



The Dragon Can't Dance

Earl Lovelace

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Carnival takes on social and political importance in this recognized classic. The people of the shantytown Calvary Hill, usually invisible to the rest of society, join the throng and flaunt their neighborhood personas in masquerade during Carnival. Aldrick, the dashing "king of the Hill," becomes a glorious, dancing dragon; his lovely Sylvia, a princess; Fisheye, rebel idealist, a fierce steel band contestant; and Philo, Calypso songwriter, a star. Then a business sponsors Fisheye's band, Philo gets a hit song, and Sylvia leaves the Hill with a prosperous older man. For Aldrick, it will take one more masquerade—this time, involving guns and hostages—before the illusion of power becomes reality.

The Dragon Can't Dance Details

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Author : Earl Lovelace

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From Reader Review The Dragon Can't Dance for online ebook

Alex Hoffman says

This book was not easy to get into, nor was it an easy read, but it was lyrical and thought-provoking. Lovelace tells the story of a shanty town in the late 60s and early 70s in Trinidad. It is a sad story told by the different, clearly individuated voices of the town of Port of Spain, focusing primarily on Aldrick - the dragon. Aldrick spends all year crafting his dragon costume for Carnival - spending all his time not really living, as it were, for two days of life. He comes to realize, however, that there is more to life than two days of vitality, as do many of the other characters. Stuck in a poverty-stricken town where the beautiful women are destined to become whores and the men must either capitulate to the system and work very hard or try to keep up a rebellion that has lost its flame, the people of Port of Spain must find a vitality of their own - something to live for in the everyday.

K's Bognoter says

A portrait of life in a shanty town in the outskirts of Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, in the late 1960's. The carnival and calypso music is at the centre stage of the novel, but do not expect a light, romantic nor easy read. Earl Lovelace is not on a mission to please. Rather, what he is doing in this brilliant novel is the unmasking of the ideology of the carnival seen as a way of allowing the steam out of class struggle. A highly recommended read, although a bit on the heavy side due to the long sentences.

Read my full bookreview at bognoter.dk (in Danish): <https://bognoter.dk/2019/01/19/earl-l...>

Luis Diego Gene says

I was forced to read it. It's a good book but it's definitely not something I'd read on my own free will - hence the low score. 1 star stands for "I didn't like it" and I most certainly did not, but it was bearable, so I'll just say it was ok. Objectively speaking, the author portrays what he intends almost flawlessly, with very detailed and crude descriptions of the setting as well as valuable character depth. I'd recommend it if you're sure you like this kind of Genre, but if you share my taste for "shallower-just-for-entertainment" literature, it may tire you.

Hazel says

I had forgotten how stunning this book is. On this rereading, I found the prologue, on poverty and futility, so poignant and painful that I was minded to desist, and pick up something light and insubstantial instead. I persisted and am rewarded with an engaging narrative of the stories of individuals; the ripening girl destined for whoredom; the vigorous young man seeking to release his energy in warfare; the frustrated artist, with a single annual outlet for his creativity; the outsider, seeking to be seen, to be recognised.

Lovelace is writing about Trinidad, Carnival and its part in the life of the people, Calypso and Steelband, the Black Power Movement of the late 60s. The story is set in Port of Spain around the time I was born, and I feel like I can recognise individuals, not just types. I suspect my parents would find it an accurate

representation of the zeitgeist. Some of the stories, I have heard before:

This is the hill tall above the city where Taffy, a man who say he is Christ, put himself up on a cross one burning midday and say to his followers: 'Crucify me! Let me die for my people. Stone me with stones as you stone Jesus, I will love you still.' And when they start to stone him in truth he get vex and start to cuss: 'Get me down! Get me down!' he say. 'Let every sinnerman bear his own blasted burden; who is I to die for people who ain't have sense enough to know that they can't pelt a man with big stones when so much little pebbles lying on the ground.'

