



# Beyond the Secret Garden? Portrayals of Mixedness

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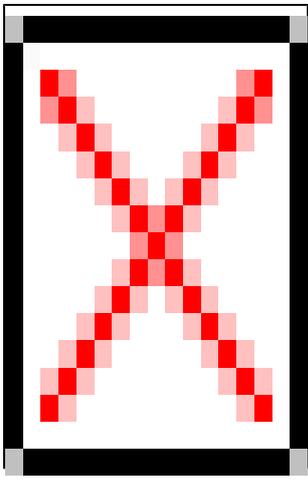
[231](#) [3]

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The latest in our new series looking at representations of BAME characters in children's literature

In G. A. Henty's **A Roving Commission; or, Through the Black Insurrection of Hayti** (1900), the young white protagonist, Nat Glover, comments that mixed-race people on Haiti, whom he labels mulattoes, 'hate the whites. I don't mean the best of the mulattoes, because many of them are gentlemen and good fellows; but the lower class are worse than the negroes; they are up to any devilment, and will do anything they can to injure a white man' (16). He argues that white people should stay shy of them, because it's not always easy to tell the 'brutes' from the gentlemen. Henty, who promoted a conservative brand of British imperialism in his more than fifty historical novels aimed at young readers, is often portrayed as depicting Victorian views about race accurately, if not favorably, and certainly his opinions were consistent with some other authors. But no era has a single opinion, and 19th and early 20th century life and literature contained many contrasting depictions of the mixed-race person. As early as 1851, Dinah Mulock Craik (who authored the 1872 **Adventures of a Brownie** and 1875 **The Little Lame Prince**) wrote a story, *The Half-Caste*, in which the daughter of an English merchant and an Indian princess wins the heart of an Englishman in England. While the title character's fortune undoubtedly swept away some of the potential racial objections to such a union, class did not always (as Henty thought) indicate the attitude of or toward the mixed-race person. Henry Charles Moore included the mixed-race Jamaican nurse Mary Seacole in his 1903 **Noble Deeds of the World's Heroines**, stating her parentage in matter-of-fact manner: 'her father being a Scotchman and her mother a native' (134). Moore criticizes the racism that kept Seacole from her work: 'Soon she found, greatly to her sorrow, that the colour of her skin was considered, in official circles, a barrier to her employment . . . It was indeed a foolish act on the part of the officials' (143). The main difference between a positive and a negative depiction of a mixed-race character in the Victorian era is not a lack of discussion of race and racism—all these depictions include both—but some books, like Moore's, encourage the reader to examine the actions of the character rather than their race alone.

While many mixed-race Victorian characters had to overcome racism, there is rarely the sense (as there is in American novels of the time) that they have to overcome their race; the characters depicted by Moore, Craik, and even Henty are not 'tragic mulattoes,' unhappy characters who fit neither in the Black nor the white world. However, later in the twentieth century, white British authors did tend to depict the children (or potential children) of white and Black British people as problems or tragedies. In Josephine Kamm's 1962 problem novel **Out of Step**, a young white teenager falls in love with an older West Indian man. When she tells her parents that she wants to marry him, they admit that they like Bob, but 'It's not fair to bring children into the world who won't be one thing or the other' (177). When Betty calls out her parents' racism, her mother tells her, 'Tisn't only the whites, Bet. Coloured people don't like them either' (177). Marjorie Darke's 1978 **The First of Midnight** offers an unusually sympathetic portrait of an 18th century relationship between a white servant and a Black slave-turned-boxer, but a similar caution about the result of such a union. At the end of the novel *Midnight* leaves a pregnant Jess for Africa, knowing that their children 'could not be accepted into my tribe' (176). While the Victorians did not hesitate to cite white racism as a problem for mixed-race people, white authors of the 1960s and 1970s argued that Black racism was just as much of a problem. Notably, Black authors did not share this view; Beryl Gilroy's early reader **New People at Twenty-Four** (1973) detailed a mixed-race family moving in to a multiracial neighbourhood; only the white people express any racist attitudes.



