

# Authenticity and realism: hallmarks of McCaulay's must-read second novel

**Title:** *Huracan* by Diana McCaulay.  
**Leeds:** Peepal Tree Press, 2012.  
**219 pages.**  
**Reviewed by:** Mary Hanna

I have written about the beloved island of my birth at different times in her tragic history; I hope I have created an authenticity, a realism.  
— Diana McCaulay

“Huracan” is the Taino word for storm and is the origin of our word “hurricane”. In this, her second novel, Diana McCaulay has created a compelling and powerfully told tale of family history and historical fiction that spans three centuries. She interleaves three key narratives: that of the bookkeeper Zachary Macaulay, who came to Jamaica in the 1780s from Scotland to witness, and ultimately turn against, plantation slavery; the tale of the Baptist preacher John McCaulay, who spent his life in the imaginary village of Fortress in the 1880s, ministering to the poverty-stricken freed slaves and their descendants; and the story of the white girl Leigh McCaulay, who returns to Jamaica after 15 years in America to negotiate Kingston in the 1980s. The plantation of Bonnie Valley, which McCaulay locates on the margins of the Cockpit Country, forges a link between all three characters, its operations offering a detailed, well-researched account of an island whose society is founded on hate, violence, and inequality. It is a gripping read, beautifully balanced and convincingly told. McCaulay writes:

On Zachary's first morning in the fields, he had stood behind the line of canecutters watching their skins glossy with sweat, their arms wrung with muscles, their machetes flashing high and low, heard them chanting primitive songs with words he could not understand. He had seen their burns and their backs, furrowed and riven like the fields themselves, torn by the cowskin lash. He rode slowly down the line and could not see a single slave who had not been beaten.

McCaulay's research is flawless. She draws a breathtaking picture of the horrors of slavery and the nature of the white people who run the plantation. The Monmouth family is closely interrogated. McCaulay is brilliant at capturing the telling detail, the insight that explains all. She places this revealing speech to Zachary in the mouth of Charlotte Monmouth, daughter of the plantation's owner.

“You know, the rules here are not the same,” Charlotte said.

“The rules, Miss Monmouth? I'm no sure I understand ye.”

“The rules. Society's rules. They are suspended. Out here, you can do what you like.” She stared at him and he felt uncomfortable. He thought if he reached across for her hand she would put his fingers to her breasts. Was he mad? This was his employer's daughter. He inclined his head, pretending to consider what she had said.

Charlotte's brother Paul has already signalled the same philosophy to Zachary when he observed:

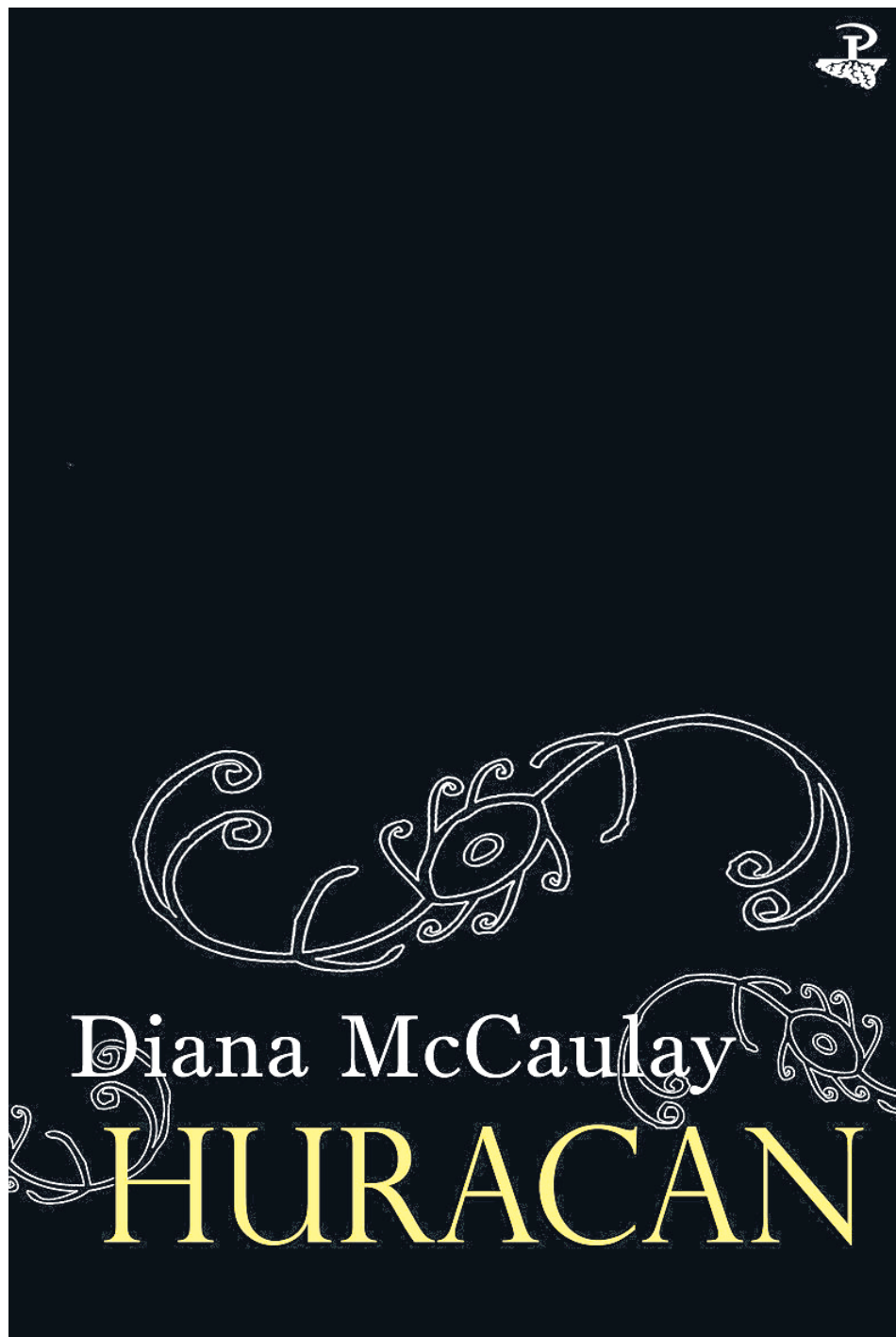
“You'll have to take a wife,” Paul said, interrupting his reverie.

