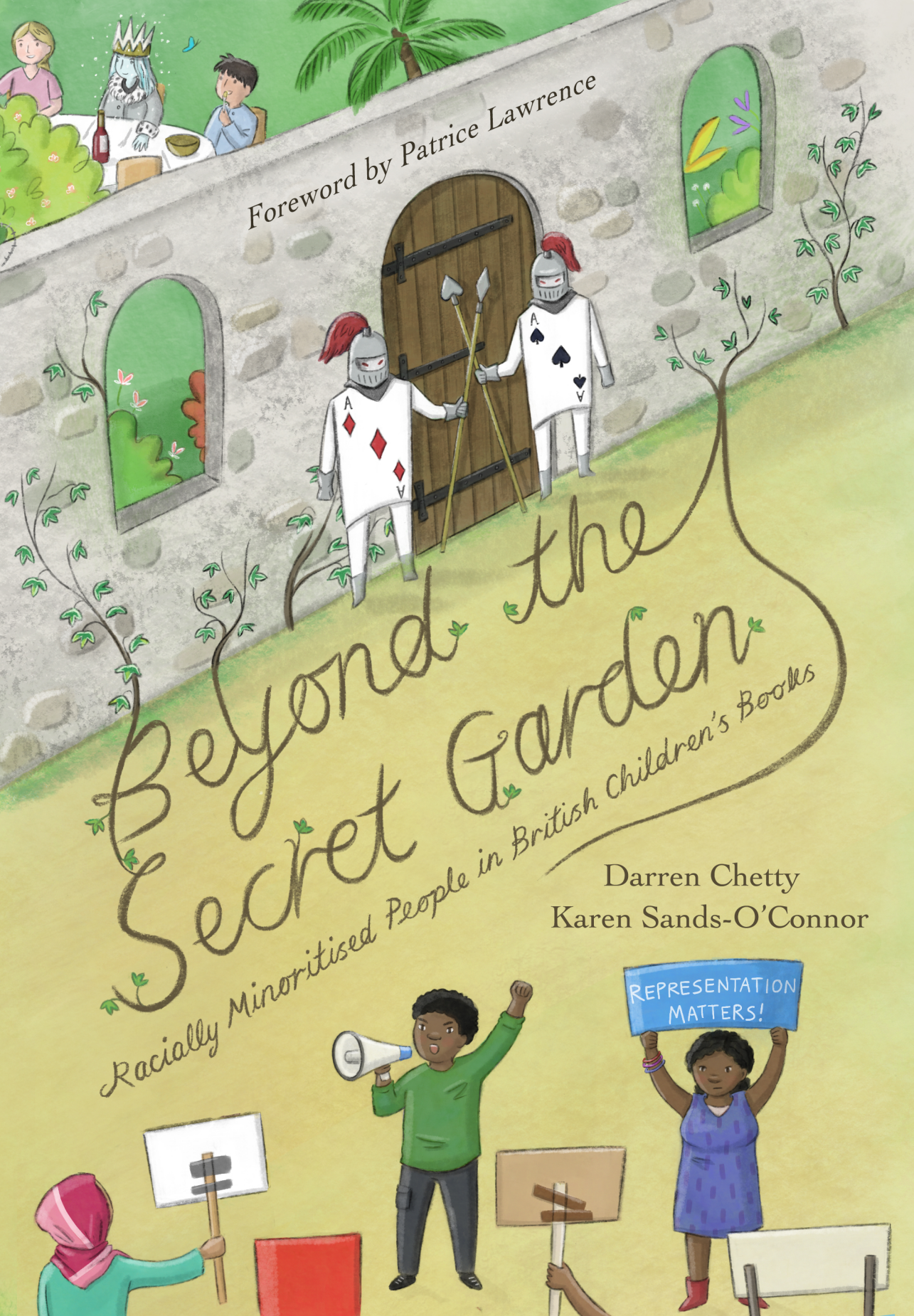
Foreword by Patrice Lawrence
Beyond the Secret Garden
Racially Minoritised People in British Children's Books
Darren Chetty
Karen Sands-O'Connor
REPRESENTATION MATTERS!

… a great and informative read. And not only for those involved in producing work for children, or teachers, but especially for those in publishing too. Together Chetty and Sands-O'Connor provide a much needed and clear-eyed look at contemporary children's literature and how it has to become entirely and properly inclusive.

Catherine Johnson, award-winning author

Beyond the Secret Garden stands in contrast to studies that see children's books as 'simply' celebrations of childhood, or expressions of a need to delight young audiences. There are times when this book is an uncomfortable read as we are invited to look again at books that might sit in our heads as unquestioned and cosy sites of nostalgia and comfort. That said, this is a book that is urgently needed. Western societies manifest through their populations of all ages the consequences of both far-off imperial adventures and modern wars. This book challenges us to think about whether and how books for children can or should reflect, show and interrogate this.

