



In celebration of Child Month, Bookends presents, *Sundays in May*, stories for the young and young at heart, from some of the best contemporary young adult fiction writers in the Caribbean. Today's authors are Guyanese Imam Baksh and Antiguan & Barbudan Joanne C Hillhouse.

By Imam Baksh

Excerpt

In the land of the Spider gods, a girl counted the stars and waited.

The hillside where she crouched was exposed to the eyes of the enemy, with just a few mossy and pungent boulders for cover, but their heads bent in prayer around the fountain below, the men never looked up from under their hoods. They lit flambeaus and put them out again in an order only they understood. Seven of the Brothers wore black robes. The eighth wore red and carried a spear.

In the land of her mother's grave and her father's memory, a girl waited.

When had she last eaten? There were candyberries in the offering plates next to the fires. Her father had told her about real candy once when she was a much smaller girl. Her little self had marvelled at the idea of candy that was actually sweet.

The name 'candyberry' started as a joke, her father had explained. Tonight, the girl on the hillside was still not fully grown, but she knew that the time for growing up was over.

In the land of cloudfire, snakeskin houses and hardwater

# Children of the Spider



roads, a girl waited.

The stars of the Fisherman had frozen in place, glowing brighter as the moon rose into the centre of the constellation. It was almost time. The girl hoped Jalana and the other rocksliders were hiding in the right place. She hoped that they would keep their word. She wondered if she could keep hers.

The man in the red robe lifted his spear to the sky and the water in the fountain exploded with golden light. The girl ran down the hill, bare feet on rocky ground. Which of them would see her first?

The biggest one. Why did it have to be the biggest one?

The man's head came up, then his robed hand, pointing as he screeched the alarm. The girl was not even halfway there and she had been discovered. Should she pull her knife and fight?

But the rest of the Brothers were distracted, watching the far side of the fountain. Rocks were flying at them and they scattered under the attack. On the far hills the girl could make out the glowing, blobby forms of the rocksliders. They sucked up rocks from below with their feeding maws and spat them at the robed men through the tops of their bodies.

The fountain was unguarded by the time the girl got there. A few late-arriving rocks smashed behind her. The mark of Arrak was inscribed on the tray holding the candyberries. She grabbed a handful and stuffed her mouth with the bitter fruit, letting them slide down her gullet. The fountain bubbled. It was more water than she had ever seen in her life. Was it even safe to jump into it?

Too late to wonder now. Jalana's people were already fleeing. The skin that held their sloshy bodies together was vulnerable to the Brothers' arrows and they could not risk staying in the open long. The girl jumped into the water and sank. At least it didn't matter that she couldn't swim. Her lungs burned as she searched out the bottom descending towards the light which grew brighter and clearer as she went deeper. For weeks she had practiced holding her breath in preparation for this, but in the end it was not enough.

Water invaded her nose, burning and making her eyes hurt. The world seemed to twist around her and she broke through the other side into sunlight. There was no neat fountain at this end of the portal just a shallow, swampy pond. She gasped as

she crawled to the shore, then curled up within the roots of an endlessly tall tree.

It was daylight. She could tell by the angle of the shadows, but the new place was dark. The treetops hung like low clouds. From the stories she had heard, Mayali had expected to feel a thrill at the sight of so many leaves, but this world of endless green seemed ominous. It was like life was out of control here. How did people survive? Well, she would learn just as she had learned to climb down rock faces to steal from the Brothers or learned to tunnel for snakeskins.

The pond bubbled behind her. Were they following her to this new world? It seemed unlikely. The fanatics on the other side were taught that women corrupted water and now that the girl had used the fountain, they probably believed it to be diseased. It was her bleeding time of the month too. She smiled. She hoped they could taste it when they drank from their stupid fountain. Of course, it was more likely that they would fill the thing with dirt rather than touch it again.

She would never return home. This new place was the rest of her life now. Somewhere, in this strange, over-green world, was

her father. She would rest until dark then sneak out and begin her search and soon she would need to find help for those she had left at home.

In the land of Guyana, the land of many waters, a girl drew her knife and waited.

Imam Baksh is a writer from Guyana. He enjoys tales of magic, monsters and heroes of all kinds. He's also interested in history and how the world works, and never accepts any claim unless he's given proof. He enjoys research, which helps him write better stories and win many arguments (in fact, he hasn't lost an argument since June 1998).

