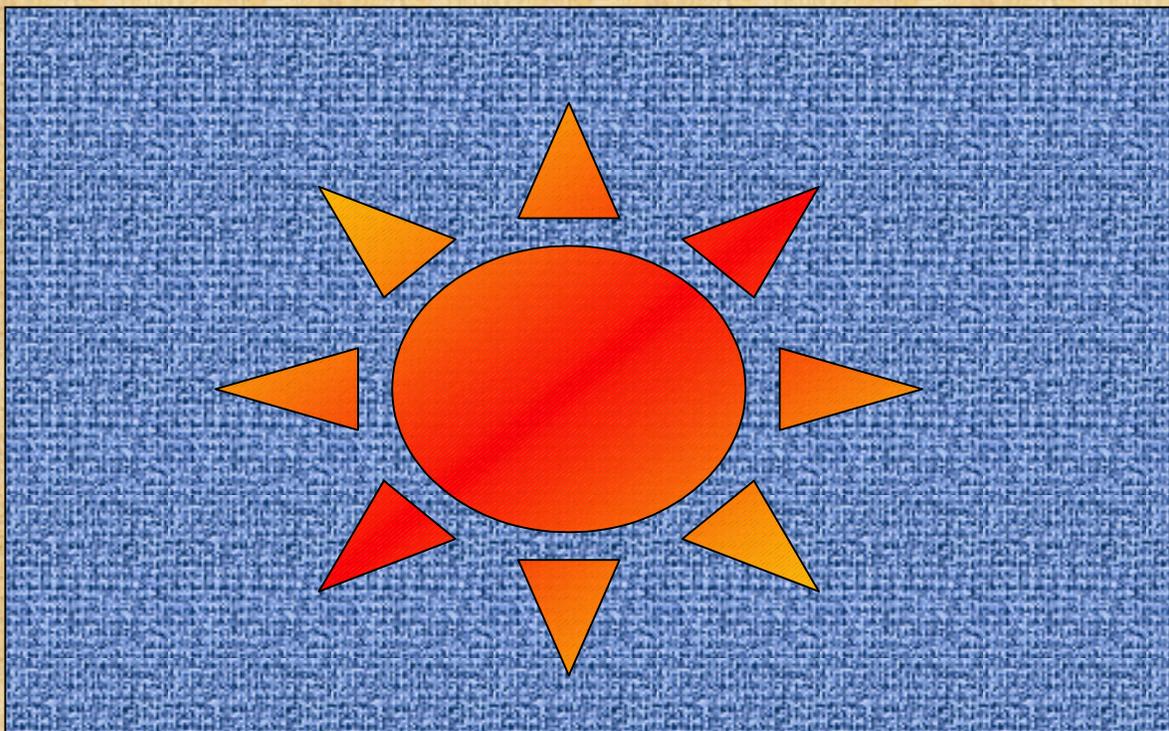


Blood Oranges

An Interview with Leone Ross



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By Kirk Henry

“My work has been described as psychological mystery, and I think that fits. It attempts to unravel an emotional place; at the end the revelation is about understanding where all the pain came from.”

Meet **Leone Ross**, a 31-year-old Jamaican author whose work - two novels and a growing body of anthologized short stories in the last four years - promises a stellar literary career.

She’s making progress. This November Orange Laughter will be sold in the US by prestigious New York house Farrar Straus and Giroux, and both books are being translated into French. Interview magazine’s September issue features Ross as one of the authors to watch out for in the future.

In the following interview Ross speaks frankly about her writing, and her life. The emotions and experiences that led to the construction of her complex characters are exposed and discussed. Interestingly, Ross has not lost her “Jamaicanness” at all; you can hear it in her language. You can see it in the way she walks.

KH: Did you know were going to be a novelist?

