



Book Review of Patricia Jabbeh Wesley's Praise Song For My Children

Neil Leadbeater

Patricia Jabbeh Wesley is the author of five collections of poetry: When the Wanderers Come Home, Where the Road Turns, The River Is Rising, Becoming Ebony and Before the Palm Could Bloom: Poems of Africa. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines including Harvard Review, Transition Magazine and Prairie Schooner. Her work has been translated into Italian, Spanish and Finnish. She teaches

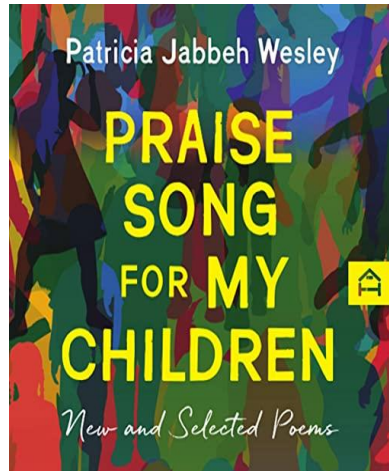
creative writing and African literature at Penn State University in Altoona, Pennsylvania, where she lives with her family.

The full title of this latest publication is *[Praise Song For My Children: New and Selected Poems](#)*. This substantial volume includes a generous number of new poems and a good selection from Wesley's previous five books of poetry. The most recent poems, written between 2017 and 2019 appear first and then the remainder of the book is set out in chronological sequence of book publication going back in time from 2016 to 1998. A useful glossary is included at the end. The collection is available in paperback and also as an e-book.

Wesley is a survivor. She is a survivor of war, the first and second Liberian Civil Wars (1989-1996 and 1997 – 2003), and she is also a survivor of cancer, a Grebo from Maryland County, Southeastern Liberia and an internationally celebrated poet.

In conversation with Nvasekie N Konneh, Wesley sums up the substance of much of the thematic material that informs her poetry: "I have written much and still do write about the Liberian experience of the civil war, the massacres our people experienced, the suffering I saw, the death of children, the use of children as soldiers, the destruction of our country and more. I also write about my family, my children, bringing up children, living in the Diaspora, the difficulty of being uprooted from my homeland, etc..."

Reading her narratives, we learn much about the customs and traditions of the Grebo people, an ethnic, linguistic and cultural grouping who live in Liberia, West Africa. Of



particular significance is the repeated mention of the kola nut, which is a symbol of life and peace.

Three places feature prominently in her writings: Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, Harper, the capital of Maryland County in Liberia, and Gbolobo, a town noted for the Gbolobo War with the Liberian government in the 1900s during the Kru resistance. We learn the Grebo words for different family members; specific ritual dances, often war dances, chants and dirges associated with the Grebo peoples; praise names and items of clothing. Traditions of mourning are often referred to or written about, especially the Mat ceremony when a large mat or several mats is spread out for mourners to sit on to celebrate and mourn the dead, the Mat representing a symbolic place to empty all grief prior to burial.

Most of the [poems](#) follow some kind of narrative, are immediately accessible and are conversational in tone. Stylistically, they have a declamatory air about them. Thematically, they often portray the strength of womanhood, resilience and endurance in a time of unbearable suffering. War and the memory of war dominate this book and Wesley's poems often take the form of lamentations, dirges and elegies for the fallen. There are poems on birth and death, ageing and regret, all those significant moments in a person's life which Wesley handles so empathetically. It is in these poems that Wesley finds her true lyrical voice.

Despite the horror and futility of war and the unbearable grief of losing loved ones, there is always hope to be found in Wesley's poetry. In '[One of These Days](#)' she writes:

One of these days
there will be rejoicing
all over the place.

There will be so much shouting,
so much wailing,
so much dancing.
There's going to be
such dancing
as we've never before seen
in Monrovia.
There's going to be a day
like that, I say,
and there's no one
who will be able to stop us.

In [other poems](#), such as 'When I Get to Heaven' this hope translates itself into unabashed joy:

When I get to heaven
I'm going to shout hallelujah all over the place.
Dancing the *Dorklor*, the *Wahyee*,
the Ballet, the Rock and Roll.
I'll dance the Brake, the Rap, Hip Hop.
All the dances only sinners have danced.
I'll sing Opera, the African way,
dance the Ballet the African way.

Reading these poems, I can see now why she chose to place her poems in reverse order: it is because, despite everything, we end on a triumphant, even defiant, note. Wesley is a poet with a big heart. She has a love for the whole wide world and that love demands to be heard.

Title: Praise Song For My Children

Author: Patricia Jabbeh Wesley

Available: [Amazon](#)

About the author: Patricia Jabbeh Wesley

Patricia is the author of five collections of poetry, including *When the Wanderers Come Home*, *Where the Road Turns*, *The River is Rising*, and *Becoming Ebony*. She lives in Altoona, PA.

About the reviewer: Neil Leadbeater

Neil is an author, essayist, poet and critic living in Edinburgh, Scotland. His work has been published widely in anthologies and journals both at home and abroad. His latest publications are *Falling Rain* and *Cityscapes and Other Poems* (both published by Cyberwit.net, Allahabad, India, 2023). Other publications include *Librettos for the Black Madonna* (White Adder Press, 2011); *The Loveliest Vein of Our Lives* (Poetry Space, 2014); *The Fragility of Moths* (editura pim, Iași, Romania, 2014); *Sleeve Notes* (editura pim, Iași, Romania,, 2016); and an e-book, *Grease-banding The Apple Trees* (Rafaelli Editore, Rimini, Italy, 2015). His work has been translated into French, Dutch, Nepali, Romanian, Spanish and Swedish.

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