

NEW DANCE STEPS TO A JAMAICAN BEAT: A CONVERSATION WITH OLIVE SENIOR

Interview by Robin Brooks*

Olive Senior is one of the most well-known Caribbean writers of our time and her oeuvre which spans nearly three decades bears witness to her giftedness with the written word. Senior, born and raised in Jamaica, is often celebrated for her collections of poetry and short stories, including *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) and *Summer Lightning and Other Stories* (1986) for which she won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Her non-fiction works such as *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English-Speaking Caribbean* (1991) and *The Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage* (2003) also reveal her depth of knowledge in the culture of Jamaica and the wider Caribbean region. Recently, Senior delighted her fan base with the publication of her first novel, *Dancing Lessons* (2011).

Published a year shy of Jamaica's 50th anniversary of independence, *Dancing Lessons* chronicles the life of Gertrude Samphire, a middle-aged woman temporarily living in the elite Ellesmere Lodge retirement home in Jamaica because a hurricane makes her rural-area house inhabitable. Her estranged oldest daughter Celia, now a sociologist and famous TV talk show host, arranges for her to stay there while the house undergoes repairs. Much of the novel focuses on Mrs. Samphire's past and her relationships with her family, particularly with her aunt and grandmother who reared her, her ex-husband, and her children, Celia, Junior, Shirley, and Lise. Celia was a bright student as a young girl and catches the attention of the white American missionary couple who ran a summer bible study program. Over time, Celia begins living with the couple in their large house in the hills of Kingston. Their lifestyle contrasts with the rural lifestyle of the Samphire family and adds to the many reverberations of class in the novel.

Dancing Lessons also captures the tense and unnerving interactions between Mrs. Samphire who does not have much formal education and the formally trained residents in the retirement home. Unlike the other residents, Mrs. Samphire has experienced a troubled life, from her unaffectionate upbringing and shame of being an illegitimate child to her distressing and, at times, heart-breaking relationships with her children. Before returning to her restored house, Mrs. Samphire and the other retirement home residents eventually form a congenial community after recognizing that their days are literally numbered. The narrative closes with Mrs. Samphire and her now adult children attempting to heal their strained and fragile relationships with each other.

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Reminiscent of some of her other works, themes quite visible in *Dancing Lessons* are relationships/friendships, rural/urban differences, class status, education, and political corruption. Present, too, are powerful motifs and symbols, including dancing/music, writing, mangoes, and a garden (a familiar presence in her writing). I met up with Senior at the University of the West Indies, Mona before she conducted a workshop for high school students preparing for the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE), which features *Gardening in the Tropics*. In the interview, Senior discusses various aspects of *Dancing Lessons* and ultimately reveals that readers learn about much more than dancing lessons after reading her novel.

Brooks: So thank you, first, for speaking with me.

Senior: My pleasure.

Brooks: I know that you have written collections of poetry and short stories and, most recently, your novel, *Dancing Lessons*. Also, I know that writing, for you, is interactive; you're writing for a reader. However, I am still interested in your craft and the process of writing. How was it different to switch from writing poetry and writing short stories to then writing a lengthy novel? Did anything change?

Senior: Not really because I'm just into the writing. I don't think "I'm going to write poetry." I'm either in the moment of writing poetry or of writing fiction, and I write nonfiction, as well. The only difference with the novel is that I thought I was writing a short story, it just happened, so I kept on going.

Brooks: For a long time! That's a lengthy novel.

Senior: Well, my first draft was relatively short. I spent a lot of time building it, developing scenes and characters after the initial draft. The difficulty was not the length so much as dealing with a lot more complexity, a lot more characters. The actual process of writing wasn't any different because the way it's written is in short takes, as you can tell. It's not a conventional novel with lengthy chapters. What I found is that when I write a short story or a poem, I have it all in my head. I don't mean I memorize it. I have the entire picture of the short story in my head, from start to finish. So, I can play around with it. I do a lot of writing in my head. With the novel, I had to be taking notes, making notes. So, just as a process, it was more complex.

Brooks: So, which form do you prefer at this point?

Senior: It doesn't matter. I'm interested in articulating experience in different ways. So I don't call myself a novelist or a poet. I call myself a writer. Right now, my current book is nonfiction.

Brooks: Oh, yes.

Senior: I've written an *Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage*, which is based on research—

Brooks: And *A-Z of Jamaican Heritage*.

Senior: Yes, and *Working Miracles*. So I'm a communicator.

Brooks: And that bridges over to the next question. You say you're trying to articulate a particular idea. I cannot help but notice the sociological concerns in your writing. Issues of gender and class are so pervasive. Specifically with *Dancing Lessons*, you have Mrs. Samphire, who is from a rural background. She was living in a damaged home, and now she's living in a retirement home where

“the rich people park their parents” (5). So, of course, there’s a lot of class tension there. I want to know, do you intentionally engage issues of class?