Mixed-race characters became increasingly common as the twentieth century wore on. In books about teenagers, such as Catherine Johnson's **Other Colours**

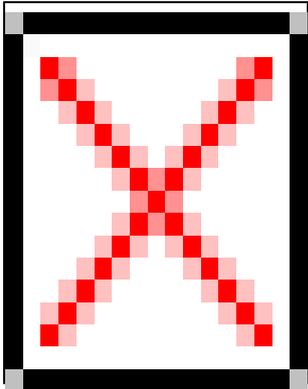
(1997), the concern is less about racism and more about identity: "Out with them, all blonde or light brown hair, all British blue-grey-eyed, and me with my yellow-brown skin and wiry hair, I know I'm something else" (9). [The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo](#) [4]

(2015), one of her historical novels, also has a character whose skin colour sets her apart; the main character, a mixed-race servant-class girl uses questions about her racial identity to run away and create a new self as a princess. Johnson's mixed-race Louise struggles with finding her place in the world and Lady Caraboo struggles to hold on to hers because of their race. On the other hand, characters in Sita Brahmachari's series about the Levenson children, [Artichoke Hearts](#) [5], **Jasmine Skies** and **Tender Earth**, who have a "dual history" ([Artichoke Hearts](#)

7) of Jewish and Indian parents, celebrate and recognize how both sides of this duality make up their identity. Finally, Patrice Lawrence writes stories about mixed-race characters who have both happy and unhappy family situations; in **Indigo Donut**

(2017), Bailey has a "six-foot ginger afro" (60), a social worker white father and a black teacher mum; he helps Indigo, in foster care after her mother, who Indigo tells Bailey was mixed-race (77) dies violently. Lawrence's books show family heritage as an important but not an overdetermined aspect of identity.

Such everyday portrayals of mixedness are present in **Through My Window** (1986) by Tony Bradman and Eileen Browne,



which endures as a picture book that adopts the point of view of a mixed race girl in a contemporary multicultural, urban setting. Depicting a happy two parent family, the book but presents Jo's mixedness as unextraordinary, and no specific reference to it is made in the text.

More recent picture books foreground mixed race children whilst exploring how their racialised mixedness informs their relationships. In

### **That's My Mum**

- Henriette Barkow & Derek Brazell (2001), Mia and Kai are friends with a common experience; people don't think that their mothers are really their mothers. They notice that they don't have the same problem when they are out with their dads. They resolve this issue, based in an experience familiar to many mixed race people, by making photo badges with the book's title as a statement of pride. In **My Two Grannies**

written by Floella Benjamin, and illustrated by Margaret Chamberlain, Alvina's parents go on holiday, leaving her with Granny Vero from Trinidad and Granny Rose from Yorkshire. At first the two grannies compete for Alvina's attention and by sharing the food, stories, and music of their own childhoods. It is Alvina who proposes they take turns. The attitudes of adults, as in Kamm's 1962 novel, remains a potential source of tension, yet here it is the child of a mixed-marriage who has the wherewithal to resolve this tension, managing her relationships with both her grandmothers and the relationship between the two grandmothers. In [Snowflakes](#) [6]

(2013) by Cerrie Burnell and Laura Ellen, Mia, a brown skinned (and presumably mixed) girl moves from the city to live with her white Grandma Mitzi in the countryside. Mia's initial sense of feeling somewhat out of place is core to the narrative but dealt with subtly. She stares into the playground of her new schools and sees "children, as pale as snow, so different from the children in the city?". Difference is acknowledged in the story but not portrayed as an insurmountable barrier to warm, loving relationships.

The use of mixed-race characters in British children's literature highlight both the fears about a multiracial society and the struggle to find where you belong in society. All of these books underscore the fundamental need for all children, no matter what their ethnic background, class or age, to be loved and accepted for whom they are and for their potential to contribute to society. As people of dual (treble, quadruple) heritage become an ever-increasing percentage of the population, we hope that children's books reflect this reality for all child readers.

Seven Stories, the National Centre for the Children's Book, and has recently published *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 Nikesha Shukla and published by Unbound, and tweets at @rapclassroom.

Click [here](#) [7] for a list of books with mixed race characters.

Page Number:

12

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[4] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/214/childrens-books/reviews/the-curious-tale-of-the-lady-caraboo>

[5] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/186/childrens-books/reviews/artichoke-hearts>

[6] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/203/childrens-books/reviews/snowflakes>

[7] <http://malaikarosestanley.blogspot.com/2011/11/books-featuring-mixed-race-characters.html?m=1>