

Black British Literature: pre-war to 1970's



**Black
History
Month**

In the port cities of the United Kingdom, communities of black and mixed heritage families have been a longstanding presence throughout British history. However, there is no identifiable body of creative literature that was written by these British born citizens. What survives are letters, diaries, memoir, song lyrics, political pamphlets and journalism.

Authors who might be described as pioneers of Black British writing prior to World War II were often from abroad, and resided in Britain (often London) for various periods of time in the 1930s and 40s. These include the Trinidadians C.L.R. James, whose 1936 novel *Minty Alley* was the first novel by a black West Indian to be published in England, and George Padmore, renowned writer, Socialist, and campaigner for African independence. Jamaican Una Marson was also influential, not only as a writer, feminist and activist, but also as the first black woman employed by the BBC during World War 2.

The trio individually and together provided vital cultural platforms, which were to remain influential long into the post-war years – although until recent decades, their presence was ignored or marginalised in British literary histories.

A significant moment in British national memory is the docking of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury in 1948. This moment now serves to identify mass migration from former colonies in the Caribbean and other regions as Britain embarked on rebuilding its war-damaged cities and infrastructure.

The 'Windrush generation' contributed significant voices to the post war British literary landscape, such as Sam Selvon, VS Naipaul, George Lamming, and Michael Anthony. From 1966, the Caribbean Artists Movement, founded by Edward Kamau Brathwaite, John La Rose and Andrew Salkey was particularly influential, and is recognised as having helped bring the work of a considerable number of Caribbean writers, poets and dramatists in Britain to wider public attention.

The racism and hostility of the post war decades was fuelled by increasingly restrictive immigration policies and the racist rhetoric of right-wing MPs such as Enoch Powell in the 1960s and 70s. During this period many writers used their work politically such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, the originator of dub poetry in his 1978 in collaboration with reggae musician Dennis Bovell *Dread Beat An' Blood* or experimented with form such as in Beryl Gilroy's novel/memoir *Black Teacher* (1976) recounting her experiences as the first black headteacher in London.

The 1970s also saw the emergence of a number of influential dramatists such as Mustapha Matura, the first British based writer of colour to have a play in the West End in London in 1974, and Michael Abbensetts who, in 1978, became the first black British playwright commissioned to write a drama series for television *Empire Road*.



Male passengers disembarking from the Empire Windrush after travelling from the Caribbean

Recommendations



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



Trumpet, Jackie Kay

Recommended by **Heather Marks**, MA Black British Writing, Goldsmiths, University of London, Freelance Writer

'If you enjoy a love story, but are also interested in how racial identities intersect with gender and sexual identities, try Trumpet by Jackie Kay.'

The death of famous jazz musician Joss Moody rocks the world, not only because his band have lost their frontman, but because in death, Moody is revealed to have been born anatomically female. It is a transgender revelation which shocks Moody's son, Colman, but not his wife Millie, who flees to their holiday home in Scotland to get away from the press, who are hounding her for salacious details. Colman however is not so lucky, and ends up in the snares of hack journalist Sophie Stones, who is determined to get her big break as the ghost-writer of Colman's autobiography. Will Colman side with Sophie and sell out? Or will he come to terms with the truth of his father's identity? As Sophie Stones needles those closest to the great trumpet player, it turns out not everyone is keen to give him up. Friends rally round to protect the memory of Joss Moody, as Stones and the arbiters of state seek to overwrite and diminish his true legacy.

The beauty of *Trumpet* lies in the overwhelming triumph of love, and its ability to render as ordinary the apparent subversiveness that the Moodys – a queer, multi-ethnic, adoptive family – present to projected ideas of family norms. Despite the manipulations of others, the Moodys emerge intact, defying traditional conventions of gender, sexuality and familial aesthetics. Jackie Kay intricately weaves the perspectives of the different characters together to create a multi-voiced narrative that reads like a jazz riff, with the reappearances of Joss Moody – the man, the lover, the trumpet player, the father and, most poignantly, the child – ringing out as a refrain, drawing the characters who loved him closer together in their remembrance. The novel concludes on a hopeful note: Joss's final letter to Colman. Joss's last words to his adopted son are a treatise on love and fate, and a keen reminder that water can be thicker than blood.

