



# Beyond the Secret Garden: Classic Literature and Classic Mistakes

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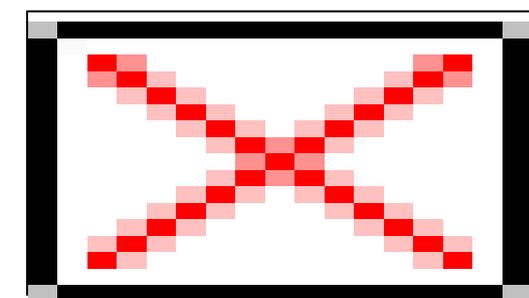
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Classic literature and classic mistakes

In the latest in their Beyond the Secret Garden series, **Karen Sands-O'Connor** and **Darren Chetty** consider the classics.



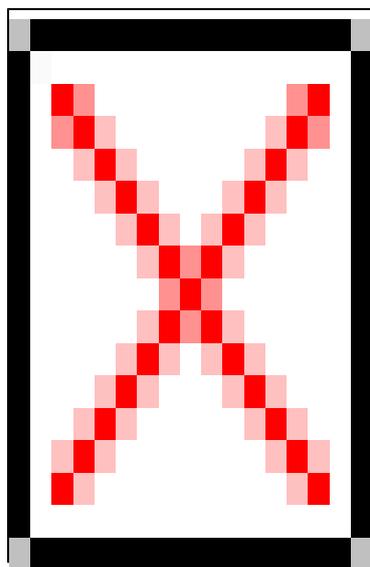
In February 2020 Barnes and Noble and Penguin Random House attempted to repackage classics in 'Diversity Editions' to 'celebrate' Black History Month in the US, producing new covers for classic texts such as **The Wizard of Oz**, **Frankenstein**, **Moby Dick**, **Peter Pan** and **The Secret Garden**. These books were chosen because, according to an Artificial Intelligence programme used by the company, the texts 'never actually specified the race and ethnicity of the protagonists' (back cover blurb from the Diverse Editions). The backlash against taking classic texts, many of which are inherently tied to white European and American ideas of colonization, westward expansion and imperialism, and 'colouring in' the main characters to sell more books, was instantaneous and angry. Barnes and Noble was forced to cancel their event promoting the books, and acknowledge that 'The covers are not a substitute for black voices or writers of color, whose work and voices deserve to be heard' (Barnes and Noble Statement February 5, 2020). However, they continued to insist that 'The booksellers who championed this initiative did so convinced it would help drive engagement with these classic titles' (Statement). In 1994, M. T. Ford wrote 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 cult of multiculturalism* Publishers Weekly 241.29: 30-31).

The idea that it is necessary to 'drive engagement' with the classics is not new, and not exclusive to the publishing industry. In children's literature scholarship, education and library journals, and even debates in parliament, the concern over what to do about 'classic' literature has raged over the last century. It is a debate that often pits form against content, with those in favour of keeping classics in print 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.'

In the past, one liberal response to this argument has been to try and 'save' the story while making changes to the objectionable content. George Nicholson, when he was the vice president of Dell, 'blue-penciled' **The Adventures of Doctor Dolittle**

to excise the racist depiction of an African prince who longed to be white. However, he did not entirely agree with the critics who called it racist, saying, 'The character is obviously a fool . . . But most people lose their sense of humour when they read that chapter' (*Blue pencil erases Doctor Dolittle's black humour* The Times 15 February 1988:1). In 2018, the Macmillan Collector's Library edition of **The Story of Doctor Dolittle**, broke with its own policy of publishing complete and unabridged versions. Philip Ardagh explained in a section that follows the story 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' (140). And so, in this version Doctor Doolittle does not bleach the skin of the African prince who wants to be white. However, whilst Ardagh may have attempted to bleach the story free of the stench of white supremacy, he elected to leave unedited a reference to 'these Darkies' (40), and the racist caricature that appears on the title page of book. This does seem to invite questions as to who is determining offensiveness and appropriateness and, indeed, whose interests are being served by these edits.

Increasingly, 'classic' books are updated with new forewords by contemporary writers who are regarded as serious children's writers. In these forewords they explain the book's importance and significance. These writers perhaps also benefit from being located as part of the tradition of great children's literature 'but in order to do this, they often need to be willing to overlook the racist elements of the book, or at least deemphasise the significance of this. 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 book's opening chapter. 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 White Man's Burden*, on the classics table, whilst 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. Whilst introducing a new generation of readers to a racist trope, the discussion helps us situate the story in the tradition of classic British children's literature.



An alternate 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 19th century American novel **Moby Dick**. Gabrielle Bellot says 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 nonwhite 'savages' and 'dusky' tribesmen, and casually uses bigoted racial tropes even in sections ostensibly unrelated to race' (*The Literal - and Figurative - Whiteness of Moby Dick*). De Waal's *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' ('Author's Note' 246). She praises Melville's internationalism (245) and never mentions race at all in her author's note. But like Melville's novel, de Waal's *Becoming Dinah* 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' (1) as well as 'silky . . . like the sleek coat of a cat' (4). 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? (119). 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' (241). 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' (303) mean that books that discuss Black girls' hair 'can be utilized to challenge racism and white supremacy' (306). 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. We are also mindful also that many so-called classic books are out of copyright and thus there is an economic imperative in play also. Publishers can produce versions of old classics relatively inexpensively and be spared the costs of purchasing copyright and having to market and promote new stories and new writers. Publishing is a business, just like film. **The Secret Garden** and **Dolittle** are in cinemas this year.

**Karen Sands-O'Connor** is the British Academy Global Professor for Children's Literature at Newcastle University. Her books include **Children's Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015** (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

**Darren Chetty** is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikesh Shukla and the author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of **What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions**. He tweets at @rapclassroom.

**Becoming Dinah** by Kit de Waal is published by Orion Children's Books, 978-1510105706, £7.99pbk

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