Michael Rosen

The rigour and range of discussion, research, philosophical debate, historical contextualisation and reflection … pays respect to all our children who deserve to thrive in a world in which their imaginations, identities, experiences, families, histories, beliefs, cultures, voices and dreams can be found and voiced in the stories they read to help them grow.

Sita Brahmachari, award-winning author

Darren Chetty and Karen Sands O'Connor have been vital voices in the renewal of children's literature. They have tirelessly championed books for all children, and have inspired many of us in the process; my own work owes them a great debt. *Beyond The Secret Garden* collects some of the most important contemporary writing about children's books, and is essential reading for anyone with an interest in the field.

SF Said, author of Tyger *and* Varjak Paw

Karen and Darren are true heroes to me, for keeping the publishing industry on its toes with their powerful and necessary insights into a whole scope of issues. *Beyond the Secret Garden* makes us, as writers from minority backgrounds, feel seen, valued and celebrated. I'm so glad these two great minds continue to challenge the way we are represented.

Zanib Mian, award-winning author

... excavates, interrogates and celebrates a children's literature with a refreshing and considered lens ... a significant resource that must be essential reading for teachers looking to promote and teach a diverse curriculum.

Professor Charlotte Williams, OBE

… shines a bright light on children's literature in the United Kingdom, directing us to see the unseen, interrogate assumptions, and challenge comfortable notions – towards an industry that can show every young reader all the worlds story can inhabit.

Candy Gourlay, award-winning author

Beyond the Secret Garden has unlocked the door for my student teachers to critically explore representation and justice in children's literature. It has empowered both them and me to challenge stereotypes, ensuring they are more thoughtful and considerate of the diverse cultures and perspectives of the children they will teach.

Mathew Tobin, Senior Lecturer in English and Children's Literature

… insightful and engaging, with the power to drive real, positive change. Everyone with anything to do with children's books – writers, publishers, booksellers, librarians, teachers, parents and carers – will find this an invaluable and inspiring resource.

Sophie Anderson, award-winning author

A beautifully curated and essential collection, this book serves as a powerful guide for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of the critical need for inclusion and authentic representation in children's literature. It is an invaluable resource for parents, carers, and educators, and a must-have tool for fostering a more inclusive and diverse literary landscape for children and those who write for them.

Richard O'Neill, author

… meticulously lays out the landscape of how children's literature is so deeply enveloped and committed to whiteness. Confronting the realities of how imperial and colonial ideas not only underpin much of how children's books have been and are still written today but also permeate teaching practice is something that we should all be acutely aware of.

Liz Pemberton, early years anti-racist trainer & consultant

Simply essential. Written with rigour, insight and criticality, this book sparks the conversations we need to be having about the stories we tell and how we tell them. This is a timely interrogation of representation and heritage in British literature.

Jeffrey Boakye, author and educator

Essential reading for anyone invested in children's literature. A thematic and historical exploration of how Black and racially minoritised characters have been portrayed, illuminating the social forces that have shaped – and been shaped by – children's literature over time. An invaluable resource for transforming how we approach and engage with literature for young people.

Professor Melanie Ramdarshan Bold

This book is an invaluable resource for teachers, publishers and anyone else with an interest in children's literature and in the messages young readers take from it: whose stories matter, who belongs where, whose heritage gets to be celebrated or erased.

Imogen Russell Williams, Guardian *children's book critic*

Beyond the Secret Garden shows how taking children's literature seriously requires us to celebrate its power and not shy away from how stories can diminish just as they can uplift.

Sharna Jackson, award-winning author

Shut children out from books and you shut out more than reading. This book explains it all in depth, with admirable scope – and it's written warmly, in a way non academics can enjoy. I read every word and then I went back and read it again.

Emily Drabble, BookTrust

... skilfully unpacks the political undercurrents that have fuelled children's and YA literature and encourage the reader to reflect. Really reflect. A blueprint for the kinds of conversations that teachers and educators can start having with each other, and more importantly with students which will positively impact this complex and multifaceted issue.

Dr Zaahida Nabagereka, Lit in Colour, Penguin Books UK

… an essential and necessary read for anyone involved in producing, recommending, buying or reading children's books. Teachers, researchers, librarians, publishers and parents alike will gain so much from the insights held within the pages.

Charlotte Hacking, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)

... an absolutely masterful job – a must read for anybody who makes, sells or engages with children's literature.

Dapo Adeola, award-winning illustrator and author

Beyond the Secret Garden

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Beyond the Secret Garden

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Finally, thank you to Andrew and Lucy at the English and Media Centre for their patience and support in editing this book – and for believing in the project.

DC & KSO

About the Authors

Darren Chetty

Darren is a Lecturer (Teaching) at University College London where he is an affiliate at the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Racism and Racialisation and a steering group member of The Critical Childhood Studies Centre. Prior to this, he taught for a number of years on the BA Education Studies at the UCL Institute of Education. He taught in primary schools for over twenty years and continues to work with schools on policy, curriculum and pedagogy.

