

Peggy Ann David Ph.D:

Review: Chin Chen, *the Adventures of Flat Head*, Second Edition, Chinsun Press, 909 Balsam Tree Place, Capitol Heights, Maryland 20743, 2008, pp279. Attractively packaged by artists: Juan C Spearman (drawing of Flat Head, front dustcover), Karla B Ashley (drawing of the author, back dustcover), and Keith Juneau (Sketch of Simo (Siemo, Flat Head's mother, front matter).

Introduction and Setting

This attractively packaged book chronicles the adventures of the poor boy nicknamed "Flat Head" who was born and had his being in Jamaica during the late 1950s. The author writes in a prefatory note that his inspiration for writing the book came from a challenge posed by E.R. Braithwaite, the world renowned author of the classic *To Sir, With Love*, after viewing a colloquy between the literary scholar and his audience at WHUT TV in Washington DC.

Chen Chin's book is a work of non-fiction, substantive in content, scope and depth, and refreshingly honest. It is organized around twenty-four chapters covering the period between the 1950s and 1980s in Jamaica, West Indies. The first seventeen chapters which are about two thirds of the text are devoted to Flat Head's early life, school days (primary and secondary) and special events. The remaining chapters cover his adult life as a policeman with sprinklings of visits and analyses by important international persons to the island. The author also recognizes the contributions of various local, national and international artists. An epilogue and afterthought complete the book.

In her description of the book, Professor Kitty Ellison, Director of the Freshman English Writing Program at Howard University writes: "Move over Huck Finn, make room for Flat Head." She cautions that in the book "you'll not find the controversy that continues to surround Twain's other "main" character, "Jim." While replete with social commentary about poverty and deprivation during the colonial and postcolonial eras, Chen Chin's book is devoid of the more tiresome themes of colonialism, racism and slavery that have been covered ad nauseam by other West Indian writers. A *Foreword* by journalist Humroy White refers to the book as a genre "of private collections with the voice of the calm reporter exercising a feel for strong rural life. There are flashes of political energy."

TALE OF A RURAL COMMUNITY

The author utilizes time and place (colonial) as the media for his social commentary. In this regard, one of the book's styles conjures up images of Charles Dickens's Tale of Two Cities which masterfully portrayed a time of great turmoil in England and France. It was 1775 and the differences between the rich classes and poor ones grew increasingly severe. In the core of Chen Chin's narrative, the objective is to craft "a true story about a boy nicknamed Flat Head, who, along with eight siblings was born in poverty. His mother Simo showered him with love and he never realized that they were poor." The book traces the many adventures of this poor young man in a rural community with names such as "Round a Bush, Occasion Corner, or Leningrad Breezy Corner."

In the early chapters, Jamaican Patois is intermingled with Standard English explanations, thereby adding weight and cultural diversity to this textual presentation. The description of Flat Head's birth holds the reader's attention: "And there he knew himself for the first time and realized that he existed in a wilderness known as Round a Bush...He was from another time, a simpler time when children had pet names such as Baby Gyal (Baby Girl), Bwoy (Boy), Bwoy Fren (Boyfriend), Brown Man and even Poor Man." It was also a time when the stories of children had happy endings; they had very vivid imaginations, feared the wrath of God, and said their prayers at least twice daily. It was a time when there was no rural electrification but students managed to attend school and studied hard for their exams by candlelight and kerosene lamps. As alluded to above, the rural urban community was organized with such benevolence that children had no idea that they were born into penury.

"A time when neighbors helped each other, and knew almost every villager for miles around. A time when a child was raised by the whole village and not just by parents. A time when it was mandatory for children to be mannerly and well behaved. A time when some mothers would bite, pinch or twist an unruly child's ear; and when such child was referred to as hard ears pickney...A time when children had to carry water in pails or buckets on their heads from far distances, tend the family's animals and sweep the yard before racing off to school and made sure they arrived on time...A time when Jamaica's own home grown music, ska, rock steady and reggae were described as "rag song," considered to be devil music and forbidden on the radio on Sundays. A time before young Bob Marley arrived on the musical scene, and began his crusade to spread reggae worldwide."

It was also a time when the train played a very important role in the lives of rural folk. Most of the poor could not afford to buy radios or watches so they depended on passenger and freight trains to tell the time. It was also the main means of public transportation and was used to transport sugar from the estates, and to the market. When the trains stopped running, crowing roosters served as timepieces.

Chen Chin records with great honesty through the lens of a child who grew up to become a responsible adult. The book chronicles how the rural and urban poor lived in a community where there was no running water, no rural electrification, no health facilities, no infrastructure and poorly constructed houses. The community practiced subsistence farming and the people practiced traditional medicine. People lived off the land and kept livestock which they ate or sold. There was very little employment in the country so Flat Head's father went off to Britain for twelve years. It was not uncommon in the colonial and post colonial era for people from the colonies to migrate to Britain in search of employment.

FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND ENVIRONS

Chen Chin provided a panoramic view of how the community cared for its children, households, and extended families at that special time in Jamaican rural history.

Flat Head was born into a large family not uncommon at that time. Families had large broods because some of the children died, so it was important to have a good number surviving. Children were assets and were expected to take care of parents in their old age.

Flat Head's parents Simo a housewife and Astan (Stan) a cane cutter made thirteen children, nine of which survived. He was the second to the last. The brood included Benny, Mirtie, Alfred, Floyd, Eddy, Alice, Mitsie, Flat Head and Martha. Readers are introduced to the extended family of uncles, aunts, grandaunts, cousins and grandparents. Families with large families were helped by relatives or friends with smaller or no families. After the birth of Flat Head's siblings, the family built a roughly constructed house with one bedroom for the parents and an open hall for the children. They later built a larger home for the family. The children named the special areas around the home King, Duke and Princess. The regal names of these streets were not uncommon in colonial societies.

In most colonial territories men had to leave their families to work on sugar estates or rice plantations. Astan worked on the sugar estate as a cane cutter so most of the child rearing was left to Simo. Simo worked very hard on her small plot to provide food for her large family. She also sold the remainder of her produce at the market. Flat Head's only cherished birthday present was a rusty wheel from his father. When his father came home from the sugar estate, he brought a rusty wheel for Flat Head. It was his first gift from his father. Flat Head later made a radio and a telephone. He had other inventions and continued to discover exciting things in his environment. His many adventures including fishing, stealing and selling produce, hitching rides on trains, and building a roofless house are documented throughout the book.

The book deals with the daily struggles of raising a large family in the rural areas where water was scarce and most food came from subsistence farming and cooked on makeshift ovens. People depended on produce from small vegetable gardens, many varieties of tropical fruit, and livestock. They sold excess output in nearby markets and shared the rest with friends and neighbors. In so many ways, this was a hard life and people had to eke out an existence by learning to live with nature. The terrain consisted of "sharp rocks on slippery gravels, down valleys and over hills" with various types of insects - bees, birds, lizards and frogs.

The book ends with an update on the lives of Flat Head's siblings. Flat Head resigned from the police department and no other information was provided about his whereabouts. However, an update on Flat Head's siblings was provided. "And there, for the first time, as it was for him in the beginning, at last he really came to know himself." Maybe readers can expect another book in the series. You would not regret buying and reading a copy of *the Adventures of Flat Head*. Chen Chin uses his language very well.

Peggy Ann David, Ph.D. is an educational sociologist who is working on a biography of E.R. Braithwaite, Author of *To Sir, With Love*.