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Garfield Ellis

For Nothing At All

Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2005, 172 pp.

Reviewed by Nadia I. Johnson

In his riveting second novel, *For Nothing At All*, Garfield Ellis returns to the turbulent period of 1970's Jamaica to explore the senseless political violence that not only marred the hopes and aspirations of a newly independent nation, but also informs the present day violence that keeps the beautiful island under siege. By contrasting narrative and landscape, Ellis illustrates the manner in which Jamaica was transformed, seemingly overnight, to a place and space where boundaries are drawn, best friends become bitter enemies, and young boys are abruptly thrust into manhood in a most pernicious way. *For Nothing At All* emphasizes the lack of opportunities that are available to young men coming of age amidst political violence, but even more significant, it demonstrates the improbability of remaining neutral in a culture that insists upon the choosing of sides. At the fundamental core of the novel, Ellis examines the devastating repercussions that arise when politicians pit "uphill" against "down the lane" dissolving the very fiber that binds communities together.

The novel chronicles the coming of age of Wesley and his friends: Colin, Stevie, and Skin, who enter into manhood amidst the political turmoil that threatens to engulf them. They begin their teenage years mesmerized by the stylistic performance of the gunmen that bring war to Central Village. They are fascinated with the cowboy-inspired shootout that takes place between former friends Spragga and Patrick in the middle of a busy thoroughfare, a scene written for the big screen. And it is their desire to mimic this stylized display of masculinity that makes them more than eager to volunteer for the neighborhood watch. Armed with cutlasses, they patrol the perimeters of their housing scheme that lies directly between the two warring political factions. Buoyed by their perceived masculinity, they revel in seizing those who innocently violate curfew. However, they are ill prepared for the harsh realities of war, as Stevie's metaphoric death is indeed the death of the innocence that will change their lives forever.

The novel is organized in alternating chapters that present contrasting narratives of idyllic childhood and a turbulent entrance into manhood to emphasize the dramatic changes that take place in Jamaica as a result of political warfare. Roman numerals and a larger font are used to denote the chapters detailing the childhood of the protagonist Wesley and his friends while those depicting their traumatic teenage years are marked by ominous titles such as "The night Stevie died." A smaller font is used for these denser chapters.

Landscape also plays a vital role in contrasting the two narratives. Wesley's recounting of their days of "sculling" school and playing "chevy chase" are filled with images of endless sugar cane fields, inviting rivers, enticing swimming holes, and expansive cow bush—seemingly a borderless region with limitless possibilities. However, the chronicling of their teenage years is replete with images of perimeters that must be guarded, gullies and highways that cannot be crossed, and a separation of "up the hill" and "down the lane,"—a newly reconfigured space of borders and limitations.

As the protagonist Wesley and his friends become painfully aware of the encroaching threat of political violence, they arm themselves with "weapons" that they feel will protect them from having to choose sides. Wesley relies on his education and Colin hopes that learning auto-mechanics as a trade will keep him out of the war but it is their fierce loyalty to friendship that inevitably ropes them in, for it is Skin's fascination with guns that brings the war to their front door. In a desperate attempt to save his friend's life, Wesley crosses the boundary that he once guarded, and it is at this pivotal moment, when his life lies in the hands of a former friend, classmate, and the local village fisherman that he is able to articulate the senseless nature of the war that is threatening to rip Central Village apart: "But politics had come. The highway had become the dividing line. And my friends on one side were killing my friends on the other" (58).

Despite his effort to stay out of the war, circumstances force Wesley closer and closer to the battle line. After passing seven subjects, Wesley leaves high school and is unable to find work. Although he is frustrated, Wesley is unwilling to seek the favor of a politician, because he knows that the latter will one day expect something in return. Wesley is keenly aware of the politicians who slink in and out of the villages at night only to be followed by the explosion of guns and funeral processions. But at the urging of his mother, he finds himself in the very place that he has tried to avoid—in the middle of the war.

As timekeeper at a new construction site, Wesley has hopes of unifying the JLP (Jamaica Labour Party) and PNP (People's National Party) supporters who line up on opposite sides day after day. However, he quickly discovers how far reaching the hands of the politically aligned gunmen really are. Reminiscent of his youthful days, Wesley must rely on his chevy chase skills to save his life and ultimately must choose a side. He chooses the self-preservation.

At the end of the novel, Wesley is in jail and not yet willing to confront the world outside that threatens to snatch away not only his life but also his humanity. Instead he chooses to remain in jail, to the bewilderment of many, to reflect on his childhood and try to make sense of why and how the days of sculling school and afternoons at the river came abruptly to an end only to be replaced with guns and death, and "for nothing ... for nothing at all" (172).

Ellis's use of language is flawless, as he moves between a seamless blend of Jamaican Creole for the dialogue of his characters and Standard English to reveal the most inner thoughts of his protagonist Wesley. His use of Creole will undoubtedly be appreciated by a Jamaican

readership, but it is also readily accessible to a non-Jamaican readership. His characters are so convincingly drawn that they pull the reader into the existence of their troubled sad world.

Ellis's poetic prose takes his reader back to a painful period in Jamaica's history and brings to the forefront the difficulties faced by former colonies in forging independent nations. Its tale of political warfare and corruption has universal resonance and yet he brilliantly preserves its Jamaican specificity. His second novel and fourth book, *For Nothing At All*, undoubtedly solidifies his position as a frontrunner in a growing field of Jamaican authors who seek to narrate their world in their own language and style. Yet this is a timeless novel that will appeal to the humanity in us all.