Darren is a specialist in philosophy for children and his PhD focused on philosophy for children, multiculturalism and racism. He has published academic work on philosophy, education, racism, dialogue, children's literature and hip-hop culture. He co-edited *Critical Philosophy of Race and Education* and has co-edited special issues of *Wasafiri*, *Ethics and Education*, and *Global Hip-Hop Studies*.

Darren writes also for general readers. He is a contributor to the bestselling book, *The Good Immigrant*, edited by Nikesh Shukla (Unbound). He is co-author, with Adam Ferner, of *How to Disagree: Negotiating Difference in a Divided World* (Quarto). Darren is lead editor of *Welsh (Plural): Essays on the Future of Wales* (Repeater).

For younger readers, Darren co-authored, with Jeffrey Boakye, *What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions* (Wayland) and contributed to *The Mab: Eleven Epic Stories from the Mabinogi* (Unbound) edited by Matt Brown and Eloise Williams. His debut picture book, *I'm Going to Make a Friend*, illustrated by Sandhya Prabhat, will be published by Little Tiger in 2025.

Darren has provided training for the Carnegie Kate Greenaway judges and advises on the CLPE Reflecting Realities research and Penguin/Runnymede Trust Lit in Colour project. He has judged the Blue Peter, YA, Little Rebels, The Week Junior and Centre for Literacy in Primary Poetry (CLiPPA) Award, as well as the BookTrust Lifetime Achievement Award.

Karen Sands O'Connor

Karen is a professor of children's literature and an expert on the history of Black British children's literature. She taught the UK's first postgraduate university module on Children's Literature and Black Britain during her time as British Academy Global Professor at Newcastle University; she also taught modules on racial diversity in children's literature during more than twenty years teaching at Buffalo State College in the US. She has also taught at children's literature summer schools for Hollins University in the US, the University of Antwerp in Belgium, and at Roehampton University in the UK. She is currently a visiting professor at the University of Sheffield.

In addition to her collaboration with Darren on the 'Beyond the Secret Garden' columns that are the foundation of this book, Karen has written numerous academic books and articles on the history of writing and publishing about Black British and Caribbean people for children, including *Children's Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015* (Palgrave Macmillan) and *British Activist Authors Addressing Children of Colour* (Bloomsbury).

Her academic work has led to partnerships with various literacy and cultural organisations. These include the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, for whom she serves as a member of the *Reflecting Realities* steering committee. She also has provided workshops, consultation and comment pieces for the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals on diversity and the Carnegie Medal. Additionally, she has written for the British Library's 'Discovering Children's Books' website, and consulted with the exhibition team for the 'Malorie Blackman: The Power of Stories' exhibition. Her own exhibition, 'Listen to This Story! Children's books and Black Britain' was hosted in Newcastle in late 2022-early 2023, and a travelling version opened in York in April 2024.

Foreword

Reader, I read them. I read *The Secret Garden* and *The Water Babies* and most of the *Mary Poppins* books. I read the original *Dr Dolittles* illustrated by Hugh Lofting himself. I read the *Brer Rabbit* stories in a Disney anthology and the *Little House on the Prairie* books, borrowed from my local library. I read about Meg, Beth, Jo and Amy March, Jane and Michael Banks, James and his giant peach and Charlie and his chocolate factory. I read about a wishing chair, a phoenix and a carpet and numerous family gangs of children who solved mysteries, outwitted villains and enjoyed a spot of mid-twentieth century boating in England's Lake District.

I was a completist. If I liked a book, I read the whole series.

I was those children, but those children weren't me. To truly enjoy those stories, I had to shed my (brown) skin. As I read, I could be white, but those adventurers could never be Black. That would make the story wrong. They would be wrong.

Books have held a power over me for as long as I can remember. Thousands of books have shaped my imagination and fuelled my desire to write my own. This should be a Good Thing. We often extol the joys of reading for pleasure, but for me, that pleasure came at a price. The idea that white children were the ones who deserved adventures settled itself so firmly in my bones it took decades to shift. And Black children actually having adventures … well. For some reason that I will never understand, a copy of Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* came into my childhood possession. My mother was incandescent with rage. The even deeper-rooted idea that Black people are of less value than white people is still one that I have to face down every day. The seeds were planted in those childhood books and white colonial values absorbed and normalised long before I knew how to build a barrier against them.

The *Beyond The Secret Garden* columns have been my literary tweezers. It's a strange, almost comical analogy, but I can think of no other. Their exploration of the impact of colonialism and the re-enactment of racial hierarchies through children's literature, plucks out those seeds and lets me examine them in the light. They tackle the ones I remember, like the hideous Lofting African stereotypes – the pictures I studied in bewilderment when I was six, trying to understand how those caricatures of an African queen and king were people like me. And, of course, Lofting's Prince Bumpo, who must bleach himself white to win the princess.

The harm they did was tangible. Those books, coupled with the fact that I was called a racist name on the first day I started school, made the pretence of being a white child a safer and more joyful place to be than the reality of small Black me. I also did not write characters of colour until I was in my 30s.

