

## MEDIA RELEASE

### FOR IMMEDIATE PUBLICATION

#### Chief judge, Judy Raymond's remarks at Awards ceremony

**PORT-OF-SPAIN, May 7, 2011:** In 1948, Frank Collymore, the Bajan writer and editor, wrote to Henry Swanzy, producer of the BBC radio programme *Caribbean Voices*, about a collection of poems he had just read, by an 18-year-old poet.

“I don’t know when I have read anything so exciting,” wrote Collymore.

The collection was called *25 Poems*, and the author’s name on the cover of the book was DA Walcott.

While the Allen Prize judges may not have discovered a new Walcott—or not yet—the story demonstrates that writers may show their colours very early.

But show them where, and to whom? Even DA Walcott had to publish that first book himself; opportunities for young writers to be published, then as now, were very scarce.

So the aim of this prize, and of the workshops and seminars that accompany it, is to offer young writers encouragement, guidance, and a chance to have their work recognised and published.

For the six judges, reading the 80 bodies of work entered in four categories—fiction, drama, poetry and creative non-fiction—was entertaining and revealing. The entries were ambitious, adventurous and wide-ranging. Few subjects or techniques seemed too large, too deep or too difficult for our young writers. Overall, the junior entries were more unpretentious and unself-conscious than some of the senior entries, but no less ambitious or accomplished.

The writers used rhyme, realism, calypso, high poetic diction, local dialect and Standard English. They offered slices of life and moral lessons, fantasy worlds and folklore.

Their subjects included not only the more predictable ones, such as school—which was treated in lively and unexpected ways—but also vampires, roti, talking farm animals, immortality, horseracing, cricket, an American detective working in Couva, and an old lady who has a heart attack after the PNM election defeat.

So the entrants obviously don’t need help with coming up with ideas. A few words of advice on other topics, however: for the future, it’s clear that the organisers need to explain what they mean by “creative non-fiction”: that category presented the most problems, with a number of entrants sending in work that was very creative, but was not non-fiction.

The judges also want to suggest that entrants regularly consult a dictionary, do a spellcheck, or investigate what those wiggly little red lines under certain words mean. Words are the tools of the

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writer's trade, and you need to know the basic techniques for using them—such as grammar, syntax and spelling—if you want your readers to understand and enjoy your work.

Also, you need to read. A lot. Reading is part of a writer's job description. And keep writing—not just talking about writing, or thinking about writing, or meaning to write—all of which, sadly, are much easier than writing. The definition of a writer is: a person who writes.

It's a hard task, and often a thankless one, but writing matters. To quote the St Kitts-born novelist and playwright Caryl Phillips, interviewed by Allen Prize founder Lisa Allen-Agostini in the latest issue of Caribbean Beat: "The development of the arts...is incredibly important to people's sense of who they are. It's the window through which we see ourselves and through which the world is going to peer at us."

Here I'd like to thank those who have peered through these particular windows, my fellow judges, who gave generously of their time to read and comment on the entries. I think they'll all agree that it was very, very hard to choose the winners: the shortlisted entries were of an almost uniformly high standard, and there were swings in the voting up to the very last minute.

Like all of you, the judges are eager to find out who the winners are. We don't know, because the entries carried only numbers, and no names, to avoid any possible bias in the judging.

Whoever leaves here with the prize this evening, all the young writers here are winners. All those whose work was selected on the shortlist will be invited to take part in a writing workshop and to network on a continuing basis with established writers. We offer our congratulations to all of you on your talent and determination, and especially to the winners of a very close contest.

For more information go to <http://allenprize.org>.

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