

Thriving In the Care of Many Mothers

A Review by Roslyn Carrington

Roslyn Carrington, a Trinidadian, is an acclaimed author of several novels and a freelance writer and editor

One woman's story is the story of many

Everyone has a story. Everyone, not just movie stars and adventurers. Each of us is unique; we navigate our way through a lifetime of experiences, from the quotidian to the earth-shaking, that shape our vision and make us who we are.

Rosemary Yvonne Borel's *Thriving in the Care of Many Mothers* is one of those books that proves my point. This is not a recounting of how she cured a pandemic, won an Oscar, or married a monarch, but it is every bit as compelling. It's a story of how a young Jamaican girl of meagre means transcended the culture of her time, in which girls had little opportunity for self-advancement outside of a good marriage, many children, and, with any luck, a stint at a clerical job to keep her busy.

But Rosemary had two things going for her; one, a sharp intellect and a hunger for knowledge, and two, the guidance of a series of women who had the courage to battle the limitations of their era to ensure that she reached beyond the expectations of the day.

The first of these women, of course, was her biological mother, Frances Anderson, who, shunned by her lover when she found she was pregnant, resolved to defy the mores of the day and be a self-sufficient single mom. I loved Frances' steady maternal presence and, a single mom myself, identified strongly with her determination to give her daughter the best of everything, regardless of the sacrifice.

But, as the title indicates, there were many more mothers, a series of women who Rosemary lived with during her early years, as she moved from town to town to receive her education. To a metropolitan eye, this moving around from home to home might seem to be, at the very least, a form of neglect. Why is she being

shunted back and forth? Why did she not have a permanent home? Did nobody love her?

But to us West Indians, raised in a culture in which children are embraced whether we gave birth to them or not, this fostering is a gesture of love, and that alone, for Rosemary, was enough.

It is these early years that I find most fascinating. The parallels between my own Trini upbringing and her Jamaican one are close enough for me to feel stirrings of nostalgia as she describes her daily life. Many passages are highly sensory, evoking the scent of mangoes and the taste of ackee, the whisper of the Caribbean breeze over the transoms in a time before air conditioning.

We see World War II-era Jamaica, with its narrow, perilous roads, open-air cinemas, and earthy Patois. I vicariously experienced events I'd heard of from my own relatives; like the visit of Queen Elizabeth, when the streets were lined with school children in smartly pressed uniforms and broad "jippi-jappa" hats. Christmas, with its Junkanoo bands, menacing the unwary in exchange for tips or a bottle of rum. The devastation of Hurricane Charlie in 1951.

Race, of course, is always simmering under the surface, but there is little evidence of resentment or tension. We're treated to a matter-of-fact commentary about Rosemary's own light-skinned or white ancestors... some of who weren't exactly keen to associate with those of darker hue. Metropolitan readers might be surprised to learn how deeply textured Jamaican society really is, from the blue-eyed blonds of German extract, to the Chinese, to the wealthy Jews, to the brown middle class.

As Rosemary matures and leaves the island — encouraged by a father who has suddenly come into the picture — we see this bright Caribbean bird land in dismal, grey Leeds, suffering both cold and culture shock. Just one hot bath every ten days? No thanks!

Finally, we see marriage, a move to Trinidad, and motherhood. Again, I see her world through the collective memory of my own ancestors. Learning how to kill a crab to cook callaloo. Navigating the roads amongst insane Trini drivers. Enduring flooding in Maraval and wild weather at Store Bay. With every line, Rosemary lets me hear the echoes of my own life, or that of my family.

In terms of style, this book is an easy, fun read, but you need to pay attention, because Rosemary's incredible memory makes it chock full of details. Let your mind wander for a moment, and I promise you you'll have to scramble backwards to see what you missed. I did find the tone occasionally dispassionate, especially at points where you'd expect a deeper emotional resonance, but this transgression is easily forgiven, considering the span of time between the actual events and the recounting of them.

All in all, *Thriving in the Care of Many Mothers* is both a chronicle of one woman's life and a snapshot of an era. It's about one person, yes, but we find in it the threads of many lives. It's also a feminist tale in the most elemental sense, that of many strong, determined women working together for the betterment of the next generation... even if it is just one little girl. And the fact that they succeeded is what makes it so beautiful.