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Introducing the SRPR Illinois Poet:
Allison Joseph

Allison Joseph was born in 1967 in London, England to parents of Caribbean descent, her mother Jamaican, her father from Granada. The family moved to Toronto, Canada, finally settling in the Bronx in 1971. Allison went to Kenyon College in 1984 to pursue literary studies, going into culture shock as she discovered that Kenyon's literary reputation of that time was all male and all white. In spite of this she continued to write, going on to Indiana University for her MFA. Her MFA thesis, *What Keeps Us Here*, directed by Yusef Komunyakaa, won the 1992 Women Poets Prize from Ampersand Press and also the Zacharis First Book Prize from *Ploughshares*. She married writer Jon Tribble from Arkansas and taught at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock for two years before joining the faculty of Southern Illinois University in 1994. In 1997, her second and third books of poems were published: *Soul Train* by Carnegie Mellon University Press and *In Every Seam* by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

Poeticizing the (Popular) Culture— A Discussion with Allison Joseph

SRPR: One of your poetic strategies seems to be a careful exploration and rediscovery of your childhood world—the events, objects, narratives that were burdened with wonder or cultural myth or significance—and then in a quick rhetorical gesture expose the lie that festered beneath the illusion. In “Reading Room,” for example, the final image is the dust rag in the hand of the young speaker who was supposed to be dusting, not reading, the books; in “Searching for Melinda’s Magic Moment,” the last line expresses a desire to burn the childhood book inscribed in the memory of the speaker like a rule. There are several such instances in your poems. Discuss your use of this strategy—it is almost a signature in the poems in this issue.

Allison: Since each poem comes to me of its own accord, with its own demands, I wasn’t really aware of using a strategy consciously. But I am the type of person who always questions what’s put in front of me as truth, as collective memory. In these poems in particular, I was recalling not just my childhood world, but was also making a start toward re-envisioning that world for others—in “Searching for Melinda’s Magic Moment,” that re-envisioning takes the radical form of burning a book (which I’d never actually do, since books are sacrosanct!); in “Birth of Nation,” it takes the form of realizing that the white “enemy” wasn’t embodied by my teacher or by the kid in the next desk over; in “Reading Room,” it’s the suggestion that a girl-child can join a pantheon of great black historical males. In each poem, there’s hope, I think, that re-envisioning the world is both possible and necessary.

SRPR: In “Birth of a Nation” and “Role Models” as well as other poems, popular culture provides an antidote to reverence of the traditions that would keep a girl from becoming a feminist, from “taking off” rather than staying “bound to the ground.” Poets of your generation do seem to use elements of popular culture much more freely than older poets. What do such elements represent for you and for you as a poet?

Allison: Popular culture is a tremendous source of both inspiration and exasperation for me, and for many poets of my generation. Many of us grew up with television as baby-sitter. Some of us have written poems about questioning or embracing the imagery of popular culture—Denise Duhamel immediately comes to mind, with the exploration of the Barbie Doll myth in her book *Kinky*. Though some might be loathe to admit it, popular culture has been and continues to be a barometer of where Americans are on many subjects—black and white relationships, for example, often get both illuminated and/or distorted by what we see on television. I think it’s too big a source of potential poetic material to ignore, so I don’t draw a line between high and low culture. There’s power in reflecting on what popular culture tells us we are, what we are supposed to be

SRPR: There are some subtle jabs at the intellectual buzzwords of the day, for example in “Reading Room,” “multiculturalism” as opposed to the “Black is Beautiful (and serious and angry and dangerous)” era of the late 60’s and early 70’s when being Black and proud meant enough to get a person sent to prison like Cleaver, killed like Malcolm X, or read like Franz Fanon. Sometimes in your poems the tone surrounding the cultural digs is angry, sometimes there is humor or irony, though the humor seems deployed rather than employed. There is always an edge that the poems skirt or dance right over. What is the nature of this edge for you?—is it historical, personal, cultural, linguistic, psychological, what? And how do you see it operating in your poems?

