Writing from Janet Bayliss, Joy Bounds, Andrew Burton, Tricia Gilbey, Mbozi Haimbe, Melissa Harrison, Amanda Hodgkinson, Solomon Holmes, Keith Jones, Jacquie Knott, Gill Lowe

Book recommendations from James Canton, Matt Gaw, Mbozi Haimbe

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BookTalk

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Suffolk Book League

Created by Andrew Burton, Tricia Gilbey and Gill Lowe

about us

Suffolk Book League is a registered charity that has encouraged a love of reading since 1982 and supports a range of local initiatives across the county.

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Honorary President: Margaret Drabble

Registered Charity no. 296783

member benefit:
10% off

Woodbridge Emporium

We're pleased to partner with Woodbridge Emporium bookshop. SBL members receive 10% discount.

contents

from the chair

We hope you enjoy this edition of *BookTalk*. In these strange times when we can't get together for our normal events, we have taken a different approach to our magazine and responded to the moment. One of the blessings of this more slowly lived year has been a chance to pause and think more of the natural world. Our online event with James Canton and the forthcoming one with Matt Gaw reflect this theme too.

We are also celebrating Black History Month. Thank you to members who responded to our request for content for this. One response was from Margaret Drabble who we are very proud to have as our president. She writes: 'I'd like to respond simply by warmly recommending a new novel short-listed for the Booker Prize by Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga called *This Mournable Body*. It evokes the spirit of Zimbabwe, Harare, the villages, street and country life. She has recently been arrested for anti-government remarks but I think is now released on bail. She is published by Faber. It is very well worth reading and I am hoping she will win the prize. She needs it, and she needs readers. So please do include this endorsement in your list of good ethnic minority books - though of course in her home country she is not minority.'

We have two more members-only online events planned, and we hope you will join us and enjoy them. The first is with Matt Gaw and will go live on October 15 2020. The second is scheduled for November 12 2020 and is with Mbozi Haimbe, our featured author in this issue of *BookTalk*. Keep an eye on the website and our social media platforms for details. Given that we have not been able to meet in person we are going to offer to carry the payments that you made for your subscriptions this year over to next year. We will be contacting you soon to let you know what that means for you.

Meanwhile, please keep safe and keep reading. I look forward to seeing you, hopefully soon.

Jacquie

forthcoming suffolk book league online events...

Matt Gaw
Thursday 15 October 2020
7.30pm

Mbozi Haimbe
Thursday 12 November 2020
7.30pm

Free to members

Log on at suffolkbookleague.org

Re-storying and Re-balancing

by Gill Lowe

Chinua Achebe's *Home and Exile* (2000) articulates the power of stories to create a sense of dispossession or to confer strength, depending on who wields the pen. Achebe examines the 'process of "re-storying" peoples who had been knocked silent by all kinds of dispossession'. He ends with a hope for the new Millennium that this 're-storying' of those who have been marginalised will eventually result in a 'balance of stories among the world's peoples'.

A decade on, in 'The Danger of a Single Story', Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, following Achebe, affirms that, 'Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize'. Adiche stresses the dangers of showing 'a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again'. She rejects the 'single story' as a 'catastrophe'. Another ten years later, 're-storying' is imperative for the first Black woman Booker Prize winner, Bernardine Evaristo. At this year's online Edinburgh Book Festival she roundly rebuffs the simplicity of a homogenous identity. *Girl, Woman, Other* explores the complexities of identities; the fluidity and intersectionality of gender, sexuality, class and race. Talking to Nicola Sturgeon, Evaristo emphasises the importance of fiction in understanding our multifaceted world. She agrees that 'literature can shape our ideas', therefore it must be more inclusive. She restores the narratives 'that aren't being told'. Since the killing of George Floyd, in May 2020, it has been impossible to overlook the abundance of books, articles and programmes relating to Black experience. In July, Evaristo recorded A Point of View on 'Why Black Lives Matter'. She says that, in her experience, 'white folk' are 'reticent to discuss' racism. She suggests, however, that white readers have an appetite for books that will 'educate'. If you are 'open' to what you encounter in reading, she asserts, 'you are not going to be the same person' but will gain greater empathy, 'a deeper and broader perspective'.

Committed to anti-racism and self-education, actor and activist, Emma Watson, compiled her list of recommended books by people of colour. But in *The New York Times*, Racquel Gates takes issue with simplistic compilations made in an 'overdue rush to acknowledge America's deeply entrenched anti-blackness'. For Gates, 'such lists reduce Black art to a hastily constructed manual to understanding oppression, always with white people as the implied audience'. There is comparable unease about the convenient use of acronyms to define groups of people by race, gender or sexual orientation. POC (People of Colour) has, controversially, become BIPOC to include indigenous peoples. In 2019 Jackie Kay listed 10 BAME writers but lately BAME as a 'label' has been challenged as too definitive, reductive and/or exclusive.

Evaristo believes that publishing has been 'closed to many voices' and the lobbying of the Black Lives Matter movement has been a 'wake-up call' across the industry. The serious diversity deficit extends to marketing, publicity, as well as sales. Evidence is cited in articles such as 'Publishers failing to improve racial and regional diversity' and 'Diversity and the Future of Publishing'. See also academic studies: 'Rethinking Diversity' and 'Reflecting Realities'. In May 2020, the Black Writers' Guild was formed, representing over 200 writers, aiming to improve 'deep-rooted racial inequalities' in publishing. An open letter outlines their concerns and proposals.

