



SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

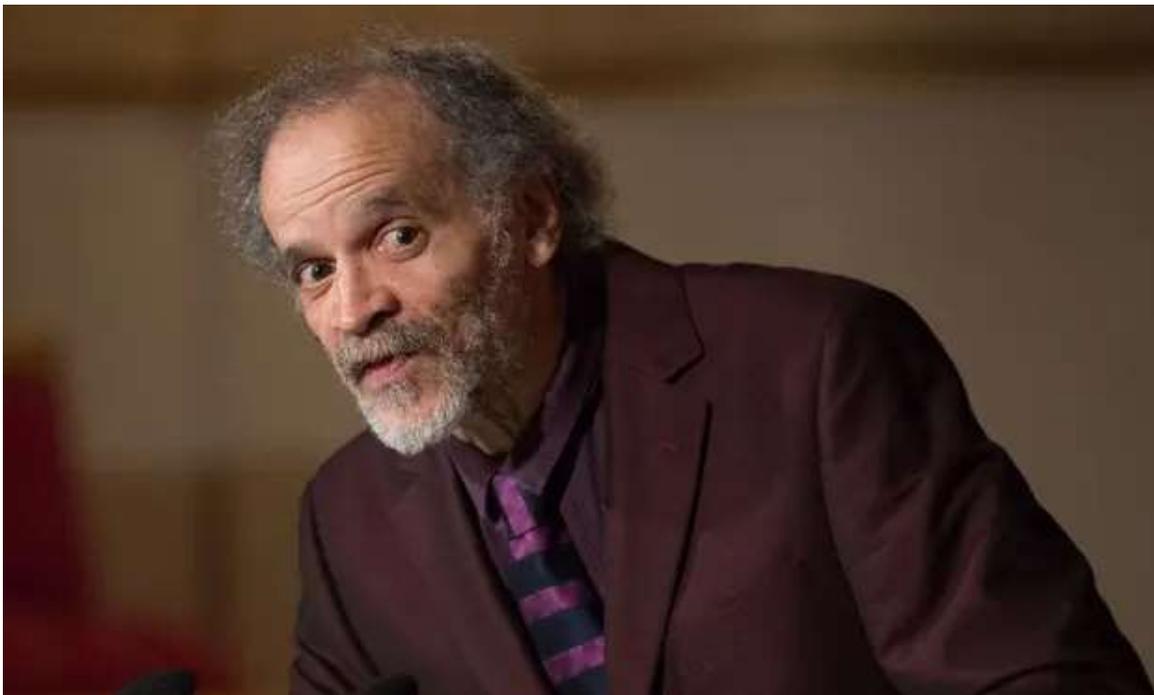
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Saints Alumnus, John Agard becomes first poet to win the BookTrust Lifetime Achievement Award

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/nov/09/john-agard-becomes-first-poet-to-win-booktrust-lifetime-achievement-award>

Reading charity pays tribute to ‘incredible words’ of Afro-Guyanese author, who came to Britain in 1977 where he has become a staple of English lessons

The Afro-Guyanese writer John Agard has become the first poet to receive the BookTrust lifetime achievement award.



‘It’s not just me receiving this award’ ... John Agard. Photograph: Rex

Agard, who was born in Georgetown, Guyana and moved to England in 1977, has been a fixture on the curriculum since 2002 for poems including *Half-Caste* (“Explain yusef / wha yu mean / when yu say half-caste / yu mean when continu / mix red an green / is a half-caste canvas?”) and *Checking Out Me History*. Winning the Queen’s



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award for poetry in 2012, he is the author of more than 50 books for children and adults.

“John’s incredible words have caught the imagination of a whole generation of children,” said Diana Gerald, chief executive of the reading charity, which has given its lifetime achievement award in the past to some of the biggest names in children’s literature, from Shirley Hughes to Raymond Briggs and the late Judith Kerr.

