

# *The Literary London Journal*

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**Hannah Lowe, *Long Time No See: A Memoir of Fathers, Daughters and Games of Chance*, paperback, 315 pages, Reading: Periscope, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-859643-96-9; £9.99.**

Reviewed by

Sonya Barker  
(Freelance, UK)

*The Literary London Journal*, Volume 13 Number 1 (Spring 2016)

How do you atone for lost time? How do you make peace with the past and past lives? How do you say 'I'm sorry' or 'I love you' or ask somebody 'who are you, really?' when it's too late? How do you discover who you truly are yourself? For acclaimed London-based poet Hannah Lowe, some of the answers appear to lie in her beautifully told and emotionally honest memoir *Long Time No See*, which recounts and explores her strained relationship with her father, Ralph 'Chick' Lowe, whilst concurrently unfurling his story. Chick is an affable half-Chinese, half-black Jamaican immigrant with legendary skills as a gambler and card sharp, his personal motto being, 'If you can't win it straight, win it crooked' (62). However, his bid to support his family through nightly dice and card games in the East End of London renders him a 'ghost-father—gone all night or in the house but asleep—a present absence, hovering at the edges of our lives' (57). As a consequence of this way of life, on the day of Chick's funeral—which is where Lowe's own strand of the story starts—Lowe is left with the stark awareness that she barely knew him. It is this urge to know her father, and in so doing herself, which drives the book's two entwined narrative threads.

As the author notes in the preliminary matter, the book is a combination of truth and invention. Throughout, Lowe deftly interweaves a fictionalised account of Chick's difficult early life in mid-twentieth century Jamaica and England (based on his notebook found after his death and interviews with family members) with chapters comprised of her own memories of her father and growing up in Ilford, Essex in the 1980s and 90s. The two histories work in successful counterpoint—a mixture of engaging third person and first person voices, skilfully bound through a simple and tender lyricism. Together they show how issues relating to identity, racism, (post)colonialism and displacement span the generations and affect the lives of both father and daughter: and how each must navigate their internal struggles, as well as

the challenges posed by their wider cultures and communities, in order to make their way in the world.

To Lowe, as she grows up, Chick is no more than a 'part-time parent' who leaves the upbringing of his children to their stoic English mother, for whom—Lowe eventually realises—he is likewise a 'part-time husband' (98). Chick is admired within the gambling fraternity, but part of the tragedy arises from his urgent attempts to win the respect of his own family and particularly that of his bright young daughter, of whom he is excessively proud. She, though, can only regard her father with contempt:

... I sensed a desperation in his pride, his need to prop himself up through me. Because what did he have? No qualifications, no job.... Even aged nine, I knew I had the opportunity for those things and that my life would take a very different path from his. I looked down on him because of it. (53–54)

The young Lowe is ashamed of her elderly, black father (Chick was many years older than her mother and already fifty-two when Lowe was born) who looks nothing like her or her brother, both of whom are 'entirely white in appearance. You wouldn't believe our father was a black man' (15). The discrepancy in skin colour leads to many awkward questions from her peer group at primary school, and at one point Lowe recalls deflecting these tiresome queries by disowning her father: by telling her little friends after a ballet class that Chick is a cab driver whom her mother sends to collect her from lessons. The childish betrayal serves to disconnect Lowe further from her father, both physically and emotionally; and the distance is compounded a few years later when she jokingly refuses to kiss him anymore, which sadly becomes a truth.

Through the first half of Lowe's story, we watch as she grapples not only with her relationship with Chick but also with her own racial identity and the effects of 'casual' racism. Who is she? How should she define herself? 'Mum, am I half-caste? ... am I half Jamaican?' (29), she asks as a child, while her father playfully reminds her that she has a 'touch of the tar brush' and that, in the words of his white gambling buddy Charlie, she is a 'mongrel' (37). Her primary school in Ilford is ethnically diverse and offers a multi-cultural curriculum, but at her predominantly white secondary school, Pinnars in 'white flight' (102) Upminster, she encounters an unsettling homogeneity and ingrained racism. Her History teacher is narrow-minded and antiquated, failing to admit the word 'Anglocentric' when Lowe deploys the term in an essay about her father's colonial upbringing in Jamaica. As she says, 'Even then I knew there was a heavy irony here—that my dusty, English History teacher ... would have no need to know a word that just confirmed his position and privilege in the centre' (101). With her father no longer required to pick her up from school, Lowe keeps her ethnic background a secret from her classmates and, for a time, is able to avoid being the butt of their racist jokes and comments. However, in so doing, she experiences a keen sense of personal dislocation and finds herself conflicted: externally she looks white and 'normal' to the other children, but their attitude and taunts wound the black part of her inner being. Her Jamaican roots are discovered later on which leads to the children calling her 'white wog' (186) for a while.

