


8-1-2014

Supplying Salt and Light by Lorna Goodison

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Herron, Pamela. "Supplying Salt and Light by Lorna Goodison." *The Goose*, vol. 13, no. 1, article 21, 2014,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol13/iss1/21>.

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Lyrical Sense of Place in *Supplying Salt and Light*

Supplying Salt and Light by LORNA GOODISON

M&S, 2013 \$18.99

Reviewed by PAMELA HERRON

Lorna Goodison's new poetry collection, *Supplying Salt and Light*, takes us on a journey around the world, weaving shades of color, wisps of music, and historic memory into a glowing tapestry of life. She takes us to Madrid, Toledo, Seville, and Lisbon. We sit in Paris cafes. We travel from West Germany to East. We travel in chains on slave ships across the ocean still drumming, still singing. We hear the music of Goodison's homeland Jamaica mixed with Marley and Motown. She paints a glorious sense of setting from her beautiful city of gold Oracabessa to bustling Toronto. Her range of places is matched by a range of voice that keeps faith in the intelligence and understanding of the reader.

The first poem in the book is a vibrant re-interpretation of the fifteenth century text *The Craftsman's Handbook*, with instruction on the various colours of black, from "sable velvet soot" to the "black that is the source of light / from a lamp full of oil." This is the first of many poems that celebrate a culture and a heritage not to be forgotten. Throughout the collection the poems traverse the countless stopping places of the vast African-American diaspora, never preaching, rather sharing the vitality, the unquenchable spirit that sustains.

In "Remember Us in Motherland" Goodison says, "My foremother was legend on the Guinea coast / as the woman who, even with her tongue / pressed down with

iron, would not stop chanting." Her poems chant, sing, and whisper of slavery, of forgotten heroes, of dreams and reality. In the same poem, she mourns:

'Where in the world,' you ask, /
'are the burying grounds for slaves?'
And my mind answers: /
In the blue boneyard of the Atlantic;
along whale roads, railways, /
and highways; in mortar edifices of
empires, fields of sugar cane, /
cotton, tobacco, and humus at the
root of cotton trees; in Jazz, /
and Rocksteady, in our music. I
crossed with my people, you know. /
I came with them as chanter girl.

This elegy for the unnamed from slavery's dark history sings of their labour and a history of wealth and success built on the backs of others. As "chanter girl" she connects herself, and names herself, to chronicle the passing of the nameless ones who built nations for others. Goodison calls upon a collective memory from those whose song remained unsung. In this and other poems she speaks for the "lost souls." As she says in the final poem of the collection, "Canto I for Derek Walcott," "I marked well his footsteps." She makes it possible for the reader to also "mark well" these footsteps by illuminating their passion and their sorrow.

She pays homage to a wide variety of artists, writers, and performers with glancing references to paintings, musicians, authors, and actors of all races from all over the world. Her lines remind us of injustices in years past and present. She blesses "the little black girls stirring up soft zephyrs for Miss Scarlett," and salutes "Hattie McDaniel for accepting with dignity Hollywood's sordid boon." Her words pass lightly over

great writers who have influenced the world, like fingertips brushing over the spines of books in a library. Her touch glides over Tagore and Thomas Merton and a host of others.

Like the African *griot*, the storyteller and keeper of legends, she reminds us of stories and places that should be remembered. Her lines dip like holy water into saints, churches, and prayers that comfort and uplift. The rhythm changes, shifts, and sways with the direction of each poem. One bounces with a hip-hop jazzy beat while another becomes a requiem, the next a song of sadness and then of hope and light.

In addition to being a poet, Lorna Goodison studied as an artist. As a fitting introduction to her poetry, the cover of *Supplying Salt and Light* is a translucent, almost ethereal watercolour painted by her called "Mothers of Revival." In it, four female figures stand tall leading us into her words.

Regarding the title, *Supplying Salt and Light*, Goodison often deals with images and uses of light in her poems both in this collection and in past works. Salt appears in the crossing of salt water oceans, the blood and sweat of slaves and workers in sugar cane and cotton fields, and the blood given by those gone before. Salt is a part of the weft of human history and legend and it is woven into the poems in this collection. Goodison invites us to share salt with her and lights the way for us.

Goodison fulfilled the advice, or was it a prophecy, of "My Teacher Lena," who gives the best advice for any writer. When told "I wanted to read books with characters / who looked and sounded more like me. / And she'd said, 'You are a writer; write what you want to read.'" Goodison

writes not just for Jamaicans or people of colour. Her lyrical poems are for the world.

To borrow Goodison's own words from her poem "Bookmarks for Eyes," "Bookmarks, he says, they will keep reading / for you long long after you close your eyes." The music and imagery created in Lorna Goodison's poems will stay with you long, long after you close the book.

PAMELA HERRON is a writer and educator in the University of Texas at El Paso in El Paso, Texas teaching for Asian Studies, English, and Humanities. Her areas of research include Confucianism and how it applies in the modern world, China and Chinese immigration particularly in the El Paso/Cuidad Juarez area, the importance and diversity of cultural identity, sustainability, and writing and teaching literature for young readers. Her book of poetry *En l'air: A collection of poems created in the air* was published this past fall.