‘Things are never quite what they seem’, writes the narrator of the posthumously published novel *Goodbye Bay* by Jennifer Rahim, who died unexpectedly and tragically young in March 2023. The narrator, Annabelle Bridgemohan, from the capital, Port of Spain, takes a job supposed to be for a year running the post office in a remote fictional village called Macaima in south-western Trinidad, which comes with an idyllic rented house near the beach. Advertised as a ‘perfect summer read’, this important Caribbean novel is a compulsive page-turner but in no way as superficial as that description might suggest.

Set in 1963, a year after Trinidad and Tobago attained independence from Britain, the very first page of the novel lists things that happened in that year both nationally and internationally, including such diverse events as the assassination of John Kennedy, the ‘I have a dream’ speech by Martin Luther King, the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and the protest of Vietnamese monks, but also, besides Trinidadian politics and the publication of a C.L.R. James cricket-themed book, the film *Cleopatra*, hit songs by the Beatles and Doris Troy and the latest calypso. Two of the events, a hurricane and a murder, will later form part of the story.

Jeremy Poynting of Peepal Tree Press has observed that one of the novel’s strategies is *not* explaining\(^1\) so that the reader who
wants to understand what is below the surface of the text needs to make use of online resources and follow up the many allusions and intertextualities to tease out the full significance of what is described, in the same way that the mysteries of gender identity, sexual proclivities and crime are teased out in the novel with all the techniques of the detective genre. This is the case for non-Trinidadians and Trinidadians alike, for the number of readers familiar with the details of politics and carnival in the early 1960s is surely limited; from that point of view it is a twenty-first-century novel, which can assume easy access to, for instance, early recordings by Lord Kitchener, Mighty Sparrow, or Mighty Bomber, or find pictures of the great masquerades of George Bailey to fill in the blanks.

For example, the reference to *Cleopatra*, starring Elizabeth Taylor, links to an earlier Hollywood film and George Bailey’s 1959 carnival pageant ‘Relics of Egypt’, in which the narrator took part, which earned its creator the nickname of the Cecil B DeMille of Trinidad. One might easily miss the significance of the Mighty Sparrow calypso ‘Dan is de Man’ until one knows that the lyrics contain a savage attack on the exclusively British-based education imposed on Trinidad’s children, later to be so effectively targeted in Merle Hodge’s *Crick, Crack, Monkey* and destined to play a key part in Rahim’s novel.

The story itself begins with a *tabula rasa*. It is Sunday midday and the village of Macaima is empty. The person the narrator is supposed to meet is not there; the narrator is reluctant to be left alone by the taxi-driver with her two suitcases in the company of a stranger who has appeared unnoticed and made an illicit back-door purchase of rum. However, the man turns out to be the emissary who will take her to her rental and give her an introduction to the village. In the penultimate chapter, when she leaves after four months rather than the planned year (perhaps a nod to Michael Anthony’s foundational *The Year in San Fernando*), the whole village is gathered, though not for her, and she departs with
the same taxi-driver. This conforms to the structure described in the Coleridge epigraph of the snake with its tail in its mouth, the ouroboros. Jung points out that this alchemical symbol traces the path of the ego circling around something that is not identical with the ego but which represents a higher value – what he terms the Self – something which takes account of the collective unconscious, representative of the truths of the whole community. From this point of view Macaima comes to stand for something more than meets the eye. The second epigraph, from a poem by Lucille Clifton, recognizes the closeness between life and death, a ‘bridge between starshine and day’, which both imbues the novel as a whole, full of spectral intimations and ghostly resonances, and illuminates the narrator’s bridging function, consonant with her name Bridgemohan.

Names are important, not least to the narrator, Anna to her friends, who takes umbrage at being addressed familiarly as Miss Bri by Franco, the man who has come to meet her. There is also an indeterminacy about names, hiding different levels and stories. The fact that Bridgemohan is the narrator’s mother’s name, not her father’s, that Franco is actually Franklyn, that the girl Pixie prefers to be called Sam, or that the family who are the landowners of this former cocoa estate, De Valremy, probably originally from Venezuela, may have invented their aristocratic title, indicates enigmas which are gradually to be unveiled. Compounding these are the misunderstandings that can proceed from similarities: which of the three generations of De Valrems is meant, or the confusion between the Maries and Marias, Anna or Ana – all adding to a puzzle which only slowly falls into place.

They may seem at first to be stereotypes of a scattered rural Trinidad community with its fixed sense of role and rank – the sassy Lucille, the extrovert Miss Gomez with her choir and clouds of perfume, officious Franco, precise Police Corporal Luke, status-conscious Mrs Austin, married to the school principal, or Brenda, housewife and mother – all of them, though,
have unexpected aspects to reveal, and all are interconnected in diverse ways. We might also mention the all-powerful and omnipresent De Valremys, one of whom only becomes visible in person just as the narrator is leaving, or the mysterious Mama Gloria, the midwife, or Maria, whom the village regards as insane. As in most of Trinidad, too, ethnic origins are diverse and intertwined. Descendants of the indigenous Warao people, some of whom were believed drowned in the riptide of Goodbye Bay, still live in the village and are rumoured to have shape-shifting powers. Venezuelans from across the channel, Afro-Trinidadians from the days of slavery and the cocoa estates, Indo-Trinidadians brought to work in the canelands, Johnny the Chinese shopkeeper, not to mention unacknowledged European admixtures, are all present here. The narrator herself, brought up by her single Indo-Trinidadian mother, housekeeper to the English Mr Henderson, who worked for Barclay’s Bank, is seeking confirmation of her intuitions about their real relationship.

