

∞ READING ROUND ∞

The Writers That Inspire Me

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I SIGHED AND LOOKED DOWN on the electric-blue cover. Nothing but static passed between *Ulysses* and I. We were not friends. ‘A classic!’, my lecturer enthused: ‘purgatory at best’, I muttered back. My second year at university – with its focus on the modernists – was my most difficult. I understood their intention but felt the modernists had gone too far. I admired but did not like them. Why should we struggle to understand what the hell is going on? Who does that serve? If I’m constantly thrashing back and forth to confirm the plot-turns how can I possibly enjoy the storytelling?

To be clear, I was not consistent but I think I now understand why. I grew up in a sea of linguistic gold. But to swim in the water required a degree of codebreaking, especially for a Black British kid. My aural landscape consisted of rum drinkers and saints, (re)mixing Scripture effortlessly; the idioms and accentuations of many Caribbean islands; Punjabi, Irish, Urdu, Italian phrases picked up from friends; White middle- and working-class speech; and of course American TV shows. I understood that language was rich but meaning not always immediate. I think, *then*, I approached Shakespeare’s clotted verse as another code to crack but the richness even on first reading suggested it was worth the effort. Shakespeare’s complexity was a fair cop — the language of a time. What the modernists seemed to suggest is that men and women like my mother and father were not welcome. It was not for them. If it was not for *them* what did that say about *me*?

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I felt secure with the realist novel. I felt a particular affinity with writers who brought the 'folk' into literature. *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* were early inspirations. Much later I encountered Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Sam Selvon's *Lonely Londoners*. Steinbeck, Zora, and Selvon stood back without judging the characters they created. In doing so they spoke to my experience of the loving, cruel, dysfunctional souls I had known but rarely seen faithfully depicted.

I made my peace with the modernists when I first read Ralph Ellison's Afro-surrealist wonder *The Invisible Man*. Here was a grim fable of Black experience where ideas and storytelling met in accessible alignment. It was nonetheless a linear novel.

The tree? Sethe's tree? *What is that?* I queried anxiously a few pages in. I prayed this promising poetic novel *Beloved* was not another turgid experiment. Gradually the tree grew into focus — scars. Morrison's genius deepened as I read until I could not reach the bottom. The nonlinear narrative mirrored memory — trauma memory. Sethe cannot tell us up front what is this tree for its birth is too painful to be easily confessed. And like any survivor speaking to the unbroken — what's the point?

Ellison and Morrison have been my guides since those days of my youth. I search out the writers whose experimentation with form appears to come from a sincere attempt to bring us closer to meaning. I search for those writers who can play with ideas but never at the expense of enthralling storytelling and lucid prose.