

TLC Showcase

MAEVE CLARKE

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Introduction to The Jackanooni

The Jackanooni was first conceived as part of a writing exercise. I had been given a CD with the sound of wind blowing and heavy rain, and twenty minutes to come up with some sort of story. It made me think of being told spooky stories, late at night, with a raging storm in the background. I initially wrote it as a stage play, my first attempt at a full-length play. It didn't quite work, but meant that I got to know my characters and the setting very well. I'm now writing it as a novel and enjoying the challenge.

The novel has is divided into two parts, the first half is set in rural Jamaica in the late 1950s in a community where superstition and fear of the supernatural runs deep. It follows the adventures of Johnson and Inez who get more than they bargain for when they skip school one day and find themselves under the mysterious Cotton Tree – known locally as the entrance to the Underworld. The second half of the novel takes place in the UK and picks up their story about 50 years later.

I guess I am unusual in the showcase slot in that my contact with TLC has been limited to date, but that is soon to change. It will make more sense, if I start backwards. I recently won the Creative Future Literary Award for a piece of Flash Fiction. Part of my prize was winning a TLC Chapter and Verse mentorship which consists of submitting 10,000 words every 2 months for 12 months and getting feedback from a mentor selected for me by TLC. I will then have a further 6 months to complete the manuscript and will receive a full manuscript assessment from TLC.

This is a wonderful prize for many reasons, as not only will I get ongoing support whilst developing the novel, but I will also receive a reader's report from TLC. I'm going to be doing a lot of writing this year, but I can't wait to get started.

The Jackanooni, by Maeve Clarke

Extract

Inez was still angry with Johnson for losing the money their mother had given him to pay for school. Their school, known as ‘penny’ school, was a tiny, rural one which catered for local children and charged a penny, per child, per day – hence its name. Miss Taylor, the only teacher, taught all the children together regardless of age. She had three rules – you came to school with a slate, a piece of chalk and your penny for the day. No slate, no chalk, no penny, no school.

‘Hold up!’ Johnson shouted as Inez marched along the country road, her back ramrod straight, her slate and book tucked under one arm. When she turned around, her dark brown eyes flashed their anger at him.

‘Leave me alone,’ she said, increasing her pace.

‘It was an accident,’ he said.

‘Why did you need to juggle with my penny?’ she asked.

‘Well, you can’t juggle with just one coin now, can you?’ he answered. Inez couldn’t argue with the logic of that, so she kissed her teeth at him instead.

At nine, Johnson was a head taller than his sister, but despite being 18 months younger, it was Inez who already showed signs of greater maturity. She would never have lost their two pennies, but would have clutched them tight in her hand until she could hand them over, hot and a little damp, to Miss Taylor. Johnson had not only lost the money, he’d also laughed when he’d realised, unable or unwilling to understand why Inez was so angry about missing school.

‘Just wait ‘til I get home and tell Mama what you done,’ she said, when he caught up with her. ‘What a beating you going to get!’ She smiled at the thought, a smile which made Johnson a little worried. He would need to get her out of this mood before they reached home, otherwise he was going to be in some serious trouble.

‘Want me to catch you?’ he suggested slyly, knowing how much she loved being chased.

'Give me as start,' she said and just like that, their little spat was already forgotten.

Inez shrieked as he chased her, growling like a hungry bear. This was a game they often played, and as always Johnson would eventually catch and tickle her until she bent double, weak with laughter. They had run from the road, deeper into the bushes and found themselves in a clearing littered with fallen coconut shells. Some were brown and lightweight, shrunken from having fallen months before and left to wither on the ground; others were fresher, with hard green shells that would not open unless at the command of a machete.

'Let's take some home for later,' Johnson suggested. 'You know how much mama like jelly coconut.'

They set to work collecting the coconuts, but there were not many good ones on the ground. Johnson stepped back, hands on hips and looked upward at the tree, silently calculating its height and just how far he might fall.

'Don't even bother think it,' Inez warned.

'Think what?' Johnson feigned ignorance.

'Bout climbing the tree,'

'Why? You think I can't.'

'I know you can't.'

'Wasn't going to. Anyway,' he said, unwilling to admit that he didn't have the skill, or the nerve, 'I'm wearing my school shoes.'

Inez looked first at his shoes, scuffed and wearing thin at the front where his big toes were beginning to poke through, then at his face, then shrugged. When had wearing school shoes ever stopped Johnson from doing what he wanted.

As they turned to head towards the rough road that would lead them home, Johnson nudged her. 'What's that?' he asked, just as Inez said 'see that?'

'Is me see it first,' she warned him, running towards the object lying in the long grass.

Johnson with his long legs quickly overtook her. 'No man,' he said pushing ahead, 'it's mine.'

It's mine!' Inez shouted, holding him back by his shirt tail. 'Go find your own.'

'I saw it first,' he insisted. His elbow caught the side of her chin as he wrenched himself free. It was an accidental blow, but one that made Inez's teeth click together and she let out a bawl that startled the preening birds above them into flight.

