R5: Poetry Inspired by the Windrush Story

After World War 2, Britain was in a bad state. There was a lot of damage to repair, and a lot of rebuilding to be done, and there weren’t enough people to do it. The British government invited people to travel from the old British Empire, which came before the Commonwealth, to help rebuild Britain.

In 1948, anyone who lived in a British colony had the right to travel to Britain to live and work there if they wanted to. Many people in Jamaica responded to a newspaper article in The Daily Gleaner, offering passage to Britain for £28.10s to come and work in Britain.

The ship Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury in Essex on 22nd June 1948 carrying more than 500 Caribbean migrants. The ship had been used by the Nazis in the Second World War to carry troops before being taken by Allied forces in May 1945 and refitted by the British for civilian use. During the Second World War thousands of men and women from British colonies in the Caribbean fought for the allies and the ship was in the Caribbean because it was picking up servicemen and women who had been there on leave.

When the new migrants arrived in Britain from the Caribbean, it was relatively easy for them to get unskilled jobs, but hard to find somewhere to live because of a great housing shortage, after the war. They found harsh conditions where they were often poorly treated.

Hinglan Cole (England’s cold)

Oh boy, England is cold! It is so cold!

Frost in the morning, snow at midday and black fog at night time. England is so cold!

I left hot Jamaica to die of cold here?

Frostbite is killing my fingers and when I walk I slip and tumble in the snow many many times,

inside the house it is worse,

I have to wrap up with hot water bottles, hat, socks, dressing gown, two sheets and twist and turn all night long.

In the morning when I lift my head from under the sheets the amount of smoke that come out my mouth you would think that I was on fire.

In the kitchen four people have one ring each on the stove to cook on.

I have to put money in the meter to get a bath and the Indian man who I rent from is watching me closely.

I thank God that they deliver milk to your door, I don't know how I'm going to cope because England is cold cold cold.

by Denniston Stewart

• Pick out some words and phrases that describe the poet’s first impressions of Britain. Is it a favourable opinion? What makes you think that?

• What three questions would you like to ask the poet if you had the opportunity?
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Windrush Child

Behind you

Windrush child

palm trees wave goodbye

above you Windrush child seabirds asking why

around you Windrush child

blue water rolling by

beside you

Windrush child

your Windrush mum and dad

think of storytime yard and mango mornings

and new beginnings

doors closing and opening

will things turn out right? At least the ship will arrive in midsummer light

and you Windrush child

think of grandmother

telling you don't forget to write

and with one last hug

walk good walk good

and the sea's wheel carries on spinning

and from that place England you tell her in a letter
of your Windrush adventure
stepping in a big ship
not knowing how long the journey or that you're stepping into history
bringing your Caribbean eye
to another horizon
grandmother's words your shining beacon
learning how to fly
the kite of your dreams in an English sky
Windrush child
walking good walking good in a mind-opening meeting of snow and sun

by John Agard

• What do you think the poem is about?
• Which words or phrases tell you what the Windrush child left behind?
• What sort of place was it?
• Who will the child miss?