

# Black British Literature: the late 1970s to 2000s



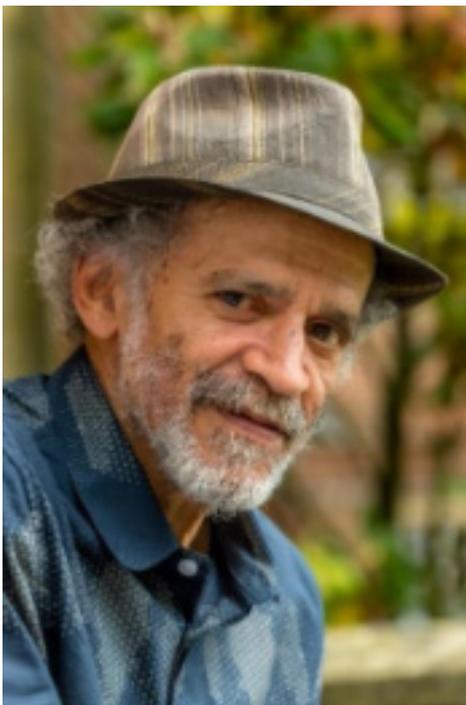
Black History Month

In the late 1970s and 1980s, a number of uprisings in many urban locations emerged from the intolerable racism and disenfranchisement young black people experienced, such as the Brixton riots in 1981. The ensuing enquiry into the context of the riots not only focused on policing, social deprivation, housing and education policy but also made recommendations around investment in community groups and initiatives, which provided support for many black artists.



*The Brixton riots, early 1980s*

The early to mid 1980s saw an abundance of work by black British poets, many of whom were showcased at the first *International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books* in 1982, including Linton Kwesi Johnson, Fred D'Aguir, John Agard and James Berry. Berry went on to edit the first major anthology of black British poetry *News For Babylon* in 1984 which also included work by Grace Nichols, Valerie Bloom and Benjamin Zephaniah.



*John Agard*

The 1980s also saw an increase in the number of plays by black writers being produced, often by black theatre companies, enabled by increased investment in arts funding. Examples include *Imani-Faith*, founded by playwright Jacqueline Rudet in 1983 to produce work for and by black women, *Black Theatre Cooperative* (1978), and *Theatre of Black Women*, Britain's first black women's theatre company founded in 1982 by Bernardine Evaristo, Patricia Hilaire and Paulette Randall. Some of these theatre companies were instrumental in broadening the focus of black British experiences on the stage, for example centralising female characters and stories such as in Jackie Kay's 1988 play *Twice Over, or Basin* (1985) by Jacqueline Rudet.



From within the generation who arrived in Britain as adults after 1945, or came as children with their parents, a wide range of writers also began to be published from the 1980s - Joan Riley, whose 1985 novel *The Unbelonging* is considered to be the first novel about the black experience in Britain by a women writer, David Dabydeen who won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize with his collection *Slave Song* in 1984, and the award-winning novelist and playwright Caryl Phillips.

The term 'Black British writing' emerged as a literary category from the mid-1990s. It is a term that distinguishes second- and third- generation literary voices and their British-born perspectives, from the migratory experiences and perspectives that transformed post-war literature ([see blog 2](#)).

These writers were finding ways to explore identities that had developed from being born and raised in Britain, often in city environments such as London, Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester, Cardiff, Glasgow, Sheffield, Derby and Leicester. In searching for ways of expressing this unique cultural position, some black British writers looked towards African-American cultural politics for motivation. A number of black American women writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Ntozake Shange and Audre Lorde are acknowledged as inspirations for many of contemporary black British writers, such as Andrea Levy, Zadie Smith, Laura Fish, Jackie Kay, SuAndi, Dorothea Smartt, Winsome Pinnock and debbie tucker green.

Many of the black literary voices who came to public awareness in the 1980s and 1990s remain at the forefront of British literary culture today.

# Recommendations



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Read on to learn about 4 contemporary black British writers who have written works set during this time period.



## **Fallout**, *Roy Williams*

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

*'If you want to read a tense thriller that immerses you in urban youth subculture, where loyalties are tested in bringing killers to justice, try Fallout by Roy Williams'*

*Fallout* opens blisteringly with a group of black youths, Dwayne (the dangerous and charismatic leader), Clinton, Emile and Perry attacking Kwame, an African 'straight-A student' who dies two days later. Emile's alpha girlfriend Shanice was the last person to see Kwame alive, while her best friend, the unpopular Ronnie, witnessed the crime. Everyone knows who the killers are, but no one will speak out. To access this closed world of allegiances, the Metropolitan Police deploy Joe – a black policeman who grew up on the same housing estate where the suspects live – to 'Make the Met look good' – and offer a £30,000 reward for information.

Williams creates a racially related homicide investigation that echoes aspects of the real-life Damilola Taylor case. Joe confronts the liberal hypocrisy of white colleagues and faces the youth gang culture that controls the housing estate. Shanice and Ronnie are in Joe's sights as key witnesses, but also have to survive in a world where unconditional loyalty is expected.

The 'fallout' of the title indicates the wider consequences of young people's social marginalisation, where aspirations are scuttled by racism, poverty, negative school experiences and the absence of strong role models. Substitute attachments are laced with male violence and desensitisation. Ronnie's questionable method to rescue herself and Shanice from this life is an attempt to fulfil their dreams against the odds.