Johnson was immediately contrite, 'sorry, Inez,' he said, pulling her close. 'It was an accident. Hush, I never mean to hurt you,' he said, hugging her tight, 'I'm sorry.'

'I know,' she said, wiping her tears away with the heel of her hands. Although her sobs had died down, her shoulders still heaved with the injustice of it all – first school and now this. Johnson felt guilty as he looked at his tough little sister, red-eyed, with one ribbon askew, her unused book and slate under one arm, and all because of he had lost the penny to pay for her lessons that day. 'Let we sit over there,' he suggested, 'where there's shade'.

'But dat's the Cotton Tree!' Inez said when she realised where he was pointing.

'So?

'Isn't dat Duppy Gate Entrance?' Without realising it, she had lowered her voice, as if she thought they could be overhead.

'So what?' Johnson laughed.

'But isn't dat where,' Inez's voice was now barely a whisper, 'duppies live?' She looked around as if she expected a duppy to appear suddenly from nowhere.

Johnson slung one arm around her determined to show off his knowledge. 'Don't talk stupidity,' he started. 'Duppies, or ghosts, or whatever you want call dem, don't exist! Duppy story is just what big people tell fi frighten us.'

Despite the reassuring weight of his arm across her shoulders, Inez was uneasy. She stared at the large sprawling tree, with roots that stretched high and wide. Even from a distance she could see how thick those roots were. They looked like heavy, bulky ropes snaking in curved lines into the centre of the clearing, as if reaching out for naughty children. She couldn't see the road from where they were standing and all she could remember were the number of times she'd heard about bad things happening near, or by the Cotton Tree. In their area, all bad luck was laid firmly and

squarely at the root of such a tree, where it was claimed a man might lose himself if he were not careful. Even her mother said so, and if Mama said something was true, then it was.

'Let's go!' she tried to lead Johnson away. 'I don't want duppy catch me.'

'Wait! Johnson grabbed her arm but Inez, who was getting tired and a little fearful about what their mother would say when she discovered where they'd been, was having none of it.

'Let go of me!' She slapped at his hands, 'I don't want stay here.'

'Come on,' he said pulling her along, 'you know I wouldn't let anything happen to you.'

'I don't believe you!'

'I promise,' he held her gaze with his. 'I will always protect you.'

'You sure?'

'You know I always keep my promise,' he said reassuringly. 'Anyway,' he added, 'no need to worry, 'cause duppy easy to fool.'

'How?' Inez looked up at him, so taken with what he was saying that she failed to notice him gently steering them back towards the Cotton Tree.

'Not many people know this,' he started, 'but all you do is just turn your clothes inside out to confuse them,' he said casually, as if it were a well-known fact.

'That's all?' Inez was dumbfounded. After all those scary stories she'd heard about duppies and spirits, and all you had to do to get rid of them was to turn your clothes inside out?

'Hmmm-hm,' Johnson nodded.

Inez looked at him admiringly, she couldn't wait until she was nine like him, just think how many things she would know then.

'Of course,' Johnson continued, as if it had just come to mind, 'it's not just duppy you have to worry 'bout.'

Inez stiffened, she might have known there would be more. 'What else?' she asked cautiously.

'Well, you have Ol' Hinge, for example.'

'Who?'

'One wicked witch!' Johnson said, his voice serious. 'Dem say when night come and the moon full, she shed her skin and fly into people bedroom.'

'And then?'

'And then,' he said in his deepest, scariest voice, 'she suck out them breath while them sleep! And she never stop suck 'til them dead!'

Inez gasped and clutched at his hand, 'you can kill her?'

'Yeah, man, but only when she not wearing her skin. So, first,' he waggled his finger to emphasize his point, 'you must find where she hide it, and when you find it, you must sprinkle it with salt and pepper before she catch you.'

'Salt and pepper?' Inez listened incredulously, eyes wide as saucers.

Johnson, now in full big brother mode, sighed as if he talking to a very small child. 'You sprinkle it with salt and pepper, so that when she come fi put it back on, it burn her so much she can't...' Whatever else he had been about to say was interrupted by the faint sound of whistling that seemed to come from somewhere behind the Cotton Tree. 'Hear dat?' Johnson squeezed Inez's hand tight as they stared in the direction of the tree, but there was nothing to see. Everything was as peaceful and still as it had been when they first arrived.

'Sounded like 'Hill and Gully Ride Oh,' she said, naming a call and refrain song that everybody knew, young and old. It had come from slavery times and was one that workers in the field would sing as they picked cotton under the hot sun. Unaware of its history, the children just knew it as a lively song for two or more singers.

'I will start, and you follow. Alright?' Johnson ordered, before singing the first line.

'Hill and gully ride oh,'

'Hill and gully,' Inez sang back, and in no time at all they were singing and dancing

in front of the Cotton Tree.

'Hill and gully, ride oh,

Hill and gully.

I beg yuh bend down low down,

Hill and gully.

