

## PREFACE

The first thing to notice about Roy Heath's novels is their aura of timelessness, a quality that, in Jeffrey Robinson's view, defines the Guyanese novel. Asked by A.J. Seymour whether there was a special quality discernible in Guyanese writing, Robinson replied, fumbling for a word to describe our literature, that it seemed "strangely mystical". Later, he writes, "I should now prefer to say that there is, in the major works by Guyanese writers, a similarity of theme and attitude. The theme is the relationship between the mind and the world and between both of these, considered as a dialectic, and time. The attitude is one that renders these relationships not so much as philosophy or theory, but as riddle or mystery."<sup>1</sup> In Heath's own words, "My preoccupation with time is, I believe, the exile's way of dealing with the separation from his roots."<sup>2</sup>

If proof were needed as to how far the literary imagination can take us into the minds and motivations of fictional subjects, then Heath's creative output provides rich and rewarding scope. Glimpses into the flawed psyches of irrational, illogical characters who lack self-knowledge and who people Heath's nine novels cause us to reflect on the words of Josef Conrad: "The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all irreconcilable antagonisms that make our lives so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous, so full of hope. This is the only fundamental truth of fiction."<sup>3</sup> Heath has practically refined the introspective Guyanese antihero, his quest for cultural identity and selfhood as tortured and elusive as society's quest for freedom and self-determination.

In *From the Heat of the Day*, Sonny Armstrong is an arrogant, intemperate husband and father, incapable of rising above the negatives in society;

Esther is warped by her desire for revenge; while Genetha's flawed bid for independence ends in her too easily yielding to society's vices. Rohan, in *One Generation*, rash and impetuous in his desire for freedom, the equivalent of the Nietzschean Superman, expends his life's energy in a reckless romantic affair. In *A Man Come Home*, Foster is a pathetic, naive character who allows his family to be shamelessly exploited; Bird, who wants instant wealth, depends on a mythological creature to save him from humiliating poverty. In *Orealla*, Schwartz is a cruel, blackmailing master and Ben is a thief, a rebellious servant and an impulsive murderer. Galton Flood in *The Murderer* and Mrs Singh in *The Shadow Bride*, wilful and disillusioned souls, in search of cultural identity but trapped within alien and irrelevant conventions, are driven to the point of derangement. Gladys Armstrong in *From the Heat of the Day* and Lathi in *The Shadow Bride* are two spineless women with weak egos who cannot break out of the stranglehold of custom and culture and fail to act to preserve the self. Trickster figures, such as Fingers, Bird, Gee, Kwaku and Pujaree are linked to the perverse society, and Ramjohn in *One Generation* is as much a villain as the nameless Minister of Hope. Heath's rebellious characters all pursue their fates to the point of heroic inversion, while it is left to a few minor characters to discover the possibilities of salvaging their lives (and the texts) from negative outcomes, at the same time offering a positive vision of renewal: in *From the Heat of the Day*, Doc extols the virtue of family even as he abandons his own family; in *One Generation*, Sidique thinks of making a new life in the sandhills away from society's corruption; in *A Man Come Home*, Stephanie, the artist, with the creative impulse necessary for survival, offers Christine an option to a truthful way of life through art; and in *Orealla*, Carl must return to his staid, predictable community life at Orealla after finding no accommodation in the upside-down world of Georgetown.

Heath has, however, found occasion to celebrate every one of his flawed fictional creatures: their humaneness, their eccentricities, their weaknesses, and their strengths, even if they are social misfits and psychological wrecks; we come to appreciate the negatives and the positives of every situation.

The texture of Heath's fictional world is worth noticing: it draws its raw material from a geographical setting where numerous waterfalls punctuate the landscape, among them the transcendental Kaieteur Falls, churning rivers and choppy rapids, kokers and trenches. The mighty Amazon in

its back yard, the murky Atlantic Ocean at its front door, Heath's fictional world is dominated by powerful water images that serve to intensify the dread of already vulnerable characters. Abandoned on the seawalls by her moody husband, Gladys Armstrong considers suicide in the lashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean. An atmosphere of fear and vulnerability engulfs Genetha, who constantly listens for the menacing sounds of the Atlantic, "like a jaguar on the prowl . . . so silent is the night that she could hear the sea pounding the shore nearly a mile away".<sup>4</sup> The Georgetown ferry stelling is the scene of a brutal crime in *The Murderer*, and Galton Flood disposes of the body of his murdered wife in the murky Demerara River. When the Minister of Hope thinks of eliminating his antagonist, Correia, he lures him to the dark waters of the Conservancy Canal, the very canal that the truant, Kwaku, breaches in his idleness, causing flooding and economic havoc in nearby villages. The jealous Genetha, who finds herself on the Vreed-en-Hoop ferry only to catch sight of her brother's pagan lover, peers into the frothing, churning river that mirrors her own mind seething with tormented thoughts. Kwaku crosses the Berbice River backwards and forwards, wracked by his self-delusions that he is an important medicine man. When Ramjohn's wife, Deen, is weary of life, she plunges to the bottom of Rohan's well.