Moreover, the mother of a friend from Pinner deems her a bad influence on her daughter allegedly after learning that Lowe's father is black.

As Lowe's narrative progresses, and with the author writing from an enlightened position of maturity and hindsight, we are able to observe how a family trip to Jamaica and Lowe's later education gradually awaken her sympathies for her father, even as their relationship at the time remains blighted by silence and detachment despite his deteriorating health. Her view of Chick alters in Jamaica as, for the first time, she witnesses him as an accepted insider rather than a social outsider. At sixth form college the teenage Lowe becomes politically engaged, joining in with demonstrations against the British National Party and the National Front, while at university she takes a course on postcolonialism which further sharpens her political sensibilities and her awareness of her father's subaltern position as a poor black immigrant in the UK, 'What power did he have to define himself in any public way? He'd had no door to education, less chance of a decent job' (240). An exchange year in the US introduces Lowe to a more sophisticated study of black culture and literature, showing her how writing and politics intersect and can be used to challenge oppressive power structures. Her time in a different country also leaves her with a disconcerting feeling of unfamiliarity and transposition, forcing her to empathise more fully with her father's circumstances. After her undergraduate studies, Lowe goes on to complete a Masters degree in Refugee Studies. It is easy for the author, looking back, to attribute her educational choices to her burgeoning perception of herself and her heritage, and for the reader to identify a corresponding growth in her compassion for her father as she expresses and explores her own ethnicity. As Lowe herself says, though, 'It didn't occur to me then that these interests might be personal, linked to my family history, my father's life story. I couldn't see the picture that broadly then' (251). Indeed, at the time of Chick's death, Lowe recalls being filled with nothing but remorse for all the things left unsaid and for the loss of the link with her father, his past in Jamaica and his secret life in London.

It is this yearning and overwhelming regret which one assumes prompted Lowe to tell and intersperse Chick's partly imagined story with her own. In a book characterised by fusions and hybridity—racial mixes, petty criminality combined with the 'everyday domestic' (111), fact and fiction—the book is as much a piece of poetic biographical writing as it is autobiographical. Certainly, one feels that, for Lowe, the third-person narrative relating the story of 'the boy', her father, is perhaps the most important element of the text. By opening the book with his story, rather than her own, Lowe posthumously affords Chick a firm position of centrality, denied to him in his life beyond the gambling den. Chick's chapters are much shorter than those describing Lowe's story, but they are even more expressive, graceful and rhythmical, possessing an elegiac quality that befits the spirit in which they are no doubt intended. The two stories dovetail adroitly and run in parallel, so that we trace 'the boy's' progress through childhood and early adulthood alongside Lowe's own coming of age.

Chick's narrative begins in Jamaica in 1935. In the opening chapter, we learn of the appalling abuse he suffered as a child at the hands of his Chinese father, after his young Jamaican mother sells him to the violent, profligate shopkeeper. We see how the quick-witted youngster acquires his remarkable gambling skills and eventually

flees to Kingston to forge a living dealing and playing cards in the back-street clubs of Barry Street; how he finds his mother and endeavours to re-establish some sort of connection with her; and how he becomes increasingly interested in Jamaican politics and the fight for independence from the UK. As his story unfolds, we follow 'the boy', now a young man, to America as part of the 1940s Farm Worker Program and watch him return to a forlorn post-war Jamaica three years later, leaving behind a wife and daughter in the US. In 1947, with few options before him, he gathers his meagre belongings and voyages to the promised-land of England aboard the *SS Ormonde* in search of a new life in London—only to be greeted with more poverty, dire housing, entrenched racism and limited job opportunities, all of which encourage a return to the old gambling ways as a necessary means of support. It is utterly heart-wrenching to see Chick's hopes fade and the realisation set in that, as an immigrant and a person of colour, he is essentially unwanted, 'Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined they would be so unwelcome. Sometimes he couldn't believe this was London, couldn't believe this was England. But this was London' (256).

