me. I believe that if I cannot see what I am writing – and I mean literally see it, unfolding on the page as I am writing it – how can I expect my dogs to see it or my readers to see it either? If I start to lose sight of it and I can no longer see the landscapes, or the room or the person, then I say I am making a mistake here. I have messed up the prose somehow, I have lost it and I have to go back and erase it and start all over again and put the sentences in a different order. Just as if I was trying to paint a landscape and it is starting to look muddy and fuzzy and I was losing it. I have to stop and redesign the picture in the same way. So it is very like that I think for me and I think for most fiction writers too.

A speaker takes the floor

How do you come to be so interested into the plight of Black people and so involved into the cause of Black people?

Russell Banks

That is a question I have been asked many times in the past and it is a difficult one for me to answer. I taught at Princeton University for many years and two of my closest friends and colleagues were the novelist Toni Morrison and a philosopher, two of the most prominent African-American intellectuals in the United States. They, and I, would sit around and say: "Ok, where does this come from?" and together we would talk. I know it comes from them but where does this come from for the white guy who comes from New England and probably never even met a Black person until he was 18 years old and ended up in Miami, Florida. Where does it come from? And it is difficult for me to honestly answer that question, except that on close examination I can say that I felt marginalized myself when I was very young. The reasons being poverty, divorce, alcoholism and violence. I was the oldest of four children. By the time I was twelve years old I had come to feel very marginalized through those four elements, (poverty, divorce, violence, alcoholism). By seeing myself in that regard, it made me perhaps more sensitive to people who, for historical reasons, felt marginalized. I felt marginalized for domestic reasons, family reasons really, which were related because my father abandoned my family when I was twelve and then we went through extreme poverty, we went from working class to underclass. I think that is the only thing I can point to and say this probably sensitized me in a way because at first my culture did not me to be sensitized. I was indeed raised in a racist culture: rural, new England, white racists surrounded me. In fact, most of them were related to me. I mean this was the world and I was raised in it so how come I did not get stuck there? That is the only answer I can give. This points to early feelings of alienation and marginalization.

An English-speaking delegate takes the floor

I have just arrived today so I do not know if you have already answered this question. You are here in Guadeloupe, French West Indies, and French Caribbean. I just wanted to know whether you have read our writers, meaning writers from Guadeloupe or Martinique. What do you think of them?

Russell Banks

The writer who I am most familiar with from Guadeloupe is Maryse Condé, whose work I enormously admire and who is a writer I think of great courage and intelligence. The writer from Martinique whose work I know is Patrick Chamoiseau, who I think is a world class novelist, and a remarkable and wonderful writer too. Unfortunately, I have to read both of them in translation and I know that both of them, I have been told by a large number of people, are much better in the original language than they are in translation, especially Chamoiseau. I think that he has probably not been well translated in the United States. *Texaco* was the book I was most taken by, I could see, this is a major book.

McDonald Ernest Dixon

I chose to come at this late minute because my question is not actually addressed to you Russell Banks. It is an interest that I have as a writer and the question in addressed to Suzie Roche. As an English teacher, I would really like to know what are the instruments, in particular the literature and the writers that you use or another teacher like you uses to teach English in Guadeloupe?

Suzie Roche

Good thing this question is addressed to everybody in the room so everybody is going to help me to answer this question talking about instruments. The instruments we use to teaching, you talk about literature instruments? You mean which authors we study?

McDonald Ernest Dixon

Books and texts.

Suzie Roche

We have two purposes when we teach English: the language itself, (the basis of the language), and also the culture of the English speaking world. Our students get acquainted to different aspects of English speaking world culture and especially, as you

know, we use textbooks. But some textbooks may leave aside the Caribbean instruments. So us, in our teaching – I think this is one of the, maybe, advantages we have when we teach and the difficulty also we have to face for our job – we have to chose – and we are free to do so – the instruments we have. So it is always our responsibility to situate what we think, that our students are in a Caribbean context and that they must also know the Caribbean. Normally, idealistically, I would say that all teachers here in the lycée will situate that, we have some texts talking, dealing with problems concerning the Caribbean and also America, Australia and so on. But I may confess that maybe not all of my colleagues will try to bring the attention on a better knowledge of the Caribbean culture. I think that first, this is one of the reasons why the Apag started a few years ago with some teachers who thought it was necessary to situate that the teachers try to consider the Caribbean context. At that time a book was released, *Trade Winds*, and some teachers, who are in the room, worked on *Trade Winds*. They issued a book and also a lexical with fruits and vegetables, and in the primary schools (because we start teaching English nowadays in primary schools), my colleagues are always playing with the names of fruits and so on. So it is our choice.

Antoine Toumson

Maybe I can put a word in to say that studying Caribbean culture and literature has been a constant fight. We are the only French speakers in the Caribbean. Most people speak English and Spanish so we have to fight our way to get in touch with our brothers from the Caribbean. And it is not an easy thing to study books by English writers, to get extracts for works and invite authors like Michael Anthony, Earl Lovelace, and so forth. But I want to insist on this aspect: it is not easy and we feel lonely. We feel like we have to get in touch and we call on you to come with us.

Suzy Roche

The association would like to thank you for attending and I would like of course to thank Russell Banks. And I hope that you have discovered enough from him now. I am not advertising and I know we do not have much time to read everything we would like to read but believe me it is worth it.