

# S. I. Martin

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BOOKS: *Incomparable World* (London: Quartet, 1996);  
revised edition (New York: Braziller, 1998);  
*Britain's Slave Trade* (London: Channel 4 Books, 1999);  
*Jupiter Williams* (London: Hodder's Children's, 2007).

OTHER: "21.6.2048," in *Mosaic: New Writings from British and Indian Award-Winning Writers*, edited by Monisha Mukundan (New Delhi & London: Penguin and the British Council, 1998), pp. 85–92;  
"Inheriting Diversity: Archiving the Past," in *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of 'Race'*, edited by Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 196–201.

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATION—  
UNCOLLECTED: "All One Word," *Wasafiri*, 32  
(Autumn 2000): 27–29.

S. I. Martin is a writer, historian, and teacher committed to uncovering the history of the black presence in Britain and to communicating this history to as wide an audience as possible. He works continuously with the museums, schools, and borough councils of London to incorporate black history into the capital's story, and is the founder of a series of historical walks titled "500 Years of Black London." In line with his broader cultural objectives, Martin has published an historical novel depicting the black community in eighteenth-century London as well as a book about the history of Britain's role in the slave trade, a futuristic short story, and an article on the role of historical archives in black communities. His forthcoming works include a science-fiction novel, an excerpt of which has already appeared in print, and a series of children's books. Martin lives in Brixton, South London.

Steven Ian Martin was born on 24 April 1961 in Bedford, where his parents had settled after arriving in Britain from Antigua two years earlier. He attended Bedford Modern School up to the age of eighteen and, in the years following, while pursuing his passion for history and literature, worked variously as a postman,

an office clerk, a factory worker, a hospital porter, and a music promoter. Increasingly frustrated by the limited published history of the presence of blacks in Britain, Martin began, in the mid 1980s, to undertake his own research in London's archives. During this period Martin's first work appeared in print—a series of Afrocentric crossword puzzles published in the leading black British newspaper, *The Voice*. In 1989 Martin was able to spend a year in Brussels, at first as a reporter for *The Voice*, and later as a writer for *The Bulletin of Brussels*. To both periodicals he contributed articles on subjects ranging from fashion to local politics, as well as museum and restaurant reviews. Upon his return to the United Kingdom in 1990, he moved to Deptford in South London and became an active campaigner for the Anti-Fascist Movement. Also at this time Martin became good friends with writer Fred D'Aguiar, whom he met, by coincidence, through living in the same block of flats.

In 1995, having spent more than a decade conducting independent research into Britain's black history, Martin wrote his novel *Incomparable World* (1996) in a three-month period—or as he put it, “in a fever dream.” The publication of the novel led to Martin's acquaintance and subsequent friendship with David Dabydeen, whose book *Hogarth's Blacks* (1985) had been instrumental in Martin's imagining black people's lives in and around the familiar sights of London. Dabydeen called *Incomparable World* “a triumph of language” [*I Query: In what did Dabydeen say this? When?*] and cited it, in turn, as an important influence in his own writing of *A Harlot's Progress* (1999). Around the same time as the publication of *Incomparable World*, Martin was contracted by the Museum of London to produce black history material for collections, in an appointment which has continued ever since. In 1998 Martin was encouraged to “revise” the text of *Incomparable World* “for an American audience,” and the result was published by George Braziller Inc. An excerpt of *Incomparable World* also appeared in *Empire Windrush: Fifty Years of Writing about Black Britain*, edited by Onyekachi Wambu (1998).

*Incomparable World* is a fast-paced adventure story full of humor, empathy, and observational detail, which was described by Mark Stein in *Wasafiri* (Spring 1999) as “bridging the gap between high-brow and popular novels.” The narrative is set in the 1780s, when former American slaves landed in London, lured by the promise of freedom to fight on the side of the British in the American War of Independence. Among these soldiers are protagonists Buckram and William, who are encouraged by Georgie George, the irrepressible “King of the Beggars,” to participate in a robbery of the American Embassy. With this novel, Martin “wanted to establish more than anything else . . . the fact of the

black presence before [the arrival of the *HMS Empire Windrush* in June 1948." Black people in eighteenth-century London, he notes, "numbered between 10- and 15,000 among 800,000 residents." The author vividly evokes this community's presence in London's Covent Garden and St. Giles as part of an underclass whose only constant is its eternal mobility around routes identified by Paul Gilroy as the "Black Atlantic" and informed as they are by the passage of the slave ships.

