



Beyond the Secret Garden: The Other Side of the Story

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[244](#) [3]

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Beyond the Secret Garden

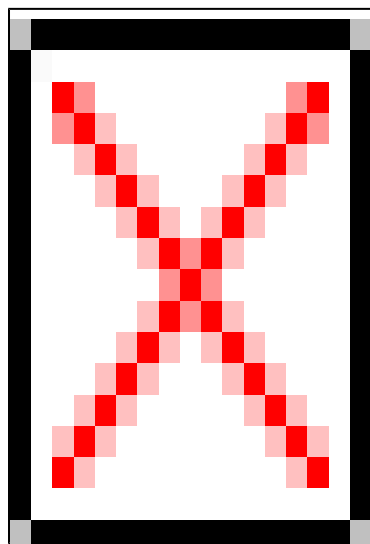
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Darren Chetty and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** delve into historical fiction

In the latest in their series examining BAME representations in children's literature, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** delve into historical fiction.

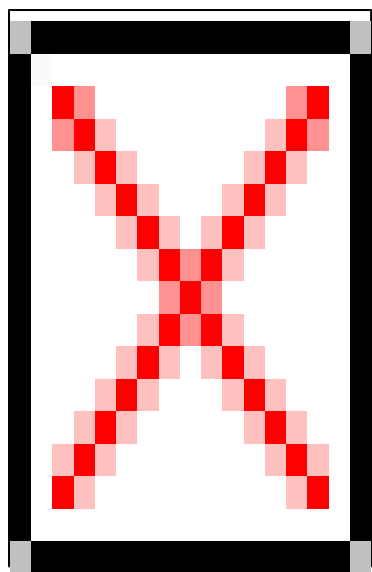
During the height of the British Empire, writers like W. H. G. Kingston, W. E. Johns, Bessie Marchant and G. A. Henty all wrote for young (white) British readers about young white British characters who found wealth, success, and even fame by dominating and exploiting the land and people of the colonies. Henty, who wrote nearly eighty novels for young people, often followed a formula with his novels in which a British young person (usually a boy) went to a colonial outpost and joined military operations against the 'natives'; during the course of the book, the British character generally was introduced to a famous real-life figure: George Washington, Robert Clive, or Horatio Herbert Kitchener are just some of the examples. The famous figure approves of the character's fighting skill and willingness to suppress 'native' unrest through any and all means to uphold the British (class and racial) hierarchy. These books, extremely popular in their time, are still in print and available online today and are marketed to homeschoolers in both the UK and the US as patriotic and easily-digested history. They remind us that whilst many contemporary commentators note the absence of Black and Asian people in British children's books, there was an earlier era where people of colour were very much present but served as a back-drop to the tales that glorified the British Empire.

Historical fiction aimed at children, and often relating to National Curriculum History topics, appears to be growing in popularity. There is a challenge to make the children's novel - often personal and intimate - speak to broader social concerns such that it is engrossing and at the same time expands the reader's historical understanding.

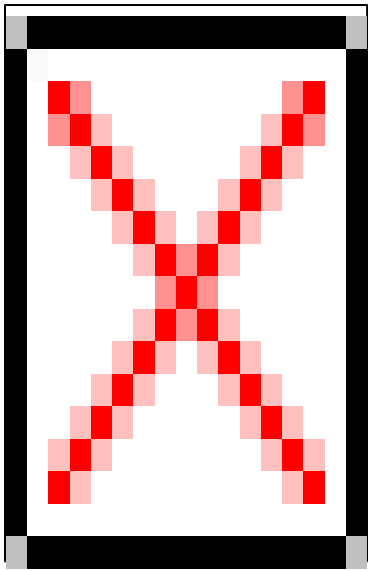


History, it is often said, is written by the winners. More and more now, however, history is being written by the survivors—including those whose ancestors fomented that “native unrest” against the empire. Alex Wheatle’s **Cane Warriors** (Andersen 2020) is one such novel that in many ways, takes the traditional format of the 19th century boys’ adventure story and uses it to ask questions about the historical past. Moa, the 14-year-old main character, is an enslaved Jamaican who gets caught up in Tacky’s Rebellion, one of the most significant anti-European rebellions of enslaved Africans in the 18th century Caribbean. Like Henty’s novels, **Cane Warriors** has Moa meeting the real-life figure of Tacky, and becoming part of his military operation against the British. Moa kills white people in this novel, just as the boy heroes in Henty’s novels often kill Africans, Indians and Native Americans. But whereas Henty’s characters fight to secure land and resources, Wheatle’s characters are fighting for survival. The incident that opens the novel is the death of a storyteller, Miss Pam, that triggers the uprising on Moa’s plantation. Moa fights because of her death, as well as to protect his family from harm and the women of the plantation from rape. Moa lives in a violent world created by the British, and he reacts to it with violence.

Catherine Johnson’s **Queen of Freedom** (Pushkin 2020) tells the story of Nanny of the Maroons, who, in 1776, was declared a national hero in Jamaica. Nanny led the Windward Maroons in guerrilla warfare against the system of slavery that was enforced by British Colonial rule. The book contains illustrations from Amerigo Pinelli and focuses on the latter stages of Nanny’s life. Historical fiction written from the point of view of those who resisted chattel slavery and colonial oppression is all-too-rare in British children’s fiction. Dan Lyndon-Cohen’s **Resistance and Abolition** in his excellent **Black History** series (Franklin Watts 2010) would be an excellent non-fiction accompaniment to Johnson’s fictionalised biography. Johnson does not shy away from the brutal dehumanisation that characterised slavery in the British Empire, or the violence involved in resisting it.



