

## Countering Conventional Crime Fiction

Jacqueline Roy

When I began to write *The Gosling Girl* I was faced with a dilemma: in conventional crime fiction a (white) detective, who is often flawed but fundamentally good, exposes, hunts down and brings to justice a perpetrator, who is fundamentally bad.

For black communities, things are much less clear cut. Our experiences of the justice system are coloured by a sense of injustice. We are subjected to far more searches than our white counterparts and are far more likely to be convicted of a crime and to spend time in prison. Therefore, I couldn't, in good faith, represent a justice system that is fair and impartial in the novel. How then to write it?

I decided to make the book a whydunnit rather than a whodunnit: the reader knows from the outset that Michelle Cameron, a black child, has been convicted of killing a four-year-old white child when she was ten. The book begins with Michelle's release from prison, an inversion of the usual convention of crime fiction, where a novel closes with the capture of the perpetrator. In most conventional crime fiction, there is neither an in-depth presentation of the context for the crime, nor an examination of the emotional state of the perpetrator, except in sensationalist terms. I wanted to avoid this sensationalism and instead to present a low-key account of

the reasons why Michelle Cameron committed such a terrible crime. I opted to use a third person narrative voice; in early drafts, whenever I attempted to use the first person, the narrative slipped into melodrama. By using the third person narrative voice, I had greater control over the emotional energy of the book.

Given that I was unwilling to duck the issue of institutional and structural racism within the police service, I also needed a black detective. Natalie Tyler, the detective constable who is assigned to protect Michelle when her identity as a child murderer is revealed, experiences racism throughout the novel. She is a token figure within the police service, presented to the public in situations where suggestions of racism need to be denied or defused. In encountering Michelle Cameron, she is forced to confront these aspects of her work. In conventional crime fiction, detectives rarely question their role.

So, in these ways, the novel subverts the crime fiction genre. I aimed to invite readers to ask questions about social and cultural values, the justice system, and the ways in which identities are formed. However, I was telling a story, so it was of vital importance to focus on creating suspense, giving pace to the narrative, and developing the characters as fully as I could. These characters had to be more than just cyphers for the examination of social attitudes. Readers had to believe in them. I wanted to bring them alive as human beings.

The aim of *The Gosling Girl* was not to provide answers for readers. In writing it, I tried to pose questions, and to invite readers to find any answers for themselves.

## **Jacqueline Roy**

Jacqueline Roy was born in London. Her mother was British and her father was Namba Roy, a Jamaican painter, sculptor and novelist, who, unable to gain the recognition his art deserved in his lifetime, worked in a factory. He died when she was seven and she was encouraged to write by grieving friends and relatives who hoped she would take up his mantle. She edited Namba Roy's novel, *No Black Sparrows*, which was published posthumously in 1989.

Disillusioned and alienated by an all-white curriculum at school, she didn't do a degree until she was in her thirties. She rediscovered a love of learning at the North London Polytechnic and went on to lecture in creative writing and literature by writers of colour at Manchester Metropolitan University.

She has written six books for children and two novels for adults. Her first adult novel, *The Fat Lady Sings*, was first published in 2000 and was republished by Penguin in 2021 as part of the Black Britain: Writing Back series. Her second novel for adults, *The Gosling Girl* was published by Simon and Schuster in 2022. She currently writes full-time.

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

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