

# Geoffrey Haddad's Harrowing True-Life Tale is A MUST-READ

**If I'm Not Back by  
Wednesday by Geoffrey  
Haddad**

**If I'm Not Back by Wednesday is a book that Geoffrey Haddad had to write. In his preface, he admits: "This is the story that burned inside me for more than forty years... every year, especially on the anniversary, I am still haunted by the events of my 1967 Christmas season; in fact, I had nightmares about this ordeal every December for 20 years."**

*If I'm Not Back by Wednesday* is a coming-of-age tale (based on the real-life story) of five young Jamaican boys — Gordon Cooper, George Hussey, Roger Bates and Geoffrey Haddad — students of Jamaica College, in the late-1960s (still relatively recent times, don't you think?), who become lost in the Blue Mountains with its heavy and continuous rainfall, dense fog, giant wasps, extremely stubborn elephant grass, seemingly cutlass-resistant giant ferns.

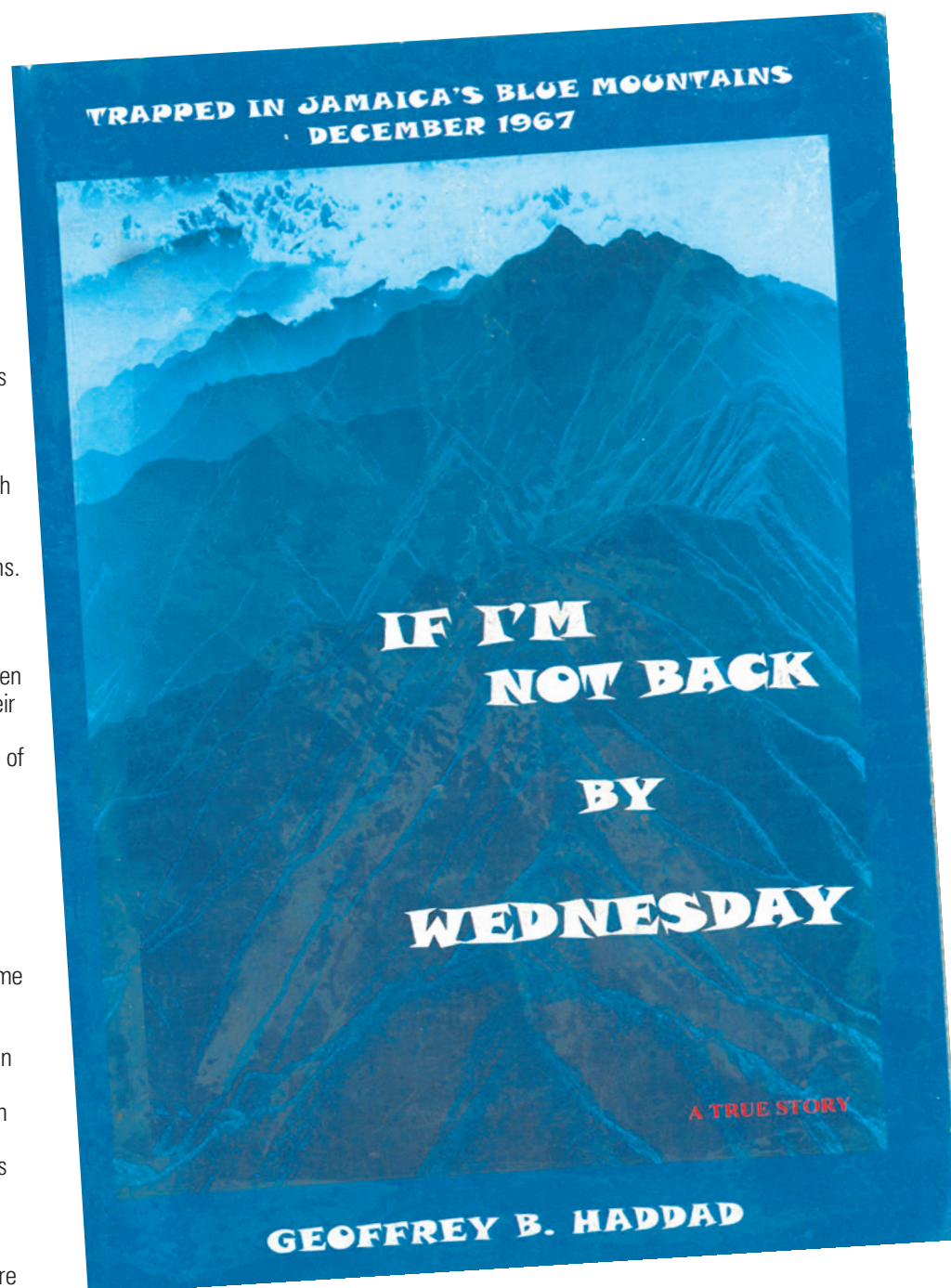
This book has all the trappings of a high-school reading-list staple. Five boys hatch a plan to conquer the wild in the dramatic Blue Mountains. They discard the tested and proven track to blaze a trail of their own; to write their own stories and histories, so to speak.

In addition, however, to the romantic notion of boys growing into manhood in the mountains, and all its attendant symbolism and allegory bringing to mind Greek gods and other mythological figures coming into adulthood in the harsh environs of the wild (young knights slaying their dragons, or even young maroons entering into manhood with their hike in the woods) *If I'm Not Back by Wednesday* has some distinctly Jamaican and Caribbean themes of class relations, etc, and also more universal themes centring on the testing of man's faith in a higher being, man's survival instinct and the testing of man's sanity and physical strength in extremely difficult situations.

