‘To Sir with Love’ Author E.R Braithwaite is a Special Person

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By Michael Jordan

“It sold very well in England because they rushed to a second printing because of the demand. For a long time I had the feeling that it was not real; for a while I would wake up and find I was dreaming. The newspapers were calling me for interviews. And the book seemed to have a life of its own…it seemed to teach all the right points to people who had an interest in the lives of young people.”

His life sounds like an implausible Hollywood script: Black youth seeks fortune in foreign land; gets teaching job in tough white neighbourhood…then turns his experiences into a bestselling book and a blockbuster movie.

Mr. E. R Braithwaite

But as incredible as it seems, that’s the true and fascinating story of Mr. Edward Ricardo Braithwaite – teacher, bestselling author, university lecturer, ambassador, and now, in his hundredth year, a National Awardee in his homeland, Guyana. Fact, it seems, is sometimes indeed stranger than fiction, and there was a time when even Mr. Braithwaite, author of the acclaimed semi-autobiographical novel ‘To Sir With Love’, sometimes thought that his success was all a pleasant dream.
Relaxing last week at the Pegasus with his companion, Ginette Ast, during a brief but hectic visit to his homeland, Mr. Braithwaite recounted the story of his rise to celebrity status.
He was born on June 22, 1912 in Queenstown, Georgetown in the then British Guiana, a colony, to a father who was a gold and diamond miner and a mother who was a homemaker. He had four other siblings.
A studious lad, Braithwaite entered Queen’s College, but on leaving school decided to migrate to the ‘mother country’, England.
“England was always used as a kind of ‘Mecca’ for us boys…a place where we could develop our own talents and skills,” Mr. Braithwaite says.
His goal was a career in engineering.
“As a kid I studied very hard. My friends wanted to be policemen and things
like that, but I wanted to be different. I had no friends or acquaintances who were writers. I never thought of writing as a career.”

He travelled to New York, then boarded a cargo ship headed for England. “It was a strange kind of voyage,” he says, a far-away look in his eyes. “Luckily, I had walked with several books, because there was no conversation with the sailors… they were too busy, so I spent time reading.”

He’d grown up in British Guiana, where every white man was of the privileged class. England came as a shock to him. For the first time, he saw poverty-stricken whites. “I couldn’t believe my eyes. I saw white men, bending and picking up cigarette butts and smoking them. All the whites in British Guiana were in managerial positions. I never associated poverty with white persons.”

But for the young man from British Guiana, it seemed that he himself was on track where his goals were concerned. He studied engineering, then attended Cambridge University where he studied physics.

**Racism**

Armed with his qualifications, he then applied at various places for a job as an engineer. It was at this point that Braithwaite had his first experience with racism. Time and again, his applications were rejected. “Again, it was one of those experiences which I suppose I had to go through,” he says, “and it was all linked to my perspective of whites as being honest; truth-telling. I wasn’t prepared to see them as ordinary people, so it was my fault. In growing up, I did not understand humanity; I saw people in terms of rich, poor, bright or stupid.”

*A scene from the movie ‘To Sir With Love’*
But good fortune comes in mysterious and unexpected ways. For the frustrated and unemployed Braithwaite, it came one day in the form of an elderly man.

“I was sitting in a park and he came and sat on a bench near to me. I was not in the mood for conversation and I ignored him; and as old men do, he began whispering to himself. Suddenly he turned to me and made a remark. I responded and we fell into conversation, and I suppose being in my present state I told him of my difficulties. He listened and said, ‘why don’t you try teaching?’

“The idea did not commend itself to me. I said that the people would not trust me with inanimate things, why would they trust me with their children?”

Despite his misgivings, he applied for a teaching position. Surprisingly, he was accepted.

“I was not expecting a great deal, but the rest is history.”

The teaching position was at a predominately white school in the tough East End of London.

“The headmaster was kind and gracious. He welcomed me, and then he gave me a run-down of the kind of students I should expect to encounter. It was not that he was dissuading me; he was just preparing me for the students.”

And what was that first day like?

“My first day was a rough day; but I was determined. This was the first (job) opening of any sort that was presented to me, and I was not prepared to let anything or anyone interfere with it.”

But first, he had to gain the respect and acceptance of his white students, who were not enthused with the idea of having a black teacher.

“Upon reflection, they were actually a product of their environment. They were big, they were tough, or at least they saw themselves as being tough, and they wanted me to see them as being tough, but after awhile they were just ‘pussies.’ They weren’t dirty, but they wanted to convey a sense of toughness….if they could present themselves as being tough, that was good enough for them.