As a boy, Baksh left his countryside home on the Essequibo Coast to attend high school (Queens College) in the city of Georgetown, where he learned most of his bad habits. He became a trained teacher, specialised in English, but he had the most fun teaching physics because he got to use electricity on his students. These days he is a full-time writer and his short stories have won the Henry Josiah Prize for Children's Stories three times between 2006 and 2010.

His debut novel, *Children of the Spider*, won the 2015 Burt Award for Caribbean Literature. In

## Fiction



# Musical Youth

By Joanne C Hillhouse

In life, there are moments that shape us. For teenage musicians, Zahara and Shaka, two of those moments involve Lauréna Lee and Andra Small, respectively. Zahara and Shaka are the main characters in *Musical Youth*, a CaribbeanReads publication which was second placed for the inaugural Burt Award for teen/young adult literature in 2014, written by Joanne C Hillhouse. Zahara and Shaka are involved in a summer production of Ashley Bryan's *Dancing Granny* – an Anansi tale. They are also dealing with a deepening relationship. In

these self-contained excerpts, they reflect on Lauréna Lee and Andra Small, who are both likely oblivious to their effect on their one-time primary school mates, but who nonetheless helped both Zahara and Shaka, in their way, to dare.

Chapter 11

When she was in primary school, Zahara'd had a girl crush on a girl named Lauréna Lee, a girl big in body, personality and charisma who'd started filling out way before the other girls were even dreaming of training bras.

Lauréna Lee had also been the queen of tall tales. Zahara and her classmates would

sop up her stories like bread soaking up gravy. Looking back, Zahara could see how ridiculous they had been.

Was the Queen of England ever going to come and see them perform the maypole? They didn't know, but Lauréna Lee had said the Queen would show up, so they'd danced their butts off at practice in anticipation.

Were there really scouts from Temple University coming to hear their grade six marching band play their rendition of Short Shirt's "Pledge" at the Independence parade? Probably not; but when they marched across the field at the Antigua Recreation Ground and saluted

the Governor General, Lauréna Lee's back straight in spite of the big bass drum she carried, they'd turned it up a notch and lifted their knees that much higher. Come to think of it, it was a blessing that Lauréna Lee had used her powers for good because God knows where she would have led them otherwise.

As a child, she had studied Lauréna Lee, trying to figure out how she got them to believe every story that came out of her mouth and follow her lead. Zahara wanted to be like her. Mostly though, she was merely in awe of her, wondered how anyone could be so bold. Her classmates had all

scattered after grade school, and if Lauréna Lee was still on the island Zahara hadn't seen her in the almost three years since she had traded her blue jumper for a plaid one. But it was Lauréna Lee she'd thought of as she'd fine-tuned a calypso melody for her presentation.

As a starting point, she'd jacked King Obstinate's "Dancing Days" and Short Shirt's "Tourist Leggo", not the actual arrangement but the spirit of them. Both songs were full of unbridled energy. She remembered watching the Party Monarch crowds Carnival after Carnival on TV and the way her idol CP and others commanded and the audience responded. She wanted to be like CP when she said "wave" and the audience waved, said "jump" and the audience obeyed. But that kind of magic was beyond her reach.

Lauréna Lee had it. She remembered the girl holding court, and all the other children rapt. And as she'd strummed her song for the presentation, she'd channelled a bit of Lauréna Lee's oomph, just a bit, and let it shoot out through her fingers. What came out had had a cocky sound to it, like calypso with a hard rock edge. Or at least it sounded that way when she played it in her room. When she'd played it at rehearsal, it had fallen flat. She couldn't blame him for nodding off. She was mad at herself really.

.....  
"Close your eyes," he said from somewhere in the dark, and she turned around, trying to see him, but it was as if he was hiding from her.

"Where are you?"  
"Close your eyes," he repeated.

"What?"  
"Close your eyes."  
"I'm not... why?"

"Trust me," he said. She took a deep breath, arms tightening around the guitar she held close to her, and then she closed her eyes.

"Play," he said.  
"What?"  
"Play," he pressed.  
"I... I can't..."  
"Yes, you can. Play."

She wanted to stamp her feet; she knew he was just trying to help but didn't like this feeling, like he was playing games with her. She kept her eyes closed even when she felt the sting of tears.

"Play, jack," he urged, his voice gentler this time, coaxing her.