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The Story of M, *SuAndi*

Recommended by **Dr Elaine Aston**, Professor of Contemporary Performance, Lancaster University

*'If you ponder on the relationships between mothers and daughters, and their link to class and race, prepare to be moved by SuAndi's heartwarming *The Story of M*'*

The Story of M is a solo performance based on the life of SuAndi's working-class mother, Margaret/M. Performed by SuAndi, the drama begins at the end of Margaret's life: dying of cancer, a wheelchair-bound M sits reminiscing in a hospital ward. Her story is told through a series of monologues, punctuated by slides that project images from Margaret's past on to a narrative of maternal privation and racial abuse. Located in the northern cities of Liverpool and Manchester, and spanning the mid- to late twentieth century, this biographical story forms an epic, poetic, and political tale of race, gender and class relations. We hear about Margaret's racist neighbours, the shops that will not give her credit, or how, during her time in a Magdalene laundry, she managed to keep her first-born child from enforced adoption because nobody wanted a black baby. Despite this discrimination, Margaret does not retreat into self-pity or a state of victimisation: hers is a rebellious spirit that laughs rather than cries in the face of adversity.

Each time I have seen SuAndi performing the role of her mother, I have been moved to think about the hardships that women in Margaret's position must have endured. The way SuAndi writes and performs this maternal-themed story is poignant, darkly funny, and politically charged. When laughing along with M, we are invited to question: why the laughter when racism means it is 'not funny to be called dirty and smelly'? Moreover, there is a dramatic twist to the performance (withheld so as not to spoil any first-time encounter with the piece) that unsettles binary thinking between 'black' and 'white'. All told, *The Story of M* speaks racially marked truths to the power of those who would sooner white-out the past, present, and future.



Something Dark, *Lemn Sissay*

Recommended by **Dr Fiona Peters**,
Writer/Social Researcher

'Imagine finding out your English name was not your real name and your Ethiopian birth mother had been stopped from finding you.'

Read how this shocking revelation felt for the playwright Lemn Sissay.'

It is 1967 in Wigan, Lancashire, and a boy is born to an Ethiopian student. His birth is to reveal the enduring impact of transrace adoption on belonging and identity. Lemn is given up soon after birth and adopted by the Greenwood family. He is renamed Norman and lives for the first eleven years of his life happily embedded in his white Baptist family. Abruptly, the family return him to residential care and casually suggest they will not contact him again.

After a difficult adolescence he leaves care; receiving his birth certificate, revealing his birth name Lemn Sissay, along with a letter from his mother (dated 1968) pleading for his return. Lemn's search for his mother begins. Will she accept him? And will she ever reveal the name of his father? This searing autobiographical solo piece of drama took twenty years to write. Its stage performance is excruciatingly honest, funny and tragic, and powerfully written to excavate the ghosts of a difficult past. The impact and beauty of *Something Dark* is in weaving loss, longing and love with forgiveness and acceptance.

Transrace adoptees often give testimony relating to complex feelings of belonging as they grow up with little everyday experience or connection to their race, ethnic heritage or culture. How these aspects of identity inform and shape belonging underpin current debates relating to the ways that children in care are matched for fostering and adoption. The current local authority and government guidelines disregard ethnic matching for adoption, but it remains a consideration for fostering. How would Lemn's autobiography differ if he had been matched for race, ethnic heritage and culture?



Prose

Trumpet, Jackie Kay (Picador, 2016)

Drama

The Story of M, SuAndi (Oberon Books, 2017)

Something Dark, Lemn Sissay in Hidden Gems:
Contemporary Black British Plays: Six Experimental
New Plays by Black British Writers ed. Deirdre Osborne
(Oberon Books, 2008)

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