

2005/April MALORIE BLACKMAN - Publishing News

For anyone who knows and understands the mindset and habits of teenagers and young adults, the idea of a trilogy aimed directly at them might seem like a bit of a hard sell. But Malorie Blackman is no ordinary writer and her *Noughts & Crosses* trilogy no set of ordinary books. Critic Amanda Craig says about her that “children’s fiction has long been the repository of great satirical writing, but Blackman’s trilogy takes it to levels unseen since Orwell’s *1984*.” And her books have become bestsellers.

This ex-Reuters systems programmer and database manager, who, it turns out, actually wanted to be an English teacher when she left school, seems to approach life with a hefty dose of pragmatism cut with a great sense of humour. “Nothing ever works out the way I plan it,” she says, “which is why I tend to go with the flow now, to be honest. I got into Goldsmiths College to do an English and Drama degree and decided to defer entry for a year and work to get some money. I got a job at a software house as a glorified filing clerk, which was the first time I’d ever touched a computer, and I got absolutely hooked, I loved it!” One thing led to another, and Blackman never did get to be a teacher.

But how did she transmute from the corporate to the creative? “After ten years I was *really* ready to do something else. I’d moved from computing to managerial, which I found very boring, and I thought if I don’t care any more I’m in the wrong job. So, while still working, I looked around for something more fulfilling and I tried acting classes for a year, but I’m no actress; what I could do, though, was come up with scenarios for the group.”

Realising the stage was not for her, Blackman thought it would be a good idea if she tried putting some of her ideas down on paper and switched her City Lit course from Acting to Writing. “I didn’t know what I wanted to write until I found the Writing for Children class. I was still reading a lot of children’s books as well as adult books at the time, because I’ve always loved them. You get such a depth and breadth of imagination in them, and I like books that have a strong story element. The navel-gazing, introspective

adult book does nothing for me, I don't like getting to page eighty in a book and thinking, I haven't got a clue what this author's going on about."

And then, she says, there was the fact that when she grew up there was a dearth of children's books which featured black characters like her. "I can't remember reading a single one and I thought, this is outrageous! And then I thought, instead of whinging about it I'll write one." Which she did. Two years and eighty two rejections later she was still waiting to get published. A combination of staying power, belief in herself and sheer stubbornness allowed her to carry on and not give up. Finally, though, someone said yes and her first book was a collection of short stories, published in 1990 by Livewire Books, the teen imprint of the now-defunct Women's Press.

Over the next sixteen years and seventeen books she's won many awards - including a BAFTA for the TV adaptation of *Pig-Heart Boy* - while *Noughts & Crosses* featured as one of the UK's favourite books in the Big Read survey, the only book by a black writer to do so. And it is *Noughts & Crosses* which has brought her so much public attention. In the book Blackman has imagined into life a world where everything's reversed, where the white Noughts were the minority and the black Crosses the dominant elite.

Had she decided she wanted to make an important statement with the book? "There was a political reason why I hadn't written it before, because people expected me to write about race, which cheesed me off as I wanted to write the books I'd missed as a child, and race wasn't the only subject I could write about. When I had a backlist behind me I thought I was ready to do it, that I wouldn't be pigeonholed as the person who writes about race, and I did have things to say. Originally I thought about writing about slavery, but the response from friends, black and white, was underwhelming to say the least.

"I thought there also might be preconceptions and I thought if I want to write something about racism and minorities, maybe I should play with people's preconceptions and that's where the idea for switching things around came from. I got the title - a game that no one can win - and it tied everything together in my head." *Noughts & Crosses* was in gestation for a good two years before Blackman started to write and from the beginning it

was going to be in two parts, except when she was writing *Knife Edge* she realised it was getting bigger. “The idea grew and eventually turned into three books and the World Book Day special...and now, five years later, it’s finished! I think, being a bit of a perfectionist, there are scenes I’d like to go back and change and rewrite, but,” she says with some sense of relief, “it’s done now.”

The final part of the trilogy, *Checkmate*, takes the story of Callum and Sephy on through their daughter Callie Rose. The first book was about love, the second hate “...and the third book is about hope, but I don’t think I sat down and analysed it to that extent when I started, it was more a case of let’s see what happens with this...it was my most ambitious project, different in tone to anything I’d done before. With *Noughts & Crosses* I really, really cared about the characters and was sorry when I’d finished it. With *Knife Edge* I was glad when that book was over...it isn’t one I’ll re-read. It’s quite harrowing. One journalist did say it was very kid-lit of me to want to end a book for young adults on a hopeful note, but I do. I do feel that sometime love doesn’t work and sometimes you get surrounded by hate, but you’ve got to feel that things will get better - even if it isn’t all hearts and flowers, which *Checkmate* certainly isn’t. If that’s kid-lit of me, I’m not sorry about it!”