



Authorgraph 241: Catherine Johnson

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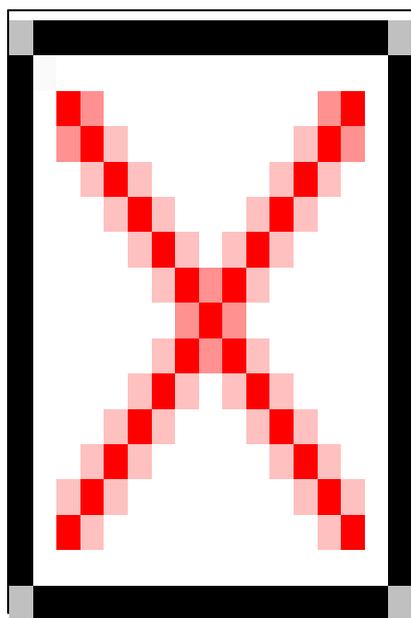
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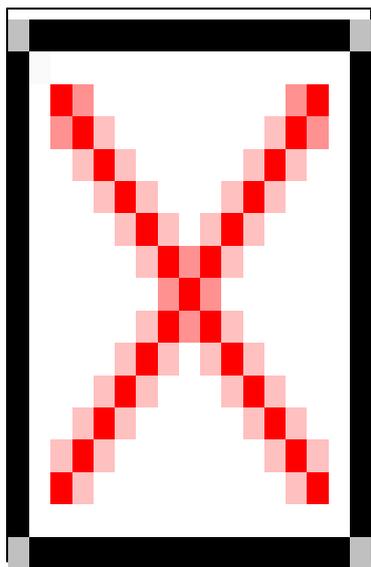
Authorgraph: Catherine Johnson interviewed by **Andrea Reece**

The last couple of years have been very good for Catherine Johnson: she won the 2019 [Little Rebels Award](#) [3] with her novel **Freedom**, was elected to the elite band of writers in the **Royal Society of Literature**, and then to cap it all, [IBBY UK](#) [4] selected **Freedom** for its three-strong nominations for the **IBBY Honour List** (outstanding books that encourage international understanding through literature). Joking, Catherine says that conditioned by years writing for TV soap operas, she's now waiting for something to go wrong: 'Just when everything is going really well, that's always when the car goes over the cliff?.'

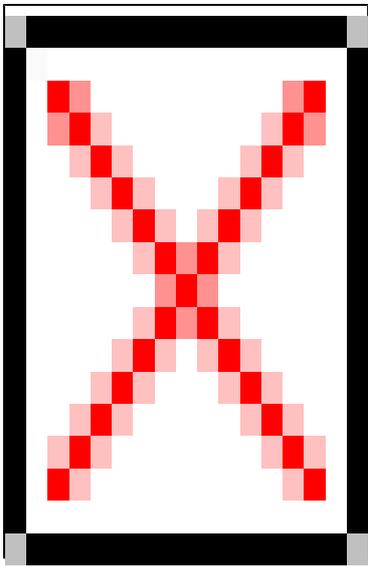


Chatting to Catherine in her bright, airy flat in Hastings made for a very enjoyable afternoon. She's funny, smart, full of astute observations about writing and the current writing scene. There's a lot to discuss: Catherine has been writing for 25 years and as well as her vivid, intelligent, pacy novels for young people, has also written for film, TV and even a computer game. Yet the word that Catherine uses most to describe her career is 'lucky', claiming she just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Anyone who has read any of her skilfully written novels will know that there's a lot more to her success than luck. I was unable to convince Catherine of this, perhaps this summary by Fen Coles of supporters [Letterbox Library](#) [5] will change her mind: 'For us at **Letterbox Library**, where so much of the middle grade fiction we see is dominated by scatologically-tinged comedy or adorable animal series (and I have enjoyed both in my time), Johnson's work is a welcome diversion delivering: quickstep, intricate plots; authentic dialogue; complex historical events (the first North Pole expeditions, the French Revolution, the 1781 Zong massacre) distilled into lightning-flash narratives; with period characters who nevertheless feel as familiar as marmalade on toast. Notably, Catherine respects her young readers. She doesn't confine her more 'mature' material to a YA readership, believing instead that a younger audience is more than capable of reading about the devastating cruelties of enslavement and more

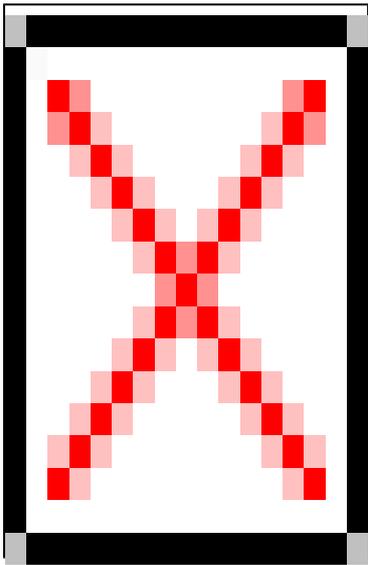
than ready to handle- with relish and a grimace!- some of the more gruesome realities of life in 18th century England. And she achieves all of this because, we believe, she is truly one of our greatest middle fiction storytellers, giving us, time and time again, adventures and mysteries which will not date nor be set aside by market trends. This is how classics are made.? Coles adds: ?[Stella](#) [6] was the first children's novel I read when I joined **Letterbox Library** and it has never left me. Yes, it chimed with many of my own reading-for-pleasure criteria (part-gothic/part-historical mystery, a defiant female lead, trickery and skulduggery in spadefuls) but I'm sure it also settled in my heart as the first slice of children's historical fiction I'd ever read which starred a protagonist who wasn't white. Catherine?s passion for portraying UK history accurately - a history populated by a rich diversity of people across ethnicity and class and gender- is felt across her body of work. She is, quite simply, putting people of colour where they always were, right at the beating heart of our UK heritage and ancestry. Always a truth teller, she is also one of our most gifted, contemporary storytellers.?



