

## **Marvellous Mark**

### **Professor wins top writing award**

**A UWI Cave Hill lecturer has scored a historic first by winning one of the top two literary prizes for 2006 in the Commonwealth world of English literature.**

Professor of West Indian Literature Mark McWatt, whose first work of fiction *Suspended Sentences: Fictions of Atonement* was published and launched last year at the campus and swept two major regional literary competitions winning rave reviews, has cemented his place as one of the world's best writers by winning the Overall Best First Book Award in the 2006 Commonwealth Writers' Prize in Australia in March.

The book hailed by judges as a "tour-de-force of invention" in which McWatt "presents a delightful caravan of stories that explore the changing character of Guyana", had previously won The Best First Book Award in the 2006 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Caribbean and Canada region and the 2006 Premio Casa de las Americas, one of the most prestigious Latin American literary prizes. The Overall Best First Book Award for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, however, overshadowed the previous two in international stature and recognition.

The competition involved writers from several regions in the Commonwealth, encompassing entries from all the countries that were previously part of the far-flung British Empire in its imperialist heyday. Thus, the competition saw entries from the four designated regions spanning the globe: Eurasia, Canada and the Caribbean, Africa and South East Asia and the South Pacific.

Professor McWatt, who received his award from His Royal Highness, Prince Edward, Earl of Wessex, KCVO, ADC at a ceremony at The State Library of Victoria, in Melbourne, Australia, commented afterwards:

"I'm very happy to have won the overall prize for Best First Book, especially since I have come to know, over the past days, the work of the other regional winners and to realise how wonderful all the competing books are. I feel deeply privileged that my book was chosen as overall winner."

The award which also comes with £3,000, is one of two signature prizes awarded annually by The Commonwealth Writers' Prize and is aimed at rewarding the best in Commonwealth fiction written in English, by both established and new writers, and to take their work to a wider audience. The other signature prize, the Overall Best Book Award went to *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville of Australia.

Professor McWatt's book, which captures the author's artful interweaving of eleven disparate stories, purportedly written by a group of sixth form students, within a single narrative frame, set against a sweeping backdrop of time, imbued with fomenting post-colonial passions and idealistic dreams following independence in his native Guyana in the 1960's, impressed judges and reviewers profoundly and led them to write their judgments in almost ecstatic terms.

The book, acclaimed internationally as original and a breakthrough, has been described as "a work of short fiction that refracts light like a powerful and many-faceted diamond" and also as "an excellent literary example of high aesthetic value and also a revealing document on the Caribbean". One reviewer wrote: "Its characters circle multiple challenges as they struggle to throw off the yoke of colonialism in Guyana. This is a wonderfully sophisticated threading of voices and variety. *Suspended Sentences* takes tremendous risks, an amazing accomplishment".

Professor McWatt, who is currently working on a third volume of poetry and also planning a novel, has a long and extensive record of publications. He is an acclaimed poet, having published two collections of poetry, *Interiors* in 1989 and *The Language of El Dorado* in 1994, which won The Guyana Prize and is the joint editor (with Stewart Brown) of *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse*

(2005), which has also received favourable reviews. McWatt began his academic career at the University of Toronto where he took his first degree before completing a PhD at Leeds University. He has since lectured at the Cave Hill Campus and served in several administrative leadership positions.

While expressing personal surprise at the international acclaim that has attended his work, he explained that his supportive family were not surprised. They read the drafts of the stories as they were completed and offered helpful (or mischievous) comments, and his daughter designed the book's cover.

"My wife and children have all been very supportive and helpful and accommodating in this project - I think they believed in it more than I did and are not as surprised as I am that the book won ... I suppose all families are like that," he said.



Professor McWatt

### **Mark McWatt.**

#### **Suspended Sentences: Fictions of Atonement.**

This review by Lisa R. Brown will be published in the JOURNAL OF WEST INDIAN LITERATURE 15, 1 & 2 (November 2006) and is reprinted here with the permission of the editors.

Readers familiar with Mark McWatt's poetry are hardly surprised at the tenor of his debut into the world of prose. The collection of eleven short stories, prefaced by a three-part introduction and culminating with a chapter updating readers on the lives of the storytellers, is written with the keen and self-conscious eye of the pilgrim poet we have come to know in **Interiors** (1989) and **The Language of El Dorado** (1994).

Both volumes of poetry interrogate the multi-faceted nature of Guyanese identity by plumbing personal and national memory for signifiers of belonging and reconciliation.

**Suspended Sentences: Fictions of Atonement** is a compilation of the stories by a 'gang' of school leavers who vandalise the Sports club at the Imperial Bank after A-Level exams and Guyana's Independence in 1969. After a mock 'trial' each member is ordered to write a short story about the meaning of the country's new status by way of punishment. But this is not all. The collection of the

stories is halted when Victor Nunes the head boy and appointed editor goes missing on a journey up the Pomeroon River. Victor's disappearance provides the perfect opportunity for McWatt to reveal his own involvement in the vandalism, his doubts of the legitimacy of the 'sentences' and his reluctance in assuming the burden of editorial duties.

The 'gang members,' seven boys and two girls, write their stories in the twenty-odd years it takes McWatt to re-establish contact, remind them of their 'sentences' and request revisions. In this time, most have found success in their chosen fields, weathered personal and life changing difficulties and, most important of all, left Guyana. The text pivots on the fusing of multiple binaries established early in McWatt's double role as a convicted perpetrator of crimes against Guyanese nationhood and the reluctant but effective enforcer of justice in the matter of these crimes. The double is central to the stories' many connections between past and present, the profane and the sacred, the guilty and innocent, the marginal and the central, among others. The 'suspended sentences' are served not only to expiate the guilt of the twin offences, vandalism and national abandonment, committed that night, but to belatedly celebrate Guyanese nationhood and support the creation of new and relevant epistemologies which reconcile diverse perspectives.

The text is haunting, magical and profane. It validates the irresistible lure of the transgressive imagination. McWatt restores our faith in the power that lies in both writer and reader to reclaim old territories and establish connections between previously disparate entities; the power to speak from liminal positions and own both defeat and triumph.