An Interview With…
Robert Grandcourt

From Individual History to Collective Memory; from Oral Tradition to Written Novel: Robert Grandcourt on his Novel *Beyond the Horizon* (2016)

Diversity, *joie de vivre*, complex historical heritage and the overwhelming beauty of nature – so many aspects are associated with the expression 'créolité'. In 2020, Seychelles is celebrating the 250th anniversary of the first settlement, and with it a commitment to history and the remarkable development towards its very own identity.

Robert Grandcourt, born in Victoria, Mahé, grew up on the island of Praslin. An economist by profession, he has held many senior posts in the government, has also worked in international institutions, and has served as the chief of the African section of UNICEF. *Beyond the Horizon* is his first novel. He is, himself, an epitome of créolité; not only with his social and cultural background, but also with his strong cosmopolitanism and his proclivity for reflection and interest in everything unfamiliar – his novel is a great and convincing testimony of living history.

Robert Grandcourt was interviewed by Anne-Berenike Rothstein who is Professor (apl.) for Romance Literature and Culture at the University of Constance, Germany.

Robert Grandcourt (RG)
Anne-Berenike Rothstein (AR)

The writing process – backgrounds and sources

AR: How did you come to write a fictional novel?

RG: It all started in a New York hospital in 1998. My late son, Edwin Grandcourt, came to visit me in hospital and brought a note from the archivist, Mr Julien Durup, concerning the origins of some of my French ancestors. Fearing that my descendants would not know of their origins, I set out to research my family's history.

AR: How did you design it? Did you first start with the nucleus of the narrative?

RG: Not at all. While convalescing, I set out to research my family's history online with the intention of writing it in chronological order. At the same time, I enrolled in a writing workshop with Gotham Writing School in New York. As much as possible, I used my knowledge of growing up in Seychelles in my writing exercises.

AR: Why did you choose a historical novel as a genre?

RG: The subject matter lent itself to the genre. Writing the origins of my family, I found an abundance of information on my white family's colourful history, but little on my African and Asian ancestors. This lack of information, and a sense of justice, pivoted me to write the story from my slave ancestors' point of view. Once I had started, often I felt that it was my characters who were telling me what to write. Their contribution was complemented with information on the slave trade in general and in Seychelles in particular.

AR: How important was it to you to base the story on historical facts? How significant were the chronological markers to you and the integration of paragraphs from the Code Noir?

RG: It was very important to use as many facts as possible to give the novel its authentic touch. I saw my novel as presenting our history through the livelier approach of personal experiences, in contrast to history books. The chronological markers, especially the *Code Noir*, was the skeleton upon which to fix the other vital elements. However, it goes without saying that fiction was essential to make my characters come to life. Even the fictional component was based on attitudes of Seychellois of different origins and their place in Seychelles society in general, and in Praslin, where I grew up, in particular. Coming from a small community where everyone intermingled, and my place in the middle of the class-cum-colour spectrum, gave me a unique advantage to hear stories from different points of view.

AR: What were your preparations for writing the novel?

RG: My fascination for the history of our islands and our origins led me to search the internet, and to find books and people who could assist me to write my story. Once I decided to write a novel rather than my family's history, I also found it necessary to join a writing group and take an online creative-writing course to improve my techniques and subject my writing for critical evaluation as I proceeded. My choice to write fiction was reinforced when one of my fellow writing-group members told me that it was a more effective way of telling the truth than facts.

AR: To what extent have you interwoven your own family history with historical and fictional elements?

RG: For my white ancestors, with considerable documentation and their role in our country's history, the timeline of the novel and many of the incidents are fairly accurate. The major departure is with my heroine, and my great-great-grandmother who descended from a famous Seychellois family. She was married to a white, Mr Patot de Grandcourt. I wanted the Creole nation to be created by a big bang. I used her to make her do the impossible at the time, to dramatize the story and to show the complex issues and the conflicts involved in the creation of the Creole people. In real life, it was my grandmother who took on this challenge, but it was too late for me to use her as, by then, slavery had been abolished. At the beginning of the novel, my first generation of black descendants, Yaya, adapted and followed the rules according to her place in society as I imagined them to be; and Alfred was prepared to observe them until the headstrong Geneviève decided otherwise. With the historical context of the white settlers and Yaya's role determined, I allowed my imagination to run wild, linking my characters to major historical events of our islands.

Writing – the poetics of survival

AR: Why did you choose the slave theme?

RG: Slavery is imbedded in our country's 250-year history. It is in our genes, in our language, in our way of life, and in our subconsciousness.

AR: Do you have a favourite character?

