



Beyond the Secret Garden: Life and Literature in Lockdown

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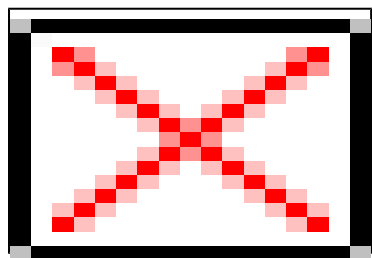
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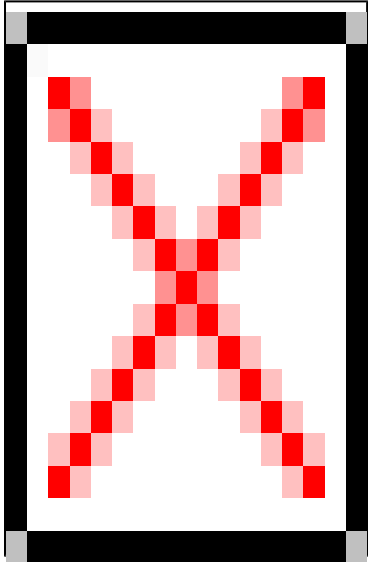
What does it mean to be a writer of colour during a pandemic and a global movement protesting systemic racism? For this issue's **Beyond the Secret Garden** column, we asked Black British and British Asian authors about their experiences over the past few months. Several generously took the time to send us responses to questions about their work, their publications, and the effect of the events of the last few months. What emerges from these responses is a story of struggle and frustration in many cases, but also a generosity of spirit particularly toward young readers who may have lost access to books during this period. We invite you to attend to their experiences, and then check out the list of books that either have already been published during lockdown, or will appear very soon, so that you can buy them for your home, school or public library collections.



Online Life: One of the responses that came up again and again when we asked what projects authors and illustrators have been pursuing during lockdown is various forms of online production. Jasbinder Bilan, Zanib Mian and Rashmi Sirdeshpande have their own YouTube channels on which they have been doing readings and Q&A sessions for schools. Other writers, including Chitra Soundar and Sita Brahmachari have also produced YouTube videos, and the illustrator Dapo Adeola has run a fascinating series on Instagram Live where he converses with peers about the publishing industry and its pitfalls for those Black writers and artists. Savita Kalhan has been working with her teen reading group remotely. Catherine Johnson and Patrice Lawrence both read stories for **Empathy Lab** (empathylab.co.uk), and Patrice, who was scheduled to headline the **Hay Festival**, had a short film of her story, *Day Zero and Chips* made which is available online. Her daughter is the narrator; Patrice told us that she bribed her to do it 'with a homemade cottage pie. I am so proud of this. (The film and the cottage pie.)' Rashmi Sirdeshpande has also been filming, including a virtual event for the **Puffin Festival of Dreams**. Irfan Master told us that 'As writer-in-residence for **First Story**, and to supplement my income and because I enjoy it, I've been working with a local social enterprise in Islington on a mentoring programme for young people.' Many have done workshops for adults as well, including Savita Kalhan, Zanib Mian, and Patrice Lawrence. Sita Brahmachari has blogged for **Amnesty International** in her role as Amnesty Ambassador. Jasbinder Bilan, Catherine Johnson, and Sita Brahmachari - along with several other fantastic authors of colour - contributed

stories to **The Book of Hopes**, published online by the **National Literacy Trust**, to entertain and comfort children during lockdown. If you are one of those readers who has approached us (or anyone else) saying you would like a list of authors of colour you should read, this would be an excellent place to start.

In fact, most of the readings, short films, and even some of the workshops and conversations mentioned here are available for free, online. And this is important, because many of the authors we interviewed mentioned that they had seen an increase in people asking them to do work for free during the lockdown. There was a sense of frustration about this, as recent studies have shown that British authors of colour do not get offered advances as large as white British authors, and many are also expected to do their own marketing and publicity. More than one author who wrote to us questioned whether they could continue working in an industry that does not support them. Most have had school visits and other paid bookings cancelled, and many have had the publication of books pushed back, often as much as a year into the future. While authors and illustrators want very much to reach their audiences, they should not be expected to do this without the support of both the publishing industry and the book-buying public?so please, if you have asked for or used the free online resources produced by these and other generous authors, return the favour and buy one (or all!) of their books. Read them and recommend them. Suggest them and nominate them for prizes (such as the **Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals**, which will be collecting nominations from its member librarians beginning in September).



