



Beyond the Secret Garden: Outside, Over There

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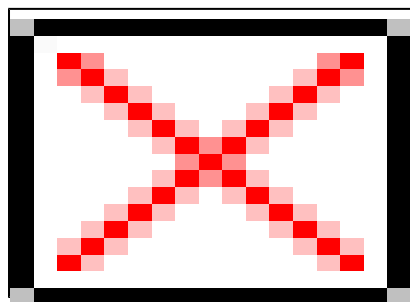
[Karen Sands-O'Connor](#) [2]

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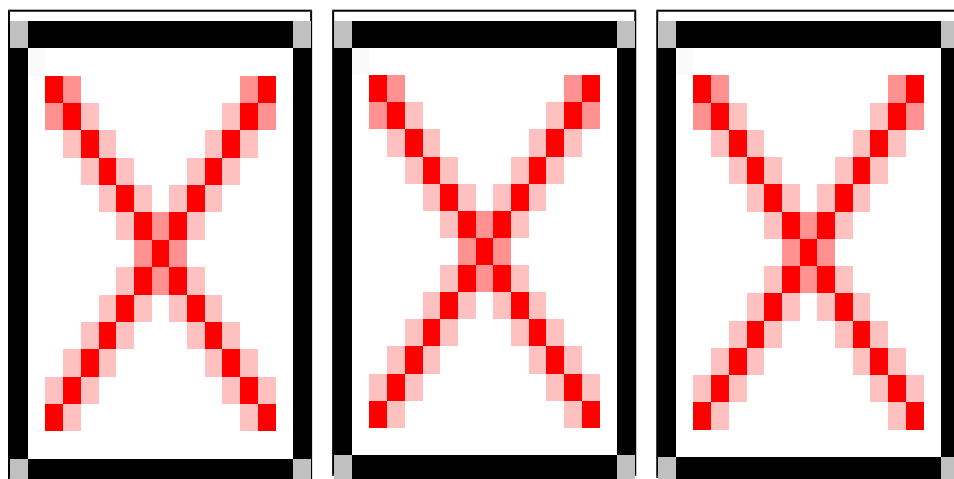
Outside, Over There ? diversity and prizes

In the latest in their series examining BAME representations in children's literature, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** look at prizes and British Children's Literature



At the **CILIP Carnegie Kate Greenaway** medal ceremony recently, Carnegie medal-winner Elizabeth Acevedo said how proud she was to be the first woman of colour to win the award. The Dominican-American slam poet champion's first novel, **The Poet X**, tells the story of Xiomara, a young woman who struggles to find her voice, experiences her first love, and challenges her parents' beliefs.

These are, of course, common young adult literary tropes, but expressed in what the judges called 'a truly innovative verse structure'. Acevedo's book had competition from other verse novels shortlisted by the Carnegie judges, including Jason Reynolds' [A Long Way Down](#) [4] and Kwame Alexander's [Rebound](#) [5]. Additionally, she was not the only woman of colour on the shortlist; Candy Gourlay's [Bone Talk](#) [6] also made the list.

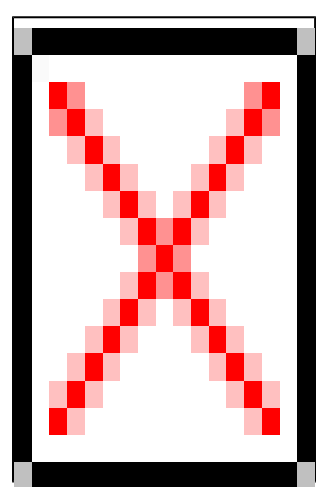


Acevedo's win follows 'two years after the prize [instigated an independent review](#) [7] into its historical lack of racial diversity, following widespread anger at 2017's 20-book, [entirely white longlist](#) [8]. In fact, however, Acevedo is not

the first woman of colour to be awarded a prize by **CILIP (The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals)**; in 2018, Angie Thomas won the **CILIP Amnesty Honour Book** for **The Hate U Give**. The medal was part of a special **Amnesty International UK** and **CILIP** joint project to raise awareness of books that promoted human rights. Thomas's book did not win the Carnegie, although it was widely praised by groups that shadowed the shortlists. This year, the Amnesty award was replaced by a **Shadowers' Choice Award**; according to Amnesty officials, this will continue the values of the **Amnesty Honour** book because it ["strongly upholds children's human right to a voice"](#) [9]. The Shadowers in their inaugural prize agreed with the Carnegie judges and picked Acevedo's book as well.

CILIP, through the changes it has made following the independent review, has certainly shown a commitment to valuing the contributions of all British readers. It recently launched **Pen and inc.**, a new magazine and listings guide to celebrate diversity and inclusion in children's publishing, freely available online. CILIP has also just launched a BAME network led by Shirley Yearwood Jackman, to provide a forum for librarians and information professionals from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds to share their experiences, support each other and network. In addition, the authors of this piece were part of a team of volunteers in an advisory group for the **Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Awards** this year. We were invited to observe judges' shortlisting sessions, offer questions and prompts for the judges' deliberations and give our views on the judging criteria. We were also invited to provide a training session for the 2020 judges.