Senior: No. It comes with the territory. Everything in Jamaica is about class. You perceive people and you immediately locate them along a space—the way they speak, the way they dress, the way they behave, etcetera. We are forever making judgments about each other. It’s just an intrinsic part of life. So, I don’t sit and think that I’m going to write a novel about class. I’m writing a novel about Jamaicans and Jamaica. I’m writing out of experience of how people behave in given situations. I know people and I know the society. But I’m not a sociologist.

Brooks: Yes.

Senior: I’m a creative writer trying to depict the world as I see it.

Brooks: You said, just a moment ago, that that’s how it is in Jamaica.

Senior: Well, in every country in the world. There’s no country in which class does not play a major role, and we need to accept that. The world turns on class. Historically, it always has. And by that, I simply mean that there is inequality or there is stratification. Not everybody is equal, and that’s how the world is. I don’t even see it as a negative or anything; I just see it as how life develops. There are some people who are struggling to move themselves up, and there are some people born in a certain class who move down, but that is what gives dynamism to life, to history, and that’s what interests me as a writer. And I’m saying that these class markers—whether it’s skin color, it’s hair texture, it’s speech, it’s where you live, it’s what kind of car you drive—all of these matter. They’re part of what, in fiction, we call characterization.

Brooks: Yes. And I know that’s the way you see it, but you’d be surprised to know that some people would deny that, claiming class doesn’t really affect people.

Senior: Oh, we’re in a lot of denial, about race, class, all sorts of things.

Brooks: And Mrs. Samphire, in *Dancing Lessons*, definitely points out a lot of the class indicators among the residents, from their clothing, to their accessories, to their speech mannerisms. I mean, everything is documented.

Senior: Yeah. But, can I just say she starts off negative, but there is a sort of enfolding. You know, once she starts distinguishing people as individuals, then the class thing is not as great. There is class-consciousness, but class is not an insurmountable barrier.

Brooks: Exactly. How would you classify Mrs. Samphire’s class level? Some people would say she’s a part of a working class, but I’m asking you because she has a house helper, Millie, and she is on four acres of land, even though it was acquired through marriage.

Senior: I wouldn’t call her working class because working class, to me, is an urban phenomenon. She comes from a rural background where things work differently. So, within that rural milieu she comes from the “best family,” although they rejected her. The thing about her is she’s very well-read. One of the things I wanted was to demonstrate how books can save you. So, in a way she sees herself as a cut above the ordinary people. Within the rural milieu, she’d be considered middle class, despite the fact that she’s not very well off.

Brooks: Okay, I see.

Senior: And her husband, too. I don’t use working class in relation to rural Jamaica. Where I grew up, everybody had a little piece of land, everybody had independence. People worked for them-

selves or even if they worked for others, it was not like going to work for, say, a factory. Within that rural milieu, you do have class stratification. Her family would be at the top, her family of birth...her father's family because they are light skinned and have some land. So even though she is dark-skinned, she does derive status from that association, though that doesn't help her much when she comes to town.

Brooks: In the rural context, how would you describe the people who didn't have land? So, if you have her father's family at the top and she's in the middle, how do you describe the people in the rural environment who were at the bottom? What do you call them?

Senior: I guess, peasants. I don't have a name for them. You are suggesting something more cut and dried and clearly defined than it was. There were lots of other ways that people at the bottom economically could derive status—through skills, talent, character, performance of their children and so on.

Brooks: But you would differentiate those people at the bottom of the rural community from those at the bottom in an urban setting?

Senior: The difference is that many people in the rural community would have access to a bit of land, a little house, even if it is on what is called family land. So, even if you're going out to work as a laborer on somebody else's land, you would probably have some sort of identity and stability. So, the situation is a bit different from, say, the person who migrates to the city who has nobody and lives in a little room somewhere or is crowded in with a million other people and has to hustle for work and so on. I'm not suggesting that this applies to everyone in every case. I am talking about my personal experiences. And I feel that social relationships are very different in the urban environment; one's engagement with the other is different. The rural/urban is something I write about because I've experienced both, and I think there's a difference, without reducing it to issues of 'class.' The urban/rural breakdown, I think, still persists, to some extent.

Brooks: Even today.

Senior: Yeah. If you can provide your own food, you're okay, even if you're a very poor person. You go dig your yam, and you pick your breadfruit. So, I think, in the Jamaican context, there is that difference, too, of having some level of independence, something to fall back on.

