

## Mervyn Taylor A Belmont saga-boy turned poet

By Andre Bagoo Monday, April 7 2014

IT WAS when his father died that things changed. Mervyn Taylor, 73, still recalls it well.

"My high-school career was shaky," the Trinidadian-born, New York-based poet says. "I was doing okay but I went into decline. My dad died when I was 13. I think as I hit 14 I got to that age where I started to become interested in clothes, in how I looked, girls, and partying. I didn't go bad because he died, but I started trying to combine studies with a little bit of, you know, hanging out."

Taylor is seated at a small table in an Indian restaurant around the Queen's Park Savannah. It is a few days after Carnival, when he played a sultan. He appears mischievous as he recalls his purported descent.

"I will always remember my mom got really concerned at the time," he continues, recalling how, on the Lord's Sabbath, he was always busy focusing on several activities in Belmont, where he grew up.

"I started hanging out up the street. It was exciting. There were Dutch parties where you would bring a bottle of something, normally on Sunday evening. We could barely afford the bottle we were carrying and many times guys would put half-water and half-cider."

Taylor continues, "Wherever there was a party we went. I developed a real interest in music. Joey Lewis was popular at the time. He used to practice on the corner of Pelham Street and Reid Lane. But the Norman "Tex" Williams Orchestra was the band of choice. That was the band. Played incredible music. When they played at a fete, the women would crowd around the guitarist. Those things became my interest. This was the 1950s."

This is the poet who, later on March 29, 2014, presented the W E B DuBois Award to Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott at the Black Writers' Conference, Medgar-Evers College, Brooklyn. At that event, Taylor made a well-received speech on the nature of poetry. It was not an easy task considering the status of the honoree involved.

"I did not go bad in terms of mugging people in the street," Taylor states over dinner. "I was still a good kid doing some school-work. I was never disrespectful, but I really had this thing for just hanging out."

Taylor has somewhat different advice for aspiring poets out there.

"Keep a notebook," he says. "Write your lines then do what is the hardest part. Edit and re-write all the while looking at poems by established poets to see what a poem looks like. Train your eye to see your heart to have compassion and your mind to be disciplined. Then listen for your own voice, it will surprise you."

Mervyn Taylor was born in Belmont on December 18, 1941, the year of the attack on Pearl Harbor. His father Julian was born in Barbados, and was a railway conductor.

"Sometimes I rode with him. My mom, Agatha, came from Venezuela," he says. "I was born right here in Belmont, in Belmont Valley Road, up near Zed Road. I lived near what was the Shango Yard up there with my mom."

He notes, "All kinds of people came out of Belmont Valley Road. For example, David Rudder came out of Belmont Valley Road. When I was about five, my father – who did not live with us at the time, he lived on Rosalind Street – bought a house at Warwick Lane and moved us down to the flat. Walcott says, 'To go downhill from here was to ascend'. And so we moved down and I grew up in Belmont." Taylor went to Belmont Boys RC then Belmont Intermediate.

"Andre Tanker was one of my classmates, as was Johnny Boos who would later run a disco in town," Taylor recalls. "There was Trevor Anatol, Courtney King, Kenwyn Smart, Winston Rawlins, Archie Thompson, Winston De Goveia, among others."

Taylor remembers the night when he won what was then called an exhibition (later Common Entrance and then SEA).

"It was a very big evening in my life," he says. "I remember being thrown up in the air when close neighbours found my name in the Evening News. I went to my father and the first thing I said was, 'Well I got the exhibition, what about the bicycle?' My father said, 'What bicycle? I don't have the money.' I said, 'Of course you have money. You always have money under your pillow.'" His father insisted on not getting anything. Then, a few days later Taylor got his bicycle as a surprise.

Taylor writes of his father in his poem, 'Picture of a Man at Peace', in his third collection *Gone Away* (2006). That book was preceded by *An Island of His Own* (1992) and *The Goat* (1999). In 2010, he published *No Back Door*. His latest book, his fifth, is *The Waving Gallery*, from which he is expected to read at the Bocas Lit Fest on April 25, alongside the Trinidadian/UK poet Vahni Capildeo.

From Belmont Intermediate, Taylor entered St Mary's College where he was doing well until his father's death.

"My grades were going down. My mom got concerned.," he says. She staged an intervention, calling in two male role-models to speak to him. "They spoke to me for three or four hours of talking and asking me what I wanted to do with my life. It ended up with everybody in tears." But it was from these tears that a germ of what Taylor would later become emerged.

"They asked me what I wanted to do. I said write. They said write what? I did not know how to articulate it. It was not yet poetry." The intervention worked.