I wonder if the material would have been better shaped into a novella, and short stories/sketches about the Calypsonian, the Badjohn, the aging Carnival Queen. This isn't a wholly successful novel. Lovelace isn't as polished as Naipaul, but he inhabits his writing, heart and soul. He moves me so much more. Here is the conclusion to the prologue section, *Carnival*

Now, the steelband tent will become a cathedral, and these young men priests. They will draw from back pockets those rubber-tipped sticks, which they had carried around all year, as the one link to the music that is their life, their soul, and touch them to the cracked faces of the drums. Hours, hours; days, days; for weeks they beat these drums, beat these drums, hammering out from them a cry, the cry, the sound, stroking them more gently than they will ever caress a woman; and then they have it. At last, they have it. They have the tune that will sing their person and their pose, that will soar over the hill, ring over the valley of shacks, and laugh the hard tears of their living when, for Carnival, they enter Port of Spain.

I am not doing Lovelace and his novel justice. But I recommend it highly, to mature readers who appreciate lyrical writing, and do not require a happy ending. It may take some time, as well to adjust to the dialogue which is in Trinidadian dialect.

Lowell Brower says

Like a record by an unknown genius picked at random out of a dollar bin at goodwill, this book, when I brought it home and unleashed it, actually (truly) made me want to dance. Written in "poor-talk," a highly lyrical Trinidadian Pidgin English which allows for incredible and delightful feats of linguistic dexterity, Lovelace's 250 page novel depicts the beautifully chaotic, pot-holed, garbage-strewn life of a small shantytown on the outskirts of Port of Spain, Trinidad, as its inhabitants prepare for Carnival. The lovingly-rendered characters (failed and famous Calypsonians, depressed costume makers, alienated Indian shopkeepers, vitriolic barmaids, drunken steel-drummers, gorgeous widows, and "bad-johns") all struggle against the nihilism and despair that their poverty engenders, as they are drawn together for the annual transformative ritual which allows them a glimpse into their mythical dream-world – a world where "All-o-we is one," where,

"with carnival coming, radios go on full blast, trembling these shacks, booming out calypsos, the songs that announce in this season the new rhythms for people to walk in, rhythms that climb over the red dirt and stone, break-away rhythms that laugh through the groans of these sights, these smells, that swim through the bones of these enduring people so that they shout: Life! They cry: Hurrah! They drink rum and say: Fuck it! They walk with a tall hot beauty between the garbage and dogshit, proclaiming life, exulting in the bare bones of their person and their skin."

A tragic-comic exploration of Trinidad's messy racial and economic legacies, a musical and excessive celebration befitting Carnival itself, a book of wild stylistic experimentation, it's also a heartbreaking tale about one man's search for 'personhood,' community, and hope in the midst of desperate, crushing poverty.

A must read for anyone interested in Trinidad, Carnival traditions, or good books.

Rita says

I love this author! In this story, told through different characters' viewpoints, the dynamics between them, and their own change and growth is explored. They are mostly poor people, but Carnival gives them a chance to come out of their simple existence and shine. Lovelace has a gift to make a character come to life in your mind's eye and feel, acutely, for them and their individual woes and joys.

Debbie Boucher says

My survey of TT/Caribbean literature continues, and I must say I'm impressed. I wanted to read something by a Creole to get that point of view, and Earl Lovelace didn't disappoint. The book elucidates the Carnival experience here: it's importance, it's facets, etc. But the book is also a social commentary, and that is where its strength lies. Every book I've read about TT so far has done this beautifully, and it enriches my experience here. It also reminds me of how many good books there are out there that I will undoubtedly miss. It's why I feel obligated to sing this novel's praises and encourage other curious/adventurous readers to take a chance on The Dragon Can't Dance.

Apphia Barton says

After reading CLR James' Black Jacobins, my head was ablaze. This was the perfect cool down; humorous and relateable as a fellow Trinidadian. His understanding of his/our culture is manifest here. The trend of anticipating the upcoming Carnival season the day after the end of the current year's festivities live on.

"Who hushed to their bosoms an anger older than themselves"

Lovelace is the master of prose-poetry .

Anthropological/ Social commentary; the analysis of race relations in Trinidad, all wrapped up in an enjoyable story. A pleasure to read. Lively and intriguingly descriptive.