And den yuh dance right round him,

Hill and gully.

And if yuh bruk yuh neck yuh gone a hell,

Hill and gully.'

Eventually, they ran out of verses and as their singing faded. Inez was horrified to see how close they'd got to the tree.

'Come,' Johnson said, 'now we're here, we might as well look who...'

'No!' All their mother's warnings about what a dangerous place it was and how they should always keep away from it, flashed through Inez's head. Up close, she could see how unusual the tree was. About 70 feet high, it soared above them and from its front and four or five thick buttresses extended from the base of its trunk. The buttresses were high, at least as tall as mama, Inez thought, and they were smooth. They looked like the entrances to tunnels, cool and inviting, but entrances which she felt certain would swallow you up if you entered. Johnson was launching himself at one of the buttresses, trying to sit on top. Slowly she walked backwards, keeping her eye on the tree the whole while. Now she could see it in perspective, and it was even more frightening. Almost human like, with thick, broad branches for arms which swept downwards as if ready to swoop up the unwary in a permanent hug. The two, dark hollows high up in the centre of the trunk looked like hungry eyes, on the lookout for naughty children. She watched as Johnson launched himself unsuccessfully at one of the buttresses, before stopping to peer closely at the trunk.

'No!' she said more loudly as if to make certain the tree could hear too. 'Me too frighten. I want go home.' Johnson stared into one of the clefts in the centre of the

trunk as if hypnotised. 'Johnson!' Inez called, but he didn't move, so she ran back and stamped on his foot. It seemed to do the trick, for he blinked hard a couple of times as if shaking off a dream and allowed himself to be lead away. They didn't speak again until they had put some distance between themselves and the tree.

'Whistling stop and me don't see nobody,' Johnson said.

'Dat 'cause nobody here,' Inez replied.

'This is what you call a mystery,' Johnson said excitedly. 'I want find out who it was... or what it was!' They walked in silence until Johnson suddenly shouted in Inez's ear, 'Whhhooooo!'

She jumped and then slapped him hard on his bare arm. 'Stop it!'

'Ow,' he said, rubbing the spot. 'Why you lick me?'

'If we don't go home right now,' she threatened, 'I going to tell Mama.'

'You wouldn't.'

'Trust me.'

Johnson looked at her little mouth set in a stubborn line and her arms crossed over her chest and recognised the signs. He knew that she wouldn't stay a moment longer and would even try and make her way home by herself, if necessary. He was almost tempted to let her go alone, but then he really would be in trouble.

'You love tell tales too much,' he said grumpily. 'I don't know how I end up with a sister like you. You too boring.'

As they headed for the main road, Inez shot an occasional glance over her shoulder to make sure that the tree was not following them.

'Ever hear 'bout Rolling Calf?' Johnson asked.

'No. And me don't want to!'

'Him big like elephant but him white,' Johnson continued, as if she hadn't spoken. 'Him eyes red and dem blaze like fire. When Rolling Calf's red eyes see you, him paw the ground with him hoof and when him start run towards you...'

'Stop telling me your stupid stories!' she shouted and put her hands over her ears and started humming to drown out his voice. 'Me not listening!'

They had been making so much noise that they were unaware of the sound of twigs and branches crackling underfoot as footsteps approached, footsteps which stopped as Johnson spoke.

'Inez! Inez!' He nudged her. 'Hear dat?'

'You just trying fi scare me. Just wait 'til I tell mama.'

'Stop chatting and listen!' he ordered.

But apart from the hum of crickets and the occasional bird song, there was nothing out of the ordinary, and then they heard it – footsteps which slowly got closer and closer until the children clutched at each other in terror.

'Run, Inez! Run!' Johnson screamed.

In their haste to escape, neither child heard the laughter that followed them, or the whistling that picked up from where their song had left off.

About the Writer

Maeve Clarke worked as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language in the Spain and Italy for many years before returning to the UK. She now teaches ESOL and Academic English in Birmingham. A graduate of Manchester University's MA in Novel Writing, her thesis for the MA was in the form of a novel – *What Goes Round* – which was published by Tindal Street Press in 2003. She has had published two readers, *Give us the Money* (OUP) for EFL students and *The Real Deal* (Franklin Watt) for teens with low literacy levels.

In 2012, she was selected for Critical Mass – a 10-week playwriting course at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry. This was her first taste of writing for theatre, and she loved it! As a result of Critical Mass, she was commissioned to write a short play for the Belgrade's Youth Theatre. She has since had some script in hand performances of her work. After a year spent in Spain (2013-2014), which didn't quite go to plan (!), Maeve returned to the UK, and gradually started writing again.

2016 was a year of writing highs and lows. Rejections – seven in three days at one point! However, there were also some fantastic highs, including winning the Creative Futures Literary Award for prose, being selected for Birmingham Repertory Theatre's Write Away programme, chosen as one Commonword's Women in the Spotlight 2016, and shortlisted for the Penguin Random House Write Live initiative.

