



Beyond the Secret Garden: Taking Series Seriously

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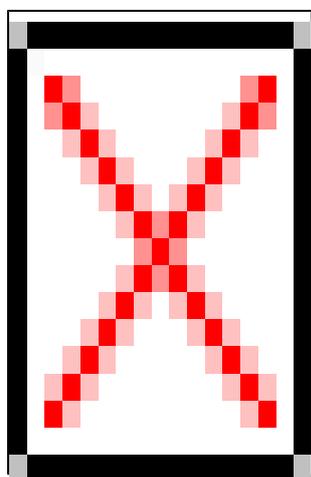
[Karen Sands-O'Connor](#) [2]

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Beyond the Secret Garden: Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor take series seriously

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



The series book has long been denigrated by multiple sectors involved with children's books: literary scholars, librarians, educators, and often, even parents. As Rod McGillis wrote in his discussion of series books, 'A book so popular as to demand a sequel and then sequels must be suspect from a literary point of view' (*Series Books?* 162). But popularity has not precluded a certain kind of series book from winning prizes. The **Carnegie medal** had as its inaugural (1936) winner Arthur Ransome's **Pigeon Post**, sixth in his **Swallows and Amazons** series; and in the 1950s recognized C. S. Lewis's final book in the Narnia series, **The Last Battle** and Rosemary Sutcliff's concluding Roman trilogy novel, **The Lantern Bearers**. But these have been exceptions, and more recent British series, including Malorie Blackman's [Noughts and Crosses](#) [4] sequence, have been passed over by the Carnegie.

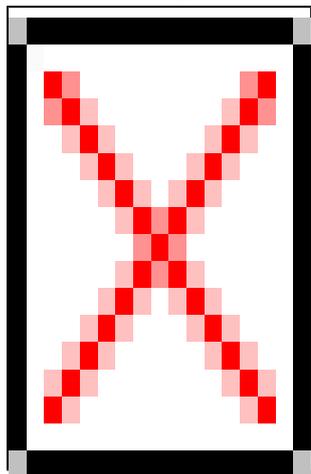
The initial book in Blackman's series did win awards in its debut year, but these were all judged by young people (**Noughts and Crosses** won the Lancashire, the Sheffield, and the Red House Children's Book Awards), suggesting that children were seeing something in the book that adult judges were not. [Noughts and Crosses](#) [5] highlighted a group of children that rarely appear as main characters in any British children's literature, and particularly in series fiction: BAME children. Blackman, who has throughout her career attempted to alter stereotypes about Black children and reading, has series for younger readers as well, including the [Betsey Biggalow](#) [6] and **Girl Wonder** series. These both feature young Black children as protagonists.

Blackman's books are not the norm in the world of British children's literature. In most series books, if Black characters appeared at all, it was traditionally as sidekicks, foils, or opponents of the main white, middle-class British child. Nineteenth and early twentieth century Empire-based series, for example, by authors such as G. A. Henty and Bessie Marchant, used secondary characters to indicate the difference between good (obedient and subservient to white characters) BAME characters and bad (rebellious, sneaky) ones. C. S. Lewis's **The Last Battle** shows the white

Narnians fighting the dark-skinned Calormenes . . . who bear a clear affinity to the fearful Saracens? according to Alison Searle (**Fantastical Fact, Home or Other** 11). These series were aimed at middle-class readers, and were written by authors who felt that readers needed to learn about Britain's values and accomplishments in the books they read. Whether historical or fantastic series, they valorized white characters and the British landscape over BAME characters or foreign landscape.

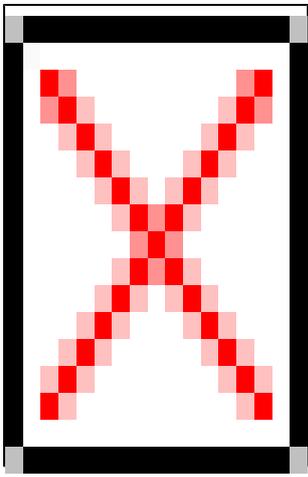
More recently, books in Alex Wheatle's **Crongton** [7] series, and Zanib Mian's **Planet Omar** series (originally published as **The Muslims**) have both been award-winners. More formulaic series (such as mystery series, for example) tend to flatten out characters to a limited number of characteristics. This is especially true for secondary characters. Thus any BAME presence in such books has often been reduced to stereotypes. Enid Blyton's various series, including the **Famous Five**, the **Secret Seven**, and the **Noddy** books, were and still are popular; yet, as Sheila Ray points out, they have continued to be attacked for their racism? (**The Blyton Phenomenon** 104). However, using a formulaic template (the mystery, the school story) does not preclude positive depictions of BAME characters. Robin Stevens' **Murder Most Unladylike** series concerns a detective agency run by two girls at a boarding school, Daisy Wells and Hazel Wong, set in the 1930s. Both white, English Daisy and Hong Kong-born Hazel who narrates the stories see Daisy as the lead detective; Daisy in fact refers to Hazel as 'Watson' from time to time, referencing Sherlock Holmes' sidekick. But Hazel's methodical nature is crucial to the success of the detective agency, and she therefore functions as more than a sidekick in the narrative, despite the seeming leadership of Daisy.