Miguel says

First review, 11/26/12:

Earl Lovelace's The Dragon Can't Dance, set in Trinidad, positions the complex ritual of Carnival in a socio-political context. Unpacking Carnival is synonymous with examining the Caribbean self, as Aldrick journeys from an anonymous masquerade dragon to an authentic self.

Lovelace explores characters from various backgrounds, exploring the transformation each undergoes as consumerism and corporate influence creep into Carnival. From the 'bad John,' Fisheye, to the rising calypso star Philo, each character is transformed and contributes to the transformation of Aldrick.

At the novel's center is the romance between Aldrick and Sylvia. Across the years and Carnivals, the two do a dance of self-discovery which is not overblown or over dramatic. Their love story is, instead, understated and believable, and represents a solid foundation for a novel with perfect prose and pacing.

Second review, 3/24/17:

As I am revisiting these various novels in advance of my PhD oral examination, I think this is yet another novel so tremendous that I could not fully articulate its significance. Frankly, I probably will never be able to "fully articulate" the significance of this novel, but images from it have haunted me for the years since reading it. I've seen images of Aldrick in his dragon costume, Sylvia dancing just out of his reach. Images of Aldrick's soliloquy from the police van. Images, speculative though they may be, of Sylvia as a freedom fighter trekking through the El Cerro del Aripo mountains.

Earl Lovelace paints such a vivid picture of Calvary Hill from the outset. His prologue with the unhappy crucified man, resenting people for stoning him, matches up with episodes from Naipaul's *Miguel Street* and Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Beyond that, the four major characters, Aldrick, Fisheye, Pariag, and Sylvia, nearly get their own novel within the text. That is not to say that the book is overly long, but there is something so vivid about each of these character's stories. Though one might argue that Philo is more significant than Sylvia, his position in the novel is that of a witness. Sylvia, too, does not get the same treatment as the other characters mentioned. She is a conspicuous absence from the text, Lovelace making clear that he may have some anxiety about writing from the perspective of women characters. But still, she is vivid nonetheless as the various opinions of her behavior and observations of her constitute a fully realized character who also serves as a formal lynchpin.

Aldrick's coming into political awareness is stirring, as he grasps toward an articulation of the slow commercialization of Carnival and homogenization of Calvary Hill in his soliloquy from the police van. And yet, it is only prison that can draw out a full political praxis from Aldrick, one that makes him a revolutionary but also radically isolated.

The novel interrogates questions of power and people, what is power and what constitutes "a people"? And what is the connection between the two? For Aldrick, it seems that the answer is that some degree of political power, some degree of or will to self-determination, is required for solidarity and the interconnectedness he, Fisheye, and Pariag are looking for. When Pariag asks "Maybe the Creole people just fuck-up" (147), he stumbles upon a truth that beyond rote ideas of colonial neurosis, the oppressive situation makes idealized connection difficult. Pariag sees himself as an outside, but what he doesn't realize is that the groups he envies are simply comprised of individuals rather than people who are experiencing the fantasmatic connection Pariag dreams of. As Malcolm X said to a group of Tuskegee students on February 3, 1965, "I believe in brotherhood, but my religion does not blind me to the fact that I am living in a society where brotherhood cannot exist." Trinidad, as a consequence of racial and economic oppression, is also such a society.

The Dragon Can't Dance is an epic. The stories are larger than life, the characters are unforgettable, and the prose is spectacular. My brief remarks are just one partial reading of a novel that can be mined endlessly for significance and signification. I'm sure when I return to this novel, I'll find something different to fixate on. Lovelace is one of the greatest living authors, period.

Roger DeBlanck says

Earl Lovelace's novel left me spellbound with how possibly to express its beauty and brilliance. With the hypnotic lyricism of its prose, the intricacy of its story, and the depth to which Lovelace investigates the struggles of an entire community, this book is an extraordinary piece of art. Only the great Naguib Mahfouz comes to mind as having a similar ability as Lovelace in probing the psychological and emotional depths of his characters.

