



Authorgraph No.99: Malorie Blackman

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Malorie Blackman interviewed by **Stephanie Nettell**.

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Gusts of laughter billow from Malorie Blackman; words tumble and cascade in a free flow. She nuzzles Elizabeth, 8-month-old sweet-pea Lizzie, whose gummy grin mirrors her mum's and who herself couldn't wait to start life. 'For me, every day is now so wonderful, I couldn't be any happier - my husband, my family, my daughter, my writing. I'm lucky because I'm doing the very thing I want to do and not many can say that.' But if life seems fun, it's largely because she has made it so. Malorie Blackman owes her writing to one great sorrow and two stupid people.

She was 13 when her parents split up, and has not seen her father since she was 16. It was a rough time. 'For three years I was utterly miserable, and I coped by making up fantasies for myself. I'd walk along inventing dialogues: 'If an alien came down what would I say to it?' I love Jacqueline Wilson's work, but she uses subjects I couldn't write about - not ones I've been through anyway! - so I deal in the escapist things which kept me sane then. It never occurred to me to write my stories down (writing was for English lessons), but I wrote out all the pain, all the feelings I couldn't share, in secret poems.'

She did well at grammar school, with nine O-levels, and aimed at a degree from Goldsmiths' College to teach English and drama. That is, until the careers teacher inexplicably refused a reference on the grounds that she would fail her English A-level - 'Try business studies at Huddersfield Poly.' She dutifully did, but made certain her three A's included a 'B' in English.

Not only did she hate Huddersfield but, coming round from an appendix operation in her first term, this 18-year-old overheard a doctor and nurse talking across her bed. 'It's a shame about her disease,' and the reply, 'Yes, she won't live much beyond 30.' I was devastated: I had sickle-cell.'

Recuperating in London she rebelled and got herself a Goldsmiths' place after all, but in the intervening year she worked for a software house, and found it so enjoyable she decided instead to study computer science at Thames Poly. In three years of night study she got her HNC with distinction. She also discovered that the doctor had been wrong.

'For years I was bitter and angry about it,' she wails in vivid illustration. 'I'd had a brilliant job in computing, travelling round the world with Reuters, and by 28 I was a database manager dealing with money markets, when I suddenly thought 'What do I *really* want to do?' I tried classes in acting, but that wasn't me, and then I realised it had to be writing - it always had been. Although I knew that the diagnosis was false, I'd got the notion well and truly into my head, and it made me realise I didn't want to shuffle off this mortal coil without leaving something behind! Now I look back and think, yes, you really did do me a favour.'

Her older sister and brother were born in Barbados, but Malorie and her younger twin brothers are south Londoners through and through - she was born in Morden, lived in Clapham and settled in Lewisham. Their father was a carpenter,

their mother has always worked in hospitals: at Lewisham Hospital she was able to knock on the door moments after Elizabeth was born, and lives close enough to Malorie to pop in and help. It's her mother's and aunt's stories and their voices that echo in the **Betsey Biggalow** books; she had written three before she'd ever been to Barbados, but feels less of a fraud after her 1994 visit. This was a holiday designed to overcome the despair of a miscarriage - and so successful it brought Elizabeth.

All Malorie's books seem dedicated to her husband Neil, in fact all 33, it turns out. She mentions him constantly - the backbone of her life, a moral support as well as the vital source of subsidy in the early writing days. 'Originally I was going to give up my job for just a year to see how I got on, and I couldn't have done it without him.'

Neil, from Edinburgh, is a systems specialist for the Bank of Kuwait, and they met when she was 19 through computing. In 1987, having abandoned acting, she had begun evening classes at the City Literary Institute - cradle of many a success - where her tutor encouraged her to send work off. 22 rejection slips later some short stories were accepted by The Women's Press, but it was only in 1990 that she plunged in full-time. Children's writing was, and always will be, her first choice. 'I remember my own childhood very vividly, the feeling of what it was like to be six, seven, eight.'

Her family's books had consisted of the Encyclopedia Britannica 'and that was it'. The memory of Saturday mornings searching the library in vain for straightforward, ordinary stories with a black central character - reinforced years later when she discovered as a Voluntary Reading Helper that children were still searching - prompted her to write them herself. Her mission was to *normalise* black kids' roles.

'I wanted to show black children just getting on with their lives, having adventures like any other characters. On a tour last year for Transworld one boy asked me, 'Are any of your books about racism?' It kind of threw me - 'Well no, not really?' - but afterwards I thought, that's not true. All my books are about racism because what I hope I'm doing is presenting positive images of black children simply *living*, instead of coping with A Problem. As one girl said, 'I don't wake up thinking, Oh my God, I'm black! I get up and get on with the day.'

'I tackle racism by showing black people doing worthwhile things - Vicky's dad works in a bank (**Hacker**), Elaine's dad is a computing manager (**Elaine, You're a Brat!**), Beans's dad is an inventor (**Gadgetman**) - no big deal, let's get on with the story.' That her characters have mixed friendships is usually unremarked, with the sole reference to their colour in the jacket illustration. 'The only time I went into it was where Vicky was adopted; in a black family you don't sit around agonising about being black - and when it comes up it's to do with outside attitudes.'

