



Christopher Laird, *Equal to Mystery: In Search of Harold Sonny Ladoo*

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Equal to Mystery is driven by Christopher Laird's lasting fascination with the brief life of Trinidadian writer Harold Sonny Ladoo. That desire to know Ladoo—his origins, motives, potential, eccentricities, and deceptions—has led to a biography that well serves both those studying Ladoo's writing and those more broadly interested in the positioning of Caribbean writers in Canada. Born in 1945 in McBean, in west-central Trinidad, Ladoo immigrated to Toronto in 1968. There, his efforts and a serendipitous encounter led him to realize his dream of being published. Tragically, his career was cut short when he was mysteriously killed during a visit to Trinidad in 1973. Laird's care with detail and knack for connection, presumably skills he honed during his four decades as a film-maker, hold this book together. He merges material from an array of archival sources and interviews to trace the trajectory of Ladoo, whom he argues deserves more focused study. The recent release of *The Enigma of Harold Sonny Ladoo*, a documentary by Richard Fung, suggests that Laird's book is timely and meets renewed interest in Ladoo.

Ladoo is generally known for his 1972 sensation *No Pain Like This Body*, a novel that wrestles in spare style with the cruelty of patriarchy and poverty in a rural East Indian community. Laird details the circumstances that made this first novel possible but also argues that *Yesterdays*, a second and posthumous novel published in 1974, is equally worthy of praise as "a rollicking farce, a tour de force of comedic writing, Trinidad style" (Laird 112). In building this case and in showcasing what survives of Ladoo's unpublished material from 1970 to 1973, Laird asks his readers to join him in marking and mourning the potential of Ladoo. Laird especially marvels at Ladoo's penchant for remaking himself in every new

context and relationship. His move to Canada allowed Ladoo to claim at times that he was an orphan or that his childhood was one of excruciating deprivation and lengthy hospital stays. As Laird explains, Ladoo “created an alternative personal history for consumption by his Canadian colleagues and the literary establishment” (17). Ladoo’s cunning in this regard makes certain details of his life difficult to pin down, even as we gain a clearer understanding of his talent for persuading others to help fulfil his grandiose ambitions.

Equal to Mystery is especially appealing because of the unique amalgam of voices it manages. In learning of Ladoo’s childhood in McBean, readers hear from Ladoo’s relatives, schoolyard friends, and primary-school teachers. The financial success of Ladoo’s father is made clear, and Laird compellingly argues that this domineering figure and his 1971 death influenced Ladoo’s fiction. As Laird details Ladoo’s move to Toronto, two voices become essential to this book. We learn of the intermediary role of Peter Such, whose chance subway meeting with Ladoo in 1970 led to his enrolment at Erindale College, where Such was a writer in residence. This institution allowed Ladoo to deepen his interest in writing and earn a degree in English literature while entering a social circle of Caribbean students, including Dionne Brand. Dennis Lee, former editor at and co-founder of House of Anansi Press, is also a recurring presence, as his editing and Anansi’s backing made Ladoo’s novels a reality. Laird gathers reflections from several other voices, including Graeme Gibson, Arnold Itwaru, Jamelie Hassan, and Jim Polk, while citing scholarship by Shalini Khan and previously published reviews and commentaries by Victor Questel, Rabindranath Maharaj, David Chariandy, and Brand. Yet the voices of Such and Lee are the ones that consistently reappear, joining Laird in his mourning of Ladoo.

This approach does not deny readers the opportunity to form their assessment of Ladoo, even if Laird’s recommendation is never far off. In my reading, the perspective of Ladoo’s wife, Rachel, appears especially poignant. In her spare manner, she shares the circumstances of their marriage and her efforts to contend with Ladoo’s ruthless threats of violence. These details, obtained in a 2002 interview with Laird and Ramabai Espinet, become an integral part of *Equal to Mystery*. Laird’s explicit intent is to demonstrate Ladoo’s escape from “the petty, oppressive and ultimately vicious world of McBean” (38), but in doing so, much more is divulged. Readers hear what it was like to be an East Indian woman in 1960s McBean, where survival required leaning into strategy, concession, and compromise to survive the demands of East Indian men. We likewise hear from Rachel’s sister, Phyllis Siewdas, and Ladoo’s sisters, Meena and Sylvia. Their voices combine to conjure how the prospect of marriage and the demands of motherhood messily meet the promise of immigration. The fact that Rachel had to leave her five children behind when she and Ladoo moved to Canada, having been sponsored by Sylvia, brought with it its pain, as did the travails of life in Regent Park. Readers learn of Rachel’s work routine in Toronto as she supports herself and Ladoo. We hear of financial struggles, the arrival of more children, and subsequent moves, just as we hear of Ladoo’s negligence as a parent and his abuse.

Laird is somewhat dismissive of the significance of Rachel's perspective even as he mines it for details about Ladoo. Rachel's note about Ladoo's irresponsibility as a parent, for instance, spurs Laird's speculation about Ladoo's wanderlust nature. He could not help but be drawn into studying the seedier side of town, the value of which takes shape in the included short stories "Lying Munroe" and "Jametin Laura!" Likewise, in sharing an unfinished project titled "1st Canadian Novel" and an incomplete draft of a short story titled "The Teacher's Wife Story," Laird is quick to suggest that Ladoo finds ways to reflect on his insecurity and viciousness through his writing. On the one hand, Laird usefully identifies "the contradictions between Harold's privileging of women in his literary world and the unpleasant way he treated women in his immediate family" (87). On the other hand, the author appears overly sympathetic in reading Ladoo as "accusing and berating himself in his literary space where the truth must be told" (145). Readers are left to square these sides of Ladoo at their behest, but Laird's inclusion of Rachel's words doubly recommends *Equal to Mystery*.

In sharing excerpts from Ladoo's published and unpublished work, and in tracing the evolution of *No Pain Like This Body* and *Yesterdays*, Laird scatters valuable insights into Ladoo's oeuvre throughout *Equal to Mystery*. We encounter an explanation of Such's role in Ladoo's decision to abandon poetry, details about Ladoo's experimentation with dialect and narrative structure, and assertions regarding Ladoo's disparate influences such as the *Ramayana* and William Faulkner. Likewise, in juxtaposing the stories "Chamar Tola 1940," "The Quiet Peasant," and "The Intruders," Laird asks the reader to consider how Ladoo's style vacillates between unadulterated rage and "gritty tenderness" (165). While often persuasive, Laird's reading falls flat now and then when he positions Ladoo as more "politically aware" than past assessments have allowed (179). This stance seems more hopeful than evidence based and would be helped with the inclusion in *Equal to Mystery* of more detailed political contextualization.

There is much more to be explored in these fragments and drafts, of course, and that is Laird's point. For example, the sharp racist barbs that appear in a short story titled "The Agony" suggest the need to consider how the rural male East Indian identity presented by Ladoo depends on (mis)apprehension of Blackness. Likewise, by connecting Ladoo's efforts with those of Sam Selvon, V. S. Naipaul, and Austin Clarke, Laird encourages readers to continue situating Caribbean immigrant writers within a broader field of cultural production, thereby better appreciating the manoeuvres they execute given the capital at their disposal. In this regard, Laird is successful in his intention, as *Equal to Mystery* credibly challenges the perception of Ladoo as having been definitely or exhaustively read.

Works Cited

The Enigma of Harold Sonny Ladoo. Directed by Richard Fung, 2024.

Ladoo, Harold Sonny. *No Pain Like This Body*. 1972. House of Anansi Press, 2003.

———. *Yesterdays*. House of Anansi Press, 1974.