RG: This is a very difficult question to answer. Most of my characters have traits and other aspects of people I have loved and admired and of those that I haven't. Yaya's courage, determination and pragmatism reminds me of my mother and other courageous women who have given everything to make sure that their children have a better life than they did. Alfred, reminds me of my tall, handsome and charismatic father. Although my father's extramarital affairs saddened my mother and the rest of us, in a perverse way his behaviour and his white woman lover gave me the material to write about the love between Alfred and Geneviève. But the greatest inspiration for Alfred was my heroic brother, Luc, who saved all his passengers when his boat sank. So many other characters were influenced by the kindness and solidarity of people I have known growing up on Praslin, and I feel guilty not doing them justice. Finally, Alexandre is partly my own story. The boy who left home at 17 to fend for himself with a minimal education, who ended up at one of the world's top universities.

AR: Your novel impresses with many atmospheric descriptions – did you also want to introduce the reader to the Seychelles as a historical site?

RG: To write authentically about my experience, I pictured myself in my village on Praslin when I was growing up. Even today, when I go for a walk on the mountainside, when I see a site of abandoned human habitation, I imagine the life of the people who once lived there, to the point where I am invaded by images, noises and smell of that time.

AR: Why did you decide to mention the end of slavery only briefly in the correspondence between Geneviève and Alexandre?

RG: I didn't do it consciously. Perhaps because, although the official abolition was a major achievement, it was not as marked as it should have been. The life of servitude following abolition was not much different for many of the liberated slaves after slavery, naturally, except for the residents of Geneviève's utopia.

AR: Alexandre brings together the different generations with his novel (and yours). What is your intention with your novel?

RG: As my initial intention was to write a family history, it followed that I should tell the story of more than one generation. For Alexandre, it was his way of showing his recognition and appreciation of his fellow villagers who had made so many sacrifices for his sake and for his generation to have a better life. Most of all, he wanted his book to be a monument to them, especially for his father, and as a proof of his worthiness even though he didn't end up as a sea captain as was desired for him.

AR: What is the meaning of the intertexts used (including the legends or rites)?

RG: They obviously served different purposes. For example, the Makonde rites followed by Yaya were included to highlight that she came from a culture with its own kind of spiritualism that she and other slaves carried with them. A belief system that she took with her and clung to, as represented by her amulet, to the end of her life. The symbolism of the amulet reached its zenith when Yaya gave it as a present to Geneviève knowing that she would, in turn, pass it on to Alexandre, which she did by leaving it with a cross in the chest to await his return. Some other rites and legends were included to give authenticity to the story. I made references to writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint Pierre to show that Geneviève was brought up in a literate family; the former to show her rebellious and utopic nature, and the latter being the love story of Paul and Virginie, set in the nearby island of Mauritius. All in all, these symbolisms were to show that in spite of the differences in culture, people can live in harmony and produce offspring of remarkable qualities, as represented by Alexandre.

"*You must be Alexandre des Seychelles. I'm Alexandre Dumas.*"
Literary tradition and role models

AR: To what extent do you see yourself in a literary tradition?

RG: Do I see myself in a literary tradition? I don't know. Writing *Beyond the Horizon* was to do something completely different from what I have done all my life; an economist and a manager. At a young age, I was introduced to the dystopian George Orwell and thoroughly appreciated his writing. Since then I have read widely, but not as much as I would have liked, and found myself reading historical novels. I love the writing of Alexandre Dumas. I can close my eyes and picture the opening scene of the Comte de Monte Christo. In the book, the captain died at sea and the hero brought his ship safely back to port. In *Beyond the Horizon*, the captain also died before the boat sank and the hero, based on my brother's true story, saved all his passengers. For me it was an ideal opportunity to bring the lovers closer together, something that they couldn't have done on land.

AR: We have in the novel some heroic slave figures (male and female), to whom the barbaric proponents of slavery are antagonistic. Only Geneviève embodies (also on the basis of reading, amongst others, Rousseau) the enlightened individual. Are there literary or historical models for the figure of Geneviève to which you refer?

RG: Yes, my grandmother, Rosa Grandcourt. She fell in love with someone of slave descent and had two sons by him, my father and his brother. She paid a heavy price for it. Geneviève got off lightly compared to her. My grandmother was disinherited and life was very hard for her and her two sons.

AR: Women play an important role in your novel (amongst other things you name two of the three parts of the book for the women acting in them). To what extent do you also want to oppose (male-dominated) historical historiography with your book?

RG: Women, especially my mother, have had a great influence in my life. Besides imposing discipline, men of my father's generation saw their role as breadwinner and left women to take care of the children. In the story, women do what they have been doing for generations in our islands.

AR: The whole plot culminates in the figure of Alexandre, the bearer of hope for different generations of slaves. Alexandre, however, remains an intellectual figure who does not join the ranks of his ancestors either socially or politically. By describing the intellectual circles of Paris, you make a radical cut to the struggles for survival of Alexandre's ancestors. What role does culture or literature play here? Can literature be understood here as an expression of the new identity (both Alexandre's novel 'Beyond the Horizon', and his collaboration with the famous Alexandre Dumas)? What role does France play here?