Martin has indicated indebtedness to both Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1932) and Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) in his evocation of these deeply transitional diasporic communities in Europe's urban centers and the largely male-oriented social lives that operated within them. The novel observes the fragility of each protagonist's social position, charting fortunes whose wild fluctuations "at the mercy of an English god" are often shown to induce a nearly paralyzing despair:

If only Buckram had a home to call his own . . . if only he could read and write . . . if only he had clean clothes . . . if only there was somewhere, anywhere, he could go without money. . . . He was just another mad sad black like all the rest, wasting away in grotty, sunless corners across the city, waiting to die.

Martin captures a relationship between the black individual and the city that is simultaneously intimate and brutal; it reflects a struggle for self-determination in a Britain that is at best indifferent, at worst openly hostile to the black presence. Martin considers the persistence of British racism, which he perceives as operating in distinct historical cycles:

It was just as William Supple had said, Buckram reflected: there would always be black people starving about the streets of London. Every now and then there would be a public outcry and demands for their expulsion would be followed by yet another cruel, half-baked scheme to drive them from the land. For two hundred years this had been their condition here. Would another two centuries bring any change?

Martin sets his eighteenth-century perspective alongside earlier and later moments of British xenophobia, which are epitomized, respectively, by Queen Elizabeth I's demand in 1596 to have "those kinde of people . . . sent forth of the lande" and by Margaret Thatcher's claim in 1979 that Britons were feeling "swamped" by immigrants.

The author's desire to illustrate a long and difficult history of racism does not, however, prevent him from asking: "why can't you do it with humour?" [*2 Query: Source and date of this quote?*] One illustrative instance in the novel is his dramatic caricaturing of

the eighteenth-century black writers Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cuguano, who are described respectively as having “the sort of face to which only outright victories could bring a smile” and “the look of a well-flogged ex-slave.” While Martin pokes fun at the godfathers of black British letters, “to demystify them,” he also calls them his “heroes” and allows them to pronounce, with inimitable pomposity, upon the central issue of Britain’s ambivalence to its black citizens:

“You do me wrong, Otto. I would not seek to undermine the gravity of our situation, I sought only to state that our numbers here increase and that we will become, if indeed we are not already, an ineradicable element of this nation’s character.”

“So, they frequent our clubs, sing our songs, dance our dances and eat our foods. They do all that in the Caribbean and still flog us to death on a whim. Dammit, Ola, there are no ineradicable elements to these people; they’re a composite of those they’ve conquered, and nothing more. . . .”

Martin’s humor may indeed humanize these figures, but it also works to dramatize the perverse contradiction inherent to black experience in eighteenth-century Britain: the opportunity that existed, for some, to gain access to a middle-class life, yet that presented itself against the omnipresent threat of slavery.

In 1998 Martin published a futuristic short story titled “21.6.2048,” set a century after the first docking of the *SS Empire Windrush*, which brought 492 Jamaican immigrants to Britain on its first of many transatlantic passages. The story imagines a time when “the days of mass migration are over” and an “annual Swim-In” decides the fate of “hopeful immigrants” who compete for entry into Britain, absurdly enough, by swimming the English Channel. Once again the author’s bitter-sweet humor emphasized the sheer ridiculousness of Britain’s paranoid watchfulness over its borders and the resulting struggle on the part of its black citizens to maintain a clear sense of their historical entitlement. Martin cites an Arabic proverb to reflect upon the cyclical nature of this immigration history: “The past differs from the future as water differs from water.” The consistent importance of the past to the process of understanding the present (and, for that matter, the future) is asserted and contrasted with some sadness to the perspective of a protagonist who ends the story “slightly drunk and forgetting again,” thus epitomizing the possibility of a future generation’s indifference to history: “All I know of history is what I’ve been taught and told.”

