

Of All These Things Is Woven The Drama Of Life

Chitra Ramaswamy

When we were young, my sister and I watched an old black-and-white film called *Imitation of Life*. I have tried to place the year in which this earth shattering event unfolded from the comfort of our sofa. It was in our Twickenham house, my first home, which we moved out of in the summer of 1986. So I must have been around seven years old, and my sister around ten. Too young an audience but it is precisely when we are young that life happens to us, rather than we to it.

Everything in that suburban terraced house is shrouded in the thin gauze of early memory. There, life happened in shades of brown and textures of corduroy. The kitchen was the centre of the world with its smooth, dark floors, stainless steel plates, and my mother pouring endless cups of rice into our Prestige pressure cooker. Children experience their homes up close; the crevices and atmospheres they hold mean something that their

future selves may no longer be able to articulate. It's as if the memories gather in the corners like dust, and remain there. When I think of that kitchen I see weak light shining through the rippled glass squares of the door leading out to the garden. My mother's fingers approaching my mouth with a little knot of rice.

Directly above the kitchen is the sitting room. This is where my sister and I end up, one afternoon, in front of a film about a pale, dark-haired girl called Sarah Jane. A girl who rejects her mother who, to us, because of the colour of her skin, resembles our mother. Sarah Jane goes off to live instead with a beautiful blonde-haired family who looks to us like the other families who live in our brand new cul-de-sac, which goes by the old English name of Tudor Gardens. Sarah Jane pretends to be part of this family, but it doesn't work. In the end, her mother dies of a broken heart and at her funeral Sarah Jane throws herself on the coffin, screaming in a torment of grief and remorse. My sister and I scream with her. We cannot stop crying. We are inconsolable. Never, before or since, have I had a reaction like it. God only knows what my mother, a floor below in the kitchen, must have thought.

In the years that followed, my sister and I rewatched *Imitation of Life* a few more times. Our reaction was the same each time, as though we had

never seen it before. We lay down obediently and let the tidal wave of distress engulf us. It was our secret torment. We spoke of it to no-one. What on earth would we have said?

Years later, I was a self-loathing teenage girl living in another white, middle-class suburb of south west London. I opened a book, and it opened me. I don't know how I came across it. It may as well have fallen out of the sky into my upturned hands. I simply received this book like a child opening her mouth to take a spoonful of medicine. The sentences, which were like nothing I'd ever encountered, rose from the page and fell into my body. The first four words of the second beginning of *The Bluest Eye* – for this was a novel that began three times – were 'Quiet as it's kept'. Quiet. As. It's. Kept. Words that were like a puzzle I couldn't quite fit together. Yet, in reading them, something slotted into place in me.

The book was about a poor, black girl called Pecola growing up in Ohio, USA, in the shadow of the Great Depression. She dreams of having blue eyes. I was astonished. I had never read a book about a girl like this, which is to say, sort of, almost, a girl like me. A little way in – 52 pages in my edition, to be precise – Pecola met a wealthy, light-skinned black girl called Maureen who asked if she was named after the girl in *Imitation of Life*. 'What is that?' Pecola asked. Maureen replied: 'The picture show, you

know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother 'cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad. Everybody cries in it.' At the mention of this film, *our film*, I gasped out loud. I still do, writing these words.

The Bluest Eye was, of course, Toni Morrison's debut novel. It was published in 1970, nine years before I was born, when Morrison herself was 39. It is a landmark in the history of the American novel, my life, and the lives of millions. Until I saw *Imitation of Life* mentioned in *The Bluest Eye*, I honestly thought – as myopic teenagers do – that no one else on earth had ever seen it. This seemingly casual connection was a live-wire, hooking me up to a world in which suddenly I could see myself. With that one tiny link between a film and a book, the lights turned on. Another way to put it? Until I read *The Bluest Eye*, I didn't know that I existed.

It took me decades to fully tap into the network of associations. To realise that my sister and I were watching the 1959 Douglas Sirk version of *Imitation of Life* – the great German director's last Hollywood melodrama, featuring a baby-faced Lana Turner and the legendary Mahalia Jackson singing gospel during Annie's heartbreaking funeral service. That in *The Bluest Eye* Maureen is referring to the earlier 1934 version of the film, which, in turn, was based on Fannie Hurst's novel of the previous year.

That in Hurst's novel the girl whom Sirk would call Sarah Jane is called Peola and that Morrison was thinking of her when she named her first literary creation Pecola. The little black girl who dreams of having blue eyes.

I have never been able to watch *Imitation of Life* again. Some things are so formative we can not return to them. But, in order to write these words, I force myself to watch the two-minute, 21-second trailer for Sirk's *Imitation of Life* on YouTube. All begins well. Words flash up in a melodramatic, 1950s, white font: 'Of All These Things Is Woven The Drama Of Life'. I smile. Yes. That's it. But then my heart begins to beat faster. As soon as Sarah Jane and her mother, Annie, appear on screen, it bursts out of my chest like a fist. I am crying. I am inconsolable. *Quiet as it's kept*, the tidal wave comes.

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Chitra Ramaswamy is a journalist and author. Her latest book, *Homelands: The History of a Friendship* (Canongate, 2022) is a work of creative non-fiction exploring her friendship with the 99-year-old German Jewish refugee Henry Wuga. It won the Saltire Non-Fiction Book of the Year and was included in The Guardian's top memoirs and biographies of 2022. Her first book, *Expecting: The Inner Life of Pregnancy* (Saraband, 2016) won the Saltire First Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted for the Polari Prize. She has contributed essays to *Antlers of Water*, *Nasty Women*, *The Freedom Papers*, *The Bi-ble* and *Message from the Skies* and recently completed a commission from the Alasdair Gray Archive. She writes for *The Guardian*, is the restaurant critic for *The Times Scotland*, and broadcasts for BBC radio.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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