

Lorna Goodison

Doctor of Letters

Durham Cathedral, 5 July 2022

Lorna Goodison is the most notable Caribbean poet writing today, internationally renowned, critically lauded, and popularly beloved. She is the author of twelve volumes of poetry, three collections of short stories, and a memoir. She is Professor Emerita at the University of Michigan, where she was the Lemuel A. Johnson Professor of English Language and Literature and African and Afroamerican Studies.

Lorna was born in 1947 in Kingston, Jamaica, on the 1st of August – Jamaican Emancipation Day, on which the abolition of slavery is commemorated. Seventy years later in 2017, she was invested as the Poet Laureate of Jamaica, becoming the first woman to hold the title. She wrote:

'I don't think it is an accident that I was born on the first of August, and I don't think it was an accident that I was given the gift of poetry, so I take that to mean that I am to write about those people and their condition, and I will carry a burden about what they endured and how they prevailed until the day I die.'

Goodison has long been committed to giving a voice to those who have been silenced, and to ensuring that marginalised communities have access to literature and learning. On graduating from high school, she drove the bookmobile of the Jamaican Library Service, ensuring that deprived rural populations had access to high-quality reading materials.

The powerful achievement of Goodison's poetry lies in her supple aptitude for what linguists call 'code switching': the ability to meld and interweave the diverse discourses and dialects of her homeland into a radically inclusive yet still authentic poetic voice. Within a single poem, Goodison effortlessly 'switches' between standard English, Jamaican Creole, and Iyaric or 'Dread Talk', the speech form of the Rastafari. This richly fertile lexical wellspring means that Goodison is uniquely well placed to tell the untold stories of her forebears and fellow Jamaicans.

Through Goodison's work, these stories have been shared around the Anglophone world. Several of her poems have featured in Transport for London's Poems on the Underground series, including 'I Am Becoming My Mother', chosen to commemorate Windrush 70 in 2018. In 2019 Goodison was the recipient of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, the highest honour available to writers in the Commonwealth. She is the first Jamaican to receive this award.

In 2012, she became the first non-British writer to be appointed Festival Laureate at Durham Book Festival. Her commissioned poem 'The Journey' was inspired by two sculptures by Fenwick Lawson, 'Cuthbert of Farne' which stands on Lindisfarne and 'The Journey', just a short walk away in Durham's Millennium Place. In that poem Lorna describes St Cuthbert as 'Wonder worker. /... Caretaker of the flock and the book. / ... in all creation / nothing alien to him.' These words lend themselves to the occasion today, as we celebrate the achievements of this poet, this 'wonder worker' in language, this caretaker of stories from Jamaica whose imagination nevertheless ranges far and free, even to this 'crag in a loop / of the Wear: Dunholme, where the lost dun cow / was found.'

Chancellor I present Lorna Goodison to receive the degree of Doctor of Letters honoris causa.