In 1999 *Britain’s Slave Trade* was published to tie in with a Channel 4 four-part television documentary series, *Windrush*, produced by Trevor Phillips. Martin

offers a succinct and accessible history of Britain's involvement in the slave trade and a reflection upon its contemporary legacy. He notes the long histories of serfdom that operated in both Britain and Africa, but he reminds readers that "the Atlantic slave trade was to transform both the idea and the reality of slavery by its scale and organization." He goes on to establish in concrete terms the foundation of Britain's wealth upon the institution of slavery and carefully traces the processes leading to its official abolition of the slave trade in 1834. The end of Britain's participation in the slave trade is attributed in part to a general decline in its profitability, as well as to changes in Britain's economic and political landscape by agitation by Nonconformists and by "an armed and organized working class" hungry for reform of "a system under which they themselves were largely disenfranchised." Martin cites the influence upon popular British consciousness of successful slave rebellions in the Caribbean and of the unprecedented impact of black activists in London, including Robert Wedderburn, who, although the son of a slave owner and one of his slaves, was born free in Jamaica but became a sailor and then moved to England, where he joined with others to protest slavery and in 1824 wrote *The History of Slavery*, and Olaudah Equiano, whose 1789 autobiographical work *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by himself* was "a best seller." Mindful of the various economic, political, and cultural factors that led to this formative moment in history, Martin notes the nineteenth-century British government's attempts to "re-brand itself in the guise of a roving anti-slavery watchdog," citing the Prime Minister Lord Russell's attribution of abolition to "the moral and the Christian character of this nation."

Martin's ability to bring history to life for a general audience is typified in this work, particularly through his persuasive evocation of a social sensibility that deemed the slave trade acceptable. About that sensibility, commenting on the reasoning that made people take the sale and purchase of human beings as commonsensical, Martin explained,

A parallel may be drawn with the current international trade in arms. . . . No one denies the human cost of this commerce—that it results in the deaths of tens of thousands of comparatively innocent men, women and children. But, despite our well-recorded distaste, the arms trade continues to flourish. It is seen as an economic necessity. This, more or less, was the same perspective that people had on slavery until the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. People said: it has always been there, it is vital for the economy and, if we do not do it, other countries will.

Part of the cultural legacy of the slave trade, as Martin represents it, was the establishment of a recognizable black community in eighteenth-century Britain. He cited scholarship suggesting that the 1770s marked a shift away from a tradition in British art of demonizing or bestializing black people, when such figures as Ignatius Sancho, Olaudah Equiano, and Ottobah Cugnano came to be represented, in portraiture as well as through their own writings, as individuals in their own right. Martin ended the book with some contemporary case studies of “white” Britons who had discovered a black ancestor, positioning such reconsiderations of history as part of the process of recognizing hitherto neglected black contributions to “Britishness.” To Martin, such recognition could be one small way of beginning to tackle the larger challenge, facing both Britain and Africa, of redeeming the culture of amnesia that still operates with regard to the history of slavery. Martin pointed, in this regard, to the example set by the Caribbean, where “Wherever there is creative expression, the presence of slavery emerges.”

Between 1999 and 2000 Martin was at his most active in leading historical walks around the important sites of “Black London,” with tours scheduled on a weekly basis in connection with the “London Walks” organization. Around this time, too, he was able to begin focusing his energies exclusively on his career in black history. His interest in the relationship between the historical and the futuristic is again evident in “All One Word,” an excerpt taken from his forthcoming science fiction novel and published in *Wasafiri* (Autumn 2000). The narrative follows a Black serviceman who has been sent on assignment to another planet and returns to Earth only to be greeted by a police beating, which leads him to comment wryly, “I was definitely back home.” Martin taps once or twice the rich comic vein; in general, however, the tone is darker. With the eyes of the “redcaps” (the officers administering the protagonist a second beating), for example, the narrative communicates a “submarine intensity,” the sense of a history too painful always to engage with fully:

It was the shock, always that same shocking monkey-grip, of how every real pain *is* the first ever pain. This is the memory the body cannot hold, all the information it can't process. It reminds us how we are matter and nothing but and our screams are those of all mammals beyond the womb.

The narrative goes on to show the protagonist's existence in the “human settlement” on the planet “Holleme,” where he has “learnt . . . how to trade life for survival” by “closing down every errant memory and earthly whim.” The piece ends with reference

to "*Per Mare Per Terram*" (By Sea By Land, the motto of the Royal Marines), which neatly encapsulates a recurring theme in Martin's work, of the life divided between land and sea.

