

**Sands-O'Connor, Karen (2017): Children's Publishing and Black Britain, 1965-2015. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan (Critical Approaches to Children's Literature). 978-1-137-57903-4, 197 pp.**

A serious academic engagement with black British writing for children has long been overdue, and Karen Sands-O'Connor is the right person to close this gap: to scholars of children's literature in English, she will be known through her study *Soon Come Home to this*

*Island: West Indians in British Children's Literature* (2008) and other contributions, many of which touch on the creation of stereotypes and othering in literature for young readers in Britain and the USA. In this collection, too, she is concerned with the portrayal of black people in books for British children from the 1960s to the 2010s.

A number of astute choices have been made about the conceptualization and the title of the book: First, Sands-O'Connor does not write about "black British children", which helps her bypass the conundrums of how to define "black British" and avoid the risk of including or excluding specific social groups in post-war and contemporary Britain. Secondly, she links black Britain and children's publishing with an "and" rather than an "in" in her title, which allows her to include writers of the 1960s and 1970s who lived in the Caribbean but evidently wrote for a British market. "Children's publishing" also provides a safe tool for selecting her material, since she can draw on publishers and does not have to fall back on other, more uncertain criteria of what is and what is not a children's book.

The beginning of this social and cultural history of publishing, then, is 1965 – for a number of reasons, none of them to do with the publication of a particular book but with social, cultural and economic changes: anyone involved in publishing in 1960s London was witness to the demographic changes of large scale migration at work, i.e. increasing numbers of black children and teenagers, and to the need for new reading matter. Economic growth meant that children had pocket-money and could spend it on books, which led publishers to create imprints especially dedicated to children. Finally, educational reforms necessitated more diverse reading materials for developing readers. 1965, then, is not understood as an exact starting point but rather as a period in which interest in publishing for black children in Britain started to develop. To contextualize her analyses of the resulting publications, Sands-O'Connor devotes several pages to the historical roots of the representational conundrums that afflict the material she is interested in, all the way back to 18th century accounts of slavery and abolitionist literature.

Sands-O'Connor demonstrates how an awareness of both class and race representation engendered the creation of more diverse books: up to the 1960s, reading material for the young in England was white, middle-class and Victorian in its values. When journalist and writer Leila Berg became aware of this, she created the *Nippers* and *Little Nippers* series in the late 1960s, early readers that told stories about black and working-class children, both in words and images. Even though retrospectively these books seemed to be quite a breakthrough, Sands-O'Connor discusses them very critically in terms of their politics and comments on their unpopularity at the time. Today, they are out of print and even copyright libraries have only a limited number of volumes – which makes this account all the more valuable.

The publishing history continues into the 1970s: Saturday schools and supplementary schools were founded by immigrants from the Caribbean who wanted their children to learn something about black history. A profound sense of dissatisfaction with the reading materials available for children engendered publications and publishing houses: John La Rose and Sarah White set up New Beacon Press in 1966; Jessica and Eric Huntley founded *Bogle L'Ouverture* in 1968; later, Verna Wilkins established *Tamarind* in the 1980s. In all this, Sands-O'Connor acknowledges the racist climate of the 1970s, which meant that those involved had to face smashed shop windows and death threats. Anti-racist education and the formation of black book fairs, however, ensured that publishing for black children continued to thrive, despite the setbacks. Neither education nor publishing, we learn from this book, happens in a political vacuum.

A whole chapter is dedicated to the history of prize-giving and stresses the obvious dearth of prestigious prizes, e.g. the Kate Greenaway and the Carnegie Medal, going to

black writers. But Sands-O'Connor also shows us what happens to politically outspoken writers that do get acknowledged: Malorie Blackman, Children's Laureate from 2013 to 2015, suffered racist abuse on social media after she promoted a more diverse approach to writing for children.

The outlook for children's publishing by black Britons is not particularly optimistic, but this might be due to Sands-O'Connor's prescriptive view of books for black children: they need to tackle racism, be confrontational and political, not too folkloristic and in the language of the street. For someone who is otherwise so sensitive to the dangers of overgeneralization, this strikes me as reductive: Why not accept that some books can be confrontational but others, especially for a younger readership, can depict a world of multicultural harmony? Why reduce such a rich variety to a didactic programme?

The field Sands-O'Connor makes accessible to us is wide and unwieldy. Little wonder, then, that there are selections and omissions: not too many picture books are referenced (Beverley Naidoo and P. Röhr-Rouendaal's wonderful *Letang and Julie* series, for instance, are not mentioned), and if they are, the illustrators are not mentioned in the bibliography – when it is so clearly the illustrations that give the black characters their visibility. Neither are children's books included by writers who are well known for writing for adults, such as Jackie Kay and Bernardine Evaristo. On a practical note, references at the end of each chapter rather than a full bibliography (structured into primary and secondary material) seems to me an unhappy choice in a cultural history written by a single author.

Despite this criticism I need to stress what a momentous publication this is: Sands-O'Connor tells her well-researched history of diversity in British publishing for children with profound expertise, intellectual curiosity and a sharp critical mind. There is still work to be done, but Sands-O'Connor has made a brilliant contribution, and her study is bound to become a reference point for any further exploration into British publishing for a diverse market.

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