

∞ READING ROUND ∞

The Writers Who Inspire Me

Juliet Gilkes Romero

I THOUGHT THIS WOULD BE easy, but it's not because there are so many! Over time, I have admired the works of Lorraine Hansberry, C. L. R. James, Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and countless others. But currently there are two I frequently revisit.

I'll begin with Hilary Mantel. In 2017 she opened her first of five Reith lectures with this: 'St Augustine says the dead are invisible, they are not absent'; Mantel then added, 'You needn't believe in ghosts to see that this is true'. Mantel proved this with her arresting story of Henry VIII from behind the eyes of his enigmatic chief minister Thomas Cromwell. The *Wolf Hall* trilogy made Mantel the first and only woman to win the Booker Prize twice. But it was her ability to deliver vivid, complex characters and hair-raising political drama that first caught my eye.

Like Mantel I have long been fascinated by how the past haunts the present and have written several historical stage plays including *At the Gates of Gaza* and *The Whip*. As I discovered, writing about the past is a fiercely contested battlefield. And now the toxic weaponization of language in the so called 'culture wars' increasingly threatens the way a writer approaches and navigates the past. But historical drama is fertile territory that I'm not willing to quit and this inspirational quote by Hilary Mantel keeps me battle ready: 'The most helpful quality a writer can cultivate is self-confidence — arrogance if you can manage it. You write to impose yourself on the world, and you have to believe in your own ability when the world shows no sign of agreeing with you.'

∞ READING ROUND ∞

Zora Neale Hurston says this: ‘Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it doesn’t make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me.’ This quote revels in Hurston’s wit and self-belief. Rejecting conventions of what it meant to be a woman and a Black writer, Hurston was a free spirit, both professionally and personally, and blessed with a unique artistic voice. But her decision to document the lives and folklore of poor southern black people and then to write her novels in the same vernacular attracted condemnation. Hurston’s anthropological fieldwork left her vulnerable to criticism from some black intellectuals. They claimed she pandered to white audiences. The truth is Hurston was an extraordinary folklorist who from 1927 onwards travelled the dangerous southern states in a car she called ‘Sassy Susie’ with a pistol for protection.

Hurston left an indelible mark on me as a young journalist. I was first inspired by her book *Tell My Horse* recounting her audacious expedition in 1936 to Jamaica and Haiti where she documented life and folklore. I wanted to try and follow in her footsteps and so in 1997 I arrived in Haiti on a BBC research bursary to study the African diaspora. *Tell My Horse* helped me to tread my own investigative path with confidence and respect for the spiritual fabric of a country challenged by poverty and a military coup but also defined by resilience, creativity, and racial pride. Hurston wrote four novels, including her most famous *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, two books of folklore, an autobiography, short stories, and plays. Her work fell into obscurity until the 1970s, when Alice Walker rediscovered her unmarked grave and anthologised her writing in a groundbreaking collection for the Feminist Press. Thank God.