

## **Foreign bodies and chocolate skin**

Patrice Lawrence

'Years of advertising have conditioned us into seeing chocolate as luxurious and lush. Evidently, this doesn't stop at black skin.' So writes Jeffrey Boakye in his excellent book *Black, Listed*, a hefty tome exploring black cultural history through racially loaded words. I reached for the book after yet another one of those discussions on a forum for children's writers about words used to designate difference. When I say words used to designate difference, I mean of course, how writers (mostly white) describe characters who (mostly) aren't white.

It is a discussion that I am fast losing patience with, not least because every time it surfaces, rarely am I treated to any startling new insights. The discussion generally boils down to some (mostly) white writers defending why they think some words are okay to use while writers from groups that have often been reduced to stereotypes explain why those same words are not appropriate. The fact that these are writers makes me especially frustrated. I think hard about every word I write, not just because I want to write the best possible story I can, but because I am not writing for fully formed adults. I am writing for young people who are still tracing the maps of their identity. I am writing for – and about – young people who are often judged, whose lives are often misrepresented if they are represented at all. For me, I feel that I have a responsibility; I don't want my words to hurt.

The academic Sara Ahmed talks about the concept of 'sticky words', words that get repeated and gain an accumulated affective value. One of the examples she uses in her 2004 book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* is the UK political rhetoric that prompted the public to consider asylum-seekers an

all-encompassing threat. Words such as ‘swamped’, ‘flooding’ and ‘bogus’ were fired from political cannons belonging to all parties – and those words stuck, didn’t they?

For those of us who grew up in immigrant families, there are a host of ‘sticky words’ that white English writers may not understand. So, yes, let’s start with **chocolate**. Of course, it can be a highly enjoyable foodstuff and, indeed, an excellent procrastination opportunity when I pop down the road to buy Dairy Milk instead of hammering words against my plot. ‘Chocolate’ was also top name-call when I was at infant school. ‘Chocolate face’. And yes, I did tell the lunchtime supervision staff. And yes, they did tell me that I shouldn’t be upset because chocolate is nice to eat. And yes, it was an early example of me being singled out for being black and having the words taken away to describe how I felt. If six-year-old me understood that the chocolate wasn’t being used in a good way, why couldn’t the adults? And why can’t they still?

But, even beyond that, when you describe someone’s skin as looking like chocolate, what do you actually mean? Yesterday, I managed to put away a massive bar of Green and Black’s Organic White in record time, is that the chocolate you mean? Or are we talking Lindt 85% Dark Excellence? Is the owner of the chocolate skin liable to melt in hot weather? Do they dress in foil? Admit it, it’s one hell of a lazy metaphor.

But in reality, it’s a euphemism. It’s saying that I want the reader to know that this character has brown skin but I want to be nice about it because, you know, saying they’re black or Asian isn’t really relevant to the plot. The chocolate skin reinforces the idea that ‘white’ is default, ‘white’ is normal, because it is only the chocolate person whose skin is being described. They are the Other One.

Connected to this, but for me even worse, is the description of mixed heritage – usually girls – as having ‘**caramel**’ skin. I’m presuming it’s not the

caramel they show in *Masterchef* when the heated sugar goes seriously dark and nearly burns. It's the bit where you stir in the butter and cream and ooze it into a jar. And more than once, that caramel skin has set off long swishy hair and green, almond eyes. Come on! Genes are splendid and unpredictable. Hair, lips, eyes, skin colour can come out any way. Please, no more clichés. It's more problematic than you can imagine.

When I give school talks, I tell anecdotes about my daughter frequently having her identity questioned – is she Spanish, Colombian, part-Japanese? Mixed heritage students often chat to me afterwards. One young man said – 'No one ever asks me if I'm British.' It's his Otherness that matters. When my daughter was nine months old and sitting on my lap in a dentist's waiting room, the woman across from me leaned forward and pointed to my baby. 'She is,' the woman said, 'just the right colour'. Since my baby was a good few shades lighter than me, I didn't know quite how to take this. Well, actually I did. But I was too polite to utter the reply that was in my head.

By maintaining the 'caramel skin' trope, writers are perpetuating a stereotype, one that slots mixed heritage children halfway between their two different-coloured parents, often fetishising their features. Need more evidence? Read Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff's article on what it's like to be a mixed race girl on the dating app Tinder, published in *Vice* magazine. The phrase 'caramel cutie' is used by one of the many non-charmers who responded. Do children's writers really want to create a younger 'caramel cutie', because that's how it can appear?

My favourite feminist, the African-American academic, bell hooks, wrote an essay called 'Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance'. (With titles like that, this is one of the many reasons why she is my favourite feminist.) It can be found in her 1992 collection, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. She says:

The commodification of Otherness has been so successful be-

cause it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.

Two thoughts spring up from that. Firstly, musician Stormzy's performance at Glastonbury in 2019. He was a young, black British man headlining one of the biggest – and whitest – festivals in the world. (Remember all the disquiet when Jay-Z was announced as a headliner in 2008?) Whether or not you listen to his music, Stormzy being there was a big deal and a very big deal in UK Black history. Naturally, black people's celebration of this moment has been challenged. One white man, who obviously meant well, responded to Clara Amfo's recognition of this powerful moment: 'Not Black British History,' he tweeted to the black presenter, 'Just true British history. Inspiring. Humbling. Incredible. No matter what your colour.' Stormzy was the 'spice' to jazz up Glastonbury's cultural landscape, only valid if interpreted through a white gaze.