Brooks: Wow. I find that very interesting because in her rural setting Mrs. Samphire would be a part of the middle class, but once she moves to Kingston and is a part of this new setting, this retirement home, I think at one point the narrative even says that the other residents were at least two levels above her. And, certainly, they don't see her as being part of their elite society.

Senior: Initially, they don't. But, also, part of it lies in her behavior. She makes no effort, at the start, to be integrated. So, we're seeing it through her eyes. And, of course, the ladies at the table are upper class and would look down at her, the way she looks, the way she carries herself—initially, they're quite shocked that she's coming and sitting at their table. But part of it, too, is her own attitude that she brings. Because that's another thing: if you're discussing class, it is also about what each of us brings to bear on the subject.

Brooks: Can you say more?

Senior: Well, I'm saying everything in that book is seen through her eyes. And, at first, she feels very uncomfortable. And she is looking at everybody through the prism of her own experience, which is very limited. And yet over the course of the book so much of her vision changes. Take, for

instance, the old school headmistress, the English woman, Miss Pitt whom she loathes. And who is quite objectionable to everyone. But yet, Mrs. Samphire comes to recognize her as someone who has fallen in life. She's white; she's privileged, in a way. She was a school headmistress, which was a very high status position, but now she's left alone, with a tiny pension eking out an existence. So, which class does she belong to? So, I'm saying, I don't see class as simply—

Brooks: Cut and dried.

Senior: No, no, no. I like things to be nuanced. I don't see things as simply black/white or rich/poor or anything. I'm much more interested in exploring the dynamism that's inherent in varied human relationships.

Brooks: I want to go to the subject of education, briefly, because after Mrs. Samphire is left by Mr. Samphire—he leaves her for another woman—she says that she swallows her pride and asked him to continue paying the school fees for Junior. She says that, “I truly wanted my children to have the best and, as I saw it, only education would give it to them, since I had no legacy” (67). Do you think education is the only vehicle to upward mobility within Jamaican society or Caribbean society in general?

Senior: Well, all parents were like her. You must get an education because it was seen as the path to a better life. People don't talk about upward social mobility—I'm calling it that. It was just simply, how are you going to get a job? How are you going to be better than your parents? People still make enormous sacrifices to educate their children, as I note in my book, *Working Miracles*. Mrs Samphire is operating out of that consciousness, and so she's willing to ask her husband for this one thing, keep our boy, our son, in school.

Brooks: Yes, certainly, I understand. And do you think education was the *only* path to upward mobility?

Senior: Well, not the only one, but it has been the main route out of poverty for dark-skinned people who have had fewer options in this society than the light-skinned. But people perceive different paths—color is seen as one important path which is why some bleach their skins. It's about perception. People perceive other paths, and one of them is race, or in having the right skin color, hair texture. It's the same in America.

Brooks: Well, colorism and shadeism, which is a preference for a lighter skin tone and discrimination based on that lighter skin tone, definitely, it exists.

Senior: Yeah. And this is why people in the old days talked about lightening the color. Where women would prefer to have relationships with lighter-skinned men to give their children that edge—that still persists. Why are people bleaching if it didn't, you know what I'm saying?

Brooks: That's one of the questions that I have for you because during recent years here in Jamaica, particularly in the downtown area, there has been an increase in people bleaching their skin, despite the dangers of it.

Senior: Sure, and it's global. It's happening everywhere.

Brooks: Definitely.

Senior: Africa, all over.

Brooks: And I wanted to know, why do you think people are doing that? Is it to ascend upwardly as far as class, or is it shame, is it self-hatred?

Senior: I don't know why they're doing it, why individuals do it. But I really think part of the problem is our inability to enable everyone in the society to access the good things of life, however they interpret it. Therefore, if you are prevented from accessing even the basics of life, then, you're going to say to yourself, how do people get what they have? And how can I get it? And if your perception is that it's because that person's light-skinned, you're going to try for that. Everybody is looking at it differently. Some people will understand that it's education, some will understand that it's color. Some people understand it's who you know. This is how it plays out in every society.

Brooks: Yes. And I wanted to say, as far as making a comparison to the US context, definitely colorism plays a role, but living here in Jamaica and reading scholarship about class and skin color, it seems that it's a little more pronounced here.

Senior: I think that's part of the legacy of—well, you have slavery, too—but I also think part of the problem here is persistent poverty. In America, a lot of people are enabled, because of the nature of the society, to improve their lives. Here, there's no welfare. There is no cushion for people at the lowest level. So poverty, I think, is a very significant factor in shaping people's ideas and philosophies and notions of life, and their notions about what can take you out of poverty. So, it just seems to me that people are always seeking ways of transcending their background, even if it's through criminal activity. Some do it legally. Some do it through education. Some do it through bleaching, some do it through marrying up, some do it by having men give them money or look after them or set them up—we're all human beings, and we're all seeking the same things. So, all these things we're talking about are just representing how individuals seek to improve their lives.

