



Editorial ? July 1997

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[Rosemary Stones](#) [1]

[105](#) [2]

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News and comment from the Editor.

White writer, black characters

Should a white writer write a novel with black characters? Jean Ure (see Letters) has been told by ?virtually every publisher in London? that it is ?not a good idea?.

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In 1970 in an exchange of letters with the then children?s book editor of the **New York Times**, George A Woods, the distinguished black American writer Julius Lester wrote: ?When I review a book about blacks (no matter the race of the author), I ask two questions: Does it accurately present the black perspective? Will it be relevant to black children? The possibility of a book by a white answering these questions affirmatively is almost nil.? Lester continued: ?whites can only give a white interpretation of blacks, which tells us about whites, but nothing about blacks... whites will never understand the black view of the world until they get it straight from blacks, respect it and accept it.?

How much has changed since this exchange took place 27 years ago? Lester was stating his position not many years after the bitter struggles of the Civil Rights Movement with its school boycotts, freedom marches, riots and assassinations. It also followed a time when, as another black American writer, Rosa Guy, has written: ?few publishers were interested in black writings, nor in our concept of what writing should be.? The establishment of the black American novel (Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Alice Walker, etc.) grew out of rage.

In Britain the novel was the beneficiary of our colonial heritage as writers emerged (Timothy Mo, Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Jung Chang) who could bring together the culture of other societies with the traditions of English writing.

In children?s publishing, books by white authors and illustrators featuring black characters (Peter Dickinson, Bernard Ashley, Shirley Hughes, Marjorie Darke, Chris Powling, etc.) have been published for the last twenty years as have books by black authors whose countries of origin were Caribbean or Asian (Errol Lloyd, John Agard, Jamila Gavin, etc.). The last decade has seen the publication of the new generation of British born black poets and writers for children ? Jackie Kay, Benjamin Zephaniah, Malorie Blackman and Jacqueline Roy amongst others. Why is there now a problem?

Writers for children are well aware of (and often kick against) the restrictions imposed on them both by society?s view of childhood and by the responsibility of introducing notions to young people at the most formative point in their lives. Empathy, knowledge and sensitivity are admirable qualities much hoped for in our children?s writers but at the end of the day surely all that a writer can offer is to not to be afraid and not to be subservient in what she or he writes. Whether such writers then have sufficient talent, imagination and insight for young readers to be able to find themselves, each

other and the selves and others they may become in their pages cannot become the subject of critical debate if the books they wish to write are not to see the light of day.



[Rosemary_Stones_40.jpg](#) [3]

Rosemary Stones

Page Number:

3

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[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/rosemary-stones>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/105>

[3] http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Rosemary_Stones_40.jpg