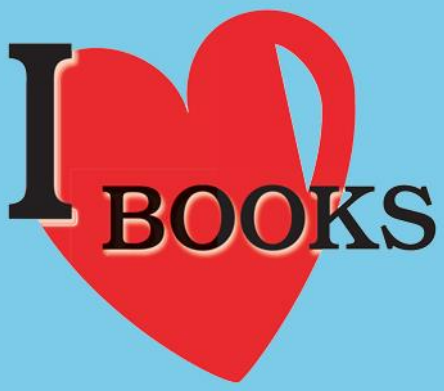


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Opening extract from

Coming to England

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Foreword

I always say that childhood lasts a lifetime, so I wrote this book twenty years ago through the eyes of a child, to give people, both black and white, an insight into the circumstances that brought a whole generation of West Indians to Britain, and the struggles they experienced. I tried, through my own journey, to share what many of them had to go through in order to make the difficult and sometimes painful transition to a new life in the fabled motherland, the 'Land of Hope and Glory'.

Since the book's first publication, many amazing things have happened to me and so many public appointments have come my way, including becoming a Baroness in the House of Lords in 2010. I often wonder who would have thought this possible, considering what I had to endure when I first arrived in England in 1960.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, hundreds of West Indians left their glorious Caribbean islands to

come to Great Britain. For these pioneers it was a time of excitement and discovery. It was like falling into the arms of someone you had been brought up to love. The immigrants brought with them their music, joy, colour, style and culture and they were quite prepared to share these wonders. But for many the experience turned out to be quite opposite to the expectation. They soon began to feel inferior and were rarely allowed to take pride in the various talents they had to offer in the rebuilding of Great Britain after the war.

For their children who had been left at home it was not a happy time. They had no choice when the decision to leave was made. The grief started when they were removed from the bosom of happy family life, many not realizing that their parents were going away. Some children were left 'overnight' with relatives or friends only to wake up to a lonely, cruel existence of great hardship with the very people entrusted to look after them while their parents set up home in Britain.

When they were finally sent for to join their parents they expected the reunion to bring joy and

happiness, yet they were to experience only rejection and worse once they arrived.

To feel you belong is a most important necessity in life. This feeling was denied to thousands of West Indian children who came to Britain, but at least they had their fond memories of the homes they left. The next generation however, who were born into an adopted country, would not know enough about their roots and how they came to be living in Britain. Today my story also reflects the experiences of children from many other countries around the world who have arrived on these shores for various reasons. They too have felt rejection and have had to face adversity.

I know that if they are given opportunities in the way eventually I was, they too can work towards making Britain their true home and a country of which they will be proud. My mum always told me and my five siblings that education would be our passport to a better life – that our achievements would contribute to a better world and make a difference. We have all been successful in our chosen careers and I strongly believe that our own children will use their

education to the same effect. It has been rewarding for me to know that telling my story in *Coming to England* has, in some small way, helped people to find their identity, to discover where they came from and to feel proud of themselves.

Floella Benjamin 2016



Chapter One

Life in Trinidad



The day my brother Ellington was born my elder sister Sandra, who was four, my brother Lester, who was two, and I, aged three, were all out on the gallery – that's what we called the veranda. My mother, whom we affectionately named Marmie, had told us that if we looked hard enough we would see a stork flying high in the sky with our new baby. I was hungry and really wanted Marmie to make one of her delicious soups for us, but I dared not take my eyes off the sky just in case I missed the big arrival.

Anyway, Mrs Jackson, the local midwife who lived in the lane opposite our house, said we couldn't come into the house to see my mother until she called us.

I was beginning to feel more and more hungry, tired and anxious but I still kept my eyes glued to the heavens. Suddenly I heard the loud cry of a newborn

baby. I felt happy but disappointed at the same time because I hadn't seen the stork arrive. My mother told us it had come through the back door. I looked for it years later when my brother Roy and sister Cynthia arrived. Mrs Jackson was always there but I never spotted that elusive stork coming through the front or the back door!

The house we lived in was a small wooden building on stilts with dazzling whitewashed walls. There were windows and doors at the front and the back. We had two bedrooms which were the scene of many pillow fights and trampolining sessions, a small washroom, with a sink and cold tap, an airy kitchen with a large glassless louvred window where we also ate all our meals, and finally a sitting room where no one was allowed except on special occasions or when we had visitors.