LR: Yes. I’m tempted to be coy and say I hoped that I would be, but I think I knew I would. I had reservations about it: I worried intensely, like any unpublished writer does, that perhaps no one would be interested and whether I was good enough. But I thought I’d write one, get it published, by 35. The fact that it came to me ten years earlier than that is interesting to me - and weird. But I knew from about three years old, that one of the best ways to pass my time was making up stories.

KH: So it’s not about writing about your life and experiences.

LR: No, not in any very direct way. Writing autobiography was never my intention or my fascination. I think that autobiography is a perfectly acceptable way to begin, but it is not something I’m very interested in. I’m not interested in disguising my life thinly and then writing that on a piece of paper. The story of a young woman, mixed race, born in England, grow inna Jamaica, doesn’t interest me as a fictional process. I live that. Regurgitating it would be boring to me.

KH: It seems to me that Leone Ross has a whole heap she could write about.

LR: Yeah, well, I think All the Blood... is the nearest thing to autobiographical I will ever get. They say it is inevitable with the first novel anyway. You get out your stuff. I’ve kept a diary since I was ten years old, so that is my autobiographical outlet, any literal issues are dealt with there. I’m more interested in going back to the little girl I was and what she wanted to write about: vampires, fairies, magic, weird stuff. I did want to express my politics in Blood, so I did do that.

KH: For example?

LR: Feminism comes through, my attitudes to gender issues. You can see in

Blood that I am definitely on the side of the woman who gets raped! But I find the rapist intriguing...

KH: How does your cultural background/experience influence your work?

LR: One of the things that makes answering questions like that challenging, is that as a writer I don't make deliberate thematic decisions from that clear place. I don't say: 'I am now going to write a book that expresses my Jamaicaness.' It is an entirely more complex and sometimes unconscious process.

KH: Blood is not a typical Jamaican book, at least it is not a typical Jamaican perspective.

LR: But it is very Caribbean, very Jamaican. It is Jamaican in that it has a lot of Jamaican patois and some Jamaican references. Mavis, the main Jamaican character, was based in part on interviews my mother did years ago with prostitutes in Jamaica. Blood is a hybrid. I'm a hybrid. Truth be told, writing about Jamaica, whether it be using the language, talking about the society or addressing themes within that community is something I can do. But because that feels essentially autobiographical, like I said, it entertains me less.

KH: The references to Jamaica in that book were a fresh perspective, fresh in that they were honest and non-judgmental. Mavis is a prostitute, yet she is also the matriarch, a very real Jamaican woman. She watches her daughter being raped and thinks that she deserves it because of the way she dresses and acts.

LR: She didn't even perceive it as rape. For Mavis the entire thing, sex in general, is nastiness, whether it be tender lovemaking or rough, violent sex.

KH: But to expose that, to create a Jamaican woman who was a whore, had babies, ran away to England to make a new life and then turns out to be practically a religious zealot, to do that takes guts. It's a story we all know but I have never seen written down.

LR: But I'm not the first one to write about that. If you look through Jamaican literature, especially the Sistren Theatre Collective's *Lion Heart Gyal*, it comes up. They have dealt with issues of sexuality, power, economic strata, and the compromises women make to survive. I guess what could be said is that I am particularly honest about it.

KH: Honest and non-judgmental.

LR: One of the things I think I bring to this craft is curiosity about the human condition without judging any of it. I love Anthony Winkler (*The Lunatic*) for his honest and non-judgmental approach. I was most interested in Mavis's emotional experience as a prostitute. The decision to make it a Jamaican experience was about knowing the setting, and ease of reference. I tried to make the patois accessible to an international audience, so it is somewhat watered-down. I didn't want to get so authentic that it would be difficult to read. But I didn't want it not to be authentic either.

KH: What was the main inspiration for *Orange Laughter*?

LR: The idea for *Orange* existed before *Blood*. It was originally a 2,000 word short story I wrote in university when I was 18. It was always an American story, but people told me it was a novel, not a short. A friend showed that story to my first publishers, and they gave me a two book deal, asked me to develop *Orange*

the story into a novel. They also asked me to do the outline of another novel I wanted to write. That became *Blood*.

