

## The World of Anderson Reynolds

reprinted from The Voice Newspaper

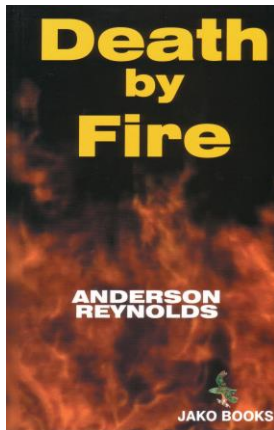
Born and raised in Vieux Fort, the southernmost town on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, home to Nobel Laureates, Derek Walcott and Sir Arthur Lewis, Anderson Reynolds who spent the second twenty years of his life in America attending college and then working in corporate America, has, since his return home, quickly become one of the country's most prolific and significant writers.

In the world of Anderson Reynolds, be it his fictional or nonfictional world, a great drama unfolds in which history, geography, nature, culture, the supernatural, and socioeconomic factors all combine to seal the fate of his characters. In this crucible of a world, readers are provided

with deep insights into where St. Lucians come from, who they are as a people, and how they became who they are.

### Death By Fire

Anderson Reynolds first book, the novel *Death by Fire* (2001), was the winner of the 2001 M&C Main Literature Prize. Against the backdrop of slavery, indentureship, catastrophic landslides, devastating fires, racial animosities, occupational hazards, and the fictional "gods of the land" reaping havoc on the land and its people, *Death by Fire* presents a story about two mothers, Felina and Christine, and their sons, Robert and Trevor.



In interviews, the author has revealed that the writing of *Death by Fire* was a ploy to present as much St. Lucian history and culture as possible, but in an entertaining and dramatic fashion. Apparently, this was achieved by intertwining the story with the history and culture of St. Lucia in a non-chronological manner.

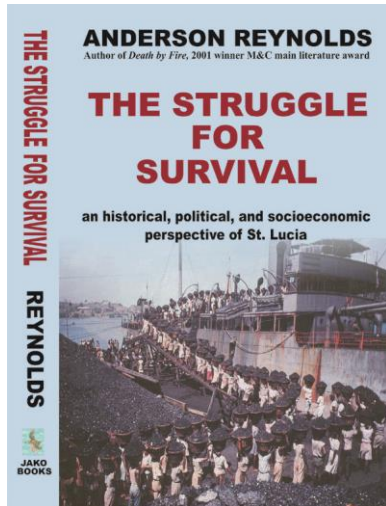
In *Death by Fire*, Felina's childhood is plagued by disaster, yet as a teenager she is betrayed by her first love for whom she is pregnant with Robert. Unable to come to terms with love betrayed, she transfers the hatred meant for her absent lover onto her son.

On the other hand, Christine, who is said to be blessed with an unsurpassed beauty, refuses to allow her misfortunes to interfere with her carefree and glamorous life in which she has little time for her son, Trevor. The two women's paths rarely crossed, but their sons become bosom friends, and as it turned out parental neglect produced nearly the same fate as parental hatred.

As the book follows the boys' lives of misdemeanor, rape and murder, the question is posed what causes such social decay or what leads to a life of crime? Is it fate, obeah, dysfunctional families, poverty, governmental neglect, or the confluence of history, nature, culture and manmade disasters? As such, *Death by Fire* presents "a profound statement on the nature of fate and the forces that shape society."

## The Struggle For Survival

Anderson Reynolds second book, *The Struggle For Survival: an historical, political, and socioeconomic perspective of St. Lucia*, can be regarded as creative nonfiction. In fact, as played out in the book, the author has admitted that his goal was to “write history that reads like a novel.” He also said that when he was conducting research for *Death by Fire* he was angered to discover that there were books on St. Lucian history, yet such books were not made available to him at primary and secondary schools.



Therefore, part of his motivation for writing the *Struggle For Survival* was to write the kind of book on St. Lucian history that he would have loved to read as a teenager.

The book achieves the feel of a novel by employing the narration of the 1993 banana farmers’ strike that culminated in the shooting death of two striking farmers as the thread that knits the book together while interjecting the striking farmers’ narration with chapters on the history and importance of the banana industry, the history of the island (including political history) from pre-slavery to modern times, the manufacturing and tourism sectors, the socioeconomic future of the island, and even a chapter on the unintended negative consequences of the banana industry.

One of the tenets of the book is that woe be onto those who neglect or are ignorant of history. Farmers, for example, thinking they were in control of their fate, went on a strike that ended in disaster. Yet, according to *The Struggle For Survival*, if they had known or heeded their history, they would have realized that “be it the early demise of the Amerindians, the establishment of sugar as the dominant crop in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the importation of Africans for slave labor, the subsequent abolition of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the importation of indentured labor as a substitute for slave labor, the transformation of Castries into a coal refueling station, or the establishment of military bases in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or even the initial establishment of the banana industry in St. Lucia, most of the inhabitants of the island never had a say in any of the major events that have determined the very nature and composition of their island. But refusing to take a page from history, farmers went on a strike and history repeated itself.” Again Anderson Reynolds great fascination with history and its power to explain or condition human drama comes through.

Yet, on another level, by going beyond the tragedy of the strike and delving into the island's history, farmers' struggles against droughts, hurricanes, falling prices, corrupt institutions, and multinational corporations is presented as a microcosm of, or metaphor for, the struggles of a people against slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and natural calamities. As such, *The Struggle for Survival* can be viewed as a story about the birth of a nation, and, by portrayal, the birth of West Indian Civilization.

