

# 16th–19th century



**Black  
History  
Month**

Until the eighteenth century in Britain, black people were represented primarily through white (and in the majority male) writers' works, and predominantly through the medium of plays. However, black characters were not played by black actors. Blackness was represented through prosthetics (black gloves, stockings, wigs) and the darkening of white performers' skin. This continued into twentieth-century film adaptations, for example Laurence Olivier (a white actor) played Shakespeare's Othello on film in 1965.

In the Renaissance (the beginnings of England's imperial expansion) the term 'Moor' was used to describe African, Chinese, Indian, Arab and non-Christian people. The most famous of these depictions in literature is the eponymous tragic hero of *Othello* (1604). Others include Niger in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* (1605), Toto in Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West* (1600–03?), and Zanche in John Webster's *The White Devil* (1611).

One significant step in these white cultural representations of blackness is Restoration playwright Aphra Behn, the first English woman to earn her living as a writer, writing *Oroonoko: or The Royal Slave, a True Story* (1688). Albeit without challenging white Europeans' assumption of racial superiority, Behn employs a female narrative voice in what was then a rare account of the horrors of British colonisation and enslavement.

The earliest known pre-twentieth-century writing by black people in Britain is found in works by eighteenth-century figures such as Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, whose 1787 book *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* called for the abolition of slavery and immediate emancipation of all slaves. Other notable works of the time include Olaudah Equiano's autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* depicting the horrors of slavery, which contributed to the passage of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, abolishing slavery in the British Empire, and Ignatius Sancho. Sancho's collection of letters, *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, an African, is one of the first accounts of African slavery written in English by a former enslaved person. He was also the first known person of African descent to have voted in a British general election and is now believed to be the subject of the c.1760 oil painting *Portrait of an African* which can be seen in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter.



Key figures of the nineteenth century include Robert Wedderburn, Mary Prince, and Mary Seacole, whose biography *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, was the first autobiography written by a black woman in Britain when it was published in 1857.

Mary Seacole

# Recommendations



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Read on to learn about 3 contemporary black British writers who have written works set during this time period.



## Incomparable World, S.I. Martin

Recommended by **Dr Leila Kamali**, Lecturer in American & English Literature, King's College London

*'If you want to read a book set in London at the same time as Jane Austen's novels, but without the manners, why don't you try Incomparable World...'*

Meet Buckram, a former African American slave who has bought his freedom in exchange for defending the British in the American War of Independence. Three years after his arrival with his comrades in London, Buckram has just been released from a stint in Bridewell prison. His friend William, meanwhile, is making a comfortable, if insecure, living in Covent Garden's gambling dens, while Georgie George, the 'King of the Beggars', is dreaming up his next get-rich-quick scheme, which might just be the ruin of them all. S.I. Martin's *Incomparable World* sets the semi-forgotten presence of eighteenth-century black Londoners amid the rookeries of Tottenham Court Road; in the filth of the city's alleyways, and the social whirl of its public houses and pleasure gardens, we follow the fates of these

'Blackbirds', a motley group composed of intellectuals as well as escaped convicts, runaway slaves, ex-sailors, and free-born black Britons.

Making frequent, arch comparisons with the late-twentieth-century moment of its publication, the majority of this narrative plays out in the year 1787, in the shadow of the

'Sierra Leone resettlement scheme', a plan presented by the British government at the time, to send three ships to Africa as a way of removing the 'burden' of the black poor from London forever. The perversity of this suggestion, coming so quickly after African American soldiers were openly welcomed to the city, is not lost on our savvy protagonists, whose fates present an ironic comment upon British race relations throughout the centuries. Taking in the sights, sounds and smells of Georgian London, this novel reimagines the moment when the history of transatlantic slavery, and its abolition, was shaping social relations between blacks and whites, and forming Britain's conflicted image of itself, even managing an encounter with a historical black British celebrity or two...



## **Strange Music, Laura Fish**

Recommended by **Dr Deirdre Osborne**,  
Reader in English Literature and Drama,  
Goldsmiths, University of London

*'If you enjoy the blurring of lines between fact and fiction in historical novels, then Strange Music is for you with its imaginative leaps across time to restore the herstory in history.'*

Fish's absorbing and affecting tale re-presents the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett before she has met and married Robert Browning, (known on school curricula for his dramatic monologues 'My Last Duchess' and 'Porphyria's Lover' among other poems). As the musical *West Side Story* retells Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, so *Strange Music* reimagines Elizabeth's life to suggest how and why she came to write her famous abolitionist poem, 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'. Fish's fiction imaginatively weaves together three first- person narratives: using Elizabeth's actual letters written during semi-invalid seclusion in Torquay, England, (and restoring) creole and black women's perspectives of nineteenth- century Caribbean plantation heritage, in this case, the Barrett family's Cinnamon Hill Estate, in her fictional characters, the sisters Kaydia and Sheba.

Fish herself writes how she was inspired by the haunting refrain, 'I am not mad: I am black', in Barrett's poem (reprinted in full at the end of the novel). She creates multiple viewpoints through Kaydia and Sheba, survivors of enslavement and its incomprehensible violence (especially towards women) as time jumps back and forth in Kaydia's, Elizabeth's and Sheba's narrative voices which construct the book. Although the subject matter of enslavement is undeniably grim and its major consequence, racism, continues to exist today, Fish's novel's experimental form in combining letters, prose and a variety of vernaculars cannot fail to bring to our attention how women experienced the institution of slavery, and survived against the odds in ways that literature can imaginatively restore.



## **Ship Shape, Dorothea Smartt**

Recommended by **Dr Suzanne Scafe**, Reader in Caribbean and Postcolonial Literatures, Course Director (English Studies), London South Bank University

*'If you want to learn more about the experience and politics of black people who were shipped from their country to England, immerse yourself in the lives of Ship Shape by Dorothea Smartt.'*

*Ship Shape* was inspired by Dorothea Smartt's visit, in 2003, to the gravestone of an African boy named Samboo, who had arrived at Sunderland Point, Lancashire in 1736 with his master, the ship's captain. Samboo died shortly after arriving in Sunderland, but his death was not commemorated until several decades later, with the headstone that stands there today. The poems in the first section of *Ship Shape* reimagine Samboo's early life in Gambia, his forced removal by slave traders to Barbados, and his eventual arrival in northwest England. The poems in the second section, 'Just a Part', describe the lives of Samboo's imagined descendants, now living in Britain but connected across the world: 'a distant lot/ scattered around migratory paths; from Barbados/landing up in London, Birmingham, New York ... Miami' (74).

The poems in *Ship Shape* are moving, powerful evocations of childhood, separation, hardship and love. Smartt's poetry presents a dazzling array of voices and poetic registers. She uses the ballad form, blues rhythms, the sea shanty and free verse: each voice and poetic form creates the distinct identity of the speaker, and provides the cultural and historical context of the poem's subject. She describes the shock of a young sailor, press-ganged into working aboard a slave ship and transformed into a man by the violence he is made to witness, and in contrast voices the anxious bewilderment of the captain's wife, who learns almost casually that her husband's vessel is a slave ship. She recreates both the raw emotions of loss and loneliness and the beauty of young black boys, 'aubergine angels' shining amidst the crowds at Waterloo station. The poems connect places, cultures and geographies; they intersect the past and present and are a lyrical testament to suffering and survival.



## Prose

*Incomparable World*, S.I. Martin (Quartet Books, 1997)

## Drama

*Strange Music*, Laura Fish (Vintage, 2009)

## Poetry

*Ship Shape*, Dorothea Smartt (Peepal Tree Press, 2011)

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