



# Beyond the Secret Garden Hooray for Health Workers!

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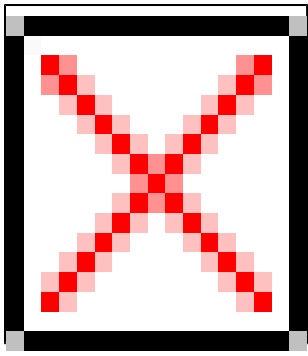
**Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** raise a cheer for some fictional doctors and nurses

Hoorah for Health Workers!

In the latest in their **Beyond the Secret Garden** series examining how BAME voices have been represented in children's literature in Britain, **Darren Chetty** and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** raise a cheer for some fictional doctors and nurses.

Discussing the postwar migration of health care workers from the Caribbean to Britain in a 2016 BBC documentary, Professor Laura Serrant commented, 'There's no doubt in my mind that those of us who migrated into England and the National Health Service saved it' (**Black Nurses: The Women who Saved the NHS**). Amidst recent news that the first ten doctors to die from COVID-19 were all from the Black, Asian and minority ethnic community, and that 35% of patients hospitalized with the virus were from BAME communities (about twice their representation in the general population), we wanted to highlight some of the portrayals of health care workers in British children's books from BAME backgrounds. British children's literature has often quietly honoured the contributions made by BAME health carers, and now more than ever we need to make sure British child readers are aware of the historical and current roles that BAME Britons have played in keeping the nation safe.

Historically, African-Caribbean women came to Britain as nurses not just after World War II, but during the Victorian period as well. Mary Seacole, the Jamaican 'doctress' who set up the British Hotel for soldiers on the front lines in the Crimean War, told her own story in 1857, but the first retelling for children came in 1909 in Henry Charles Moore's **Noble Deeds of the World's Heroines**. Moore's account was an anomaly, however, and Seacole did not reappear until the 1980s, when Brent librarians Audrey Dewjee and Ziggi Alexander discarded biographies of racist Britons and replaced them with biographies that better represented their reading population, including one they wrote themselves about Mary Seacole (1982). Since then there have been several depictions of Seacole for children, including by BAME British authors Trish Cooke (**Hoorah for Mary Seacole** 2008) and, most recently, Naida Redgrave's **The Extraordinary Life of Mary Seacole** (2019); it is the biographies by BAME authors that are most likely to directly address the racism Seacole faced.

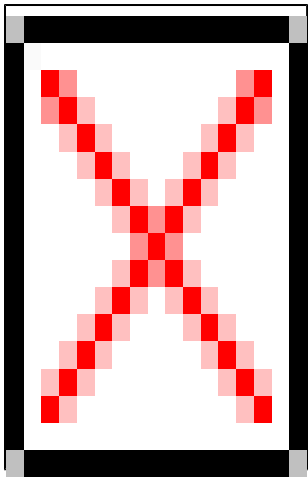


Many young readers in Britain, whether BAME or white British, have been cared for by one of the many nurses who came to Britain in the Windrush generation. African-Caribbean nurses were even represented in Ladybird books, whose 1963 **People at Work: The Nurse** included a Black nurse. White authors have often included Black female nurses in British children's literature since, including in the 2001 **Ladybird Nurse Nancy**, where the eponymous nurse 'is always neat and tidy and she works very hard looking after the patients at Story Town Hospital' (n.p.) - all of whom are white. The informational book about doctor or hospital visits is a common introduction for child readers to the role played by BAME communities in the NHS. Lucy Cuthew and AndoTwin's **Busy People: The Doctor** (2015) shows a British Asian GP who, despite her 'busy day' (n.p.) still manages to be gentle and take time with her patients.

Picture books also depict BAME health care workers in positive ways, often with child characters emulating them. One of the earliest picture book series to feature Black British children from a mainstream publisher was Petronella Breinburg and Errol Lloyd's **Sean** series; the 1975 **Doctor Sean** depicts a 'hospital' run entirely by Sean and his sister. Tony Bradman and Eileen Browne's **Through My Window** (1986) has the main character, Jo, waiting for her mother to return from work with a surprise. Jo's mother, a nurse, brings Jo a doctor's uniform for dressing up. Hena Khan's **Under My Hijab** (2019) also features a mother who is a health care worker—a doctor, whose 'bright pink hijab looks so cheerful tucked into her tidy white coat' (n.p.). And Sasha, in Lauren Ace and Jenny Løvlie's beautiful decades-spanning picture book [The Girls](#) [4] (2018), grows up to become a doctor.