"I would stay behind in school everyday and start over from theorem one. This is what brought me back up to par.," Taylor says. "Finally, I ended up leaving school with a second grade, which allowed me to qualify for a job at the Treasury." The future poet and teacher – who has worked with youths in prison – worked for four years as a second-class clerk in the Treasury, making sure columns were added correctly. That was from 1960 to 1964.

"I was able to buy a fridge. A lot of people did not have a fridge at the time. I got a car. I got my licence. Took my girlfriend to the beach after Maracas, Tyrico I think," Taylor says. "I had money to buy clothes I liked. In some ways I became a kind of saga boy. I was real dapper. I was dressing and having a good time. Continental suits were in style at the time. As much as you guys now like the slim-fitting suits, those suits were the thing."

Taylor would play mas and remembers becoming a member of a group of saga boys called Amboy Dukes.

"The name came from an American group. It was a big deal at the time. There were bad john boys," he says. It was perhaps a premonition.

Taylor, sensing a kind of inertia setting in among those around him at the Treasury, made a decision to go to America, like some key relatives had before. A brother, Ansil, a boxer (subject of the poem 'My Brother the Boxer' in *Gone Away*), and aunt, Bertha, were among them.

"I came to America," Taylor says, still in that country even as he speaks over dinner around the Savannah. "What I remembered most when I first came out of the airport was how loud it was. This was 1964. This was September. I started school at Howard University. I spent two weeks in New York, then I went down to DC, met my first American girlfriend." The times were, for him, exhilarating.

"It was the height of the whole Black Power movement and poetry was an essential part of that movement. I wrote a few things for The Hilltop school newspaper. I wrote a couple of short poems," he says. But it was really in classes that poetry came to him in a strong way.

"John Lovell taught a course on Walt Whitman," Taylor says. "I think that opened my eyes to the possibilities of poetry: how it could flow. We studied *Leaves of Grass*. I remember something happened during that class when Dr Lovell was absent for a few days. His wife had died but still he came to teach the class. He was really devoted to the idea of poetry. He said it was better doing this than sitting at home. That never left me."

Taylor was also taught by one of the great American folk poets, Sterling Brown, whose first book was *Southern Road*.

"He had been a whole part of a movement in terms of literature and black expression. He used to have students come to his house and roundtable things. His wife was Daisey," Taylor says. "Eventually, he went through some changes and there was talk of suspension. But it was inspiring."

By 1968, Taylor graduated with a BA in English and headed to New York. Along the way, he met Carla Thomas and Otis Redding, got a job in the garment district making, "ugly women's coats, working as a charge clerk, writing receipts." Then, after a year, he took a job at Plenum Publishing Company.

"It wasn't what you think, they published Russian, Math and science journals," he says. "I would be proof-reading the translation. Publishing was different then. They would cut and paste. You had to cut blocks of type and stick them and line it all up. I met very unusual people." But writing called.

"I wanted to get back into writing or start some kind of workshop and somebody gave me a number for the American poet Nikki Giovanni," he says. "So I called her and she was really sweet and she said the writer John Killens runs a workshop at Columbia. I started this. One night, Derek Walcott came and substituted for John." He recalls being "fresh" with Walcott who tried to get the workshop members to have a more open approach to poetry, to go beyond reactionary, political writing.

"Derek was saying every poem does not have to be this politically conscious thing," Taylor recalls. "I was full of it, and said things down in the islands are not all that honky dory. I was saying there needs to be a revolution down the islands. I was being fresh with myself."

Today, Taylor has settled down a little now that he's a grandfather. His son, Ihsan Taylor, though not a writer has inherited an interest in words and is an editor at the *New York Times* where he writes the *Paperback Row* column. Ihsan is married to Becca and they have two children Julian and Zadie (named after the writer Zadie Smith). Taylor's daughter, Suchitha is a therapist and is married to Jude, they have two children, Sarai and Taj.

Today, the saga-boy and bad john of times past is so reformed that he gets a little sheepish when it comes to Carnival. This year, he says, he enjoyed himself. But there was something on his mind.

"I liked the Carnival, though I felt in some ways it interfered with the work," he says. "With Carnival, I am sure that somewhere I am paying the price for that. The poet should be really observing, taking it in. The poet should play poet, not mas. I've always felt this dichotomy, like if I was more serious about the work I would not be spending so much time with the mas jumbie." But however costumed, Taylor, and his poetry, continue.

Mervyn Taylor and Vahni Capildeo will read at the Bocas Lit Fest on Friday, April 25, at the Old Fire Station, Abercromby Street, Port-of-Spain, at 2.30 pm. Admission is free.