In the midst of all these important themes is the heart-wrenching story of five families fearing that their sons are dead. Prior to the hike, Haddad shows us how closely-knit his family is, and how enamoured his parents are of their children, with the father opting for early retirement in his 30s to enjoy his children and, much to the chagrin of Geoffrey, to drive him to and from school, the great JC, in the old 1948 Ford V8, when Geoffrey really wanted to take the Number 6 Jamaica Omnibus Service (Jolly Joseph) bus.

Truth is, Haddad's close relationship with his parents, especially his father, one which he seems to have emulated with his own family, is a very important side story/theme in this book. The genuine familial love and support displayed by the Haddads does serve as a good model of healthy Jamaican family relations.

Yes, Haddad's book can be a tear-jerker, especially when you see the effect the experience has had on the man. It's no doubt that those 10 days in the fearsome Blue Mountains increased Haddad's appreciation for life and its mysteries and coincidences, as we see an older Haddad in 2006 coming to tears and marvelling at the miracle of being seated next to one of his rescuers, David Dumont, at a bridal head table. The reader will indeed be grateful for being let into this private and emotional moment, which I think was crucial to



the book being finally penned. Indeed, the penning of *If I'm Not Back by Wednesday* is a cathartic moment for Geoffrey Haddad and I, for one, am grateful he wrote it.

Haddad's recollection of his brush with fate, which was published last year by Great House Books in St Catherine, Jamaica, is certainly a page-turner, enhanced with not only pictures of himself, his family and friends, the rescuers, after the rescue and the breathtaking and imposing Blue Mountains, but also with illustrations and explanations of some Jamaican realities such as the bulla; the John crow; the corner shop; his father's 1948 Ford V8, etc. In fact, not subtracting from the riveting story of five boys trapped in the arms of the mysterious Blue Mountains in the Christmas season of 1967, these historical tidbits and illustrations are gems, sparkling throughout the cliffs and ravines of the story.

In some ways, you could say *If I'm Not Back by Wednesday* is the non-fiction response to high school staples like *The Young Warriors*, *Escape to Last Man Peak*,

or even *Lord of the Flies*, any other male-oriented coming-of-age stories. This, however, doesn't mean that its readership should be restricted to teenage boys; no, since the book also documents a Jamaica many of us only hear about from our parents and grandparents. It is therefore at once, a dramatic, adventurous and historic look into Jamaican life at the time.

Haddad has a winner here, since such a book is not only relevant to the high school reading population, but also to members of the wider Jamaican society, both here and in the diaspora, who relish having a piece of the island's history at their fingertips, and also the university populations for its historic, literary and anthropological merits.

The over-200-page book has historical value, as seen in the authenticity of the story and the many historical facts lodged in the adventure of being trapped in a part of the Blue Mountains that was at the time previously untraversed as far as written evidence supports; the historical and factual illustrations and explanations already alluded to, and other historically important information

relating to Jamaica College, the Jews in Jamaica; the burgeoning business sector and the national badminton movement, through the Jamaica Badminton Association, etc.

As Haddad depicts his environs and the Jamaican sociological landscape before, during and after the hike, the reader becomes aware that he/she is at once reading an adventure tale that's not a tale but a true sociological study of Jamaica. Interestingly, as Haddad illustrates his experience as a child of the Jamaican middle class growing up on Windsor Avenue, and as we see the difference between the middle-class and working-class existence, we are also shown Jamaica's beautiful geographical diversity, with temperatures in the Blue Mountains such that hail can be formed, and such heat and humidity that years later reggae group Third World will convincingly sing a song titled *96° in the Shade*.

So it seems only natural that whilst on the North Side of St John's Peak, at an elevation of 6,332 ft, on a Sunday morning following a chilly night at 17°Celsius, made to feel even colder with the wind-chill factor of the north-east winds, Haddad's mind begins to wander to his usual Sunday morning activities at the Cable Hut and Brooks Pen beaches, with the fare of escoveitched fish and bammy or festival.

Though Haddad is not a fiction writer, he's certainly gotten parallelism down pat — he portrays the different realities of the Jamaican classes as they coexist in the island. And he's gotten contrast, too, as he successfully employs the literary device of contrast at this point and many other points in the retelling, when, whilst in the cold environs of the Blue Mountains he takes us to what would have been happening back home with his friends and family. He therefore lets us in on ways in which the mind protects itself in such harsh and threatening environs.

*If I'm Not Back by Wednesday* reminds of William Golding's classic *Lord of the Flies*, in which young British schoolboys turn on each other, with some resorting to cannibalism, after being marooned on an island. I suspect Haddad has not let us in on the full details of the arguments the five would have had, but he does disclose one argument in Chapter 12 which centred on who was to be blamed for wasting the kerosene, or for ill planning the hike in the first place. He also lets us in on his fear that the five would split up into groups. Thankfully, this didn't happen, but we sense that Haddad sensitively has left out some fractious moments in their ordeal. He also depicts the Job-like questioning of God's benevolence in the same chapter when Gordon Cooper exclaimed: "Lord, why should we all, five decent boys, suffer like this? It's possible for us to die!"

Another reason Haddad's book is a good tool for an anthropological study of Jamaica is that it saliently illustrates the complex social and class relations that existed then and exists now in Jamaica, in that, although the five boys were middle-class Jamaicans with mostly immigrant grandparents not from the African race, they are quite comfortable speaking the local patois — a reality white South Africans did not share in apartheid South Africa at that time. This reality, borne out throughout the book, also gives credence to Jamaica's national motto: "Out of Many — One People."

"If I'm not back by Wednesday, call out the army" are the famous last words of Geoffrey Haddad to his friend before going on their fateful hike, and indeed the book's title should be the title of the film that I suggest should be forthcoming.

— Ann-Margaret Lim