The story takes place in the poverty-stricken shantytown of Cavalry Hill in Trinidad. The plot focuses around the festival of Carnival each year. In this impoverished setting and during the transcendent yearly event of the Carnival celebration, Lovelace takes readers into the lives of a range of characters with all their pain and joy, their failures and triumphs, and their shame and redemption. There is Cleothilda, the hostile shop owner; Sylvia, the gorgeous maiden; Fisheye, the wayward combatant; Philo, the calypsonian dreamer; Pariag, the minority outcast; and Aldrick, the dragon masquerader himself. Each of them carries a lifelong weight of both wounds and dreams.

In particular, Aldrick is the focal figure. He is the one who most symbolically undergoes a spiritual transformation each year when he dons his dragon costume. When he becomes the dragon, he asserts both his humanity and his dangerousness, while also reminding himself of his past and his need to survive. Everyone attempts to escape their harsh reality by entering the realm of their masquerade during Carnival. The festival temporarily transports them into their dreams and out of the dismal situation of their lives. They each strive to reach a feeling of hope. After the yearly gala ends, however, problems arise when the people must return to their daily hardships. Lovelace charts these phases and transitions with great compassion and empathy. He scrutinizes the dynamics of race and class distinctions. He traces the emotions and motives that drive his characters to survive, and he also examines what pushes them beyond their threshold of tolerance to a condition where they snap.

The Dragon Can't Dance is the type of unforgettable narrative that embeds itself in your thoughts. It affirms the power of literature to explore the essence of truth and to address the meaning of humanity. Lovelace is a master at showing us how within a destitute community, the yearning to live, grow, and have hope is no different for people anywhere in the world, regardless of their station in life.

Andrew says

The main character in this novel is not really Aldrick, who plays the dragon, or Fish-eye the "bad-john", or anyone else, but the district of Calvary Hill itself. Earl Lovelace introduces us to a range of different characters who live in Calvary Hill, a poor district on the edge of Port-of-Spain, and we follow them through the years as the neighbourhood changes and the characters are caught between embracing the new and regretting the loss of the old.

Carnival plays a major role in the novel. I heard Earl Lovelace speak about this at Bim Literary Festival in Barbados recently and he said "Carnival is welcoming people into a space, holding up the idea of "all ah we is one" even if it's not always the case in reality. In music we're all the same, we're all human." In this novel he does a great job of exploring this, exposing the cracks in the community for the rest of the year and showing how they are temporarily put aside for carnival. But as things change, even in carnival itself there is division, as some want to get corporate sponsorship and "clean up" carnival, while others want it to retain its traditional, untamed revelry.

Lovelace has tremendous compassion for all his characters and develops them all fully. Although he is

compassionate, he is not sentimental, and shows their faults as well, such as their exclusion of the Indian character Pariag. Novels without a focus on a strong central character can sometimes feel a little disjointed, but this one doesn't. I cared about all of the characters, and cared about the fate of Calvary Hill too, as all the characters fight to preserve it in their own very different ways.

Normally there's something about a book that I don't like, but this one really is hard to find fault with. It's a tremendous literary achievement, a moving depiction of a community, and I can wholeheartedly recommend it. Five stars.

Ruth says

An oldie but goodie, set amid the poor residents of Calvary Hill, an urban enclave in Trinidad. I love Lovelace's incredible, patient empathy with his characters. Years go by & they're still plodding along, because that's all they can find to do. But some of them deepen their consciousness & change, personally & politically. It's a very internal novel--gets deep inside the heads of numerous characters. Even when I'm super annoyed with some of them, there's a degree of empathy & caring that the novelist has taught me. What a master.

Bonus: the story includes the most hilarious tale of a political uprising I've ever read.

Michelle Hirschfeld says

This novel is an excellent portal into Trinidad; a colorful world of Carnival, calypso, and masquerade. The story is both heartbreaking and touching. The novel revolves around Aldrick, who plays the dragon during Carnival, and his interactions with other people in the neighborhood. There's Fisheye, the neighborhood ruffian, Sylvia, the wild beauty, and Parigi, the West Indian outsider. It was an entertaining and educational read that taught me a lot about the culture of Trinidad.

Alliyah says

A very enjoyable read! Lovelace writes beautifully and is almost Baldwin-esque in his thoughtful prose and perfect imagery.

Raya Al-Raddadi says

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