

## **Tropic Death: a Review**

*Tropic Death* is a blistering read. This description is often used, but it perfectly sums up Eric Walrond's collection of stories inspired by his formative years growing up in British Guiana (now Guyana). Not just because of the unrelenting sun that scorches each of the ten tales.

I did not enjoy it. I had to read it when I felt 'up to' reading it. But, I know I will never forget it and have valued reading it. Even when it left me puzzled, sad, angry or with a chill of quiet horror.

For a start there is the sometimes blindingly lyrical quality of the prose. It's one of those books where you often pause and read out passages quietly to yourself, especially those describing the effects of the sun:

*"The western sky of Barbados was ablaze. A mixture of fire and gold, it burned, and burned — into one vast sulphurous mass. It burned the houses, the trees, the windowpanes. The burnt glass did amazing color somersaults — turned brown and gold and lavender and red. It poured a burning liquid over the gap. It colored the water in the ponds a fierce dull yellowish gold." (Panama Gold)*

Second, is the power of the stories which tell of men working stone quarries or building the Panama Canal; young boys ('Wharf Rats') risking their lives diving for pennies thrown by rich white tourists from luxury liners; a mother happily prostituting her daughters from their home; a child so hungry she eats the 'marl dust' from the parched landscape.

These people struggle to survive, navigating a brutal world in which their colour makes them second class citizens and where the whims of nature, another human (or even voodoo) can end their lives in a heartbeat. Each story has a death as a culmination. It is not a pleasant read. But, these people's lives were not pleasant and their pain enabled the comfortable life of many around the world.

The third element that really struck me is Walrond skill in using the patois, or dialect, of each region he writes about. Even to the untrained ear (eye?) each has its own feel and rhythm. This both draws you into the character's world and also pushes you away, as your brain struggles to adapt - as these men, women and children had to adapt to a white world.

*"Pay me? Man, yo' should o' see how fas' dey pay me! Pay me fas' enough, indeed! Five hundred pounds! Ev'y blind cent! Man, I wuz ready to sick Nelson heself 'pon dem! At a moment's notice, me an' de council wuz gettin' ready fo ramsack de Isthmus and shoot up de whole blasted locks! Hell wit' de Canal! We wuz gwine blow up de dam, cut down de wireless station, an' breck up de gubment house! If dey didn't pay me fo' my foot!" (Panama Gold)*

The stories don't have to be read sequentially. I would recommend 'Drought', 'Wharf Rats', and 'The White Snake'.

Project Gutenberg have an online copy at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/71465> But, maybe don't read them just before bed!

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October 2023