

JANET JAGAN

by Petamber Persaud

SHE is better known as a politician than a writer although she has been writing for as long as she has been a politician. She has a lifelong intimacy with books, something that grew on her while she worked as a proof-reader for the American Medical Association.

As a journalist, newspaper editor and prolific writer of children's books, she touched on almost every subject in the universe including and in particular the fight against discrimination to women, the fight for labour and better working conditions, and the fight for Guyana's independence. You would also find she placed great emphasis on the rights of the child; 'Children first fund' was started many years ago to establish libraries in schools to re-launch a reading culture among youths.

Janet Jagan and her late husband knew the power of the written word, both prolific

writers setting their thoughts down on paper for debate and dialogue. But Mrs. Jagan went to the heart of the matter when she started writing for children.

Writer, patron of the arts, lover of literature, freedom fighter, politician, Janet Jagan was born on October 20, 1920 in Chicago, U.S.A. In December 1943, she came to Guyana, making it her home where she achieved a number of firsts in various spheres of activities.

In 1950, she became the first editor of 'Thunder', the official organ of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) and in the same year was the first woman elected to the City Council. In 1953, she was the first woman to become Deputy Speaker of the Legislature. Janet Jagan was also Guyana's first woman Prime Minister and woman Executive President.

She was educated at University of Detroit, Wayne University, Michigan State College; Cook County School of Nursing. She was a popular youth who loved swimming, horse riding and flying. In fact, she said she was not afraid when she arrived in Guyana in 1943 by a seaplane landing in a rough, murky Demerara River. And adventurous; she is one of

the first women to approach Kaieteur Falls from the bottom up.

In Guyana, Janet Jagan quickly got involved in union activity, working with Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow to organise domestics and later teaming up with Winifred Gaskin and Frances Stafford to form the Women's Political and Economic Organisation. This was in addition to working as an office assistant and hygienist in her husband's dentistry and raising a family. In 1950, she co-founded the People's Progressive Party and was jailed for six months for the ideals of that organisation following the suspension of the Constitution.

Janet Jagan held a number of significant positions in this country. In 1957 she was Minister of Labour, Health and Housing. In 63/64, she was Minister of Home Affairs. During the years 1970 to 1997, she was president of reorganised Union of Guyanese Journalists. She was also the Editor of the Mirror Newspaper between 1973 and 1997, a small embattled paper that devoted a page to the literary and artistic need of children.



Janet Jagan was awarded the Order of Excellence, Guyana's highest honour, Woman of Achievement by the University of Guyana, and the UNESCO Gandhi Medal for Peace, Democracy and Women's Rights in 1997.

She married Cheddi Jagan on August 5, 1943; the union issuing two children. Janet Jagan has five grandchildren. It was for her grandchildren she started writing children stories as birthday gifts. What better gift anyone could give a child than the gift of reading!

So far she has published five children's books:
When Grandpa Cheddi was

- a Boy and Other Stories, 1993
- Children's Stories of Guyana's Freedom Struggles, 1995
- Patricia the Baby Manatee and Other Stories, 1995
- Anastasia the Ant eater and Other Stories, 1997
- The Dog who loved Flowers, 2000
- The Alligator Ferry Service

Sources:

- * Interviews with Janet Jagan October 2005
- * Archive of the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre
- * Online information

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and Other Stories from Guyana, 2001.

Janet Jagan has also written the History of the PPP, and edited 'The Lure of the Mermaid and Other Children's Stories' 2002.

She remembers how significant was the meeting with other writers like Martin Carter and Wilson Harris in her Laluni Street home – the fostering of ideas. She also recalls vividly the meetings with Jan Carew who was part of the struggle.

Janet Jagan witnessed the writing of the most significant book to have come out of Guyana, that book, 'The West on Trial', written by her late husband, Dr. Cheddi Jagan.

Many of her children's stories were published in 'The Guyana Annual'. She has written poems and poems were written about her. A film that won three awards, 'Thunder in Guyana' documented part of her legacy to this country.

For the last few years, she has been a regular contributor to the Mirror Newspaper, writing a weekly column. Some of those articles were recently published in a book, 'Iraq Exposed'.

She has scores and scores of books in her, still to be written, welcome additions to the great and glorious story of Guyana.