Brooks: One place in the narrative that was a surprise, both to the reader and Mrs. Samphire, is the part about the letters...the letters that Mr. Bridges and his fiancé were writing about Mrs. Samphire, calling her first the "Mad Country Cow" and then the "Little Country Mouse" (273). What was the purpose of including the letters? The narrative could have left that out, but those letters were quite significant, and it changed the perception of Mr. Bridges. What was the purpose?

Senior: Well, it just happened. [Laughter] But first, I want to say that the letters were not written by Mr. Bridges. Mr. Bridges was probably just writing to his fiancé, feeding her information, not necessarily malicious. Those letters are coming from this bitch, this malicious, horrible, woman.

Brooks: [Laughter] Margo, okay.

Senior: I didn't plan it. Mrs. Samphire just discovered this packet of letters and read them. That became a turning point for her in terms of her own perception of herself. For one thing, it made her very angry. It changed her behavior. She takes to her bed. She's ashamed and hurt. She says she wants to die. But then she gets angry. And it's her anger that moves her. So, in the novel, you do need to create strong emotional reactions. That's the turning point.

Brooks: Yes.

Senior: And, to me, this is what the letter does to her.

Brooks: In reading this novel, I laughed, I cried, it was like a good movie. And normally, I don't get so dramatic with novels, but this was very refreshing.

Senior: Yes. It was dramatic. It was almost over the top. But something had to happen to move her. And we knew—I hope the reader realized—that she was fantasizing about Mr. Bridges because, you know, he was being nice to her. She had this bubble brewing. This is a woman who's not ex-

perienced in life. Everything is through fiction and through books. So, something had to happen there to really shake her up, and it happened to be the letters.

Brooks: I know we're coming towards the end, but I want to ask about nature, specifically gardening. Because I know that plays a big role within your works. Within this particular novel, the garden that Mrs. Samphire starts—in my opinion, it seems even that can be read as symbolic of class differences, to an extent, because the residents of the home get into a competition about who had the best gardener.

Senior: The best gardener! Yeah.

Brooks: So, there's a difference between the physical act of gardening and actually having a gardener. What role does the garden play in this particular novel?

Senior: Well, again, it's not just about class but of the rural/urban environment because Mrs. Samphire is a country woman, and she's into gardening in a real sense, of knowing the seasons and the plants and when to plant, and she's done planting herself. Whereas, in the urban gardens of the other residents, you hire a gardener. You give directions. So I'm making that point about being somebody growing up in the country, and being close to nature in a real kind of way, and somebody who grows up in an urban environment who has a beautiful garden, but it's a garden that's created and maintained by someone else. It's not the same as getting your hands dirty.

Brooks: Yes, quite different.

Senior: On the other hand, Mr. Bridges who is also of the elite says he used to garden, in that sense. So, I don't think we should read too much class into it as we read a difference between people who are truly close to nature and people who are into the aesthetic or decorative aspects of nature.

Brooks: Mr. Bridges, I like him because he's a male who is slightly different from a lot of the other male characters. You have Mrs. Samphire's father, who is somewhat mentally ill or embattled, and then you have her husband, who cheats a lot. Also, you have her son, who gets involved in—

Senior: Gardening, of a different sort. [Laughter]

Brooks: Yes, a different type of gardening, drug gardening, but what is your commentary right now on black men in Caribbean society in general?

Senior: I don't have any commentary. What I mean is, I write poems, I write short stories, I write fiction, all of which reflect a wide range of characters and situations. I don't deal in any fixed kind of characterization or setting. The characters come out of the situations, or the situations throw up the characters, because I believe in difference. I truly do. There are all kinds of men out there who are doing all kinds of things, some positive, some negative. I like to feel that my approach is nuanced, so I don't like to have my work categorized as one thing or another.

Brooks: Yes, I understand.

Senior: Because what I'm trying to do is reflect society in all of its aspects.

Brooks: Some writers, for instance, Merle Hodge and Kamau Brathwaite, say that writing has a social function. Do you think your writing has a social function? Is it any type of political activity, anything like that?

Senior: I don't know if it has a social function; in any case, politics is intrinsic to everything we do. I feel my job as a writer is to explore the society and to be subversive—to show people different aspects of the society which they might want to think about, as they pursue their daily lives.

Brooks: Well, thank you so much for your time. Thank you.

Note

The interview was edited for clarity purposes. A special thanks goes to the Department of Literatures in English at the University of the West Indies, Mona for facilitating the interview.