# Recommendations



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## **Too Black Too Strong,** *Benjamin Zephaniah*

Recommended by **Kadija Sesay**, poet, editor, publisher, doctoral researcher, University of Brighton

*'Veganism, Black rights, police harassment and the death penalty – Zephaniah is a man with strong political views. If you enjoyed his novel Face when you were younger, or sampled his poems, try this collection.'*

Benjamin Zephaniah is a British poet, a Jamaican poet, a Rastafarian poet, and it is evident in his poetry that he is all three, equally. Within *Too Black, Too Strong* are poems that derive from his experience as a black man from the streets of Birmingham and London. Zephaniah is a socially conscious poet who addresses bullying – from police harassment to family harassment ('honour' killings) – as well as a concern for animals, vulnerable people in our communities, (im)migrants and the status of the working class. His poems reflect how he views multicultural Britain from a Black British perspective. They also reflect his worldview on issues that he is passionate about: Zephaniah attacks colonialism, capitalism, and other 'isms'. He addresses topics employing poetic styles such as rant, rap and free verse with techniques of repetition, rhythm and rhyme. He also experiments with echoing the styles of 'classic' poems to create his own form and content, such as Kipling's 'If' ('What If') and Larkin's 'This Be The Verse' ('This Be The Worst'). He explores the use of language extensively in the way it is written and the way it sounds. In some poems he uses a mix of standard English and patois, in others, he makes up his own words.

As a Black British person who has experienced a family member dying in police custody, Zephaniah's poems for victims like 'Ricky Reel' ring true, yet they link to experiences to enable us to think of other incidents that provoke our consciousness. A poem such as 'One Minute of Silence' is as potent for those who have died in natural disasters as it is for war veterans. A 'one-minute silence' has no class, colour or creed. Most of all, he challenges the reader to think of their place as a world citizen; a humanist who cares about planet earth.

# Recommendations



## **NW**, *Zadie Smith*

Recommended by **Dr Malachi McIntosh**, Lecturer, Goldsmiths, University of London

*'Why do some people stay in their home town for life, and others want to escape their roots and reinvent themselves? Explore the stories of these choices in NW.'*

What's wrong with Natalie Blake? Born into a working-class Caribbean family in Northwest London, Natalie has fought hard to change her circumstances and her name. After success in university and at the bar, she's now a barrister, married to a beautiful man with two seemingly perfect children. But still, something is missing. The question of what that is can only be answered by considering the place where she grew up, Caldwell Estate, and the lives of the people who live in and near it: her best friend Leah; Nathan, the boy – now man – that Natalie and Leah used to lust after at school; and Felix, a man Natalie never meets, whose name flashes up, briefly and tragically, on the news.

*NW* is a novel about success and failure. From beginning to end it thinks about what it takes to have the life that you want, and what might be lost along the way to attaining it.

Splintered into five fragmented sections that focus on its four main characters, the novel presents a common place of origin

– Caldwell Estate – that flings people in completely different directions. Through the hopeful, hopeless, and sometimes meandering lives of Natalie, Leah, Nathan and Felix, the novel asks how much the place you come from affects the person you are, and how far what happens in your life is yours to choose. More so than any of Zadie Smith's other works, *NW* tries to find the universals in very particular experiences, returning again and again to the unique Natalie, a black British woman struggling with race, place, selfhood and desire, and desperate to find new ways to live.

# Recommendations



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## **nut**, *Debbie Tucker Green*

Recommended by **Dr Valerie Kaneko-Lucas**,  
Regent's University, London

*'If you have been fascinated by the destructive relationships in Shakespeare's tragedies, try a very modern perspective on friends and family in nut by debbie tucker green'*

Divided into three storylines, *nut* traces intimacy gone wrong between friends, spouses and siblings. Reclusive Elayne wants to write her own eulogy, but her unwelcome visitors launch into a fierce competition about who will have the best send-off: celebrity event, musical concert or grandiose feast. In the second storyline, Elayne's sister and her ex-husband engage in a vicious dissection of their marriage; tucker green adroitly captures the complexity of lost hopes fuelled by bitter disappointment. The third storyline shows a woman coping with her sister's self-harm, delicately balancing between empathy and frustration. At the heart of *nut* lie the recurrent motifs of damage inflicted upon those we have loved, of fleeting hopes for redemption.

*nut* was first produced in 2013 at the National Theatre's NT Shed, directed by the author. The play captures the suppressed rage of the clinically depressed Elayne, and the ill-timed remarks of her so-called friends are clever put-downs with a sting in the tail. The scenes between the Ex-Wife and Tyrone have a compelling intensity as each struggles to maintain their dignity and status in their tug-of-love battle over their daughter. *nut* shows – with compassion, wit and black humour – how those nearest to us can fail to understand or appreciate us. tucker green's writing captures the rhythms of everyday conversation, with a sharp eye for the unspoken vulnerability and loss at the heart of failed relationships.



## Prose

*NW*, Zadie Smith (Penguin, 2012)

## Drama

*Fallout*, Roy Williams (Bloomsbury 3PL, 2003)

*nut*, debbie tucker green (Nick Hern Books, 2013)

## Poetry

*Too Black, Too Strong*, Benjamin Zephaniah  
(Bloodaxe Books, 2001)

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