This room was my mother's pride and joy. Its brilliant white curtains always smelt fresh and the mahogany furniture was always highly polished, as was the wooden floor. My sister and I spent many hours polishing and shining that room from as far back as I can remember. We had to do the polishing

before we left for school each day. The comfortable wooden chairs in the room were draped with crisp white lace headrests and the round table, which we ate from on Sundays and other special occasions, had a doily in its centre, on which sat a vase of glorious fresh flowers. These were from our small front garden, which was full of exotic, sweet-smelling flowers and shrubs such as beautiful flame-red hibiscus which seemed to attract swarms of exquisite butterflies and hovering humming birds, in search of nectar. The back yard was where Marmie grew vegetables for our kitchen, like pigeon peas, cassavas, okras and dasheen. A tall bushy tree stood in the yard, reaching up to the kitchen window, and whenever one of us had a bad cold Marmie would pick some of the leaves, boil them and give us the vile-tasting liquid to drink. It always made us better – I guess the thought of a second dose was enough to do the trick! Also in the yard was a galvanized shower unit where we had our



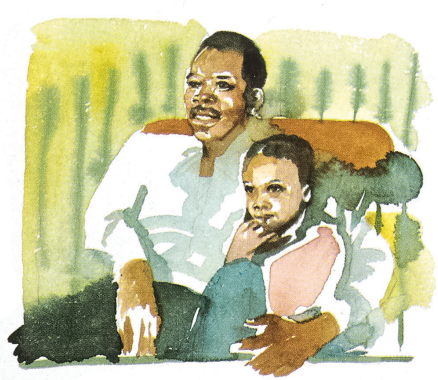
baths. There was no hot tap but the cold water was always warm because of the heat of the sun. During the drought season, from around July to September, we would have to get water from a standpipe in the street. Everyone would queue up with large enamel buckets, oil cans, basins – anything big enough to carry the water. The washing was done under the house in a big wooden tub with a scrubbing board, and the washing lines hung between two trees in the back yard. Our car was also parked under the house.

At the very bottom of the yard was the latrine, the outside toilet. It was a small wooden hut and none of the planks of wood quite met, allowing chinks of light to shine through.

Inside was a four-metre deep hole, reinforced with concrete. A wooden seat was built on top like a throne. The lock for the door was a piece of string which was hooked over a large nail. The square pieces of toilet paper, cut out of sheets of newspaper, hung on one of the walls. The comic strip pages always made good reading, but the only problem was you could never finish a story because the last part had inevitably been chopped off to make another sheet.

I didn't mind using the latrine during the day. I would imagine myself as a queen sitting on a throne holding court. But in the evening it was a different story. The scratching sound of the crickets, the loud deep croaks of the toads, the buzzing and flashing sparks of the night insects was enough to drive any child's imagination wild and I was no exception. I hated having to visit that dark hole – even the flickering light of my candle was no defence or comfort.

I liked sitting on the gallery after dark, though. We would sit there at night on the two rocking chairs with my father, Dardie, who used to tell us some amazing tales: his own stories as well as Anancy



stories, the tales that came from Africa to the Carribbean. Dardie was born in Antigua and came to Trinidad, where he met Marmie, when he was nineteen. So he would tell us about his homeland, and about the capitals of the world – where they were and how many people lived there. We were quizzed on these night after night. He also gave us vivid descriptions of American movies and filmstars and we were each given a filmstar's name as well as a pet name. Mine was Martha Raye because I used to love to dance and sing like her. In fact we each had to do a party piece before we went to bed, parading and performing up and down the gallery like superstars. There was no television so we had to make our own entertainment. But once a month he would take us to see a film at the cinema in San Fernando.

Dardie felt it was his duty to open our eyes and minds to the world even though we lived on a small island just a few miles from South America. He always found time to play with us even though he worked hard as a field policeman. He patrolled the huge oil refinery at Point-a-Pierre which was near the oil field Forest Reserves in the southwest of the

island. He wore a khaki uniform with brass buttons which we all took great pride in polishing every night so they would glitter in the sunshine like gold. We always ran to meet him on his way from work and he would carry us home like a strong giant, two under his arms and two on his shoulders, while the two youngest watched. Then he would toss us in the air like acrobats. Oh what excitement! We didn't always have our meals with Dardie because he worked shifts, but we would crowd around him whenever he had his meals.

Food played a very important part in our lives. Marmie insisted that we had plenty of it and her cupboards were never empty. She insisted we all ate well so that we would grow up big and strong. Mind you we didn't need much encouragement – it was always a race to see who finished first or ate the most food. Not a scrap was ever left on the plates.

For breakfast we would have fresh home-baked bread, scrambled eggs or saltfish, fresh fruits and tea, which could mean anything from fresh grated cocoa, coffee or tea itself. After breakfast we had to line up





to be given a dose of cod liver oil which was hideous.

The fishy, oily liquid seemed to line the inside of the throat and stay there. It was one of the few things I didn't want to be first in line for and when it was my turn I used to hold my nose and only the promise of a piece of orange would encourage me to take it. Marmie told us it was good for our bones and teeth, which was true but it didn't make it taste any better.

For lunch it was either a rich tasty soup which was like a stew made of meat, pulses, vegetables and dumplings, or rice served with beef, chicken or, on Fridays, fish. For dessert we had whatever fresh fruit was in season: mangoes, pineapples, pawpaw or pomsitea, and for supper we had bread and cakes, all baked by Marmie, washed down with cocoa.

Saturday was Marmie's baking day, and she would bake enough for the whole week. Bread or bakes – a sort of bread with no yeast, sweet bread – bread with coconut and sugar, sponge cakes and coconut drops.