The centre of that narrative circle, or rather spiral, since it ends on a higher level of awareness, is the so-called ‘storm day’ when Hurricane Flora devastates Tobago and sweeps its tail as far south as the Trinity Hills near Macaima. In a climax of nightmare fever-dream, the mystery of the cobwebbed schoolroom-cum-storeroom is enacted, confirming its status as a repository of the repressed unconscious; the contents of the unopened suitcase Anna has deposited there is revealed as well as the story of abuse behind Maria’s schizophrenia. It is a night when crimes are uncovered and avenged. From that point on, the process of healing in its various forms can begin for the characters, while the newly independent nation’s path also begins to change and some of its illusions are shattered.

This development is marked in the novel by the last-minute cancellation of the Prime Minister’s promised visit as part of his ‘Meet the People’ tour. That and the following programme of
road-building, which favoured the oil and construction industries, has been seen by some as a political move to emulate postcolonial politicians in Africa in their attempt to bind the people to the governing party. In Eric Williams’ case it seems to have reflected a desire to form a new unity in the illusory belief that ethnic differences were primarily the result of colonial ‘divide and rule’. Rahim portrays the tensions between the (predominantly African) cocoa workers in Macaima and the (predominantly Indian) cane workers and shopkeepers in Railway, the larger part of the community. Williams called the villages ‘the national community in microcosm’, but the narrator is scathing about the Party’s ‘usual reduction of the nation’s ethnic diversity to a drummer and two dancers, one dressed in leopard skin and a black leotard, the other in sari, veil and ghungroo bells’ (p. 99). However, the villagers, in particular the women, are beginning to find their own independent voices, as Brenda demonstrates when the Party’s Women’s Coalition arrive to give a lecture and she rejects their right to speak for her or the diverse others: ‘You cannot expect me to be handmaid for no damn party’ (p. 117).

One other ‘strange attractor’ around which the story circles is La Divina Pastora, the black Madonna of Siparia which has been an object of worship for Amerindians, Catholics, Africans and Indians and has played a role in Trinidadian literature from one of C.L.R. James’s first stories to Robert Antoni’s Divina Trace. ‘La Divi’ has a connection with Anna’s birth – her mother comes from Siparia – and on the day Anna leaves the village Mama Gloria has gone to Port of Spain to demonstrate in favour of replacing the statue of Columbus ‘to put up Mai instead’ (p. 263) as a more fitting icon of the nation of Trinidad and Tobago.

Before she leaves the village Anna begins to write the story of her stay in Macaima, using a stock of unwanted envelopes to write on, symbolizing her bridging function between narrator and author, true to her nickname of ‘Miss Post’, conveying correspondence between the villagers, and between the village, the
nation and the reader. On this meta-level she brings the story back to her friend Thea, whose part in her life she was before never quite able to acknowledge. Thea, a supporter of the ideas of C.L.R. James (Comrade Nello) and of the aborted plans for a West Indian Federation, is the one whose political enthusiasm has infected and educated Anna.

‘Macaima’s story … had somehow ended up being my own’, Anna realizes (p. 265). And as Thea has ‘a way of weaving the collective with the personal that mesmerized me’ (p. 85), her project, and Rahim’s, is to do the same in her own story. Lucille, seeing Anna’s notes on the envelopes, urges her to write ‘a history that will connect up everybody’: “Past is what come to meet all-a-we and put we where we have to make a future happen. So write it for you, for Macaima, for this nation we in — and for everybody” (p. 245).

The final chapter of the novel is set in 1970, at the great Black Power march through Port of Spain: ‘People walked through the streets like trees, their heads touching the sky. Thunder rolled in their throats’ (p. 265). In conversation with me in 2010, Jennifer Rahim expressed her love and admiration for the work of Earl Lovelace, and something of his ambition in the novel Salt can be seen here too. There is, I feel, an intertextual link between Rahim’s description here and a Lovelace short story which writes of a young man called Blues watching ‘the cavalcade of black princes crowned with tall hair go by on majestic stilts, their bodies wrapped in banners, the flagpole of their fists punching the skies, their volcanic shouts of ‘Power!’ thundering across the hillsides.’ Blues follows them to Woodford Square to hear ‘that he was maker of a new history’. The title of the story is ‘The Coward’. For all the hope it expresses, Rahim’s novel, too, is under no illusions about the nation she portrays.

All in all this is a highly impressive novel with skilful characterization, convincing dialogue, evocative natural descriptions, and a differentiated narrative persona alternating curiosity and protective reticence in a style that can range from sly humour to a
haunting sense of the uncanny. Above all it is informed with a serious intention which wears its scholarly familiarity with the social and historical background lightly and deals with themes that are burningly relevant today. If I have one criticism it would be that the extent of the denouement chapters after the central climax upsets the balance a little. Perhaps this is something the author might have addressed, had she lived. One can only speculate what we have been deprived of by her death.

NOTES