Supporting Justice (but at what cost?): Just by looking at the list of books published or forthcoming from these authors, it is clear to see how their work embodies an understanding of what it means to be a person of colour in a white-dominated society, and how important it is that stories of these experiences are told. Sufiya Ahmed's forthcoming book about Noor Inayat Khan and Catherine Johnson's books about Alexandre Dumas and Nanny of the Maroons highlight largely-untold histories. Sita Brahmachari's work, including her forthcoming novel, describes the experiences of migration (both forced and migration by choice). Rashmi Sirdeshpande, who self-describes as a 'lawyer-turned-storyteller' wants her readers to believe that they could change the world. Other authors are writing thrillers, mysteries, humorous books and fantasies, giving readers the opportunity to see protagonists of colour in all different types of books.

But many authors and illustrators have struggled to work during this time. The lack of contact with friends and family members, and increased caring responsibilities are struggles that have affected most people during the lockdown. For the authors and illustrators we surveyed, however, their commitment to a just world for all children everywhere has occasioned additional, and painful, stress and anxiety. Jasbinder Bilan says that 'there have been times when the scale and gravity of the situation just hits you out of nowhere and when I have heard the stories of deaths it has stayed with me, and upset me a lot. Especially when you consider the inequalities surrounding who gets infected.' Sita Brahmachari agrees, writing that being ill during this time 'made me reflect on the debt owed to migrant people working in the NHS and Social Care and Key Workers who have been particularly badly impacted during this pandemic. The treatment of BAME key workers, health and societal inequalities have been much on my mind, and in my heart in real life as in fiction.' Irfan Master reminds us that 'being a writer in the world is, particularly now, a political act.' Some of our respondents have specifically commented on the events surrounding the police murder of George Floyd in Minnesota.

Dapo Adeola told us, 'having to hear about the continued racially motivated killings of Black people at the hands of the police in America was enough to push me to breaking point. During these last three months I've gone from crazy highs and lows in energy and lethargy to rage, anger and sadness . . . to be honest, I'm exhausted.' One author echoed that exhaustion, writing that the racist incidents in America and the UK 'has made me question my own writing and the predominantly white industry within which I work.' We only asked a few writers to respond, but we know that the commitment to community and the concomitant feeling of exhaustion are felt by many British authors of colour. They need our support as much as we need them.

With many thanks, and book plugs to:

Dapo Adeola (**Clean Up!**, with text by Nathan Bryan, will be published July 2020, Puffin, 978-0241345894, £6.99 pbk)

Sufiya Ahmed (**My Story: Noor-un-Nissa Inayat Khan** will be published in August 2020, Scholastic, 978-0702300059, £6.99 pbk)

Jasbinder Bilan (**Tamarind and the Star of Ishta** will be published in September 2020, Chicken House, 978-1913322175, £6.99 pbk)

Sita Brahmachari (**When Secrets Set Sail** will be published in August 2020, Orion Children's Books, 978-1510105430, £7.99 pbk)

Catherine Johnson (**Queen of Freedom** will be published in August 2020, Pushkin Children's Books, 978-1782692799, £6.99 pbk; and **To Liberty!** in September 2020, Bloomsbury Education, 978-1472972552, £6.99 pbk)

Savita Kalhan (**The Long Weekend** was due to be republished this year, but due to Covid-19 the new publication date will be in spring 2021)

Patrice Lawrence (**Eight Pieces of Silva** will be published in August 2020, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444954746, £7.99 pbk)

Irfan Master (*Blair Peach 1979* can be found in the anthology **Resist: Stories of Uprising** edited by Ra Page, Comma Press, 978-1912697076, £14.99 hbk)

Zanib Mian (**Planet Omar: Incredible Rescue Mission**, 978-1444951295, £6.99 pbk, and **My Friend the Alien** will be published in July 2020, Bloomsbury Education, 978-1472973900, £6.99 pbk)

Rashmi Sirdeshpande (**Never Show a T-Rex a Book**, Puffin, 978-0241392669, £6.99pbk and **Dosh: How to Earn it, Save it, Spend it, Grow it and Give it**, Wren and Rook, 978-1526362759, £9.99 pbk will appear in August 2020; **How to Change the World** was due to be published in May but this has been pushed back to January 2021)

Chitra Soundar (**Tiger Troubles** appeared in June 2020, Bloomsbury Education, 978-1472970824, £4.99 pbk).

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