KH: So why did you write *Blood* first?

LR: I knew it was a simpler narrative, structurally and thematically. I felt I needed the practice of the craft before writing a full-length *Orange*, which was going to be a more complex work. Both books come from my fascination with emotional experiences. So in a crude way *Blood* started when I thought, 'What does it feel like to be raped? What is that? What is the nature of that? And what does it do to you if your community doesn't believe you were raped, or that you deserved what you got?'

KH: You mean like the Desiree Washington/Mike Tyson drama?

LR: Yeah, it was a couple of years after the Mike Tyson trial. I was angry that Desiree Washington's experience was dismissed, regardless of the fact that the man was found guilty and served his time. There is still an attitude within the international black community that 'the gyal bring down a black man. How could she do that?' Not everyone. But I still hear it.

KH: Yes I've heard her being called a hussy by men and women.

LR: You know, I've gone to many a hotel room, many an empty house with a man, and even if I was unwise, it did not mean I was inviting rape. No one invites rape. For me the responsibility was with Mike Tyson. And when a girl says no, hold your fucking corner! *Blood* came from wanting to explore that psychology, both of raped and rapist. You have to begin with character.

KH: And *Orange*?

LR: That began with the idea of outcasts, of kids who feel that they are not being loved. I was interested in the dynamic between Mikey and Tony, a black boy and a white boy, both outcasts in their different ways. What is it like not to belong, and to find saviors in others who don't belong? I never start a novel thinking about the specific storyline, always with character.

KH: So it began with children, not with the adult Tony or Mikey?

LR: The first character that came to me was Mikey, the little white boy. I was sitting under a tree at UWI and heard his voice in my head: 'So, I have this friend. His name is Tony, he's really cute, he's black and he takes care of me and he's clever and I'm just fat ole Mikey and I really appreciate his friendship and I love him.' This little boy kept talking in my head, about friendship and pain. Originally it was Mikey's story but when I started developing it into a novel I decided Tony's character had more potential for drama.

KH: Obviously you feel your characters. Could that be the secret to the in-depth characterization which your critics praise so much in both novels?

LR: I cannot write them unless I know them. I have to sit down and have conversations with them in my head. I have to do lists of their core beliefs, background, age, what they look like. I have to feel them as real people before I write them down. The literature I've loved the most, even as a child, was the work where the characters felt real to me. I give a lot of time and patience to writers who can carve individuals that I can see, hear, feel. People with a fresh approach to the human perspective. John Edgar Wideman, Toni Morrison, Pat Conroy, Miguel Angel Asturias, Dickens.

KH: So how does a British born, Jamaican grown woman create a story of a black, bisexual man from the South, living in NY? Was it imagination or was it researched?

LR: When the short story occurred to me I was doing a BA in Literature and was reading Ralph Ellison, Stephen King, loved African American literature. So I was majorly influenced by that genre when the characters in *Orange* began to talk to me. In terms of research I went to North Carolina, walked around, breathed the air and met two fascinating men in their nineties who answered many of my historical questions. I spent hours reading American autobiography and history. But in the end I knew it was folly to try and write the definitive Southern novel, so I just wrote Tony human. Which is what he is: a human being dealing with a childhood and an adolescence full of pain. The fact that he is a man, I find that fascinating. I am not a man. The fact that he is bisexual, well I'm bisexual. I don't know why Tony is bisexual, is the most honest answer. That's just how him chat to me. When I was a teenager I had a friend who would fuck anything that paid him any attention, and I wondered about that as a psychological and emotional place. The ability to make yourself sexually available to anything that was interested in you. I decided that that could come from pain.

KH: So are you saying that bisexuality...and pain are related?