For Heath, landscape is an ambivalent metaphor for freedom and entrapment, deployed largely as a mechanism to reinforce his theme of existential distress in a suffocating society. His writing conveys an overwhelming sense of futility and failure to transcend the daunting physical realities of the colony he depicts in nine novels. Even though the population of this vast land is sparse, Guyanese society is cramped, crammed in the narrow coastal strip between seawall and backdam, ocean and jungle. A character in *One Generation* succinctly summarizes the unyielding landscape of coastal Guyana: "The ocean on one side and the forest on the other, threatening to crush us between them."<sup>5</sup>

Heath's estranged characters dwell on the margins of the landscape: waterfront sawmills and stellings, urban tenement yards, market cookshops, brothels and rum shops. In *Orealla*, Mabel lives in a muddy tenement yard where "coconut husk islands form stepping stones across the mud lakes". This is the 1920s and the yard remains in the very same state of dereliction, occupied by Gee and Muriel in *A Man Come Home*, Heath's novel of independence – a

testimony to the chronic poverty bequeathed by colonialism. The congested city remains the focal point in Heath's novels, and a very few of his characters harbour no more than a subliminal attraction to an unknown jungle interior: Armstrong constantly thinks of "Bartica, the gateway to the vast hinterland, the hinterland which made Guyanese such odd people" (*One Generation*, 58), but he lacks the will to venture through that symbolic gateway to explore either the vast, unknown hinterland of country or his dense, unknowable self.

That these works end in tragedy and collapse and still leave us with a vision of the open-endedness of human experience is testimony that Heath has revolutionized the form of the regional novel. We notice in his corpus a longing for community, especially when society threatens to disintegrate around vulnerable characters. We come to see in the tragic end of old relationships the possibility of renewal, the liberation of characters from the victim status bequeathed to them by family and by history, and the anticipation of something new and inventive after foundering and failure. Heath's characters are imbued with a sense of self and identity, a desire for change, and a few of them with revolutionary ideas: one is convinced that the way to change and renewal is to "burn everything to the ground and start all over", while another character advises: "Throw out everything and start over." In *One Generation*, Sidique rejects his narrow ethnic enclave on the Essequibo coast and dreams about humanizing a space outside the village, among the sandhills, with the possibility of a fresh start, free of the shenanigans of family and a poisoned past. Ben dreams constantly of the idyllic life of an Amerindian reserve at Orealla on the Corentyne River, a dream that is, however, never fulfilled. Heath seeks to revise the premises of a flawed society, and while his characters may be expendable, the writer's vision endures – a vision of the necessity for a new and creative architecture of community.

Through the utterances Heath puts into the mouths of his imperfect characters, and through their relationships with each other, his vision of renewal and wholeness becomes clear. Both the alcoholic psychopath, Sukrum, and the progressive Dr Singh in *The Shadow Bride* possess an unmistakable sense of belonging as Guyanese; the trickster, Kwaku, and the criminal, Ben, both rebels against an unjust social order, remind their employers that humans are not (owned like) chattel; Genetha struggles for her humanity in the face of a wily lover, a vengeful servant, and an intolerant society; Foster plucks up

the courage to strike out against his villainous friend, Gee; Ben goes to the gallows with an invincible human spirit intact; and Mrs Singh rebels against threats to her cultural certainty in a colonial backwater. These characters expend their life force in rebellion but also in quest of human dignity, of a new order of community, of reprieve from a bitter past and a devalued sense of self. One hopes that this work can manage to alter some mistaken impressions conveyed in the existing criticism about Heath's vision being one of failure and pessimism.