Sharna Jackson's **High Rise Mystery** is the first in a new middle-grade detective series about two sisters, Nik and



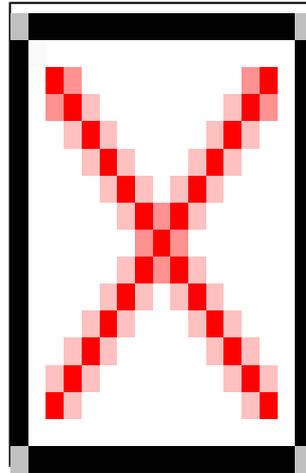
Norva Alexander who live on a South London housing estate. Events stay very local - the Tri Estate - and a sense of place emerges mostly through the language used by the characters. The book's cover depicts two Black children, but in the story itself their ethnicity is only implied. Jackson has been quoted as saying, 'My thinking was that if a character is black it doesn't occur to them that they are. That is just the default.' The topic of murder is often viewed as a controversial topic for the intended age group. It may be all the more controversial when setting a story on the housing estate and featuring two Black protagonists. However Jackson appears very much aware of the complexities in this regard. A YouTube video of the news report of the murder has 'The black man did it!' at the top of the comments, a realistic example of online racism. Elsewhere the theme of gentrification emerges: 'buying flowers from Whitford Market was clearly out of our budget. The World's Most Expensive Cheese Sandwich had made that crystal clear.' (168)

Narrator Nik and her sister Norva are initially broadly sketched as logical and emotionally attuned respectively - 'According to her, she's the Gut and I'm the Nut' (2). However their existence as Black detectives in British children's fiction is momentous. This becomes all the more apparent when we notice the list of TV detective shows that Norva enjoys watching. **The Bill**, **Midsomer Murders** and **The Inspector Lynley Mysteries** are not shows renowned for their ethnic diversity. Indeed in 2011 then-producer of Midsomer Murders, Brian Tve-May was quoted by the BBC as saying, 'We just don't have ethnic minorities involved. Because it wouldn't be the English village with them.' Lack of representation is not an issue confined to children's literature; fans of detective stories not yet old enough to watch the post-watershed Luther starring Idris Elba are highly unlikely to encounter Black British detectives. Until now. Jackson emphasizes the problem-solving aspect of the genre, commenting 'Murder mystery is basically a game that can be played and written in new ways.'



Thematic series **Voices** is a new historical fiction series by Scholastic. The series consultant, Tony Bradman, commissioned writers to write stories featuring central characters from under-represented groups with a focus on periods which feature in the Key Stage 2 National History Curriculum. The series kicks off with Bali Rai's [Now or Never ? A Dunkirk Story](#) [8] telling the story of Private Fazal Khan who travels from his home in India to the battlefields of the Second World War. Fazal experiences moments of solidarity from some of the English soldiers he encounters, (not least Captain John Ashdown, father of politician the late Paddy Ashdown) he is struck by the discrimination he faces from those fighting on the same side; 'For the first time, I had learned of my place in the pecking order of British India. I was one place above my unfortunate mules.' (p190)

Patrice Lawrence's **Diver's Daughter ? A Tudor Story** explores the life of a young East African girl, Eve, living with her mother in the Southwark slums of Elizabethan London. When they hear from a Mary Rose survivor, George Symon, that one of the African free-divers who was sent to salvage its treasures is alive and well and living in Southampton, mother and daughter agree to try and find him and attempt to dive the wreck of another ship, rumoured to be rich with



treasures. Lawrence's tale stresses the everyday humanity of her characters and brings to life the challenges faced by African descendants in Britain in the sixteenth century. This series is seen as a long-overdue addition to books such as H.E. Marshall's **Our Island Story**, described by its author as 'not a history lesson, but a story book' (Marshall, 2005 [1905]: xxi-xxii) and by then-Prime Minister David Cameron as 'my favourite book'. Patrice Lawrence comments 'The UK's history is shaped by people with roots across the world'. The Voices series is a step toward fully acknowledging the humanity of those with roots beyond this island.

Karen Sands-O'Connor is professor of English at SUNY Buffalo State in New York. She has, as Leverhulme Visiting Professor at Newcastle University, worked with 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 Nikesh Shukla and published by Unbound, and tweets at @rapclassroom.

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High Rise Mystery, Sharna Jackson, Knights Of, 978-1999642518, £6.99 pbk

[Now or Never ? A Dunkirk Story](#) [8], Bali Rai, Scholastic, 978-1407191362, £6.99 pbk

Diver?s Daughter ? A Tudor Story, Patrice Lawrence, Scholastic, 978-1407191409, £6.99 pbk

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