The racism in children's books like *Dr Dolittle* cannot be disputed, though, of course it often is disputed. The nostalgic pull of golliwogs doesn't seem to be loosening its grip any time soon. But in the world of children's publishing, where it's much easier to talk about nebulous diversity than the ugly realities of embedded racism, contemporary children's books are rarely forced to reveal the subtle ways that stereotypes are strengthened. And if they are – well, the backlash to change is so great that publishers backtrack. (Would you like your Roald Dahl retro or modernised?)

Thankfully, Karen Sands O'Connor and Darren Chetty have certainly not backtracked. Whether they are examining the representation of children from different heritage groups in books or laying out the background to recent publishing controversies, the columns and additional pieces are thoughtful, accessible and truthful. If you truly believe in the power of children's literature and the right of every child to feel equal and valued in our society, please read every single word.

Patrice Lawrence

Introduction

Children's publishing brings together many key aspects of our society such as literature, art, education, the family, and, of course, business. As such, it is inescapably political, which may explain why debates about children's books seem to interest the media more than the actual books. In this book, we prefer to look closely at the books themselves, to pay attention to them as works produced with artistic, educational and commercial imperatives in play. We are not interested in reducing books to an approved/non-approved binary, or in dealing with questions of representation through quantitative methods alone. Rather, we hope to offer examples of thoughtful discussions about children's books in all their complexity; the kinds of discussions that teachers, parents, caregivers, and children might also have.

The pieces in this book are essentially written versions of the discussions we have about representation in children's books. We come from different backgrounds and interests. While we both started out as primary school teachers, Karen in the USA and Darren in the UK, our further studies have focused on different aspects of representation in children's books. Karen brings knowledge of the history and development of children's literature and the publishing industry over the past two centuries, and Darren has considerable expertise in educational philosophy and antiracism, and more recently, experience in writing for children. We have been writing the 'Beyond the Secret Garden' column for *Books for Keeps* since 2018. Together we try to think about how the history of children's books and the representation of racially minoritised people in (mostly) British children's literature continues to influence what is published today, and why that matters for readers.

There has never been a better time to find children's books by and about people from racially minoritised backgrounds. According to the 2023 CLPE *Reflecting Realities* report, authored by Farrah Serroukh, 30% of children's books published in Britain during 2022 featured a racially minoritised character, up from 4% in 2017 when we began thinking about writing 'Beyond the Secret Garden'. Many of these books are by authors from racially minoritised groups as well, and many – including those by author Patrice Lawrence and illustrator Lucy Farfort, both of whom contributed to this book – have been shortlisted for and won major children's book awards. With increasing access to quality books by and about people of colour, some people might ask, why keep writing the column? Why publish this book?

The answer is simple: even if all the books published with racially minoritised characters were of the high quality produced by some of the authors we write about – and definitely not all are – numbers do not necessarily equal influence. Melanie Ramdarshan Bold has written about the reasons it is 'challenging for authors of colour to become visible and earn a living once they are published' ('The thirteen percent problem'), which include a dominance in the industry of celebrity authors, a lack of marketing for racially minoritised authors, and a fear that racially minoritised authors might be writing stories that would not appeal to a white British audience. The publishing industry is not the only place where these concerns prevail; historically, children's book awards have had similar concerns. It has been difficult for teachers and librarians to access these books, especially if they are in areas of the country where the reading population is less racially diverse. We look at the ways that the past interacts with the present and continues to influence these roadblocks to the full participation of racially minoritised authors and characters in the world of children's literature.

Why 'Beyond the Secret Garden'? Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 novel, *The Secret Garden*, acts as a touchstone for us, a bridge between historical children's literature and more recent works. During the nineteenth century, people from all parts of the British Empire appeared in children's books, depicted as exotic or entertaining, but generally these people were represented by white authors as inferior to white characters. India, which had been effectively ruled by the British East India company since 1757, highlighted the draw and the dangers of imperial pursuits for young, white British readers. British children's books, from Martha Mary Sherwood's *The History of Little Henry and his Bearer* (1814) to G.A. Henty's nine historical novels about India, including *With Clive in India* (1880), painted Indian people as exotic and magical, but also uncivilised and dishonest, often violent. Twentieth-century books such as Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) reinforced the idea of positioning Indians as counterpoints to the cultivated English/British people who are at the centre of stories.

While earlier books about India are out of print or difficult to access, *The Secret Garden* continues to be published and reworked in new formats for children. The way that 'classic' children's literature figures in contemporary children's publishing continues to interest us. Through multiple reissues, illustrated versions, plays and films, children inevitably encounter some, if not all, of these classics. In many ways these stories collectively establish a blueprint for what good children's literature looks like – its themes, tone, concerns, settings, stock characters. Paradoxically, these stories are often taken to be at once 'timeless'

and, when speaking of particular stereotypes, 'of their time'. It might even be possible to say that these classics provide an architecture for children's literature – figuratively and literally. *The Secret Garden's* stately home of Misselthwaite Manor was based on a real stately home that Frances Hodgson Burnett visited.