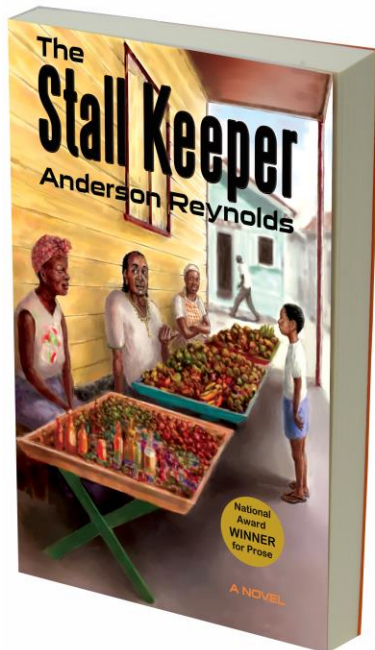
## The Stall Keeper

Anderson Reynolds third book and second novel, *The Stall Keeper*, is set for the most part in his hometown of Vieux Fort, and uses the American World War II occupation of the town as backdrop. Again, in this latest work, history and geography combine to decide the fate of human drama. As one of the largest stretches of flat, coastal land on the island, the result of a geological freak (a mudslide) of nature, Vieux Fort was selected as the site of an American World War II military base. Overnight the American presence turned Vieux Fort into a boomtown with serious housing shortages, prostitution

gone amok, and with money so easy to come by that some of the town's residents, calling themselves one-day millionaires, took to lighting their cigarettes with dollar bills and making sure that all money made in a day was spent that same day.

But the good times were short-lived, lasting only eighteen months, and coming to an abrupt end when after the war the Americans packed up and left, following which Vieux Fort fell into a state of despair and disintegration, forcing a commentator to ask: "After the Americans, what?" Historians have posited

that the Americans inculcated a dependency syndrome that Vieux Fortians have been unable to completely shake off. Thus for the longest while it was said that Vieux Fortians were just sitting around as if waiting for the Americans to return and bring back the good times.



Accordingly, in the novel, the odds are against Vieux Fortians for making something of themselves. "Even when one tried, when one scratched and fought, when one gave it one's all, when it appeared that one was going to make it, someone or a force beyond one's control would just come and snatch it all away. If it wasn't the French, it was the English; if it wasn't the English, it was slavery; if it wasn't slavery, it was the plantation owners; if it wasn't the plantation owners, it was the Americans; if it wasn't the Americans, it was the government; if it wasn't the government, it was Castries folks; if it wasn't Castries folks, it was someone putting obeah on them; and if it wasn't obeah, it was some fire or some hurricane or some other act of God or of Satan or of both. So why even try?"

To play out this drama the narration employs the characters of Eugene and Ruben. Eugene, who is a stall keeper, is described as "the town's most free-spirited and colorful character, a woman living in a man's body, and a man living in a woman's world." We see him overcoming his father's physical and verbal abuses, his mother's premature death, and ridicule from the community to rise from a stall keeper selling street-side to owning the most successful store in Vieux Fort, but only for the store to completely burn down and him returning to selling from a stall, never to rise up again, as if fate had deemed that a stall keeper was all he was meant to be and that the store had been just a temporary escape. The question then becomes, was Eugene's destruction the cause of an accidental fire, or the work of obeah sent his way by jealous competitors, or was there blight or a curse on Vieux Fort so nothing good could come out of there.

Ruben, we are told, is a favorite son, an intellectual, a famous cricketer, the darling of Vieux Fort, one of its most accomplished citizens, and a staunch Roman Catholic. His downfall began when he falls madly in love with Eunice, a staunch Seventh Day Adventist with the gift of foretelling the future. In order to marry Eunice, who would not be unequally yoked, Ruben has no choice but to forsake his Roman Catholic faith and join the Seventh Adventist Church. But it turns out, try as Ruben may, he cannot bring himself to stop playing cricket on Saturdays and miss his cricket matches. Observance of the Saturday Sabbath, however, is the single most important practice that separates Adventism from most other faiths, so, understandably, the church had no choice but to disfellowship Ruben for continually breaking the Sabbath, and since Eunice would not be unequally yoked, she in turn had no choice but to break the engagement, and so began Ruben's downfall from the most celebrated citizen of Vieux Fort to a *wonmyé*, a drunkard, the island's lowest ranked citizen.

Again, the question is what forces were responsible for Ruben's downfall. If you were to ask Father Pierre, the Roman Catholic priest, he would answer that Ruben's childhood deprivation imbued him with an inferiority complex and a loser mentality and so by choosing the Adventist woman Ruben had subconsciously set himself up for a downfall. If you were to ask most of the town's residents, they would answer that this was the work of obeah for sure, and would list many other examples of obeah at work to prove their case. And if you were to ask Daddy Mano, the town's great humanitarian, he would answer that it was because Ruben was born in the wrong time, in the wrong town, and had fallen in love with the wrong woman.

All three narrations present a world in which the characters are victims of their circumstances. History, geography, the supernatural, love denied or love betrayed, parental neglect, adverse socioeconomic conditions all come together to seal the fate of individuals, communities, or for that matter the fate of a whole nation or a civilization. Is there any escape or any hope of rising above circumstances of birth and geography? Well, maybe. A hint of an answer is provided in *The Struggle for Survival*, where the narrator says, "*But refusing to take a page from history, farmers went on a strike and history repeated itself.*" So in the world of Anderson Reynolds, knowledge and understanding of one's history and culture represent the only possible means of escape from one's fate. In other words, "man know thyself and do thyself no harm." But even so, there are no guarantees, for in *The Stall Keeper* Ruben was well equipped with a knowledge of his history and culture, yet this did not prevent his downfall.