

## **London is the place for me**

Patrice Lawrence

I'm in the early stages of my fourth book for young adults. As usual, I have a little think beforehand. Do I know who my main characters are? Yes. Do I know the main problem they have to overcome? Definitely. Do I know which parts of London they wander through? Ah... Time to sit on a few buses and work it out.

I am a Londoner. In common with 'writer', it's a label that I had wanted to seize for some time but felt unworthy. I wasn't born in London – I came here from Sussex in my mid-20s. The people, the geography, the etiquette, the landscape...they were (and remain) hard to grasp because they are in a constant state of flux. It's a churn of a city, sitting on thousands of years of change. London's very complexity can make it hard to find your place, especially when everyone else seems to have carved their niche. Yet, it's that sheer complexity, the layer upon layer of different identities, that also means that there is niche for most of us.

I constantly explore the theme of belonging in my books because I have found it hard to find my place. I was the first in my family to be born in the UK. In my young eyes, my Trinidadian mother and Italian stepfather didn't have to be English. Their accents, their stories and, of course, their passports gave them their own national identity. They may not belong to England, but they certainly belonged somewhere else.

Me, with my brown skin and untameable hair, what was I? I was born in Brighton and aced my English and History O levels, but whether it was through the rhetoric of the racist National Front party or the gentle lilt of The Jam song 'English Rose', I was constantly absorbing messages that people

like me couldn't belong. But neither did I belong in Trinidad where the food confused me and most of my cousins couldn't understand my accent.

Before I lived in London, I'd visit the city to get my hair braided at black hairdressing salons. Even those early excursions made me feel like someone separate. My points of reference were so different from those of the black women working and being worked on. In our house it was Dean Martin, War of the Worlds and Status Quo, not soul or funk. I grew up in an atheist/secular household, so I could not share the Sunday church experience. And as for food, my stepdad had worked as a kitchen assistant in 1970s hotels, so his specialities are fried plaice and peas, prawn cocktail and black forest gateau. My mum, on the other hand, cooks splendid Italian food, though she did later learn to cook Caribbean food from the cookbooks sent over by her older sisters. I'd head back to Victoria for my train home feeling that my own experience of being black was the wrong one.

As time passed, I did find my niche. In a city so big, there are thousands of people whose lives have wandered outside the presumed perimeters. We always find each other.

So when I write about London, I write about belonging. I write about young people who are pushing through the stereotypes, be they young black men with an encyclopaedic knowledge of *The Matrix* or young women in foster care who model themselves on Debbie Harry. I write about the everyday London places, the buses and kebab shops and perpetual scaffolding, the museum stuffed full of taxidermy and the Soho basement arcades. I want to widen out our city so everyone can see a place where they belong.

## **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](http://patricelawrence.wordpress.com)

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

© Patrice Lawrence