And I know this and understand this. I am someone who never wrote a character who wasn't white until my 30s. Of course, I had never seen myself as a character in books as a child (unless it was via some outrageous stereotypes). I had never seen people like me writing books. But even more distressing, in spite of my prodigious reading habit, I never saw people like me as readers of books. I wrote books for white readers. My words were only valid if they had white approval.

When I started writing *Orangeboy*, my debut Young Adult novel, I was forced to think very hard about this. Was I writing about a black young man getting drawn into crime with a white readership in mind? No. I was writing about a subject that could so easily spread into stereotype territory. Marlon

had to be a complex and rounded character. I had to research, explore and come to terms with what it is like to be a young man of colour in the twenty-first century. I would not send books into schools and shops that could hurt members of my own community. And I don't want writers outside of my community to do that either.

So let's head to another word, one that's sticky for those of us with parents born overseas – 'foreign'. The writer and academic, Nazneen Afroza Pathak prompted a discussion online when she was frustrated by modern children's books that seemed to strengthen harmful racial stereotypes. As the thread lengthened, she argued why the term 'foreign' is so loaded. I asked her to elaborate for me:

The word 'foreign' can appear neutral to white writers, but it has strongly negative, Othering connotations for me and for others who are BAME (the acronym for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic). There are other ways to denote that someone comes from elsewhere, but the word 'foreign' is just a crude shorthand to me that makes me feel like I'm not one of the book's intended readership.

Nazneen is right. Foreign to whom?

Many of us born to immigrant parents understand the constant juggling of identities. How much should we try and fit in? Even if we try, will 'they' let us? What's the ideal mix of skin shade, accent, homemade food disclosure (I'm old enough to remember the 'foreign muck' era) and cultural reference points that will mean that I will no longer be seen as foreign? Jeffrey Boakye describes this identity juggle in a chapter in *Black, Listed* titled 'White-sounding forename'. He says:

When my parents, two black Ghanaians... stared down at a fat, black, newborn baby... and decided to call it Jeffrey, they were

making a cultural statement tied to a complex socio-historic web. They gave that baby a name that would catch sail in European winds, a name that signalled compatibility with a white world and through accident or design, we can never be sure, distances me from my Ghanaian heritage.

In other words, a name that made him sound just a little bit less foreign.

Of course, I'm not saying that writers should not refer to characters' physical presence, but if that's your plan, ask yourself two questions first. Number one, if I can't find the words to describe a character's external appearance, how good will I be at charting their internal world? Do I understand the subtle ways that a character's life is shaped by the way mainstream society relates to them? Secondly and most importantly, why do you want to write that character?

I ask that because I make very positive decisions about the backgrounds of my characters. Austin, in my novels *Indigo Donut* and *Snap*, is a Nigerian Muslim because there just aren't enough Nigerian Muslims in Young Adult fiction these days. Islam comes in different colours and shapes including a loud-mouthed east-ender who describes himself as 'a brown Mary Poppins'. Bailey, in *Indigo Donut* is mixed race and middle-class, his parents still together. Why? I wanted a middle-class, mixed race family. I wanted to counteract the trope of absent black fathers. I also wanted to give him a ginger afro to cancel out the caramel skin/swishy hair combo. Rose, in *Rose, Interrupted* is also mixed race. Why not take the clothes and make up of a very fair-skinned fashion lifestyle – Japanese 'fairy kei' – and give it to a brown girl? And of course, I also wanted the young people in London to see themselves reflected back. I wanted to demystify Otherness.

One final word to finish. Let's wheel in **exotic**. Let's scoot back to

*Vice* magazine and mixed race young women negotiating Tinder. Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff recalls a focus group discussion:

One girl, 23, said that initially she didn't mind the questions or 'focus' on her ethnicity...but then it became too much. 'I realized it was such a prevalent focus for a lot of people. Especially when they opened with lines like, "Ooh you're exotic"'.

Nazneen Afroza Pathak finds 'exotic' as alienating as 'foreign': 'When a culture, ethnicity, hair type, or skin tone is represented as remote, glamorous, or enticing through the word "exotic," it negates the possibility that that particular culture or ethnicity could in fact be the reader's lived, everyday reality.' Is the Caribbean exotic? Not if you grew up there. But that insidious mist of exoticness is continuously wrapped around young people who aren't white. As bell hooks would say, they are 'a new delight'. As a contemporary writer for young adults, as a black feminist and the mother of a mixed heritage daughter, I cannot ignore this. What I hope I can do, is recognise those tropes and stereotypes in my books, turn those words in on themselves and help young people find ways to resist the chocolate.

### **Patrice Lawrence**

Patrice Lawrence was born in Brighton, Sussex, and was brought up in an Italian-Trinidadian family, her mother having come to England from Trinidad to train as a psychiatric nurse. Lawrence has an MA in Writing for Film and TV. Her first story to be published was 'Duck, Duck, Goose', which was included in *The Decibel Penguin Prize Anthology* (Penguin Books, 2006). It was while attending an Arvon Foundation crime writing course led by Dreda

Say Mitchell and Frances Fyfield that Lawrence had the idea for her debut young adults' novel, *Orangeboy*. Published in 2016, *Orangeboy* won The Bookseller's YA Book Prize 2017, the Waterstones Children's Book Prize for Older Children 2017, and was shortlisted for the 2016 Costa Children's Book Award. Her follow-up book, *Indigo Donut* (2017), was described by Alex O'Connell in *The Times* as 'addictive'. Her third novel, *Rose, Interrupted*, was published in 2019. 'The Lawrence Line' is a blog on her experiences of writing and having work published. [patricelawrence.wordpress.com](https://patricelawrence.wordpress.com)

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at [writersmosaic.org.uk](https://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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