Martin's work as a teacher and research consultant has involved him, since 2000, in a wide variety of projects, working with organizations such as the Public Records Office, English Heritage, the National Archive and Museum of Black History, the Horniman Museum, and the Museum in Docklands. Between 2000 and 2001 Martin worked as a researcher for the Lambeth Archives' Black History Project, through which he became particularly involved in working with schools, specializing since then in the design and delivery of storytelling and writing development programs as a means of introducing London's black history to schoolchildren. He has run writers' workshops in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe and spent periods as a writer-in-residence at the University of Ostrava in the Czech Republic (2001) and at the State University of New York in 2002. Also in 2002 he prepared the "Greenwich Slavery Trail" pamphlet and webpage for the National Maritime Museum, as well as a webpage for Anti-Slavery International. In 2003 he made contributions to *The Sunday Feature: Black London's Story* for BBC Radio 3, to *Mongrel Nation* for BBC4, and to *The Tom Molineaux Story* for Channel 4. Martin is also a regular contributor to *London Live*, *The Robert Elms Show*, and *The Angie Greaves Show* on Greater London Radio. In 2004 Martin was commissioned by the London Borough of Southwark to write a pamphlet for St. George's Day titled *A Sense of Belonging* and he coordinated with Year 9 pupils in the London Borough of Islington a research project on black performers in nineteenth-century London, which was published in pamphlet form as well as online.

In his article "Inheriting Diversity: Archiving the Past" (2005), Martin expresses his concern about the state of Britain's archives and their accessibility to ethnic minorities, who in a 1999 survey were found to constitute only "2 per cent of the archive-using public." The heritage sector in Britain, he said, "has a uniquely low image and poor profile. The crude view is that museums, galleries and archives are still places which tend to be *about* us rather than *for* us." Martin was heartened, however, by recent efforts to establish local history projects charting the impact of the black presence in communities such as Bristol, Lambeth, Tower Hamlets, and Northampton. Thus begins a process by which, Martin wrote, "promoting accessible archive use to the general public" is "about providing a developing multi-ethnic society with the tools to handle difficult questions about origins, ethnicity, identity and nationalism."

In 2006 Martin was involved with the National Youth Theatre's workshops on Deptford's local history, was a contributor to an *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, and participated in the production of a BBC 4 documentary on Olaudah Equiano. He continued to lead walks, intermittently, around the sites of London's black history. His series of children's stories, contracted by Hodder's Children's Books, are set between 1903 and 1911 and told from the perspective of a young black boy working in London's minstrel shows. Based on real people and historical events, the books will show the boy's fascination with performers George Walker and Bert Williams, who called themselves "The Two Real Coons" and whose minstrel show *In Dahomey* was a triumphant success in 1903. In Martin's stories, London's black entertainment world arouses the suspicions of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which enlists the young protagonist as an undercover agent. *Jupiter Williams* (2007) is set in the 1800s and tells the story of a schoolboy from a wealthy Sierra Leonean family who encounters a black culture different from his own in a part of London to which he must go to search for his missing brother.

S. I. Martin's commitment to pulling black history out of what he calls the "geriatric ward" environment of the archives and into communities where it can help people—through inspired marriages of history, literature and education—offers hope that the next generation of Britons, and especially of Londoners, will be increasingly aware of the contributions that slavery and the black presence have made to the nation. Moreover, even in the handful of fictional works Martin has published to date, some recurring concerns can be discerned. He is particularly keen in his work to reflect xenophobia in Britain as operating in clear historical cycles throughout history. As a result of this persistent, yet unpredictable, possibility of hostility, blackness in Britain is for Martin associated with an eternally transitional existence, which moves not only around the "Black Atlantic," [3 *Query: Isn't an explanation needed?*] but even, in Martin's ventures into science fiction, into a futuristic no-man's-land where the individual's struggle to locate identity is challenged by the absence of traditional markers. Martin consistently approaches his protagonists with poignant empathy, but he also arms them with a healthy sense of irony, which helps them to negotiate Britain's often cruel and irrational challenges. Martin's work illuminates the persistent danger of racial and economic oppression in reducing the subject to a state of hopelessness, so that history becomes a burden or the subject feels compelled, in the pursuit of self-preservation, to indulge a dangerous forgetfulness. In his fiction as well as in his teaching, Martin delineates the urgent need to learn about the present

by looking at the past. Martin's message is clear throughout his works. In the face of the cold and persistent blows of institutionalized racism, an enormous potential for the redemption of humanity comes into being when people remember history as clearly as possible, especially the achievements of good people.

**Interview:**

Christopher Campbell & Leila Kamali, *Interview with S. I. Martin*, in *New Formations*, 55 (Spring 2005): 130–141.

**References:**

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