And she breathed and

Turn to **MUSICAL** on Page 4

Bookends Credits

Co-ordinator

Sharon Leach

Writers

Sharon Leach  
Imam Baksh  
Joanne Hillhouse

Art Director

Rorie Atkinson

Layout

Marlon Forrester

Contact Information

Mail:  
Bookends c/o The Jamaica Observer Ltd, 40-42  
1/2 Beechwood Ave, Kgn 5

E-mail:  
sharonleach715@hotmail.com

**MUSICAL from Page 3**

breathed again, and lifted the guitar. It was awkward since she didn't have her strap and it kept slipping. Still, lashes wet and tears streaking her face, she strummed, conscious that he was out there in the dark somewhere listening to her. And as she played, something about his presence, about the attentiveness and encouragement she felt flowing from him had a calming effect on her. Her strumming grew more assured, as if she had the Lauréna Lee oomph right there at the tips of her fingers. At the last lick of her pick, she opened her watery eyes to find his face inches from hers. She hadn't heard or felt him come closer. Thinking he might kiss her then, she held her breath; but he merely smiled.

"How you feel?"

She searched her heart.

"Happy," she said.

Her fingers were still tingling, and the electricity of it travelled up the rest of her body until she felt like she had to move, or scratch, or dance or something. She leaned forward and kissed him. And just like that the spell was broken.

"Woohooo!" a voice hollered.

"Mi boy goin' get some," said another.

And she looked past him, squinting in the darkness, to see Kong, Accident and the rest of them. Shaka rolled his eyes and she tried to be angry but she was still tingling. Besides, of course he'd brought his crew. She knew by now that they were a big part of his life. She kind of envied them that.

"You good, sistren, you real good," Kong said.

The others nodded.

She blushed. She'd spent a lot of time perfecting her playing, filling up her lonely hours with music; still, she didn't think she was *that* good. But there they were grinning at her, all white teeth in the dark, as though she was something special.

**Chapter 12**

Talking about colour...and girls...always made him think of Andra Small, the first girl he'd ever checked for.

They were in grade six when suddenly Andra had grown these twin peaks on her chest. Andra, the best athlete in school, who'd always been like one of the boys, was suddenly a girl. Weird.

He'd felt bad for her when some of the guys started calling her "Big Bubby Small". She'd started keeping to herself, had given up any sport where she had to play on a team. But she'd stuck with her running and continued killing it at cross-country. Even back then, he'd known what was going on, how Andra, once she'd developed, preferred to do things alone. She'd didn't want to stand out in a group of girls; in fact, she'd stopped hanging out with the other girls altogether. Or perhaps more correctly, they'd stopped wanting to hang out with her.

One day, they'd been doing laps around the track during PE, everyone except Kong who always got a pass because of his leg. Shaka had spent the time composing a rhyme in his head, too distracted to notice the burn in his legs. He didn't come back to himself until he'd felt the need for a pen and his notebook to write down the lyrics before they slipped away. That's when he'd realized everyone was in the middle of the track. His classmates had dropped out one by one and were cheering on the only two runners left on the track: him and Andra Small.

They'd been neck and neck, and he remembered the look of deep concentration on her face. Even now, he wondered what she'd been thinking about. He'd never been particularly athletic. He did what he could for his House on Sports Day, had shot hoops with his boys for as long as he could remember, and rooted for teams during the NBA play-offs. But he'd never cared about

being an athlete himself. Andra had obviously cared. She'd pushed herself hard, invested in winning. Not only was he not invested in winning, now that his mind was back in his body he was feeling every burn. He'd caught a stitch and pulled back, and she'd won.

The girls had swarmed around her and from where he'd stood doubled over and panting, he'd seen the look on her face. She was just happy to be one of the girls again. He'd felt good, like he'd given her something she'd been missing. Though it wasn't like he'd let her win; she'd always been the better runner.

His body had hurt for days afterwards and when the track coach had chosen him and Andra for the Inter-School games, he'd tried everything he could to get out of it. Thankfully, the boys from the other schools had been more invested and more talented on the track than he was. The best he'd ever pulled off was third place. Endurance running was hard when you were actually in your body to feel the burn.

Andra though, had won her heats and for once everyone had focused on her running and not her chest. She'd also seemed to have gotten that... area... under control somehow. He figured that someone had recommended sports bras for her; at the time, he'd just been relieved that she'd gotten them to behave. They were distracting. And he'd never liked it when the other boys ogled her.

Andra Small had been his first crush.

They had become friends during the afternoon practices back when he was still prepping for the Inter-School games. He'd walk her as far as the roundabout where they'd break off in opposite directions. With the games over, though, there was no reason to continue that routine. He went back to walking home with the boys, but found he couldn't stop thinking about Andra. The guys noticed, of course, and teased him about it. He shrugged it off at first. But he'd liked Andra and had a feeling she liked him back. She may have become silent and sullen but she'd always had a smile for him.

