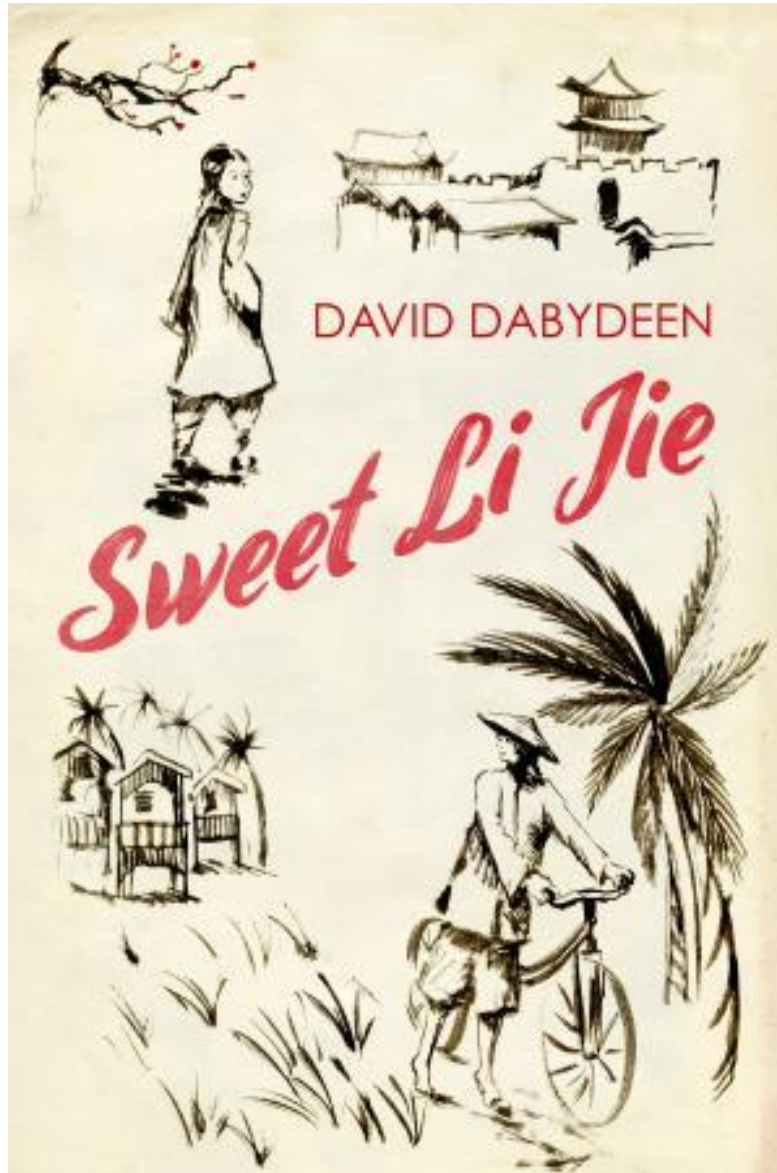


Sweet Li Jie by David Dabydeen

Set in Wuhan Province and British Guiana around 1876, *Sweet Li Jie* brings together the concurrent settings of the break up of feudal life in Wuhan and post-emancipation British Guiana. It is a novel which explores the complexities of dwelling in servitude in these societies in the last decades of the 19th century.



The story is told chiefly through the eyes of a travelling textile merchant, Jia Yun, who leaves Wuhan to join the great exodus of migrants fleeing poverty in China, most of them indentured to work in the cane fields of Demerara.

Through a series of letters intended for his sweetheart in China, Li Jie, Jia Yun gives a vivid and compelling account of the conditions of life for Indians, Africans and other ethnic groups living under British rule, whilst the sections of the novel set in China capture life in rural Wuhan under a crumbling feudal regime.

Sweet Li Jie is also a novel which highlights the complex interpersonal relations and intimacies that develop between the novel's characters – for example, between the landlord, Wang Changling and his servant, Baoyu and between Jia Yun and his Afro-Guyanese guide, Harris in Demerara –revealing their struggles for personhood and interdependence in the face of vulnerability and uncertainty.



David Dabydeen

David Dabydeen was born on a sugar estate in Berbice, Guyana in 1957.

His family lived for a time in New Amsterdam where he attended school. He recalls moving back to his family village, Brighton, during the 1964 race riots. At the age of around ten he won a scholarship to Queen's College in Georgetown where he studied for a couple of years. He was sent to England at the age of twelve in 1969 and was in care until he was sixteen. He won a scholarship to Cambridge University and read English there and at London Universities, completing his doctorate in 1982. He was a post-doctoral fellow at Oxford University for three years. He is currently Professor at the Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Warwick and was for some years a roving ambassador for Guyana.

His poetry first came to attention in 1978 when poems later published in *Slave Song* won the Quiller-Couch prize. *Slave Song*, which was published by Dangaroo in 1984, won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. In these poems he explores the connections between slavery and indenture, the desire-hate relationship between Black and White and the violence and vitality of Creole. *Slave Song* was controversial not least in the fact that the dozen or so poems were each accompanied by an English translation and a detailed commentary. *Coolie Odyssey* (published by Dangaroo in 1988) is a celebration, albeit a tentative and unsentimental one, of the survival and rooting of a creolised Indian culture in the Caribbean, and Dabydeen's own exploration of his cultural origins. *Turner - New and Selected Poetry* (Cape, 1994) and republished by Peepal Tree in 2002, returns to the subject of slavery and restores to the foreground the drowning figure of the slave in JWM Turner's painting, 'Slavers'.

His first novel, *The Intended* (1991) draws both on memories of a Guyanese childhood and of fending for himself in immigrant London before going to Cambridge. *Disappearance* (1993) is about a Guyanese engineer working on a cliff reclamation project in rural Kent. It is full of intertextual play with Conrad, Wilson Harris and V.S. Naipaul, and investigates the buried centre of Empire deep in England and the ironies of the difficult but hopeful multicultural transformation of British society. *The Counting House* (1996) is an historical novel set in India and British Guiana in the earliest days of indenture, and deals with the meeting of African and Indian within the corrupting commerce of the sugar plantation. In *A Harlot's Progress* (1999) Dabydeen echoes the method of 'Turner' by taking the black slave boy from Hogarth's 'A Harlot's Progress' and inventing a biography for him. As the oldest black man in London, forced on the charity of the abolitionists, Mungo spins a story which in its twists and turns is the one he wants to tell, not the story of victimisation and paternalistic rescue which his 'benefactors' want to hear.

In addition to his fiction and poetry, David Dabydeen has written two works of art history, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Dangaroo, 1987) and *Hogarth, Walpole and Commercial Britain* (Hansib, 1987) and a critical work, *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature* (Hansib, 1988). He is the editor of *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Manchester University Press, 1985); *India in the Caribbean* (Hansib, 1987); *A Handbook for Teaching Caribbean Literature* (Heinemann, 1988); *Black Writers in Britain, 1760-1890* (Edinburgh University Press, 1991); *Across the Dark Waters: Indian Identity in the Caribbean* (MacMillan, 1996). In 1997, Peepal Tree published *The Art of David Dabydeen*, ed. Kevin Grant, the first assessment of his work.