



The story of The Pavee and the Buffer Girl

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[Tony Bradman](#) [1]

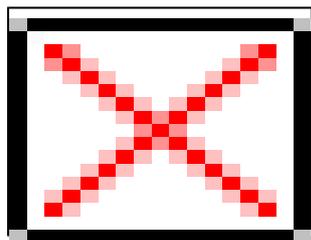
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Byline:

Tony Bradman on the commission that launched the career of **Siobhan Dowd**.

In 2003 I was involved in an interesting project. I had persuaded Puffin Books to let me put together an anthology of short stories about racism. I'd done research and realised that no one seemed to have done anything quite like it before, so I felt sure there was a need for such a book. I came up with a title - **Skin Deep** - and set off on the quest to find great stories to put in it.

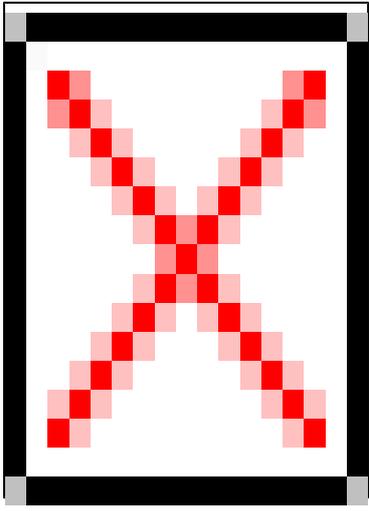
That proved pretty easy, at least to begin with. Writers were keen to contribute, and I soon had stories covering a wide range of characters and locations around the world. But I still kept looking, convinced that I needed one more story of a particular nature. Over the years I'd come to believe there was one group of people almost everybody felt it was OK to be racist about, and that was Travellers. So I thought it was very important to have a Traveller story in **Skin Deep**.



Finding someone to write such a story proved a lot harder than I had thought. I had two main criteria - I wanted to find a good writer, of course, someone who could tell a good tale and bring the characters to life. But I also wanted a writer who had real knowledge and experience of Travellers - someone who could be relied on to produce a story that was authentic in every way. I spent a lot of time looking for the right person, with no luck and then someone told me about a collection of Traveller songs and poems that had been published by the University of Hertford Press. The collection had an editor, and I finally managed to track her down. I sent her an email and then we talked on the phone.

She turned out to be very nice, and also to have done a lot of work with Travellers and other marginalised communities. We had a friendly conversation during which I asked her if she could find someone to write the story for me. She said she'd try - she knew some Travellers who were writers. Then a few days later she emailed me to ask if she could try and write a story herself - she had never published anything, but had always wanted to write. I liked her, so I said sure, why not?

She sent me the story a few weeks later. I remember that I read it sitting at my desk - and remember feeling enormously



moved. It was a Romeo and Juliet tale about a Traveller boy and a girl from the local community, and I knew from the very first line - as you sometimes do - that it had been written by a wonderful writer, someone with a clear, original voice and a deep understanding of people. As soon as I had finished reading it, I called my agent, the excellent Hilary Delamere, and said that she had to meet this new writer.

The story was called *The Pavee and the Buffer Girl*, the writer was Siobhan Dowd, and her career took off immediately. She was in her mid-40s by then, and it was as if all the stories that she had been wanting to write for years exploded out of her. She wrote four amazing novels in not much more than four years - [The London Eye Mystery](#) [3] for top juniors, and the YA titles *A Swift Pure Cry*, [Solace of the Road](#) [4] and [Bog Child](#) [5]. Each book gained terrific reviews, she won 65 awards, and her books were all translated into many languages.

The brightest stars burn out quickly, though. Siobhan was diagnosed with breast cancer, and died aged 47 ten years ago - *Bog Child* was published after her death, and she became the first writer to win the Carnegie Award posthumously. She had also written a brief outline for a story which she couldn't write before she died, and the editor who had commissioned it - Denise Johnstone-Burt of Walker Books - asked Patrick Ness if he would be interested in writing the story. Patrick said yes, and *A Monster Calls*, a book about a boy who has to come to terms with the impending death of his mother, illustrated by Jim Kay has - quite rightly - been hugely successful all around the world, and made into a film with a screenplay by Patrick himself.

Siobhan's legacy is her books, and they go on, but there's an added dimension as well. Just before she died, Siobhan set up a charitable trust into which the future royalties from her books would be paid, and in her will she said she wanted the money to be used to fund grants that would 'provide books to children from disadvantaged backgrounds'. Siobhan asked me and several of her friends to be trustees, and along with Siobhan's family we still run the trust that bears her name, the **Siobhan Dowd Trust**. We've made many grants to schools and organisations all over the country and in Ireland. You can see what we've done and what we're planning on [our website](#) [6].

During all those years I've often thought of that very first story and I'm very proud to have published *The Pavee and the Buffer Girl* - I sometimes find it amazing to think of what has grown out of that commission for an anthology that's now out of print. But that's the way writing works - if a story really touches people, and *The Pavee and the Buffer Girl* certainly does that, then there's no telling where it will lead: 'Stories are the wildest things of all,' says the monster in *A Monster Calls*. 'Stories chase and bite and hunt.'

Now *The Pavee and the Buffer Girl* has a new life. Barrington Stoke have turned it into a book on its own, and what a book it is. They asked Emma Shoard to illustrate the story in colour, and her pictures are wonderful - full of the feeling that leaps out of the story and the characters that Siobhan created. As her first editor, I barely touched the story and Barrington Stoke have published it untouched. So anyone who reads it will be experiencing the story as Siobhan wanted it to be, and in so doing you'll encounter one of the best writers for children there has ever been.

Siobhan's novels are all available from Penguin Random House. *The Ransom of Dond* which also began life as a short story, is now published as a novella with illustrations by Pam Smy. *A Monster Calls* is available in various formats

from Walker Books and I highly recommend the Special Collector's Edition (978-1-4063-6577-1), which includes essays by Patrick, illustrator Jim Kay, Denise Johnstone-Burt and Bayona, director of the film.

The Pavee and the Buffer Girl by Siobhan Dowd, illustrated by Emma Shoard, Barrington Stoke, 978-1-9113-7004-8, £12.99.

Tony Bradman's new book, **Anglo-Saxon Boy**, illustrated by Sam Hart, is published by Walker Books, 978-1-4063-6377-7, £5.99 pbk.

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