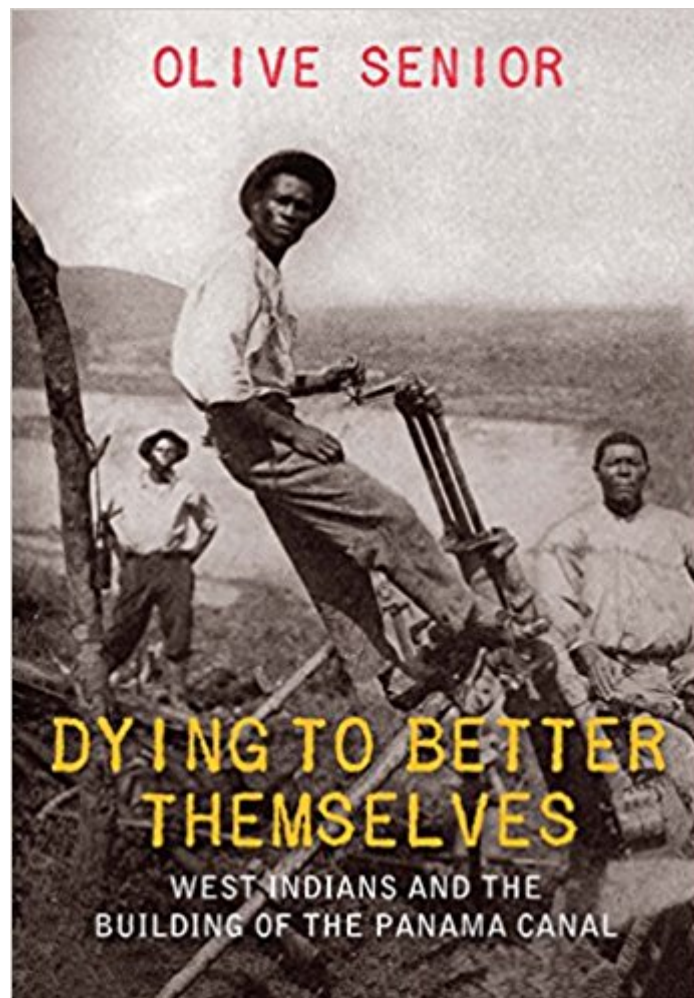




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# Dying To Better Themselves: West Indians And The Building Of The Panama Canal



## Synopsis

The popular West Indian migration narrative often starts with the Windrush Generation in 1950's England, but in *Dying to Better Themselves* Olive Senior examines an earlier narrative: that of the neglected post-emancipation generation of the 1850's who were lured to Panama by the promise of lucrative work and who initiated a pattern of circular migration that would transform the islands economically, socially and politically well into the twentieth century. West Indians provided the bulk of the workforce for the construction of the Panama Railroad and the Panama Canal, and between 1850 and 1914 untold numbers sacrificed their lives, limbs and mental faculties to the Panama projects. Many West Indians remained as settlers, their descendants now citizens of Panama; many returned home with enough of a nest egg to better themselves; and others launched themselves elsewhere in the Americas as work beckoned. Senior tells the compelling story of the West Indian rite of passage of Going to Panama and captures the complexities behind the iconic Colon Man. Drawing on official records, contemporary newspapers, journals and books, songs, sayings, and literature, and the words of the participants themselves, Senior answers the questions as to who went to Panama, how and why; she describes the work they did there, the conditions under which they lived, the impact on their homelands when they returned or on the host societies when they stayed. Many books have shown the conquest of the Isthmus of Panama by land and sea exploring how the myriad individual lives touched by the construction of the railroad and the canal changed the world as well.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Olive Senior is a leading Caribbean author, well known for her prize winning works of fiction and poetry. Her Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage and other non-fiction books have also earned high praise from scholars, historians, and the general reader for her meticulous research and her ability to transform complex material into works that are accurate and accessible to a wide audience, the aim also of *Dying to Better Themselves*. This is her 15th book. Her many awards include the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Gold Medal of the Institute of Jamaica. Olive Senior lives in Toronto, Canada and Jamaica.

Not too many West Indians are aware of the mass migration of workers from islands such as Jamaica and Barbados to the Isthmus to build the railroad and canal. They are even less aware of the invaluable contribution of these migrants to one of the most remarkable feats of engineering ever attempted. The lasting impact that this migration had on the general culture, politics and economics of these islands, even when a number of migrants never returned home because they died trying to better themselves, as the book's title indicates, or moved on to opportunities in the U.S. for example. Olive Senior has managed to engage, enlighten and educate on a critical but little known aspect of our history that will certainly advance our understanding and appreciation of the nature, value and necessity of migration in the development of the islands of the West Indies. It is not surprising that Ms. Senior's presentation also reveals the horrors, racism and financial discrimination that were a natural part of the work environment at the time. The work is usefully accompanied by numerous photographs and almost punishingly replete with references that enhance its authenticity. There is no question that this work is among the most complete and insightful of its kind regarding the building of the Panama Canal. Whether one is a student of history or simply a curious observer of culture, politics and the economics of migration, "*Dying To Better Themselves*" is distinctly worth reading, especially if one has roots in any of the islands of the West Indies.

Still reading but for what I can tell, the history is interesting especially coming from Panama I learn so much more that was not taught to me previously growing up as a child.

very extensive and well researched

meticulous research and fabulous writing! very engaging!

An absolute gem, I learned, I laughed, I cried and I came away with a sense of gratitude to the writer who so meticulously researched the contribution West Indians made to the construction of the canal. Thank you Ms. Senior

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