



I Din Do Nuttin... to Gregory Cool

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Rosemary Stones on BfK's updated Multicultural Guide.

Rosemary Stones on the evolution of our updated BfK guide to **Children's Books for a Multicultural Society**

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Ten years ago **Books for Keeps** published its first multicultural children's book guides, **Children's Books for a Multicultural Society**, in two editions - for 0-7s and for 8-12 year olds. The guides, written by Judith Elkin and edited by Pat Triggs, sold a staggering 35,000 copies.

For everyone concerned with children's books - writers, illustrators, publishers, teachers, librarians, parents, booksellers - the '70s and early '80s had been a period of intense and sometimes acrimonious discussion as the need became accepted (mostly) for all our children to have access to a literature free from racial stereotyping on the one hand, and reflecting the diversity of the multicultural society that we are, on the other.

In her pioneering bibliography published in 1971 by the Institute of Race Relations, **Books for children: the Homelands of Immigrants to Britain**, the then Lambeth Children's Librarian, Janet Hill, wrote in the introduction: 'Many books are blatantly biased and prejudiced... How is an African child growing up in this country likely to react to some of the patronizing, insensitive and outmoded tales of the noble white man and the natives that are still in print? Perhaps saddest of all is that despite the rich variety of adult novels by African, Indian and West Indian writers, there are hardly any for children.'

After more than a decade of criticism and heated debate of this kind, the **Books for Keeps** 1985/6 guides brought together the evidence of an extraordinarily creative response from the children's book world to the challenge posed: the need for books of quality and imagination for and about all our children.

Where we had got to by the mid '80s can be judged from the contents of the guides. There was much of note. Amongst the writers included were Black Americans (such as Rosa Guy) who had begun to be published here. Their books had an immediate and profound impact, giving us instantaneously the definition of a 'Black voice' and laying down the highest and most demanding standards for what was possible.

Well established British writers and illustrators (Peter Dickinson, Jill Paton Walsh, Bernard Ashley, Robert Leeson, Chris Powling, Shirley Hughes among others) wrote or illustrated fine picture books and fiction that reflected multiracial realities in contemporary Britain via fantasy or social realism.

New 'Black British' writers and illustrators (Errol Lloyd, John Agard, Jamila Gavin and others) whose countries of origin were in the main Caribbean or Asian, brought new talent and a new particularity in terms of subject matter which was also often expressed in voices using forms of English renewed, as American English has been, by the impact of a colonial history. **I Din Do Nuttin** was the title of a John Agard poetry collection from the mainstream publisher, The

Bodley Head.

Attitudes towards children whose first language was not English had started to change. As it became acknowledged that being bilingual was an asset, not a handicap, teachers' centres and publishers began to produce the first dual-language books.

Publishers began actively to seek out writers and illustrators capable of creating the kinds of books that were needed. Here was a phenomenon (when will there ever be another such, wonder hard-pressed publishers) - an audience (the children of multicultural Britain) for whom there were no books.

It wasn't easy to find writers who could get it right, even harder to find writers of talent and imagination who could get it right. The problems ranged from the unwitting internalisation of colonialist assumptions, painfully discovered, to the heavy demands made on the few British ethnic minority writers there were to become spokespeople for their communities on any number of pressing issues before the needs of children for books could be addressed.

Some publishers commissioned books to fill the gaps. In the main these were photo-story books with a multicultural mix of well scrubbed children dressed in their best clothes displaying polite interest in each others' customs. These 'one-of-each' books (as my daughter cynically referred to them) were at worst dull as ditch water; at best they gave enormous pleasure to many children from ethnic minority backgrounds who had never before seen themselves reflected in a book.

Ten years have sped by and this October sees the publication of a revised and updated **Books for Keeps Guide to Children's Books for a Multicultural Society**. Spanning titles for 0-12 year olds, it has been written by Judith Elkin and Steve Rosson and is published in collaboration with the Reading Centre for Reading Development who have contributed the section on dual-language titles. It contains a selection of 250 titles, chosen from a possible 500.

So, what can be deduced this time around (and after reading so many books) about the state of publishing for children in multicultural Britain?

There can be no doubt that the most significant development of the last decade has been the emergence of a new generation of British born Black poets and writers - Jackie Kay who followed the success of her prize-winning adult collection, **The Adoption Papers**, with **Two's Company** and **Three Has Gone** for children; rap poet Benjamin Zephaniah (**Talking Turkeys**); novelists Malorie Blackman (**Girl Wonder and the Terrific Twins** and many other titles) and Jackie Roy (**Soul Daddy** and **Fat Chance**) amongst others. Their work speaks to a young audience for whom multicultural realities are now part of the wallpaper.