When the summer had come and they went their separate ways, he'd regretted not acting on the attraction. Next year they'd be in different schools.

He'd decided to check her at home and had taken the boys with him, for company and as back-up.

"Man, mi leg ah hat me, all dis walking fu wan gyal," Kong griped, leaning exaggeratedly on the old wooden grandfather cane.

Shaka ignored him. He knew Kong was using the cane to step up his swagger more than anything else. His friend needed the exercise anyway; milking the sore foot for all it was worth was making him lazy.

"Arwe na even know where she lib," said Monkey, who always had to echo Kong.

"We'll just go to the playing field," he said for the millionth time. "Somebody there bound to know her. She's an athlete."

"Some people use this thing called phones, you know, maybe you've heard of them?" was Accident's comeback. It was mutiny. Soon, even Big Head and Scaly would have something to say.

"Yeah, you have one?" Shaka shot back.

It was a low blow. Accident was the poorest among them and didn't have a landline telephone in his house much less a cell phone. Besides, he and Andra had never exchanged numbers; they hadn't had that kind of friendship. Sure he could've looked her up in the phone book. How many Smalls could there be? But her parents might have answered. So, the trek to the playfield was the best plan. They'd all agreed to it, so he didn't know what they were griping about now anyway. Leave it to Kong to always stir things up.

"We almost reach," Kong said trying to soothe things over as though he hadn't started the whole thing in the first place. When Shaka gave him a look, Kong gave a slight shrug that might have been an apology, not that Kong was the apologising sort. Kong was giving him a break now, but he knew his friend

would never let him forget that he'd been nervous to talk to a girl, and 'Big Bubby Small' of all girls.

At the playfield, there was a scattering of people in the stands. A half-hearted football match was in progress. He had spotted Andra right away standing with a clutch of girls at the far end of the stands, cleaning off their cleats. He didn't know she'd started playing football again. Her jersey was a slightly different colour than the others suggesting that she was the goalkeeper, still effectively a loner. She seemed to fit in okay with these girls though. They were talking loudly and all at once, laughing and pushing at each other.

"Hi, Andra," he said, feeling shy all of a sudden. His boys hung back. None of the girls reacted.

"Andra, hi," he said louder. She looked up then, her eyes widening. But before she could speak, another of the girls said with a smirk.

"Ah who you?"

And the other voices followed.

"Andra, ah you boyfriend that?"

"Lard, he good black!"

"But he kinda cute though."

Andra continued cleaning her shoes, head bowed, as if he wasn't even there. And he kind of wished he wasn't by that point. He just stood there, skin warm.

"Na bother with dem, bunch ah dutty foot." It was Kong speaking, and he felt his friend's arm around his shoulders, pulling him away. "Come, Zulu."

The girls burst out laughing, all except Andra.

"Ah Zulu fu true."

One of the girls started making jungle sounds, cracking the rest of them up even more. He left the field with his head bowed, feet dragging. His boys were talking too loud, all at once, dissing the girls.

"As if Big Bubby Small all that...she na even all that pretty."

They tried their best to lift his spirits as they made their way out of the playfield.

"You call mi gyal dutty foot," said a boy now blocking their path.

If it had been just him, they might have been able to just push past; but, like Shaka, he had his crew and soon they were brawling. His first fight, only fight to date; after all, they weren't a gang, no matter what some people might think.

.....  
"Boss, she ha fu play wid arwe from now on," Monkey said.

"She nah go agree to that."

Ever since they'd heard Zahara play in the Gardens, the Crew had been bugging him to get her to perform with them. It was nearing the end of July, the pre-Carnival fête season, and his boys had got it into their heads that they could land some gigs, maybe even a guest spot on the Teen Splash show, one of the big shows of the season. Shaka knew this was a pipe dream. But try telling his Crew that. They thought they had a real shot at getting booked with Zahara in the group.

But he was trying not to push Zahara too much. She'd told him her Granny had actually given her licks with a belt after catching her sneaking back into the house that night they'd met in the Botanical Gardens. He knew she wasn't ready to take any more risks just yet.

*Baby steps*, he kept reminding himself. Between rehearsals for the musical and the Social Sciences project, there was already a lot going on.

....  
**Joanne C Hillhouse** writes in different genres: you can read more about her and her books which include *Musical Youth*, *The Boy from Willow Bend*, *Dancing Nude in the Moonlight 10th Anniversary Edition* and *Other Writings*, *Fish Outta Water*, and *Oh Gad!* at <http://jhadli.wordpress.com>