In recent times there is a broader appreciation of how these homes were financed, built and furnished. Are there connections to be made between the grand rooms in these houses and the children's sections in High Street booksellers? Often such sections are organised around a centre-piece, the classics table, a physical reminder of how the past can dominate the present. Classic children's books are often packaged as nostalgia for our own childhoods and, in many cases, for a time that preceded us.

Classics like *The Secret Garden* still matter, but we need to consider what that means for all readers and writers of children's books. Humphrey Carpenter, author of *Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children's Books* (1985), suggested that

> Adult fiction sets out to portray and explain the world as it really is; books for children present it as it should be.

But Kwame Anthony Appiah urges us to question this assumption about the so-called Golden Age, writing,

> books can bear the imprint of their time and place without losing their claim to our interest and regard. We benefit from the cultural achievements of the past in part because we can situate them in history – not to stand in complacent judgment but to be mindful of the ways in which the past is indeed a different country.

This helpful insight prompts us to think about the kind of education that best helps children to situate classic books in history. Darren's own experience of reading Burnett's book included a fascination with its story of childhood self-cultivation, of magic and wonder; at the same time its contrast between the English countryside as fortifying and India as a place of sickness troubled him. From our own time as teachers, we know that 10-year-old Darren wasn't so unusual in thinking about questions relating to characterisation, plotting and motivation while reading a story that included 'non-white' people. These are questions that deserve our attention as a society.

British children's literature has been and continues to be globally successful, in part because it often (re)produces characters who justify the inequalities of the

world as it is. We have worked in both our *Books for Keeps* column and in the additional pieces in this book to expose these inequalities; but we also try to celebrate the authors writing against the weight of history, trying to change the stereotypes and misconceptions about racially minoritised people. In exploring the representation of Black people and other racially minoritised people in children's literature, we are building on the work of those who came before us. In 2023 the British Library opened an exhibition 'The Power of Stories' dedicated to Malorie Blackman's career. Blackman was the UK's first Black children's laureate. It is to the curators' great credit that she was presented as both an individual writer of exceptional talent and as a key figure in what can be viewed as a broader tradition of Black and racially minoritised writers working in Britain. The exhibit's first section included James Berry's 1966 typescript for a BBC Radio programme on the negative and racist representation of Black people in children's literature. Producers rejected his programme, alleging that Berry had 'exaggerated the issue'. The exhibition also highlighted authors and illustrators, like Dapo Adeola, who have been inspired by Blackman's work, demonstrating the way that writers of previous generations lay the groundwork for those trying to reach children today. Knowing this history, and the history of children's books in general, helps us to examine the ways that books can challenge the status quo and, as Carpenter said, show children the world 'as it should be'. It helps us to ask questions about those books that don't. Many of the authors you will read about in the essays that follow, create characters from marginalised communities who participate fully in British (and global) experiences – from those who interact with Arthurian knights, to those who travel to outer space. Their characters are, in fact, found everywhere that white characters have traditionally dominated – helping to tear down the walls of the once secret garden of British children's literature.

DC & KSO

A Note on Terminology

The terminology used in response to racism and racialisation is contested, changing and context-dependent. Terms shift across time and place and depending on the purpose.

The Law Society offers this explanation,

> It's now widely accepted that race is a social construct. However, having been racialised and shared common experiences of racism, racial identity is important to many and can be a basis for collective organising and support for racially minoritised individuals.[1]

For the title of this book and in many places in the text we use the term **racially minoritised**. The Race Equality Group at Queen Mary University of London write that,

> This is a term that aims to recognise that individuals have been actively minoritised through social processes of power and domination, rather than just existing in distinct statistical minorities. This term speaks to an understanding that some groups have been treated differently and subjugated (minoritised) because of their racial identities, within a context of a racial hierarchy. This term is less well used in the mainstream but is increasingly preferred by some who wish to capture the importance of power when talking about race.[1]

Black is usually used as term to identify as being from an African or African diasporic background. It is a mainstream term. The National Education Union, in common with many other UK trade unions, continues to use Black in a political context to encompass 'all members who self-identify as Black, Asian and any other minority ethnic groups who do not identify themselves as white'. Using Black in this way is sometimes termed Political Blackness and has its origins in the UK in the 1970s. Using the term Black in this way is now rare outside of the trade union movement in the UK.

In recent times both **BAME** (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) and **BME** (Black and minority ethnic) have been used when making comparisons with the 'white British' population and reflect what was a common way of gathering and collating statistics, for example, by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and

[1] https://www.qmul.ac.uk/media/black-history-month/SGLT.pdf

in company diversity monitoring. This term was created by government rather than activists. It was dropped by the UK government in 2022.

People of Colour is a term used by some activists and in some academic work and has grown in popularity in the UK in recent years. It is more commonly used in the USA as a term of solidarity for all people not racialised as white. In the USA the term Black, Indigenous and People Of Colour (BIPOC) is often used as a way of balancing the tension between terms of solidarity and acknowledging the way racism has impacted particular racialised groups.

