

 BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2019

# WORDS ALONE CANNOT DESCRIBE THIS LITERARY FEST

**Nichelle Smith**  
USA TODAY

TREASURE BEACH, Jamaica — Caribbean-Canadian friends had raved about the Calabash International Literary Festival, which every two years draws thousands of authors and readers from around the world to this spot. Once I learned of the gathering, I became obsessed with getting here. Now that the opportunity had come, what would I find on the remote south side of the island, far from the big resorts and cities?

Joy. Peace. And a reasoning to remember.

Unlike most of the festivals on the island, this one takes place in the country's rural breadbasket, a community of fishing villages not far from the town of Black River, centered on a small hotel called Jakes. The guest houses and cottages were built by Perry Henzell, director of Jamaica's first feature film, 1972's *The Harder They Come*. Henzell's daughter Justine, along with poet Kwame Dawes and novelist Colin Channer, created the festival in 2001 to bring authors of international renown to the island.

"The mission was to get Jamaican stories told by Jamaican writers," Henzell said. An international festival "was an opportunity for our writers and our poets to be exposed to top-class talent from all over the world."

More than 30 authors — from U.S. poet laureate Tracy K. Smith and British hip-hop artist turned writer Akala to young voices like Somali-British poet Warsan Shire and American actor-authors like Michael Imperioli — took their turns on a stage with the Caribbean Sea as the backdrop. Dawes, also a professor at the University of Nebraska, served as part emcee, part *Obeah* (spiritual healing) man as the festival opened on a June Friday night under starry skies. It set a reflective tone for three days of readings, recitations and song.

Was it the heat that made me nearly

drunk from so much knowledge and culture packed into one short weekend?

"This year has been fantastic," Dawes said. He noted that the lineup was heavily female and that early on, he recognized the influence of Jamaica's women as readers. In keeping with the way life works in Jamaica, as well as in Ghana, where Dawes was born, the festival caters to women's tastes. "We knew if the women came, the men and youth would follow," he said.

Between each act, crowds packed Jakes' small bookstore for each author's latest work. As the sun fell and the reggae music turned up, I felt the joy well up as I connected freely with the spirits that dwell on this island of former West African slaves.

The spirits dwell within each of us who gather in this place. One of my Canadian friends, no-nonsense school administrator Jackie, shed the thick skin we North American black women grow to fend off the never-ending barrage of verbal missiles aimed our way. Clad in sandals and cool, colorful skirts, she transformed into the radiant Queen of Calabash, working a crowd of admirers, delighting in introducing her neophyte friend to jerk chicken, rice and peas, curry conch and sweet potato pone.

I also shed my protective skin and moved languidly to unconsciously adopt the lilt and patois, smile and haggle with teasing Rasta vendors and take in the real Jamaica so many come to see but fail to find.

Long after Sunday's last readings and dances, as vendors packed up and the books were put away, Jakes began to return to normal. I walked the country roads one last time, stopping to sit by the sea at Frenchman's Reef.

A peace came over me in this beautiful, unusual place. The thought of leaving made me want to cry.

Part of my soul still walks Treasure Beach, dancing, laughing and waiting for my return.



**Tracy K. Smith**



**Akala**



**Dancing to reggae and jazz closes the 2018 edition of the Calabash International Literary Festival at Treasure Beach in Jamaica.**

CALABASH INTERNATIONAL LITERARY FESTIVAL

**The Jakes Hotel, the center of activity for the festival, looks out on the sea from the southern coast of Jamaica.**

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