Whilst there are many signs of progress, it is notable that all the shortlisted books for this year, and Thomas's **CILIP Amnesty** winning book from last year, all are about people of colour in parts of the world other than Britain. Writing about the Carnegie Medal, Pearson, Sands-O'Connor and Subramanian suggest that, "Race and racism continue to be issues 'out there', not 'over here'" (*Prize Culture and Diversity in British Children's Literature*, 102). White author Tanya Landman won the **2015 Carnegie** for [Buffalo Soldier](#) [10], about a young African-American woman who becomes a Buffalo soldier in the American west to escape the brutality of life in the south following the American Civil War. BAME author Candy Gourlay was shortlisted this year, but her book is about the Philippines at the turn of the century and the American invasion; her earlier books about British Filipinos were not shortlisted. On the other hand, nominations of books by and about BAME writers are up. Not only did 2019 see the highest number of nominations altogether (137), but the highest number of books by and about BAME Britons, including books by Sita Brahmachari (twice, for [Worry Angels](#) [11] and [Zebra Crossing Soul Song](#)), Nikesh Shukla (**Run, Riot**), Muhammed Khan ([I am Thunder](#) [12]), Onjali Rauf (**The Boy at the Back of the Class**) and Catherine Johnson (**Freedom**). This suggests that readers are beginning to recognize and value the BAME British experience in books.



This recognition is also reflected in the fact that other recent prizes have not only nominated, but awarded, books by BAME authors. Several of the **Little Rebels** award winners have had BAME characters, including the 2018 winner **The Muslims** by Zanib Mian. The **Jhalak Prize**, which celebrates British BAME writers for all ages, has shortlisted books by Kiran Millwood Hargrave (twice) and Onjali Rauf in its three-year history. Patrice Lawrence won the **Bookseller's YA prize** and the **Waterstone's Prize for Older Readers** for **Orangeboy** in 2016. The **Guardian Prize for Children's Fiction** awarded Alex Wheatle's **Crongton Knights** in 2016 but has not awarded a prize since then.

The proliferation of prizes for BAME writers is encouraging, but the concern remains as to whether these prizes will materially improve the state of British BAME publishing in the long term. In the mid-1970s, white activists Rosemary Stones and Andrew Mann started the **Other Award**, designed to run counter to the **Carnegie** and celebrate anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-classist literature. It was the first British award to recognize a BAME writer; Farrukh Dhondy's **East End at Your Feet** won in 1976. The award would go on to recognize several books about BAME characters, including by white authors Bernard Ashley (**The Trouble with Donovan Croft**) and Geraldine Kaye (**Comfort, Herself**), and BAME authors Farrukh Dhondy (a second time for **Come to Mecca**), Keith Ajebo (**Black Lives, White Worlds**) and John Agard (**Say it Again, Granny!**). None of these books are currently available in new editions, and only **The Trouble with Donovan Croft** has seen multiple reprintings. One of the reasons that the Carnegie has received so much attention from critics concerned with issues of diversity in children's literature is that the prize tends to grant some measure of longevity to the awarded books; Pearson, Sands-O'Connor and Subramanian note that "In 2019, two-thirds of Carnegie winners remain in print, including many from the first two decades of the award" (91). Prize-winning books are not only kept in print by school and library purchases, but also because publishers are more willing to promote them. This is an enormous issue for BAME writers, who often bear a large part of the burden of promotion of their own books. As Melanie Ramdarshan Bold points out in **Inclusive Young Adult Fiction** (2018): "This extra level of labour and responsibility can be demoralising, demotivating, and isolating for authors, particularly those who are already marginalised", not to mention giving them less time to write.

Karen Sands-O'Connor is professor of English at SUNY Buffalo State in New York. She has, as Leverhulme Visiting Professor at Newcastle University, worked with **Seven Stories, the National Centre for the Children's Book**, and has recently published **Children's Publishing and Black Britain 1965-2015** (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

Darren Chetty is a teacher, doctoral researcher and writer with research interests in education, philosophy, racism, children's literature and hip hop culture. He is a contributor to **The Good Immigrant**, edited by Nikesh Shukla and published by Unbound, and tweets at @rapclassroom.

The Poet X, Elizabeth Acevedo, Electric Monkey, 978-1405291460, £7.99 pbk

Long Way Down, Jason Reynolds, Faber and Faber, 978-0571335121, £7.99 pbk

Rebound, Kwame Alexander, Andersen Press, 978-1783447206, £7.99 pbk

Bone Talk, Candy Gourlay, David Fickling Books, 978-1788450188, £7.99

The Muslims (Planet Omar), Zanib Mian, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444951226, £6.99 pbk

Orangeboy [13], Patrice Lawrence, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444927207, £7.99 bpk

Crongton Knights [14], Alex Wheatle, Atom, 978-0349002323, £7.99 pbk

Worry Angels, Sita Brahmachari, Barrington Stoke, 978-1781126950, £5.99 pbk

Zebra Crossing Soul Song, Sita Brahmachari, Barrington Stoke, 978-1781126967, £5.99 pbk

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