Black illustrators are still thin on the ground. Ten years ago Lisa Kopper (the **Jafta** books) wrote about the absence of ethnic minority students at art schools and how few of the few there were, took illustration. Black illustrator, Jenny Bent, (**Calypso Alphabet** and **Come Home Soon, Baba**), writes in the new guide about how both her class teacher and head teacher at school constantly advised her against going to art school - they thought accountancy more suitable.

Above all, though, this latest guide gives us evidence that the number of talented contributors to the field (black and white) continues to grow on the one hand, and on the other that many 'household' names continue to produce dazzling books. A few examples must suffice: for picture books the Jamaican poet James Berry and illustrator Louise Brierley's Caribbean version of the nativity, **Celebration Song**, is breathtaking; illustrator Caroline Binch's **Hue Boy** and **Gregory Cool**, both set in the Caribbean, impel the reader into the world her characters inhabit; for fiction, Beverley Naidoo's **Chain of Fire** about turbulent years of resistance to apartheid and Elizabeth Laird's **Kiss the Dust** about the plight of the Kurds stay in the mind; for poetry Grace Nichols' **Come on in to My Tropical Garden** creates a lyrical sense of place; for folk tales, Trinidadian Grace Hallworth's **Cric Crac** shows her to be a consummate storyteller as is Romila Thapar in her **Indian Tales**; for non-fiction David Bygott's **Black and British** is an accessible and moving history of the British Afro-Caribbean community.

There are also, of course, new publishing directions contingent on the historical moment. Thus, the excitement and joy

of the emergence, after so many painful years of struggle, of a new South Africa are reflected in a number of strong picture books. Hugh Lewin and Lisa Kopper have added **Jafta: The Homecoming** to their acclaimed series about the small South African boy longing for his father who must live far away from the family home. But 'mother says things are changing in our country and now he can come home?'. Set in a shanty town, Rachel Isadora's **At the Crossroads** has a similar theme as children wait and wait for their fathers to arrive home on leave from the mines.

Of course the strengths and weaknesses of areas of children's publishing in general are also reflected in multicultural publishing. Publishers' dependence in the field of non-fiction and novelty items such as board books on co-edition partners can be seen in the paucity of multicultural titles of particular relevance and worth in those areas. Some under-represented areas in multicultural publishing reflect the composition of British ethnic minorities - there are still relatively few titles featuring, for example, Asian or Chinese children.

Multicultural publishing for children has come a long way, though there is still, of course, a fair distance to go. What is of concern, however, is whether the many adults who will welcome and use this new **Books for Keeps** guide, will have the resources and support they need to acquire the books and actually use them with, or get them to, young people. For while the last decade has seen the publication of a wealth of multicultural books, it has at the same time seen a massive attack on the educational and public library structures which underpin their availability.

We need only to think of the abolition of the ILEA, the deprofessionalisation of the school library service, LMS, the opting out of schools, the exigent demands on the time and morale of teachers of the National Curriculum and, in the public library arena, substantial cuts in resources and a move towards contracting out library services to bidders who may or may not be cognizant of multicultural issues.

We must also add to this a new social climate of ridicule and alienation around equalities issues which it has become socially acceptable to dismiss as 'political correctness?'. The intellectually challenged Report of the **PEN Committee on Censorship** which purported to give evidence that children's writers were being coerced by PC editors was enthusiastically taken up by the right wing press which gave further credence to the notion that concerns such as multicultural books for children are undesirable.

One of the key roles of this new **Books for Keeps Multicultural Guide** will undoubtedly be to reclaim, by the strength, passion, humour, exuberance and warmth of the many fine titles it encompasses within its pages, our knowledge that all our children continue to need access to books for the multicultural society.

Rosemary Stones is Editorial Director of Blackie, Dutton and Viking Children's Books and a writer. Her latest book, **It's Not Your Fault: what to do when your parents divorce**, is published by Piccadilly Press in October. In the '70s, she was a founder member of Children's Rights Workshop, a campaigning group that was concerned, among other issues, with gender and race stereotyping in children's books.

The Guide to Children's Books for a Multicultural Society: 0-12 will be published at the end of October 1994, price £4.99 (inc p&p). there are also a range of bulk discounts up to 60%. To obtain a copy or further information write or phone: **Books for Keeps**, 6 Brightfield Road, Lee, London SE12 8QF. Telephone 081-852 4953.

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