

## **An author's journey home**

### **Documentary follows Caribbean writer from Toronto to Trinidad**

**By NICHOLAS DAVIS**

Charles Dickens, Jane Austen and William Woodsworth were just a few of the great authors whose classic books lined the shelves of Ramabai Espinet's home while growing up in San Fernando, Trinidad, in the 1950s.

Around this time there was also an emergence of great Caribbean writers. This exposed Espinet to the works of Trinidadian author V.S. Naipaul, St. Lucian author Derek Walcott and many other West Indian writers. These works set the foundation for Espinet's future.

"I related so much to what they were writing about because they were writing about the world around me and the city I was growing up in," Espinet says. "I knew from back then that I wanted to be a writer."

But the road to becoming a writer wasn't a straight one for Espinet. In the late '60s her family migrated to Canada. They settled in Montreal and soon after Espinet found herself living in a hippie commune in Vancouver with her husband who also wanted to be a writer.

"The thought of all that freedom appealed to us," says Espinet. "It was great at first. Everyone was trying out a new way of living and a new way of thinking. But there was one thing that bothered us - the issue of race was never discussed. And this was during the civil rights movement. This alienation of race was surprising to me. After a while I started to feel uncomfortable."

#### **JILL OF ALL TRADES**

Espinet and her husband eventually left the commune and she decided to go to university. She ended up at York University where she studied English. To help pay for her education, Espinet drove a cab on weekends. She also worked as a waitress, a shipper, sorted mail at Canada Post, made sandwiches and did proofreading. Espinet graduated from York with a BA and a master's degree in English. She then earned her PhD in English at the University of West Indies at St. Augustine, Trinidad.

Throughout her journey, Espinet kept on writing and had her sights still firmly set on becoming a writer.

"I was ignorant of all the difficulties involved in that profession," Espinet recalls. "But that ignorance saved me because I didn't know better and I just forged ahead."

Espinet established herself on the literary scene in 1990 by editing a book of poetry called *Creation Fire: A CAFRA (Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action) Anthology of Caribbean's Women's Poetry*. A year later her own book of poetry called *Nuclear Seasons* was published.

Espinet then became well-known as a children's author after her books, *The Princess of*

Spadina and Ninja's Carnival were released in 1992 and 1993 respectively. And Espinet's first novel, *The Swinging Bridge*, was released in 2003.

*The Swinging Bridge* tells the story of race and displacement, passion and determination -- issues Espinet has lived with throughout her life. It was short-listed for the Best First Book Commonwealth Prize.

After receiving such international acclaim, Espinet returned to her childhood home in San Fernando to launch the book.

"Going back home to Trinidad to launch the book was very important to me," says Espinet, who lives in Toronto. "I wanted to read the book to the people of San Fernando so I could continue the conversation started in the book with the people I was writing about."

#### 'WONDERFUL JOB'

Caribbean Tales, a multimedia company run by Frances-Anne Solomon, accompanied Espinet on that visit and produced a documentary called *Ramabai Espinet: Coming Home*. It airs on television this weekend.

"I think Frances-Anne did a wonderful job documenting my journey back to Trinidad," says Espinet, who also teaches Caribbean and Women's Studies at the University of Toronto. "I've always felt like I live in two places at the same time. I see both as a continuum not two separate places and Frances-Anne has managed to capture that in the documentary. She was able to see the connection between the homeland and the Diaspora within myself."

---

*Ramabai Espinet: Coming Home* airs on Saturday, May 6 at 9 p.m. and Sunday, May 7 at 8 p.m. on Rogers Omni 1 Television. *The Swinging Bridge* is published by HarperCollins.