The prize is intended to celebrate the work of an author or illustrator who has made an outstanding contribution to children’s literature, with judges this year including Gerald and the authors Frank Cottrell-Boyce and Piers Torday. They singled out Agard’s “persistence and creativity in championing and challenging the language norms that too often dominate literature and the curriculum as well as his ability to connect with children today and inspire them to reach for their goals and aspirations, whatever they may be. “I’m particularly thrilled that this year’s award is going to someone who explores and experiments with different ideas and genres, showing children and adults everywhere just what language can do and demonstrating the power of an authentic voice when it comes to storytelling – important messages that children today, whatever their background, need to see, experience and have access to,” said Gerald, adding that Agard’s writing has “challenged and changed how poetry is studied and enjoyed in the classroom and demonstrated that it is a modern and relevant medium with the ability to connect with children”.

Agard said it meant a lot to him to receive the prize. “I feel happy that I’ve stuck with this craft since I was a 16-year-old boy writing in a classroom in a Caribbean ex-colony. It’s not just me receiving this award, but all the people that inspired me,” he said. “People like my teacher Father Maxwell, the people who published my books, those who contributed to my journey way back in the Caribbean, and John Arlott, the legendary cricket commentator who inspired me with his words.”

“Very often, poetry is continued, and fiction gets a high profile,” said the author. “By being the first poet, I’m excited, because I see it also as a mark of recognition for poetry. Because let us not forget that going right back in our evolutionary DNA, poetry was the medium of utterance, ecstasy, a lullaby, an incantation, so before you had things written down, there was poetry. But somewhere along the line, particularly in the western tradition, the oral was cut off from the written, and then poetry began to be perceived as something abstract and airy fairy and not about the concrete fact. But let us face it: do we want to dwell in a world of concrete facts?”

Agard wrote his first poem in the sixth form, on the back of an exam paper – which he failed, although his teacher admitted it was a good poem and it went on to be published in a magazine. He taught French and Latin at O-level after he completed



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his education, before working as a librarian and moving to England in 1977 where he became a touring lecturer for the Commonwealth Institute to promote a better understanding of Caribbean culture. He visited 2,500 schools over the next eight years, and began to write poetry for children.

“I was a teacher for a year but I never dreamed I was going to be a teacher; a librarian, but I didn’t plan to be a librarian. But that was a good grounding and a lovely experience. My mum felt poetry was a hobby, so I hesitated for a while to say I was a poet, but as time went by I took a delight in saying I was a poet – especially when I’d arrive at immigration, and they’d say ‘what do you do? I’d enjoy in a secretive, quietly humorous way saying poet, because people respond differently to you then,” said Agard.

He added that he still gets “excitement from language”, and finds “joy in standing in front of people and reading a poem ... I know this thing connects. This thing could touch a soul. This thing doesn’t have to be didactic; I don’t have to preach to people. My whole brain is on a tidal wave of delight.”

Continued .



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Part 2

Poem of the week:

Get Down Ye Angels by John Agard

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2021/mar/22/poem-of-the-week-get-down-ye-angels-by-john-agard>

A rousing call to find the divine in worldly, bodily life



Get Down Ye Angels

Get down ye angels from the heights.
Try a few of earth's numinous delights:
the orgiastic rustling of the grass.
The wind's brazen feather tickling your arse.

Exchange your robe even for a day
with the raiment of one made of clay.
Lay down your harp and dig these pipes I play.



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I'll put my lips to the weeping reeds
till temptation thrills the heart of every hill
and the very stones begin the dance of leaves
as if stones had gained a fluttering will.

Welcome ye cherubs to the carnal hubbub.
Take a break from heaven's eternal monotone.
Inhabit the splendid risk of flesh and bone.

Commentary

Get Down Ye Angels was first published in John Agard's 1997 collection, *From the Devil's Pulpit*. Ben Wilkinson described the book as "a meditation on the devil as a necessary evil and creatively anarchic power". The benign state of potency and anarchy to which the angels are invited is the animal body, "the splendid risk of flesh and bone".

There are enough kill-joy forms of religious faith still around to justify reading the poem as a rebuttal. Angels are rarely available. Genderless, heavy-winged and hierarchical as they're usually portrayed by Christianity, angels are not deeply interested in earthly matters. They're aristocrats with haloes. And now they're being commanded to "Get down" – down, and possibly dirty. The archaic form of address "ye angels" might not entirely convince them of the speaker's devotional seriousness.

