

## **My favourite book**

Charlotte Williams

Try finding a book that resonates with the rich legacy of Caribbean literature, that is rightfully part of the Black British canon, and that sets a new trajectory for writing in Wales. Leonora Brito's *Dat's Love* is it, first published in 1995 and reprinted (posthumously) as *Dat's Love and Other Stories* by Parthian (2017) as part of their 'Library of Wales' series of classic Welsh literature in English.

In the skeleton of Black writing in Wales, Leonora Brito provides us with a firm backbone.

Leonora's collection of short stories is on one level simply a great read. The musicality, artistry, movement and rhythms of the book carry me along joyfully. In the title story, Leonora invites us to follow the thoughts of a gospel singer working in a cigar factory and her aspirations for starry love. She sings the opening lines of the book, '*Dat's love, tra, la, la, la, dat's love*'; and later we hear, '*Love is a bird, that flies where it will, that's what is says in the song. But I think we travel in flocks; different flocks, cut into by our shadowy opposites always flying the other way. And not just for love, but for life.*'

In the story 'Moonbeam Kisses', a 'half-caste' girl, Margaret-Rose, facing life in a Catholic orphanage, when asked by the Sister, 'In whose image and likeness were you made?' can only think of a song, 'Moonbeam kisses'. It is not a surprise that Leonora Brito's training in fine art leads her to paint scenes in such detail. In 'Roots', the 14-year-old Marcie looks at the wedding photo of her parents: 'My father's face is mahogany, with slivers of bronze where the light falls on the left-hand side of his face; the cherry red on my mother's lips is the only spot of vividness about her...two faces in black and white.' Brito's visual acuity is superb, but it is her insight into the fluidities of mixed-race positioning that resonates with me so strongly. The stories are bristling with people, places, localities and familiar signs and symbols of a very particular Wales, a multicultural Wales. She gives us a set of characters that reveal explorations of race and identity as intricately mixed with issues of class, gender and place. Whilst she uses the full repertoire of devices of mixed-race writing, she remains somewhat exceptional in the way she portrays Black life as ordinary, embedded, just there, part and parcel of the countryside, the small town, the workplace, the city and its environs. That's what I love about the work. We may by now have acknowledged the broad reach of multiculturalism into the rural landscape, but when Brito was writing the literary representations of countryside were spectacularly ethnically cleansed. Yet, like Leonora herself, her characters always wriggle and resist category.

Do we as Black writers always write with political intent? Leonora's subtle address and mellow polemic may suggest not. In an interview with me in 2003 she argued, perhaps controversially, that race could mean as much or as little as you want it to. 'I'm in agreement with Ralph Ellison's statements about Black writing', she said, 'it's not your experiences per se that are important but what you make of them artistically... I'd also go along with Zora Neale Hurston when she spoke of not wanting to belong to the

'sobbing school of negro-hood'.<sup>1</sup> The fact is, though, race just *is* in Brito's work. It is both political and not. And her exploration of the themes of race, community, place, history and identity make her writings timeless.

Leonora's book is an important landmark in the literature of Wales, and I will continue to demand recognition for her place in the broader legacy of Black British writing.

### **Charlotte Williams**

Charlotte Williams OBE is a Welsh-Guyanese writer, academic and cultural critic. Alongside an academic career, Williams has engaged with the literary life of her home countries, Wales and Guyana. She is most well known in Wales for her groundbreaking text [\*A Tolerant Nation? Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Wales\*](#) (co-edited 2nd ed. 2015) and for her award-winning memoir *Sugar and Slate*, which won Wales Book of the Year 2003. She has made numerous television and radio appearances and is a regular commentator on issues of Welsh multiculturalism. In 2007, Charlotte was awarded an OBE in the Queen's New Year's Honours List for services to ethnic minorities and equal opportunities in Wales. Charlotte is currently working in Melbourne, Australia as Professor of Social Work and Deputy Dean at RMIT University. Her home and wider family network are in north Wales and she returns home each year.

A recording of this talk can be found at [\*\*writersmosaic.org.uk\*\*](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://newwelshreview.com/product/new-welsh-review-62-winter-2003>