“There was no overt disrespect…everything was hinted at.”

No quitting

But despite the covert hostility, the young teacher from British Guiana refused to quit.

“Under no circumstances would I quit on them, because to quit would be to quit on teaching, and I liked the idea of being a teacher. I liked the idea of
being called ‘Sir’, no matter how reluctantly it came out, and there was reluctance.
“The problem was that the idea of a black teacher did not appeal to them….but after awhile, the ‘blackness’ did not interfere with my teaching. I think they were eventually able to ignore my blackness in favour of my teaching.”
And to his surprise, Braithwaite discovered that he had a knack for teaching.

“Mr. Braithwaite receiving the Cacique Crown of Honour

“The idea of being an engineer began leaching out of my system, because there is something about teaching; it grips you. It grips you because each night I had to prepare something for the next day, which meant that each night was a period of discovery. I had to read and re-read to make connections. I had to do things to face the students the next day. There was never a dull moment.”
He stayed there for nine years. When the time eventually came, parting with his students was a heart-breaking moment.
“It was difficult to leave because in spite of myself, I felt a closeness to them, and as the time of my departure drew near, I found that the things that I disliked about them most were not so offensive after all. I saw myself in them. I saw some aspects of their behavior as reflecting things that I had thought and done.”
His students gave him a farewell present.
It was a package, marked ‘To Sir With Love.’ The package contained cigarettes, all bearing his initials.
“I discovered later that they had visited WD&HO Wills (a cigarette manufacturer) and ordered the cigarettes, each initialed ‘E.R.B’.
Because he was a non-smoker, Mr. Braithwaite kept the cigarettes.
“I wasn’t a smoker in that sense, so I could occasionally look at them and remind myself of the days in that school.”
But Braithwaite could not get those memories out of his head. “I suppose that all of us at some point in our lives reflect on things past, and at one time in my life I thought of recording those good times and bad times. I was not a writer per se...I wrote about my life up to that point, and when it was done, I was advised to get it published. So I wrapped the book up and took it to a publishing house in London. “I wasn’t greeted with any kind of welcoming. The publisher was not there, and one of his minions told me to leave the package on the desk and eventually somebody would read it. I later learned that though a series of accidental events, the book was taken home that very night and read; because the very next day, I had a phone call inviting me to go and meet the publisher. “I became very friendly with my publisher. He later told me that it was evident when he read it that I was not a professional (author). But there was something about the book which he found intriguing and he knew that persons would find it interesting.”

Published!
And when it was finally published in 1959, the response by readers was indeed overwhelming. “It sold very well in England because they rushed to a second printing because of the demand.
It took some time before the writer could adjust to his new-found fame. “For a long time I had the feeling that it was not real; for a while I would wake up and find I was dreaming. In addition to that, the newspapers were calling me for interviews. And the book seemed to have a life of its own, particularly among academics. It seemed to teach all the right points to people who had an interest in the lives of young people.”
In 1967, the now-famous Guyanese author had another pleasant surprise. Hollywood came knocking. “They came to see me at my home and told me that they wanted to make a movie (based on my book). But that was it. They didn’t invite me to participate in any way in the production. If they had done that, there were a lot of changes that I would have made.”
The movie, ‘To Sir with Love’ starred renowned actor, Sidney Poitier. Mr. Braithwaite has been quoted elsewhere a saying that he wasn’t enthused with Sidney Poitier’s portrayal, since he “seemed to be having too much fun.”
“I wasn’t satisfied (with the movie version) but I’ve learned to live with it,” he admits.
“I met him (Poitier) but we didn’t talk about the movie.”
To date, no Caribbean author has replicated this feat of having one of their works turned into a successful Hollywood movie.
Mr. Braithwaite also wrote the books ‘Paid Servant’ (based on his experiences as a social worker in London), ‘Honorary White’ (from his experiences in apartheid South Africa) ; ‘A Kind of Homecoming’, and ‘House of Straws’.
At least two of these books were made into radio plays by the BBC.
Mr. Braithwaite also held numerous international posts; including Guyana’s Ambassador to the United Nations after independence and Ambassador to Venezuela. He also taught at the New York University and Florida State University.
Belatedly, the country of Mr. Braithwaite’s birth is making attempts to honour him.
A play based on ‘To Sir With Love’ was recently produced locally.
Last week he was conferred with the Cacique Crown of Honour (CCH). And Kaieteur News honours him today.