Ethnicity is a term used by the Office for National Statistics since 1991. A person's ethnicity is essentially a matter of self-identification. The ONS states,

> Since ethnicity is a multifaceted and changing phenomenon various possible ways of measuring ethnic groups are available and have been used over time. These include country of birth, nationality, language spoken at home, skin colour (an aspect of consideration for some and not for others), national/geographical origin and religion.[2]

In this book, to enable us to analyse patterns and make connections, we often use collective terms. Individual people may not necessarily use these terms, or may use them in some situations and not in others. How we choose to identify is context specific.

We recommend that teachers pay close attention to the way that writers describe themselves and the language used in books. We recommend that teachers take racism seriously as an object of study. Ignoring racism does not reduce racism.

We recommend teachers allow children to describe themselves as they see fit. As educators, teachers can help children understand more fully the terms in use in relation to racialisation and identity more broadly and the reasons why particular terms are favoured by some and disliked by others.

[2] https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/measuringequality/ethnicgroupnationalidentityandreligion

Classic Literature and Classic Mistakes

This article was first published in *Books for Keeps* in March 2020. It explores the continuing interest in repackaging children's literature considered to be classic, and the artistic, ethical, and commercial issues in play.

In February 2020 Barnes and Noble collaborated with Penguin Random House and advertising agency TBWA/Chiat/Day to repackage classics in 'Diversity Editions' to 'celebrate' Black History Month in the US, 'colouring in' characters on new covers for books such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Frankenstein*, *Moby Dick*, *Peter Pan* and *The Secret Garden*. These particular texts were chosen using an AI programme, which had ascertained that they 'never actually specified the race and ethnicity of the protagonists'. Believe it or not, this was stated on the back cover blurbs. The backlash against 'colouring in' classic texts, many of which are tied to white European and American ideas of colonisation, westward expansion and imperialism, was instantaneous and angry.

Barnes and Noble was forced to withdraw the titles, acknowledging that

> The covers are not a substitute for black voices or writers of color, whose work and voices deserve to be heard.

However, their statement still insisted that

> the booksellers who championed this initiative did so convinced it would help drive engagement with these classic titles.

Penguin Random House issued a statement saying they supported the cancellation of the programme. But neither they nor Barnes and Noble were engaging in a new phenomenon when they attempted to repackage books to reach wider audiences. In 1994, M.T. Ford wrote in 'The Cult of Multiculturalism' that a trend toward multiculturalism meant that publishers often looked to backlists

> for titles that can be repackaged in some kind of multicultural way, because it takes so long to produce new titles and the demand is immediate.

The idea that classic stories should be somehow made relevant to new generations of readers is not new; nor is it exclusive to the publishing industry. In scholarship about children's literature, education and library journals, and even debates in parliament, the concern over what to do about 'classic' literature has long raged. It is a debate that pits notions of 'cultural inheritance' against notions of appropriate content, with those in favour of keeping classics in print and in wide circulation arguing that a good story should trump a few lapses into racist (or sexist, or homophobic, or ableist) stereotypes, especially because 'people thought differently back then'.

One form of response to this argument has been to try and preserve a book's underlying story while making changes to its objectionable content. George Nicholson, when vice president of Dell in 1967, 'blue-pencilled' the racist depiction of an African prince who longed to be white in *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*. Not that he entirely agreed that it was racist, saying,

> The character is obviously a fool … But most people lose their sense of humour when they read that chapter.

In 2018, the Macmillan Collector's Library edition of *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* broke with the company's own policy of publishing only complete and unabridged versions. Philip Ardagh's afterword explains that he chose to

> have the offending passages … rewritten in such a way as to exclude the inappropriate material but to keep the narrative view.

And so, in this version Doctor Dolittle does not bleach the skin of the African prince who wants to be white. However, while Ardagh may have attempted to bleach the story free of the stench of white supremacy, he elects to leave unedited a reference to 'these Darkies', along with the racist caricature on the title page. This does invite questions as to who determines what is offensive or appropriate and, indeed, whose interests are being served by these edits.

But there are different ways to 'clean up' the classics. Publishers who don't want to change the original authors' words will often bring in a famous contemporary author to reassure readers (or their parents or teachers) that these books are acceptable and even a necessary part of a child's education. Increasingly, 'classic' books are reprinted with forewords by children's writers, who explain the book's importance and significance. These writers perhaps benefit from being associated with canonical children's literature – but in order for this to happen, they often need to overlook the racist elements of a book, or at least hide them

from attention. For example, Lauren Child's illustrations for the centenary edition of *The Secret Garden* (2011) do not depict the Indian people who attend to Mary Lennox in the opening chapter. Another way to keep classics current is by having a contemporary author produce a 'return' to a classic. At a time when British books featuring South Asian boys on the cover are still hard to locate, Katherine Rundell's *Into The Jungle: Stories For Mowgli* (2018) helps to keep Rudyard Kipling, the author of *The Jungle Book*, on the classics table, while also signalling that she is writing in the classic tradition. In the opening chapters of *The Explorer* (2017), her characters, finding themselves lost in the Amazon rainforest, discuss the possibility of being consumed by cannibals. By introducing a new generation of readers to a racist trope, the characters' discussion situates the story in the tradition of classic British children's literature.