“A wife?”

“A slave wife. Everyone does it. I'll pick one for you, if you like.”

... “Who's your wife?” he said, embarrassed.

“I have a stable.” Paul laughed. “Whoever I



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feel like, whenever I feel like it, wherever I feel like it. Canepiece, tool shed, my bed - it doesn't matter. I don't take them young as some do, though. See her there, the tall, brown one with the scar on one cheek and the brand on the other?” Zachary saw a rangy woman with a small boy at heel, like a hunting dog. She met his eyes for an instant and he saw they were fierce.

“A wonderful f--k,” Paul said. “Spits and scratches like a cat. I gave her that scar.” Zachary turned away, repelled and aroused.

This is how McCaulay introduces Victoria, whose real name is Madu, the slave woman with the unconquerable spirit who is ultimately betrayed by the Maroons and dies in childbirth, bearing Paul Monmouth's baby. It is respect for this woman that leads Zachary Macaulay to abhor slavery and return to Europe with the baby to become an abolitionist.

One hundred years later, the Baptist minister John Macaulay tells his white neighbours, the Bannisters, that there “always seemed to be

some kind of secret surrounding my grandfather's birth in Jamaica. I don't think even he knew how it came to pass. His mother and father died in a hurricane, we understand, and this man, the abolitionist, brought him back to Scotland”. The Baptist minister has his own conscience to wrestle with as he tries to help the villagers of Fortress but stay aloof from them. He is horrified when his brother marries a black woman, and John changes the spelling of his name to McCaulay in protest.

But he too is influenced by the example of the black people, in this instance, the farrier (blacksmith) Cuba, who builds a schoolhouse for McCaulay that wins the allegiance of the villagers. Cuba is sent to Bonnie Valley to fix a horse shoe and while there he is accused of stealing and placed in the gibbet which drives him mad. On being cut down, he takes a machete and kills all the white people on the property and three servants - ten people in all, including the baby of the Monmouth family. It is the end of the plantation which falls into ruin.

Of the free villagers, Diana McCaulay writes:

Of course the people were noisy, undisciplined, violent, governed by superstition. They thought duppies lived in the roots of the cotton trees, that the blood of an animal should be sprinkled in the foundations of a house and that owls brought death. They were also noisy, joyful and tough; they eked out food just as easily from stony hillsides as from the fertile valley bottoms; above all, they survived - and some thrived.

Leigh McCaulay's story, which opens the text, is interleaved with the narratives of Zachary and John. She works for a charity and lives simply in Kingston until she witnesses police murder a hapless coconut seller in the street. With her Jamaican boyfriend Danny, Leigh goes into hiding and then seeks out her estranged father who is a tour operator on what turns out to be Bonnie Valley plantation, now called Edinburgh. There is a final hurricane and the Great House is demolished:

She was dry-eyed. She thought she had loved this valley she had briefly lived in and perhaps she had, but gorgeous as it had been, she was glad the Great House was gone. Shepherding tourists through a sanitised version of history could not now be her future.

What Leigh decides to do with her life forms the argument at the end of the text. It has been a complex journey through a violent history to reach the present day for this McCaulay. Diana McCaulay has done her forebears proud, rendering their stories in clear and evocative prose that is imbued with historical fact and imagined detail. She has written a big book, a novel of consequence that many different kinds of readers will enjoy and benefit from. Huracan is a fitting sequel to *Dog-Heart* in the sense that it explains both the origins of the ghetto in her first book and the nature of white guilt in the second. This novel is a wonderful read and a welcome addition to every Caribbeanist library.

Diana McCaulay is a writer and an environmental activist. She is the chief executive of the Jamaica Environment Trust and was awarded the 2005 Euan P McFarlane Award for Outstanding Environmental Leadership and a 2009 Bronze Musgrave Medal from the Institute of Jamaica. Her first novel, *Dog-Heart*, won a gold medal in the 2008 Jamaican National Literature awards.