Catherine?s writing career started at St Martin?s College where she studied film, thanks to a brilliant art teacher who encouraged her through secondary school (an otherwise deeply unhappy experience). When she finished, she ?had babies? and bored at home, pitched an idea for a film. It got taken up, and ?I thought maybe I could do this?. She devised an idea for a TV show, a pony story starring a teenager with a Welsh mother and Guyanese father (strong similarities here to Catherine?s own life, her mother was Welsh, her father Jamaican, and she has a passion for ponies, of which more later). A friend knew an editor at a publishing company looking for stories like this and sent it off. The publisher took it on and, says Catherine, guided her through the writing process: ?They really helped me, sent me on a writing course at **T? Newydd** with Jan Mark and Catherine Fisher, I had a masterclass with Bernice Rubens.? More book deals followed with the Women?s Press and Oxford, and then she was invited to write a screenplay for a film. Reluctant at first ? the subject was a crime drama with black boys and guns: ?Really? Are there no different stories?? ? she took it on (A friend said, ?If you don?t do it, someone else will?) and it became **Bullet Boy**. More work followed both for screen and page, including **Holby City**, and the children?s novels that grew her reputation, [Sawbones](#) [7] and its sequel **Blade and Bone**, and [The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo](#) [8] plus her first book for Barrington Stoke, **Arctic Hero**. She thinks there?s a great deal of synergy between writing for the screen and writing for young people: ?If you?re writing for children you?re telling stories through drama, people don?t walk about saying how they feel, everything has to be shown ? if you?re writing for screen, that?s the same.? She?s very aware of the influence television has had on her writing: ?I grew up with telly ? often if I read something it was because I?d seen it on the telly. I?m of that generation where TV was really important. Sunday afternoon family costume dramas were my favourite thing.? Another thing learned from writing for the screen, ?You want everything to matter, if it doesn?t matter, if there isn?t a payoff, why is it there? But, like knitting or sewing, you want it to look like there?s no effort involved.?



In a world where there's far too little diversity amongst the heroes of our novels, she's often asked to write these missing stories. When Scholastic asked her to write a book about the slave trade rather than setting the story around abolition acts as suggested, she chose instead to write about the massacre on board the slave ship the Zong and the subsequent court case, all seen through the eyes of slaves and former slaves themselves: 'the start of a long change'. Of her historical fiction she says: 'Part of my writing is about belonging, because if you're someone like me - born here, not white, you do not 'belong'. My books say you know what, yes you do, this is your country, this is my country. I'm a Londoner but I go around saying 'look, I'm English (it's painful for my Welsh mother!) - this is what English looks like'. White writers don't have to deal with that.'



She's disappointed in the slow change around diversity, highlighting upcoming children's conferences with almost all-white line-ups of speakers, but another major concern for her is that the environment for young writers is so much harder than when she started out, that they'll need even more luck to succeed. She highlights lower advances, the unequal distribution of promotional support and an unwillingness amongst publishers to take time to develop authors for the future.

Catherine's own future however is pretty secure: she has a new book with Bloomsbury about her hero Alexandre Dumas, out later this year, a new book coming from Barrington Stoke and a novel for Pushkin too, as well as a top secret project she's not allowed to talk about yet. And the computer game. A note for any publishers who'd like her on their list, she'd love to write a pony series: someone sign it up!

As she walks me back down the hill to the station, chatting about her love for ponies (she rides one called Flicka) and pony books (the **Jill** series) and obsession with the **Netflix** series [Free Rein](#) [9], Catherine is still insisting her career is down to luck rather than an extraordinary ability to tell stories that tease out truths; it's her readers who are the lucky

ones.

Andrea Reece is managing editor of **Books for Keeps**.

Books mentioned, all by Catherine Johnson

Freedom, Scholastic, 978-1407185484, £5.99 pbk

[Race to the Frozen North](#) [10], Barrington Stoke, 978-1781128404, £6.99 pbk

[The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo](#) [8], Walker Books, 978-0552557634, £7.99 pbk

[Sawbones](#) [7], Walker Books, 978-1406340570, £6.99 pbk

Blade and Bone, Walker Books, 978-1406341874, £6.99 pbk

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[3] <https://littlerebels.org/2019-shortlist/>

[4] <https://ibby.org.uk/awards/ibby-honour-list/>

[5] <https://www.letterboxlibrary.com/>

[6] <http://mail.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/205/childrens-books/reviews/stella>

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