The fourth line reminded me of an old phonetic taunt typically made by a pupil to a particularly stuffy schoolmaster. "Do you tickle your arse with a feather, Sir?" The response is an indignant, even outraged, "I beg your pardon?" And the pupil, keeping a perfectly straight face, replies "Particularly nasty weather, Sir." In the poem, the wind's feather is "brazen" – an adjective that means "excessively bold" but, originating from "brass", might suggest a more painful kind of ouch.

In the first tercet, the speaker identifies himself: he's none other than the goat-legged, pipe-playing nature god, Great Pan. As this essay tells us, the Catholic poet and writer GK Chesterton considered the death of Pan to have marked the advent of theology. Agard's poem restores Pan to life, and generously makes room for some reformed theology.

Pan's music, like that of Orpheus, brings even the inanimate world to dancing life. And the cherubim receive a special invitation to this "carnal hubbub". I had a rethink



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about cherubs as a result. Why are they personified as winged baby boys (putti) in western art? As we're told here, "there are no angel-babies in the whole of Scripture." The earliest putti, however, were associated with Pan. It's appropriate that "cherubs" and the Earth's "hubbub" should hobnob in a bubbly near-rhyme.

Instead of seeing the poem as a chance for me to take issue with the religions of bodily denial and penalty, I decided to focus on the positive – the religions that celebrate and contact their God through the physicality of music and dance. So this week I've listened to a gospel Sunday service from the Green Pastures Tabernacle, performances by the brilliant Hassidic violinist Daniel Ahaviel, and a beautiful Sufi Dervişane. It has been quite some research experience.

In an interview quoted here, Ahaviel says, "People ask me where I get the energy from, but I say, what energy? This isn't me – it just happens from some deep place." Of course, that deep place wouldn't be of such depth and availability if it hadn't been nourished for years by Ahaviel's training as a concert violinist. There may be an extra ingredient – but I wouldn't know if it had anything to do with angels.

Although religion's most basic tenet is that mankind is elevated by worship, and will ultimately rise to share God's kingdom, the reverse process in which the Holy powers descend has often been a centrally important phase of the narrative. Agard's poem goes farther, and persuades us to ask, what if the Thrones and Powers were incarnated, not for human redemption, but for their own? Or, what if they're incarnate already? What if angels are us?

Gently anarchic in structure and rhyme, combining humorous wordplay with innocently erotic whispers and rustlings, *Get Down Ye Angels* knows that the "numinous" is bodily. In mood and imagery it's a kind of springtime poem. It reminds us the world isn't all bad, and could be very, very good, with less cold piety, more celebration, and a truly pancosmic philosophy.

John Agard was born in Guyana in 1949, and has lived in Britain since the late 1970s. He's a prolific writer for children and has translated a child-friendly version of Dante's *Inferno*, *The Young Inferno*, with illustrations by the wonderful Satoshi Kitamura.

Agard's latest book for adults is *The Coming of the Little Green Man* (Bloodaxe Books, 2018).

This article was amended on 9 April to correct the title of John Agard's most recent book.



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Guyanese Online Addition

<https://guyaneseonline.net/2021/11/11/guyanas-john-agard-becomes-first-poet-to-win-booktrust-lifetime-achievement-award/>

VIDEO – HALF CASTE – PERFORMED BY JOHN AGARD

<https://youtu.be/Z1V-pQBEDO0>

Comment from: varnika chandrasekara

To those who don't understand... It is a poem where the poet is brilliantly criticizing the offensive term 'half-caste' that was used in the past to describe interracial people. He is pointing out that the term makes absolutely no sense because you cannot be half of something as we are all whole human beings.

It is like you only consider one half of your identity while discarding the other. Like he says, 'when Picasso mix red and green it is a half caste canvas' he is saying that everything that people value and wonder, like the paintings of Picasso and the symphonies of Tchaikovsky, which were composed using 'black and white keys', hence producing a marvelous piece of music and painting using a blend of two colours.

He is implying that it is offensive to consider someone as half of something instead of referring to them as a whole person. It is the same as calling someone as not 'pure-blood' which therefore makes 'half-caste' a racist term.