No Guyanese or regional writer before Heath has been so consistent in dismantling the class paradigm in the quest for a more democratic society. No non-Indian writer has displayed such remarkable cultural knowledge and such psychological depth in depicting East Indian experience in the West Indian novel. Heath's portrayal of the volatile nature of the multiracial, multicultural society, with a symbolic clash of the two major races, is convincing. His investigation into the institution of the family, community and traditional values by which a society coheres is admirable without neglecting the matter of the valid pursuit of individual freedom. Heath also dares to experiment with the integration of the Amerindian into mainstream society in *Orealla*. His vision of assimilation (in *One Generation*) in a society characterized by racial and cultural diversity needs to be pondered on in an age when cultural distinctiveness is a valid concept.

In almost every one of his novels we witness change in the social structure occurring almost imperceptibly. The fragility of class boundaries and the erosion of social barriers deepen the reader's understanding of a society in flux, of colonialism teetering to its end: a middle-class woman marries below her social class; a servant is in control of a middle-class Queenstown household where she would normally be "kept in her place"; a young woman from a comfortable middle-class home in Queenstown becomes a homeless prostitute seeking shelter in the hovels of Albouystown, while a destitute family is ensconced in her house through trickery; an unemployed idler with questionable wealth dares to acquire a prestigious Brickdam residence; a vagabond is temporarily master of a mansion on Vlissengen Road, and, later, a vagrant takes over.

The virtue of Heath's oeuvre lies in its presentation of a credible psychological realism together with its redeeming vision of man and society. It mediates

a line of thought in the region that the damage done under colonialism, more especially in psychological terms, remains a permanent scar that is mirrored in the socio-economic and political structures of the post-independent society.

Analyses of the texts yield ample evidence to support the argument that Heath is an urban/coastal writer who seeks to revise the complex terms of existence of his people. They reveal Heath's vision of the need for fundamental change in the society after independence, even if so far only articulated via art forms, and his insistence that only a renewal of consciousness can bring about the psychic changes sought by independence. So far, he is the only Guyanese novelist with an entire corpus devoted exclusively to the city and its crippling arrangements: its brutal social differentiation, its relentless poverty and trope of dispossession, its squalid range-yards and slums, its brothels, its corrupt political culture and its power structures. His idiosyncratic novels all add up to a lacerating critique of Guyanese society and a broadside against the political establishment. It would be fair to argue that a body of work that investigates urban failure, human uncertainty, psychological frailty and a redeeming vision is Heath's unique contribution to both the Guyanese and the regional novel.

Heath's novels participate in a view of the cultural importance of art as a reservoir of society's values and beliefs. Heath explained that he "laid much store by cultural customs and mythology" and built his narratives around man's reliance on such phenomena, for instance, the Water Maid, obeah, white-table ritual, séance, Kali Mai puja, his trickster figures based on the fables of Reynard the fox, and so on. Such influences and allusions helped to illustrate the "inexplicable and the irrational in man and his condition of existence".<sup>6</sup>

The novels achieve two effects: deepening understanding of the evolving society and increasing self-knowledge. Heath is likely to be claimed by many communities for the universalism of his ideas, but this work will demonstrate that this novelist has first dealt patiently with the specifics of his society. Heath's novels go far in giving twenty-first-century Guyana a clearer idea of itself, in offering the individual a deeper understanding of self and, fundamentally, of what it means to be Guyanese. His works sit firmly within the West Indian literary canon. It is perhaps fitting to introduce some broad comments from Susan Fromberg Schaeffer:

Heath's novels are unlike any I have ever read. British reviewers have called them exotic, and they *are* exotic, although not because of their unfamiliar settings (all of them are set in British Guyana) or the extravagant behaviour of the characters who inhabit the world Heath creates. What makes these novels exotic – and intoxicating – is how wonderfully they accomplish what the Russian critic, Viktor Shklovsky, said all art must do: they make new rather than merely make known. Heath's world is no more exotic than that of Franz Kafka, but it is no less exotic, either. After some acquaintance with Heath's characters, the reader finds them not in the least strange, but so familiar as to be frightening, so that everything we know to be true of them – their sudden plunges into lunacy, their tendency to take a step and find that the ground beneath them is no longer solid – we come to suspect is also true of ourselves. Our view of ourselves is made new, is changed, by reading Roy Heath. His work is the best illustration I know of the axiom which holds that in order to be universal a character must first be portrayed in all his unique, even eccentric specificity. The shock of Heath's work – and it is a shock – comes, when we realize, not how different we are from his Guyanese, but that we are identical with them.<sup>7</sup>

Our aim is not to seek a comfortable critical position on which to rest. We can only hope that this work will serve to create an opening for other critical inquiries and for the discovery of more meanings in Heath's novels.