

Shara McCallum: No Ruined Stone
Review by Sarah Van Clef



Shara McCallum's sequential poetry collection, *No Ruined Stone*, interweaves the story of Robert Burns, an 18th-century Scottish poet popular for his known New Years Eve anthem "Auld Lang Syne," and McCallum's own as a Jamaican woman. Robert Burns signed up three times to work for a Jamaican slave plantation in 1786 as a recorder for the purchasing, execution, and punishment of enslaved African people to make extra income despite his profound words advocating for equality amongst people in Scotland."Despite not going each time, due to scheduling conflicts all three times, his intent to support the enslavement was clear.

Upon discovering this information, McCallum posed a question to herself: *what if he got on the boat? Would he have known her ancestors who worked on these slave plantations at the time?* By using a fictive voices in this book of poems, McCallum was able to weave her ancestry, her own story of her life as daughter of a Venezuelan and Jamaican into Burns' story. She was able to inject anger towards the injustice and false

narrative that he {Burns} projected towards the societal patch work of advocacy. This book drips in secrets, and forces readers to question the uncertainty of our leaders. She then poses the question toward our society: *Why do we celebrate a man whose words hypocrite his true feelings on equality?*

In the poems “Crumbo-Jungle” and “Fate” McCallum’s actual voice as a poet sneaks out when she starts talking about her ancestry and her life as a person of color. In these poems, as well in the later poems in the book when in the voice of Isabella, Burns’ voice and her’s become fluid as she illustrates how her story and his creates tension within the overall narrative arc. Because Burns is also a poet, MacCallum uses his own poetic language as a counter argument and a collaborative tool to create his distinct voice that sounds authentic, thus, making Burns’ character come alive on the page.

McCallum has the ability to create voices that are imaginative but yet grounded in research. She manages to interweave the facts with fiction, creating a multilayered, multi-fasciative conversation about not only race, solidarity, and culture divides, but also the power of choice.



Shara McCallum was born in Jamaica to an African Jamaican father and a Venezuelan mother and moved to the United States with her family when she was nine. She earned a BA from the University of Miami, an MFA from the University of Maryland, and a PhD from Binghamton University. Her collections of poetry, published in the US and UK, include *The Water Between Us* (1999), *Song of Thieves* (2003), *This Strange Land* (2011), *The Face of Water: New and Selected Poems* (2011), and *Madwoman* (2017). Her work considers the intersections of race, gender, history, and personal identity; in an interview, she noted that "poetry helps me explore the ways we understand complex notions of identity, whether that's personal, familial, or cultural." She is a Liberal Arts Professor of English at Penn State University and, from 2003-17, served as the director of the Stadler Center for Poetry at Bucknell University. McCallum has received a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Witter Bynner Award from the Library of Congress, and other distinctions. In 2018, she was awarded the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature for poetry.



Sarah V. Van Clef is a poet and memoirist from South Amboy, New Jersey. Her lyrical essays and poems have been featured in *Local Gems NJ Bards Literary Anthology*, *SoupCan Magazine*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *The Monmouth Review*, and others. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Monmouth University, and is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of English at Monmouth University and Brookdale Community College. She is also the Reviews Editor for *Philadelphia Stories*, a literary magazine that celebrates artists and writers within the Philly area and surrounding communities, and the Founder of *The Social Writerly* ; an online educational company that offers support and community to artists on any point in their creative journey.