Lowe earlier comments that Chick's grounding in colonial Jamaica has left him with divergent attitudes toward England: he is vehemently against its imperial politics but at the same time venerates the country and its institutions. This deep-rooted deferential reverence never leaves Chick, but he must learn quickly to adapt to the grim reality of living in a racist society. And it is the cosmopolitan London underworld, the hidden jazz bars and seedy gambling lairs, which offer him that space in which to thrive and exercise some control over his destiny—a rare place of equality where black people are accepted and some are able to demonstrate their musical skills and creative abilities, 'This was a different London, the boy thought—away from the unfriendly stares, the graffiti, the taunts in the street. Here black people were respected and rightly so' (283). Chick is a fighter who displays admirable tenacity and spirit, and a determination to beat all the odds by making his own luck. Thanks to this resolve he is able to succeed in building a comfortable life for himself in London and maintains an involvement in the wider struggle to improve the prospects of West Indians both in the UK and in Jamaica. His is a quiet heroism, which the adult Lowe is, at last, able to recognise and commemorate. Whilst conveying the disdain for her father that she felt as a child, Lowe simultaneously excavates a more nuanced portrait of the man behind the tragic layers of misunderstanding. The person she reveals is a true survivor who has had to use his own cunning and resources to adapt to hostile situations first in Jamaica, then in America and finally in England; a well-read man who, in spite of his lack of a formal education, was knowledgeable about politics, current affairs, philosophy and religion; a person, like herself, who has had to battle his inner demons and who has sought to piece together his identity over the years through efforts to reconnect with only partially-known parents and half-siblings.

By the end of this deeply moving book, Lowe is forced to acknowledge that she may never know who Chick actually was—portions of his life will always be shrouded in mystery—and there is a lingering sadness that accompanies this consciousness. To a certain extent this is part of the sadness of life, for we can never truly know who anyone is other than ourselves (and for many of us, as Lowe intimates, self-discovery may become an on-going quest too). However, the subtle power of *Long Time No See* lies in the fact that it speaks on a number of levels and is much more than a

daughter's personal search for a better understanding of her elusive father: it is a brilliant and potent reminder to us all that we should make time to listen to others, to ask questions and to learn, before a person is gone forever. This is especially important when it comes to family members, for in learning about them we uncover more about our ancestry and who we are as well. The genre-straddling text also acts as a poignant memorial to Chick and, in some ways, to all the unsung souls like him who bravely left the Caribbean in the mid twentieth-century in the hope of finding fresh opportunities in England. At a time when high-profile debates on immigration abound in the media, *Long Time No See* takes on an even wider contemporary relevance by offering some insight into the general plight and courage of the migrant. Lowe may focus on one person, her father, but the text discreetly pays tribute to the multitudes, past and present, who have left behind all they have ever known in their country of origin and have then had to transfer their entire sense of self to a new and potentially unreceptive culture—a massive physical and psychological upheaval which constitutes no ordinary feat.

Eloquent, richly textured and brimming with feeling and unobtrusive sagacity, this is a compelling book—crafted with a lightness of touch by a talented wordsmith ('...the father's hatred sang itself in the cracking of his leather belt...' (1); '...his lip busted like a split plum' (242))—which continues to resonate long after you have finished the last page. A highly recommended read.

### **Note on Contributor**

**Sonya Barker** is a freelance writer and publishing professional. She was formerly Senior Editor for Literature and History at Palgrave Macmillan, UK.

### **To Cite this Article**

Sonya Barker, 'Review of Hannah Lowe, *Long Time No See: A Memoir of Fathers, Daughters and Games of Chance*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 13, Number 1 (Spring 2016): 60–64. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2016/barker.pdf>.