LR: No (emphatically). I am saying that promiscuity in general can come from pain, that using sexuality in the way that Tony does can come from pain. I'm not saying that any kind of sexual orientation is a construct of pain. It seems to me that people are born with their tendencies to sexuality. But how we use that sexuality, sure, the way we explore it, it seems to me that that has something to do with our socialisation and experiences. It occurred to me that Tony would use sexuality in a particular way. He would use it for power. Because he feels disempowered. He is promiscuous with men AND women because he is bisexual.

KH: One of your constant themes is an examination of sexuality being used as power and that power being used as a weapon.

LR: It's certainly being used as a cope strategy. Characters in both novels take great satisfaction in, and power from the fact that they are wanted sexually. Tony is one. I would appreciate you emphasising that *Orange* is not just a comment on bisexuality, it is a comment on sexuality, period, and a whole heap of other things. And it's just my view.

KH: What about the reactions to *Blood*? What are your feelings on the reaction of the Jamaican community in particular, to your work?

LR: I'm not particularly aware of any reactions in the Jamaican community to my work. So far as I'm aware, my audience has largely been within the black community in Britain. I don't think that Jamaicans know that I exist, in particular. British black men and women have responded to both books with recognition. They take great joy in the language in *Blood*. It's also woman stuff, man stuff, how you feel about your body stuff, life stuff, career stuff. My only experience with a Jamaican audience was at the *Blood* launch in Jamaica where I did feel more than a frisson of audience disapproval. I can't say for sure what they were responding to, but I suspect it was the swear words, the overt sexuality and a

feeling that this was not the most positive way that I could portray Jamaica, like: 'You've left Jamaica to write about slackness.' With the best will in the world, I don't give a fuck. I can't afford to. I've learnt - after a great deal of anxiety - that my job is to produce the best work that I can. More and more I am able to ignore all the 'shoulds': should write about black politics, should write about gender politics, should present black men in a positive light, shouldn't be writing slackness. Nobody controls what I write about, nobody. No one makes that decision for me. Every writer has to find a way to satisfy himself in terms of his themes. Sexuality is going to be a constant theme in my work. It is a constant theme in my life. A fascination with the way that we are sexual beings. But it would be nice to get recognition in Jamaica. It is home, after all.

KH: You are not writing lies or anything uncommon, whether people want to admit it or not. But Jamaica is conservative. I can only imagine the reaction to a reading that includes fuck, bumboclaat etc, especially coming out of the mouth of a woman portrayed as a Jamaican matriarch.

LR: You see, if people were shocked or dismayed, I am sorry, but it is true. Something that came up a lot in black British audiences, was: why are you creating this negative black male character? That comes from a communal consciousness of the way the British media deals with black people, its persistent racism and myopia. So people asked me: do we really need more works that promote the idea of the black man as beast, rapist, hurtful? But there is the balance in characters like Michael, a gorgeous man who happens to be black. Otherwise, I simply ask: do black men rape? It is not one of the most 'positive' things I can write about but it is one of the truths that I can write about. Sometimes life is ugly. But then I think my work is also full of redemption and hope and love. I would hate to think that my readers are thinking that it's just this dark shit. There's a lot of hope and humour.

KH: And there are alternatives in the work. I think you show in some characters, at least, a sort of responsibility. They can make conscious decisions. The reader recognises that this character could take a different route.

LR: Yes. Jeanette could allow her life to end after she is raped, but she chooses freedom. She goes through this period in which she is traumatized and she doesn't feel that she can be a sexual person, but in the end she makes the decision to dance and to feel her sensuality again. To love again. Tony makes decisions too. New ones. Life waits for them – question is, what will they do with it?

KH: I'm fascinated with the great divergence in the content and presentation of the two novels. As a young author, how have you managed to avoid what seems to be the norm - writing the same story in the same setting?