But those attitudes create lasting scars, and beneath the irritation at how reactions to colour dog her work, she is actually ambivalent, her own past pain undimmed. 'When I was six this white boy (I still remember him) spat at me and called me names: he was my age so obviously he'd got it from his parents. I arrived home crying. My mum was washing up, curlers in her hair, slippers on her feet, apron round her waist. She took the apron off, but didn't bother with the curlers or slippers, and marched down the High Street and up his road, where she confronted his parents. There I was, embarrassed about everyone looking at her curlers but at the same time thinking how wonderful she was!' Malorie knows, too, about the wearisome drip of trivia: how someone always rushes up as soon as she enters a shop to serve her before she nicks something; about always, always being stopped when flying, whether travelling the world for Reuters, the only black person on the flight, or holidaying with Neil.

It's not, she insists, every moment of the day - then remembers an incident with Neil at the start of their relationship. 'We were in Smith's, with two huge aisles of magazines and maybe three on the bottom row like **Ebony** or **Black Essence**, which I was looking at. Neil commented that 'You don't get magazines for white people like that, do you?' - and I said, 'Neil, what do you call all these?', waving at the hundreds of others on the stall. Then I could see the wheels going round!' She rocks with delighted laughter.

She is less tolerant of shops who judge her books by the face on the cover. 'We don't have that big a black population here?, or even, 'They don't sell like normal books?! As David Fickling once said, '**Farmer Duck** did well and there's not that big a duck population round here either.'? Or of publishers who suggest 'putting her on your multicultural

shelf? when they could be recommending her to those who enjoy computers or thrillers. ?Transworld are brilliant at promoting them simply as books, and **Hacker** ?s winning the W H Smith Award and the Young Telegraph?s - both chosen by children - did me so much good.?

She is hugely prolific (though Elizabeth has pushed back a few deadlines), with an inexhaustible imagination providing strong, ingenious plots for any sub-teen. Reviewers who depress her with accusations of ?unbelievable? are missing the point: against an everyday background, her characters empower young readers to achieve what in reality they never could - solve the mystery, be smarter than the police, see the future and return. ?They?re the books I loved best when I was young.? and in many ways she has the readability knack of a modern, PC and livelier Blyton. And she writes almost as compulsively, touch-typing 50 words a minute for 12 hours a day. ?Neil: ?That?s enough, that?s enough.? Me: ?Just one more page, one more page!??

Picture books are hardest (?I like to witter on?), although **That New Dress** was a notable success, and **Mrs Spoon?s Family** , about a dog and cat arguing (?a blatant message, but there you go!?) promises well. She loves line-drawings, provided they don?t cross-hatch a black face (her *bête noir*?), and feels indebted to Lis Toft (**Girl Wonder** and **Betsey**), Doffy Weir (**Elaine**) and Patrice Aggs, her partner in the Orchard puzzle-stories she typically invented. A graduate of a script-writing course at the National Film and Television School, she revelled in personally scripting the Channel Four dramatisation of **Thief!** , her most ambitious novel, part thriller, part time-travel fantasy, and an earlier 10-minute drama about ?Trust? for BBC2. She longs for, and may get, more, and also to try adult drama.

Yes, she?s a go-getter. Herself undaunted by life?s mis-routings, she urges youngsters ?If you want something, go for it.? Don?t be channelled into stereotyped jobs by others? low expectations, as her generation too often were.

Few people realise that there are far more black women writers and illustrators than five years ago: does their invisible blackness mean they are at last being taken for granted? ?I?m relaxed around children because I know they?ll take me for what I am, whereas I get very nervous addressing adults. There?s always another agenda there, what it?s like to be a black writer, etc., whereas kids just want to know what it?s like to be a writer.

?I?m not a representative of anything. I?m Malorie Blackman.?

Photographs by Richard Mewton.

Some of Malorie?s books:

Hacker , Doubleday, 0 385 40278 3, £8.99; Corgi, 0 552 52751 3, £2.99 pbk

Elaine, You?re a Brat! , ill. Doffy Weir, Orchard, 1 85213 365 1, £7.99; 0 85213 642 1, £3.50 pbk

Operation Gadgetman! , Yearling, 0 440 86307 4, £2.99 pbk

Thief! , Doubleday, 0 385 40504 9, £9.99; Corgi, 0 552 52808 0, £3.50 pbk

Mrs Spoon?s Family , ill. Jan McCafferty, Andersen, 0 86264 582 4, £8.99

A.N.T.I.D.O.T.E. , Doubleday, 0 385 40679 7, £8.99

The Orchard ?Puzzle Planet Adventures? with illustrations from Patrice Aggs cost £6.99 in hardback.

Girl Wonder titles are published by Gollancz (hbk) and Puffin (pbk).

Betsey Biggalow titles are published by Piccadilly (hbk) and Mammoth (pbk).

That New Dress is now out of print.

Visit the Malorie Blackman website at www.malorieblackman.co.uk [3]



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