RG: According to my father, a man's work had to be a combination of physical and intellectual. He mistrusted lawyers, bureaucrats and the liberal professions and had a low opinion of them. When I decided not to follow in my father's footsteps by becoming a sailor, I disappointed him. In Alexandre, I wanted to prove that one can bring value to society by different kinds of knowledge, other than the obvious ones. Appreciating culture, literature and oral traditions is an integral part of liberation: one reason why Geneviève read stories to the villagers and appointed Yaya as a teacher in the school to teach her culture, and Mr Kirby to teach his, while she concentrated on that of her parents. At the time, in France, writers like Alexandre Dumas were like Mbappe today. France provides both a backdrop and a source of influence through its religion, language, and other cultural aspects that the settlers imposed on everyone. Even after the British takeover, the maintenance of the French culture, language and traditions were guaranteed under the articles of the Capitulation. Many of them remain even today, especially the Catholic religion, the language, and the Napoleonic Code.

AR: Alexandre Dumas is Creole himself – did you also want to emphasize the importance of Creole writers through your novel?

RG: At one stage, I wanted Alexandre to be a fictitious Dumas. Realizing that it was too pretentious, I adapted the plot, kept the name, and found a suitable ending. As Dumas used a lot of ghostwriters, it still worked out for me in a way.

AR: Do you think that in some time your novel will be evaluated differently to how it is now?

RG: I hope that it will be taken as a non-professional writer's attempt to tell the story of his ancestors in an interesting way. This was my intention; but as I am not sure how it is evaluated now, it is difficult for me to tell how it will be in the future. Obviously, I hope that it will be seen as a worthy contribution to our literature.

250th Anniversary of Seychelles – créolité and society

AR: In your opinion, to what extent does your novel make the individual fates of the slaves more interesting to society?

RG: Dehumanization was an essential element of slavery just as it is in any other form of exploitation of other human beings. Showing their individual personalities, strengths, weaknesses and even idiosyncrasies was my way of revealing that they were humans after all and that they deserved as much, if not more, recognition as their oppressors.

AR: You dedicate your novel to the Creole people with their slave past. Doesn't the new self-confident créolité define itself precisely by fading out the slave past?

RG: No and yes. No, in that it is a recognition that we are a product of our past, which we cannot deny. Yes, in the sense that when Geneviève and Alfred made love on the beach, she told him that they were born in, and belonged to, these islands, unlike their parents. They were the Adam and Eve of the Seychellois Creole. A recognition of our origins is acknowledging the molten metals which created the Creole alloy.

AR: A statue is going to be erected in honour of the sailors. Would a memorial place for the slaves be also conceivable?

RG: The monument to honour the seafarers and passengers who lost their lives at sea over the past 250 years is of a Creole – embodying all the different races of the people involved. At the time when I thought of the memorial, I did not have any specific event in mind until I realized that the 250th Anniversary was upon us. A monument to slavery was also planned for the occasion but has been cancelled because of financial hardship provoked by COVID. The slaves have, however, been honoured by a virtual exhibition.

AR: What status do you think literature has in Seychelles?

RG: Not enough for my liking. As a result of our oral tradition and, until recently, a high level of illiteracy, literature has not had the important role and status in our society that it deserves. My wish is that its status will improve over time concomitant with the increase in the level of education of my compatriots. An increase in the status of literature will, in turn, have a positive effect on writers' motivation.

AR: Do you have the impression that literature also contributes to the self-image of the Seychellois?

RG: Definitely yes by those who read literature, and even by those who do not. This is evident by the use of quotations from literature in speeches, writing, and sometimes debates in the National Assembly. As history has shown, the impact of literature on the national psyche outlives the writer and is often greater after a writer's death than during his lifetime.

AR: What measures do you consider necessary to preserve the oral tradition in Seychelles and still promote the important scripting?

RG: There is a synergy between preserving the oral tradition and promoting scripting. To script, the author relies to a large extent on oral tradition for multiple reasons. For example, to write my novel I relied extensively on stories from my parents' and grandparents' generations. None of these were written down, but told. Or, to put it another way, writing my book was my way of honouring our oral tradition. Sadly, most of this tradition is being killed by modern technology where children prefer to watch films or play games rather than listening to stories told by their elders. On a positive note, modern technology has given us the means to record oral stories for posterity. We have some recordings of these oral stories from the past fifty years, but too few. Before it's too late, it is important for the country to create a film and recording bank, to assemble past materials and record as much as possible. This will serve as a good source of materials for future scripters, researchers and others. Ironically, the saddest event in our country's recent history, the coup d'état of 1977 and its aftermath, has made the public aware of our rich oral tradition by witnesses to the recently established *Truth, Reconciliation and National Unity Commission*; albeit in a most painful way.

AR: What status will literature have at the 250th anniversary celebration and what future value do you see in writing and scripting?

RG: Luckily, literature-based activities have been retained in spite of the cancellation of many others because of COVID. A book to mark the evolution of society over the past 250 years and multiple articles in the local press, and on radio and television, have been published. Many of my compatriots, including me, have written and broadcasted for the celebrations. Scripts for two films have been produced and a competition of poems has been organized; and many songs have been written, registered and performed.