LR: I'm not interested in repeating myself. There were people who wanted All the Blood is Red 2 but it's not going to happen. I do see commonality in the two books, obviously, because the uniting factor is me, and that which fascinates me. I see them both as comments about friendship, sexuality, love, power, fear, childhood, parenting, race, gender...and things that go bump – in your brain – at

night. I think they are political, but not aggressively political. They don't rant. For me, the personal is tied to the political. I think that a high level political agenda, which is one I grew up in, loses sight of the individual. As a child I had a very bad response to this. I am a political animal but politics must bow to the individual, to the emotional experience. I'm not seeing the characters if I see them through a filter of gender, or race or sexual orientation or disability. I begin by wondering who they are under all that. I am interested in the heart place underneath all of that. Then I can wind political points through that heart. It's no mistake that Tony, the black man, the brilliant one, is the one who ends up homeless. I did that because I wanted to make a comment on all of his lost potential. Historically, as minorities, we have not been given the same opportunities. We're dealing with the challenges of racism, sexism, homophobia etc. that Mr. WASP isn't dealing with. Even though Mikey is hurt, he's a middle class white man who goes to Princeton, marries his black girlfriend and has that life. So I am making a political point, but I am also saying that Tony made individual choices – he was given some opportunities, he just didn't take them.

KH: I still want to address how different the two books are in terms of setting, register, language, the narrative.

LR: I think each fictional work should fascinate in a new way. I'm writing for an audience but I am also writing to entertain myself. And I wouldn't find it entertaining to re-hash the same narrative line. I wonder sometimes if that is a problem in terms of marketability. Someone suggested that the third book was not the place to move to science fiction or anything new because I would cheat my current audience by changing the genre again. But it won't change. The themes are there, regardless of whether I'm writing about alternate worlds or time shifts or screaming vampires or whatever. I hope that people will follow me there too.

KH: But I think exactly that your current fans appreciate the dynamism.

LR: (laughter) Well I would hope so.

KH: So where are you now in your writing career? What's left for you to do?

LR: Plenty. Write more books. Get better at the craft. I haven't even started. Do you know how many mistakes I've made? (laughter)

KH: All the Blood is Red was long listed for the Orange Prize, the largest literary prize in Britain for women's writing worldwide. What was that like for you as a young, black, author?

LR: Encouraging. I certainly didn't expect to win the £30,000. I didn't think that Blood was ready to win that sum, but it made me press on with my writing. I was in very good company; among those listed were very well established American, British and Canadian writers. I also won an Arts Council Award this year, which is a financial award given by the British government to support the careers of writers. They give 15 awards per year and I got that to write my third novel. It's certainly been wonderful being acknowledged in that way.

KH: Has there been a down side to all this?

LR: What has been lacking is critical response. I do expect this to change when Orange is published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in the US in November. It is

quite difficult for an unestablished author to get column inches in Britain. It seems to me that in Britain in particular, it is a matter of one nigger at a time. Therefore when *Blood* was first published, a young black author, Diran Adebayo, was the hot thing and was published at about the same time. He did very well. At the moment there is Zadie Smith, who got a £250,000 advance from Penguin and who was nominated for the Orange Prize this year. These people are doing good work and should be recognized, but it appears to many of us that only one black author is recognized at a time, which is irritating and frustrating.

Personally, I don't want anyone to review me because I am black. I want them to review my work. But I also think things take time and I wonder whether or not I would have wanted to explode in that way and how it would have affected my work. Maybe slow growth is the way.

KH: Therefore, the novels have basically been ignored by the British press. Do you think it is because they choose not to write about them or that they don't know about them?

LR: Not ignored. There have been reviews. But I'm saying it's a struggle for major coverage. My first publisher was a tiny independent, and they did their best. I know every newspaper in Britain got a copy of *Blood*. When Orange was re-published by Transworld, which is a huge press, all the press got copies too. The few that did review it were largely complimentary. The Telegraph loved it. Just that hey, like any young author, I don't just want the good stuff, I want the heavy, thoughtful, constant critique and attention. Let's be real – it sells copies. But you know, that'll come. For the moment I'm more concerned about writing the third one.