

Coming to England: a child's perspective

Coming to England is an autobiographical novel by children's television presenter and author Floella Benjamin. In it, she reveals a richly detailed picture of her early childhood in Trinidad and tells the story of her family's sudden and unexpected move to England.



Photograph of Floella Benjamin as a child with her mum, dad, sister Sandra and brother Lester. Courtesy of Floella Benjamin.

Choose from one of these two tasks: Celebrations or Expectations.

You can read more of her story here:

<https://www.bl.uk/windrush/articles/floella-benjamin-on-coming-to-england>

Celebrations

This extract describes Floella's special Sunday lunches at home with her family in Trinidad.

Read the description aloud and look out for the details that reveal that, for her, it is a special experience. Make notes of your thoughts.

For lunch it was either a rich tasty soup which was like a stew made of meat, pulses, vegetables and dumplings, or rice served with beef, chicken or, on Fridays, fish. For dessert we had whatever fresh fruit was in season: mangoes, pineapples, pawpaw or pomsitea, and for supper we had bread and cakes, all baked by Marmie, washed down with cocoa.

Saturday was Marmie's baking day, and she would bake enough for the whole week. Bread or bakes – a sort of bread with no yeast; sweet bread – bread with coconut and sugar; sponge cakes and coconut drops. The smell of freshly baked bread and cakes was wonderful – it always made me hungry. Sandra and I had to do our bit by helping to grease the baking tins and stir the cake mixture. The best part was when we fought over licking the cake bowl.

Sunday was a special day in Trinidad. It was the one time of the week when we all got together which gave me a happy feeling of belonging and a sense of occasion. The realisation that the family unit was special began to take place during that time. We ate lavishly in the sitting room: the crisp starched white tablecloth would be spread out over the mahogany table, and the best glasses – frosted coloured ones – and plates were used. Then the table would be laden with dishes of food – it was like a feast. On the menu was brown down chicken, rice, plantains, callaloo, sweetpotatoes, cassavas, gungo peas, and macaroni cheese pie.

(Floella Benjamin, *Coming to England*, pp. 15–18)

Over to you

Think of a special family meal or celebration that you have experienced and write about it.

What details will you choose to paint a vivid picture for the reader?

o How will you show that it is a very special experience?

o Use sensory language to bring your writing to life: what can be seen, heard, felt, smelt, tasted?

Expectations

In this extract, Floella and her siblings have finally boarded a ship bound for England. Their mother, Marmie, has already been there for some time and has now sent for them to join her.

Read the extract carefully out loud and think about how Floella is feeling whilst on board the ship.

Finally the day for our journey across the ocean came. My mother had asked her sister Olive to buy the tickets for all four of us. Auntie Olive lived in the Port of Spain which was where had to board the ship for England. We spent our final night with her before being packed into her car for the drive through the busy evening traffic to the port. I had been there before to wave goodbye to Dardie when he left the country. But now it was my turn to leave these tropical shores for the first time in my life. I was just about to begin a journey of a lifetime which would take fifteen days across 4,000 [miles?] of ocean.

The excitement at the port gave me a tingle inside. I felt butterflies in my tummy. I could see the big ship far out in the water. It couldn't come right up to the side of the wharf because the water wasn't deep enough so everyone had to be transported to the ship in small motor boats. There was so much noise it was deafening, everyone was pushing and shoving, people were shouting, making sure their trunks and suitcases were safe as the boats ferried backwards and forwards. I felt bewildered, lost amongst the other passengers and those who had come to bid them farewell. Many were hugging and crying as they said goodbye. Prayers were being said for a safe passage. Suddenly I started to cry too. I felt scared, but of what I wasn't sure. Perhaps it was because I now realised what was about to happen. I was leaving my homeland, the land where I had experienced great happiness with my family. Maybe it was because I was frightened of going into the small boat as it bobbed on the dark, oily water – water which crazily reflected the harsh harbour lights like a liquid mirror and separated us from the waiting ship that seemed to be calling me to her. Maybe I was just scared of facing the unknown. I still don't know.

Over to you

- o Write a postcard or a letter from Floella to her mother in England.
- o What feelings will she share?
- o What questions might she have about the life that lies ahead?