An alternative approach is to tell a new story that contains echoes of an earlier 'classic', but can be read without prior knowledge of the original. This is the case with Kit de Waal's Carnegie-nominated *Becoming Dinah* (2019), which frequently references Herman Melville's nineteenth-century American novel *Moby Dick*. Gabrielle Bellot says in 'The Literal and Figurative Whiteness of *Moby Dick*' that

> Over and over, Melville's novel makes the point that, under our skin's complexion, all humans (and whales) are equal. Yet the book also contains many racial tropes about non-white 'savages' and 'dusky' tribesmen, and casually uses bigoted racial tropes even in sections ostensibly unrelated to race.

Becoming Dinah is ostensibly about (re)inserting the female into the novel – de Waal writes that it is

> *Moby Dick* for now and for all the girls and women who are on a journey to self-discovery.

She praises Melville's internationalism and never mentions race at all in her author's note. But like Melville's novel, de Waal's is intimately concerned with racial issues. Dinah, whose mother is white English and father is Black and from the Kosi people of Benin, indicates her desire to create a new self at the beginning of the book by cutting off her hair that is 'thick and heavy as a blanket' as well as 'silky ... like the sleek coat of a cat'. But she cannot throw away her hair, nor can the novel let go of the images of hair, calling it Dinah's 'crowning glory, the same as her grandmother's, the same as all the Kosi women'. The book's epilogue has her hair growing back, 'little prickles of hair, soft and downy, and the cuts have

healed and against the odds it looks brilliant'. African American scholars Wanda M. Brooks and Jonda McNair point out in "Combing' Through Representations of Black Girls' Hair' that 'the historical and sociopolitical nature of Black hair' mean that books that discuss Black girls' hair 'can be utilised to challenge racism and white supremacy'. De Waal's novel, through Dinah's hair, challenges the idea that race can be invisible in a text – classic or not.

Debates about the place of classic children's literature are often framed as being about culture and the desire to preserve or erase a rich literary heritage. We acknowledge that this is an issue worthy of serious consideration. As many so-called classic books are out of copyright, there is also, of course, an economic imperative in play. Publishers can produce and market versions of old classics relatively cheaply. Film-makers are spared the costs of purchasing rights. Publishing and adapting books for the big screen is a business. *The Secret Garden* and *Dolittle* are in cinemas this year [2020].

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Literature Mentioned

L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz*, orig. pub. 1900. Penguin, 2020.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, orig. pub. 1818. Penguin, 2020.

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, orig. pub. 1851. Penguin, 2020.

J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*, orig. pub. 1911. Penguin, 2018.

Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, orig. pub. 1911. Penguin, 2020. With illustrations by Lauren Child, Puffin 2011.

M.T. Ford, 'The cult of multiculturalism,' *Publishers Weekly* 241.29, 1994.

Hugh Lofting, *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, orig. pub. 1920. Dell, 1967; Macmillan, 2018.

Katherine Rundell, *Into The Jungle: Stories for Mowgli*, Macmillan, 2018.

Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book*, orig. pub. 1894. Oxford, 2008.

Katherine Rundell, *The Explorer*, Bloomsbury, 2017.

Kit de Waal, *Becoming Dinah*, Orion, 2019.

Gabrielle Bellot 'The Literal (and Figurative) Whiteness of *Moby Dick*,' LitHub, 2019.

Wanda M. Brooks and Jonda McNair, "Combing' through Representations of Black Girls' Hair in African American Children's Literature,' *Children's Literature in Education* 46.3, 2015.

With You in History

Using Traditional Forms to Tell Black Britain's Story

This column was first published in December 2016 in *The Race to Read*, a weekly blog written by Karen between December 2014 and February 2019 to 'focus on some of the books, people, and ideas that help or hinder children from talking about race, and think about why the discussion is crucial to all of us'. It looks at the way the 'classic' form of the Boys' Adventure story was reworked by Catherine Johnson to include Black British characters as heroes.

In the nineteenth century, Britain's G.A. Henty was promoted as 'The Boys' Historian' based on the novels he published. And while Guy Arnold's monograph about Henty, entitled *Held Fast for England: G.A. Henty, Imperialist Boys' Writer* (1980), claims that 'Henty was no historian, nor did he ever claim to be one', the fact remains that many British boys in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had their first grounding in imperial history from Henty's stories and novels. The books, which had titles like *With Wolfe in Canada*; *With Clive in India; A Roving Commission or Through the Black Insurrection of Hayti*; and *The Young Colonists: A Tale of the Zulu and Boer Wars*, offered British (and other) readers a chance to experience vicariously the conquering and securing of the British Empire throughout the world, with frequent reminders about white British superiority. One of the key reasons for Henty's success is that, unlike a traditional history book or even many historical novels, his stories use characters – normally a young white British boy – to draw attention to the history (there are a couple of exceptions, where a girl character is centre stage). When Henty uses a title such as *With Wolfe in Canada*, both his main character (in this case, James Walsham the teenage son of a doctor from Sidmouth) and his potential reader are with Wolfe. Henty was urging the reader to go along on the journey.