Allison: I think it’s a tonal edge—it reminds me of the comments my father would mutter when looking at something he didn’t agree with, most specifically, something he thought embodied the folly of white people. He had a devastating sense of humor, which I enjoyed when it wasn’t turned on me to highlight my shortcomings as a daughter. That edge is a voice I hear when I’m disgruntled, when I’m feeling left out of that popular culture I try too hard to both embrace and distance myself from. But instead of letting the humor fester, like my father did, I try to use it in the poems to get to that re-envisioning I mentioned earlier. I try though, not to just stay on the level of a linguistic smirk or smart remark—I try to take readers to the source of both the humor and the hurt.

SRPR: In the early days of the feminist movement, there was a gulf between black women and white women when it came to feminist issues: Black women would not call themselves feminists, and several black

women writers made the point that race was stronger than sisterhood, that white men and women had oppressed both black men and women and therefore black women could not join forces with white women to point an accusing finger at black men. Your poems, especially “What Women Want” and “On Viewing Two Different Date Rape Movies” deal with feminist issues writ large! What do you think has changed in the culture? Have racial viewpoints changed? Has poetry changed? Does the change have to do with the poetry audience changing? (It seems to me that for a long while, black poetry was directed at black audiences in the way that for awhile feminist poetry was directed only to women audiences—men could overhear but not participate in the conversation. It was impossible to bring the audiences and, therefore the poetic voices, together.)

Allison: I didn’t think of “What Women Want” and “On Viewing Two Different Date Rape Movies,” as feminist poems per se, though I am definitely not against the poems being read that way. To me, both poems began as critiques of topics that I thought of as absurd—isn’t it weird that there would be two movies—one on TV, one made for the movies—that present rape, for all their good intentions, as something to entertain audiences? And isn’t it weird that both movies starred these actresses who played at being daughters on sitcoms? In “What Women Want,” the absurdity was having *Playboy*, that bastion of male sexuality, talking about lesbianism as a threat to male egos. I thought that was absurdly funny—just what assumptions were the editors and writers there making? That there’s this lesbian plague taking over all sorts of women? I just thought both situations were ridiculous—and thus ripe for writing about. It just happens in those two poems that the situations themselves spring out of feminist concerns, which really are human concerns. I still think that your assessment of poetry audiences holds, unfortunately. I don’t think audiences have changed—it’s harder and harder to get people to attend a poetry reading without some sort of disclaimer attached. Like “she’s a poet, but that’s OK, she’s also an African American, or —.” Fill in that blank with whatever category. I don’t know how we can get past this—unless it’s through mechanisms like the Dodge Festival, which seem to celebrate poetry as a worthy art in and of itself, no matter the color or background of the poet.

Allison Joseph

Searching For *Melinda's Magic Moment*

I wonder if I could find it,
beloved book of my childhood
whose story transported me
past ordinary black girl status
to the rarefied life of Melinda,
a brown-skinned charmer who longed

to sing and dance onstage
so everyone could roar and applaud,
captivated by her dazzling talent.
I remember its coarse cover
of woven green cloth, its large type,
pages soiled by fingers of girls

who took it from the library
to read it in their rooms,
dreaming of being as pretty
as Melinda, as adored by adults.
Every teacher loved her—
her cute nose that wasn't

too broad, her lips that weren't
too full, her head of Shirley
Temple curls. But beauty
wasn't enough for Melinda,
who wanted nothing but to be
the lead in the school play,

a production of *Alice in Wonderland*
that called for a petite blond Alice
used to pinafores, bows, white stockings.
So desperate was Melinda that she
powdered her brown skin pale,
perched a wig of fat yellow curls

on her head, put on her best dress—
one her momma kept pressed
for Easter—and she auditioned
for the role, won it, loved
all the more for her sweet
singing voice, her poise

under piled-on make-up.
She was the girl everyone cheered,
the gifted child we all hoped to be
before mirrors and magazines
told us otherwise.
So if you find this book

at some swap meet or garage sale,
if you dig it out of your mom's attic
or grandmother's basement, send it to me.
I'd like to read it again, touch it, see
if it's like I remember. And then,
I'd like to burn it.