Another kind of violence suggested by the British Empire is the violent erasure of Black and Asian Britons from British history, and this too has been corrected by recent historical fiction. Scholastic’s **Voices** series depicts ordinary Black and Asian Britons throughout British history, including Roman times (Leila Rasheed’s **Empire’s End**), the Tudor period (Patrice Lawrence’s **Diver’s Daughter**), the Victorian period (E. L. Norry’s **Son of the Circus**) and World War II (Bali Rai’s **Now or Never**). Not coincidentally, these are periods of time covered in Britain’s national history curriculum for key stage two; traditionally, nonfiction history materials ignored Black and Asian Britons and their contribution to and participation in historical events. The movement by several historians, librarians, and teachers (Black and white) beginning in the 1980s to get Mary Seacole, the Jamaican Crimean War-era nurse, into the curriculum, raised awareness of the absence of many British communities in history. While many history textbooks have made an effort to include the heroic Briton of colour depictions of ordinary Britons are still almost entirely white. Scholastic’s series makes Black and Asian Britons visible throughout history.



In similar fashion, Sita Brahmachari's recent **When Secrets Set Sail** indicates the importance of revealing the unseen figures that haunt Britain's past. Whilst not historical fiction in the usual sense, **When Secrets Set Sail** is a contemporary ghost story that invites the reader to consider the how the past shapes our present. Brahmachari weaves together the Windrush scandal with an altogether undiscussed scandal: that of abandoned Indian Ayahs and East Asian Ammas in Britain of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. In a recent interview, Brahmachari notes that the Ayahs' stories have stayed in the margins, citing **The Secret Garden** as one such example amongst classic British children's literature. Brahmachari has spoken also of the challenge of capturing the voice of those whose voices were not recorded. The story is a story of excavation – not merely adapting existing narratives for a modern, young audience.

Sufiya Ahmed's [Noor-Un-Nissa Inayat Khan](#) [4] (Scholastic 2020) is written in the first person and covers Noor's childhood in France, her early career as a children's author (her version of Jataka tales is still in print), and her work in France as part of the Special Operations Executive during the second World War. The daughter of an Indian Muslim who is said to have introduced Sufism to the Western world and a white American woman whose half-brother was a pioneering American yogi, Noor defies easy categorisation. She was born in Moscow, grew up in Paris and moved to London. She supported Indian independence and was influenced by her father's pacifism. She fought for the British against Nazi Germany. Ahmed's narrative balances the thriller element of Khan's story with the horror of the war and her eventual execution at Dachau with great sensitivity.

Beyond Britain, Catherine Johnson's [To Liberty: The Adventures of Thomas Alexandre Dumas](#) [5] provides a fascinating biography of the man who was the most senior Black soldier in any army in Europe as well as the father of Alexandre Dumas the writer. Johnson's ability to write compellingly whilst basing her narrative on thorough research has marked her out as one of the finest current writers for children and young adults. [Children of the Benin Kingdom](#) [6] (Dinosaur Books 2020) is a work of fiction set in the Edo Kingdom of Benin in the 12th century roughly seven hundred years prior to its annexation by the British Empire. A fast-paced adventure story of Ada's quest to understand her true identity, Dinah Oriji's debut novel includes a detailed appendix that provides the reader with further information about the ancient Kingdom of Benin and West African culture and traditions.

Candy Gourlay's [Bone Talk](#) [7] (2018) is a critically-acclaimed work of fiction set at the time of the colonial encounter between American soldiers and indigenous Filipinos from the point of view of Samkad, a young Filipino boy. Gourlay's **Ferdinand Magellan** (2020), part of the **First Names** series from David Fickling Books, goes some way to challenging the hero narratives employed to write about European explorers traditionally published in Britain. From the book's cover we see that the account offered is multi-perspectival. 'I'm the first person to discover these islands!' Magellan announces. 'Oi! We've lived here for centuries!' responds a smaller drawn figure. We might nevertheless perceive that the decision to publish this history under the title **Ferdinand Magellan** gives greater weight to 'Ferdinand's' perspective – indeed the alternative perspectives in the book are often in the comic-style illustrations akin to **Horrible Histories** rather than the main text. A key illustration of Magellan's men invading Mactan (p129), is drawn from their point of view, which has the effect of making the local population, not the invaders, appear to be the aggressors.

However it is important to note that in the Epilogue it is stated in bold, that 'the locals were robbed' and thus '[t]o them the Age of Exploration is the Age of Exploitation.' Given that as recently as 2019 a children's book published by Laurence King presented Magellan as 'steely' and his actions as uncontroversially heroic, Gourlay's book destabilises the notion of an uncontested Eurocentric narrative and as such signifies a break from convention. It comes at an important moment for education and publishing and invites questions as to how to most effectively contextualise historical figures so as to teach a history oriented towards truth rather than glorification.

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.

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[To Liberty: The Adventures of Thomas Alexandre Dumas](#) [5], Catherine Johnson, Bloomsbury Education, 978-1472972552, £6.99 pbk

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Page Number:

14

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