Any readers choosing to do so were rewarded with 'introductions' to famous figures in history. In *With Wolfe*, for example, not only does James interact with those involved in the battle over Quebec in Canada, he also meets General George Washington, the future first president of the United States:

> James resolved, at once, that he would speak to Colonel Washington, and ask him if he could join the Virginian militia. He accordingly went up to him, and touched his hat.

> 'If you please, sir, I am anxious to join the Virginian militia, and, as they tell me that you are adjutant general, I have come to ask you if I can do so.'
>
> 'I see no difficulty in it, my lad,' the colonel said; 'but if you have run away from home, in search of adventure, I should advise you to go back again, for we are likely to have heavy work.'

James manages to convince Washington that he is not a mere adventurer. The general calls him a 'lad of spirit' and organises his entry into this militia. James, and the reader, are riding by Washington's side when the battle begins.

Henty's books invite readers to identify with the young protagonist, rewarding them with equal status to significant historical figures. Identification is not available to all readers though. At the same time as the white protagonists are welcomed as 'boy[s] of spirit', non-British, non-white subjects and characters are demonised. In *With Wolfe*, Washington draws on racist tropes to describe members of Indian tribes:

> The Indians will pounce upon a village or solitary farm house, murder and scalp the inhabitants, burn the buildings to the ground, and in an hour be far away beyond reach of pursuit.

Elsewhere in the book they are described animalistically, as 'swarming'. These are just a couple of examples, and *With Wolfe* is far from being Henty's most racist novel. His descriptions of Black people are far worse. British empire history and racism go hand in hand in the nineteenth-century boys' adventure novel.

I mention all this because I have recently been reading historical novelist Catherine Johnson's *Blade and Bone* (2016), a sequel to her 2013 *Sawbones*. I had a brief moment of déjà vu at the beginning of the novel when the main character, Ezra McAdam, through whom the novel is focalised, finds himself in Revolutionary-era France. 16-year-old Ezra, a surgeon's apprentice who appears in several of Johnson's novels, is performing an amputation on an infantryman when a real historical figure enters his makeshift operating theatre: Lieutenant Colonel Dumas, head of the American regiment. Like Washington in Henty's novel, Dumas praises Ezra's skill, gives him guns, and invites him to stay with the regiment. The respect Dumas accords a mere boy is not depicted as surprising in any way, because the reader has already been encouraged to identify with Ezra. In this way, Johnson, writing in the twenty-first century, uses the same narrative strategy as Henty, but with one significant difference.

While Johnson may be writing boys' adventure, she is not writing a novel of Empire. In many ways the novels featuring Ezra act as anti-Empire narratives. Ezra is a mixed race (Black Caribbean and white British) former enslaved young man. Unlike slaves and former slaves in Henty's novels, he is not an escapee turned rebel (an 'insurrectionist' in Henty's terms). Significantly, he isn't brought to England as a servant or page boy. Instead, he is taught to use his brains and his hands to become a surgeon. By the time of the surgeon's death, Ezra nearly equals the skill of his employer. His involvement with Dumas is significant too. Like Ezra, Dumas is the mixed race son of an enslaved mother and a white father who did not remain in slavery but was educated in France, becoming the first Black person in the French army to be made a brigadier general. Both the fictional Ezra and the historical Dumas defy their imperially-designated roles. However, while both are remarkable, neither is shown by Johnson to be so remarkable that readers could not aspire to similar greatness. Johnson writes Ezra as a British subject who neither likes nor approves of the idea of Empire. In so doing, she reminds us that although Ezra may have been of the minority opinion in Britain, he was part of a global community of people who had experienced European imperialism differently from the flag-waving British imperialists of Henty's novels.

For Ezra, empire and slavery are inextricably linked throughout the world. In *Sawbones* he confronts the son of an Ottoman Empire sultan for whom both slavery and imperial rule are ordinary, arguing,

> 'No one man should belong to another. No man should have that power. That is wrong … My life has been thrown into chaos because of your stupid empire.'

In *Blade and Bone* he writes to his friend, Loveday Finch, that,

> 'I think it a sign of Great Advancement for any people to want to Govern themselves without the Intercedence of any Kings or Lords or Suchlike.'

Ezra is an anti-monarchist, and in favour of the principles of the Revolution (though not, as he later finds, the methods of it); he is not, however, anti-British. At the end of the novel, he wants to go home – and home means London. Johnson's novels, like Henty's, take the reader through British history by creating a young, highly-skilled British character who meets up with famous figures and has the agency to affect history. But unlike Henty, Johnson takes readers with her through versions of history overlooked in the canon, making room in the past for Black Britons and anti-imperialists.

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Literature Mentioned

Guy Arnold, *Held Fast for England: G.A. Henty, Imperialist Boys' Writer*, Hamilton, 1980.

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