The depiction of health care workers in books for older readers is, perhaps unsurprisingly, more nuanced than that for younger readers; in books written by BAME authors, the strenuous and often financially-unrewarded nature of health care jobs is depicted more often. Trish Cooke's **The Diary of a Young West Indian Immigrant: Gloria Charles, Britain 1965** might suggest a return to the Ladybird stereotype of Afro-Caribbean nurses, but Gloria's mother is 'working part-time in the hospital. She cleans there from four o'clock to eight o'clock' (32) while Gloria's dad works long hours in a factory and Gloria watches her younger brother after school, trying to squeeze in homework. Cleaners, porters, and other necessary NHS jobs are often overlooked as low-skilled and unimportant, but Cooke's story shows how vital this work was for a family—and for the NHS. Catherine Johnson's [Sawbones](#) [5] (2013), though set in the 18th century, nonetheless demonstrates the extra burden of being Black in the medical profession; Ezra MacAdam is treated as less than capable by many white Britons, and regularly faces casual racism in his everyday work. **Sawbones** is an adventure story, but like **The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole**, Johnson's tale cannot be an adventure purely innocent of British racism.

In the past decade, books aimed at middle grade / Key Stage 2 readers have often included BAME parents who are health workers. Candy Gourlay's [Tall Story](#) [6], (2010) includes Bernardo and Andi's Filipino mother an Accident and Emergency nurse who is 'always working. Night shifts and twelve-hour shifts and this shift and that shift.' (p 27). Hilary Mckay's **The Time of Green Magic**, (2019) has Abi's British Jamaican father Theo, also an A&E nurse.



One of the most recent to be published, Roopa Farooki's [The Cure for a Crime](#) [7] (2020) deserves special mention in this particular column. Farooki had already achieved critical appraisal and success as a writer of 6 novels for adults before she decided to train as a doctor and has recently been working on a Covid-19 ward. Her children's debut, the first in the **Double Detectives Medical Mystery** series is as fast-paced as they come. Twins Ali and Tulip investigate the apparent ill-health of their mum, a doctor. Any concerns that a story featuring a medical South Asian character may conform to a popular trope are off-set by the inclusion of the twins' double-amputee Grandmother, a spy with hi-tec equipment and an impressive array of skills. Perhaps unusually for contemporary children's fiction, Farooki manages to keep the children centre-stage without diminishing the importance of the multi-generational family. Terms rarely seen in books for this age group - medical and non-medical - are used and explained; 'Munchausen by proxy' is introduced, and Brian Sturgeon the Brain Surgeon is fully aware of the existence of 'nominative determinism'. Chapters are occasionally interspersed with summaries of medical blog posts written by the twins and included in an appendix. This includes a Bristol Stool Chart - no doubt fascinating to many young readers - and rather presciently, an illustrated guide of how to wash one's hands thoroughly. A BAME doctor penning a children's book where order is restored through courage and the application of medical knowledge could not have happened at a more appropriate time.

**Karen Sands-O'Connor** is the British Academy Global Professor for **Children's Literature at Newcastle University**. Her books include *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 the author, with Jeffrey Boakye, of **What Is Masculinity? Why Does It Matter? And Other Big Questions**. He tweets at @rapclassroom.

Books mentioned:

**Hoorah for Mary Seacole**, Trish Cooke, illus Anni Axworthy, Franklin Watts, 978-0749674137, £4.99pbk

**The Extraordinary Life of Mary Seacole**, Naida Redgrave, illus Alleanna Harris, Puffin, 978-0241372777, £6.99 pbk

**Busy People: The Doctor**, Lucy M. George, illus AndoTwin, QED, 978-1784931520, £6.99 pbk

**Through My Window**, Tony Bradman, illus Eileen Browne, Francis Lincoln Children's Books

**Under My Hijab**, Hena Khan, illus Aaliya Jaleel, Lee and Low Books, 978-1620147924, £12.52pbk

[The Girls](#) [4], Lauren Ace, illus Jenny Løvlie, Caterpillar Books, 978-1848578432, £6.99pbk

[Sawbones](#) [5], Catherine Johnson, Walker Books, 978-1406340570, £4.99 pbk

[Tall Story](#) [6], Candy Gourlay, Tamarind, 978-1848531376, £6.99 pbk

**The Time of Green Magic**, Hilary McKay, Macmillan Children's Books, 978-1529019230, £12.99 hbk

**The Cure for a Crime** [7], Roopa Farooki, OUP, 978-0192773593, £6.99 pbk

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