

MALORIE BLACKMAN: DLITT

Mr Chancellor,

If books are a window to other worlds and other places, then surely they have greatest power and impact if they are also mirrors in which we recognise something of ourselves and our own situation. So imagine how it feels if a child can see nothing of themselves in the books they read. The distinguished children's writer Malorie Blackman, whom we are honouring today, has described how frustrated she felt as a child, searching the library in vain for ordinary stories with a black central character: "*I kept looking to find myself, but the pictures, the descriptions constantly reinforced that I wasn't meant to be there.*" Instead, what she saw was, "*the world of white, middle class eyes, and that was not my world*".

Malorie was born in Clapham in 1962, to parents who moved to London from Barbados as part of the Windrush generation. They came here to build a better life for themselves and their family. From a very early age, Malorie was passionate about reading and treated her local public library like a second home. She started writing her own poems and stories when she was seven or eight, and initially wanted to be an English teacher, but was discouraged by her careers teacher who told her that, "*Black people don't become teachers. You can become a secretary instead.*" Well she didn't become a secretary, she became a computer programmer. But she never gave up on the writing. Indeed the skills she acquired designing and testing software are very much akin to those she uses in the meticulous planning of her stories, ensuring there are no plot holes and that all of the characters are believable, speaking and acting with their own internal logic.

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Whilst she has written over sixty novels, Malorie Blackman is perhaps best known for the multi-award winning Noughts and Crosses; the first in a quartet of books which feature a dystopian future where society is divided between the powerful crosses and the oppressed noughts. The twist in the tale is that the subject race, the noughts, are white, whilst their oppressors, the crosses, are black. Many of the incidents of racism depicted in the book drew on Malorie's personal experience of growing up in south London and she has described Noughts and Crosses as the most painful and also the most satisfying of her books to write. It is certainly powerful and affecting - I defy anyone not to be moved to tears by its ending. Racism was one of the three urgent and great problems that Dr Martin Luther King spoke of so movingly at his honorary graduation ceremony on this very day in 1967. Malorie Blackman was just a child when Dr King was assassinated but she told me that she has always admired his courage in the face of injustice and adversity, even though he knew that what he was doing would probably claim his life. She shared with me one of her favourite quotes from his writings, "*Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.*" Having re-read Malorie's Noughts and Crosses quartet whilst researching this citation, I feel that this empowering and ultimately hopeful sentiment could justifiably stand as a leitmotiv for her own work.

Philippa Dickinson, former Managing Director of Random House Children's Literature, says of Malorie, "*Right from the start, she had big ideas for children's literature. She writes great characters and has a fantastic ear for the way that children speak and think.*" In 2013, Malorie Blackman became the eighth Children's Laureate. During her term of office, she pledged to make reading irresistible and initiated a Young Adult Literature Convention, bringing together authors, illustrators and readers in an engaging programme

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of workshops and discussions. She also set up Project Remix to inspire teenage children to come up with their own creative responses to books written by established authors. As a writer, Malorie has consciously embraced challenging topics such as bullying, teenage pregnancy, gang violence, drugs and racism, to reflect what teenagers face in the real world. Whilst she is unflinching in her portrayal of these issues, never sugar coating them, she believes in “hopefully ever after” and there is a strong moral ethos to her work.

Although arguably best known for her teenage fiction, Malorie Blackman’s extensive output includes not only works for younger children, but television scripts and plays. In 2000, the television adaption of her book *Pig Heart Boy* won a BAFTA for best drama. She has never been afraid to experiment with different forms of writing and her acclaimed novel *Cloud Busting* was entirely written in verse. Malorie’s achievements as a writer have been recognised by numerous awards and prizes. In 2005, she was awarded the Eleanor Farjeon award for her distinguished contribution to children’s books. This was followed in 2008, by the award of an OBE for services to Children’s Literature. Malorie can also claim the distinction of being the only children’s author to have been name-checked in a rap song – Tinie Tempah’s “Written in the Stars”. How cool is that?

Reflecting on the decision to award an honorary degree to Malorie Blackman, Kate Edwards, Chief Executive of Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children’s Books, had this to say, “*Seven Stories is delighted that our partners at Newcastle University have chosen to honour Malorie Blackman in this way. The recognition is thoroughly deserved. It is vital that children and young people access books and enjoy stories that speak directly to their experience*

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of growing up in a fast changing digital world - a world that is smaller and more divided than ever.”

Kimberley Reynolds, Professor of Children’s Literature in our School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics, remembers very clearly the first time she heard Malorie speak in public, *“Everything about her was new and impressively positive... She was funny and vibrant and, of course, she was also black and female in a programme that featured a great many white men... When Noughts and Crosses was published, nearly a decade later, it made her the most influential figure talking about race in the world of children’s publishing. That book offers a powerful dystopian vision, but to my mind Malorie Blackman is still one of the most positive writers for children and young people we have. And not just for or about issues to do with race. Her books feature strong, independent girls and young people who are clever, competent, and moral – and who generally succeed in doing something to make the world a better place. Rather like their creator!”*

Mr Chancellor, for her passionate, inspiring and innovative contribution to enriching and diversifying children’s literature, I present to you, Malorie Blackman, OBE, for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*

Citation by Jill Taylor-Roe, Public Orator

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