Re-storying makes great commercial sense, given the proven success of books about previously neglected areas. *Girl, Woman, Other* is a global bestseller, translated into 33 languages. If we hope for a fair re-balancing in story-telling current developments are positive. However, in the US, Patrick A. Howell traces the '30-year cycles of peaks of interest in African American books, authors, and writing—each lasting plus or minus 12 years'. Editor of *Wasafiri* and academic, Malachi McIntosh, recognises a 'hunger from readers', but warns about the cyclical nature of publishing booms. Observing a 'publishing frenzy', he wonders if recent changes will actually be sustained.

Further Reading:

What Would Bernardine Read?
Black British authors top UK book charts
Reading group: which black British author should we read?
Most Impactful Black Books of the Last 50 Years
50 Indian books since 1947 Independence
10 Self-Help Books by Black Authors
If You Really Want to Unlearn Racism, Read Black Sci-Fi Authors
10 Powerful Inclusive and Anti-Racist Books for Kids and Teens
British Book Award: Candice Carty-Williams
BookTrust: Opportunities for Writers and Illustrators of Colour
Resources for Black Lives Matter

Featured Author: Mbozi Haimbe

Mbozi Haimbe was born and raised in Lusaka, Zambia. She completed a M.St. in Creative Writing at the University of Cambridge in 2018. Her short story, 'Madam's Sister', in which the arrival of a sister from London causes upheaval in a Zambian household, was a regional winner of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. Mbozi is currently working on her debut novel, as well as a collection of short stories inspired by Africa. She lives in Norfolk with her family.

We are delighted and honoured to include in this issue, Mbozi's article, written especially for Suffolk Book League, about Black characters in science fiction; her short story 'The Harvest' and a list of some books that have influenced her writing.

Short story for Suffolk Book League

The Harvest
by Mbozi Haimbe

Photo: Mumena, Zambia by Joshua Dixon (courtesy of Unsplash)

Banging startles me awake as a group of aunties swarm into the gloom. Boss Auntie holds up a paraffin lamp, and the thin yellow flame casts flitting shadows over her face. I'm a shadow too. I knew it was bad news when I first caught the metallic scent off Tamara last month; when I saw the red stain. Even a shadow knows these things. So here we are because of the stain, invaded by aunties.

'Get up! Move!' they chorus.

I don't get up or move. Neither does Tamara. Boss Auntie drags her up off the mattress and throws Tamara's downy blanket over her. Shivering at the sudden loss of Tamara's body warmth, I grab a corner of the blanket. And hang on as the aunties march her to the door. My heart's beating too fast. I really want these angry women to be a bad dream.

'Stop pushing her,' I want to say, but wailing comes out of my mouth instead.

Into the red morning, where more girls wrapped in blankets wait outside the hut. They huddle close together, the aunties moving them along with shouting. Reminds me of when all the cattle in the village are herded to the communal dip. There's a lot of stumbling and unhappy cows but the herd boys seem happy with all the whistling and calling and swinging their sticks to lash the slow cattle. I don't like the herd boys. I like the aunties even less.
I follow Tamara through the sleeping village. I'm her shadow. I have to stay by her side. In the distance the sun's just peeping above purple mountains, which rise in every direction except south. The aunties herd us along a dirt road past fields of maize seedlings sparkling with dew. We walk and walk, through an acacia forest where hummingbirds dance among yellow acacia flowers, their tiny wings beating like a single frightened heart. We arrive at a long house in a clearing ringed by acacias. Also here the hummingbirds dance. It's dark inside the long house. The air's thick. Already I'm longing to be out in the open, but I stay because Tamara needs her shadow.

There's a door at either end of the long house. Boss Auntie points at the one we just came through.

'Once you enter this place you leave childhood behind,' she says.

'Inde,' the other aunties murmur in agreement.

'You cannot go back to being children,' says Boss Auntie. 'Starting today, we will teach you how to be good wives, obedient wives, good mothers.' Auntie points at the other end of the room. 'And you will leave through that door as fully-fledged women.'

Me, a fully-fledged woman? I glance up at Tamara. Her eyes are wide and her lips trembling, but she stands straight and strong. I don't feel strong at all. Or womanly.

'Tamara.' I tug on her blanket. 'Tamara, let's go. Let's get out of here.'

She bows her head and doesn't say a thing. She doesn't even glance at me. A junior auntie's pulling the door shut. It scrapes the ground and sticks on something, a rock or gravel, but the door sticks and I know I have to get out before it unsticks.
I release Tamara's blanket. Girls and aunties spring away from me, exclaiming.
'Ah-ah! Where did this child come from?'

'You. Child,' Boss Auntie grabs my arm. 'How did you get in here?'

'Same way as you.' I strain to pull out of her grip.

'You're even being cheeky? Wait, let me go and fetch my big stick.'

Stumbling as she releases me, I don't wait to see where she keeps her big stick but dart out through the childhood door. The aunties' voices chase after me. I keep running, through the acacia forest, past the maize fields, past Tamara's mother sweeping the compound with a straw broom. I barge into Tamara's hut and burrow my face into her pillow. It smells of wood smoke and earth. But the familiar scent doesn't comfort me. I feel prickly everywhere, because I'm bad. I left Tamara behind.
I flip onto my back and stare at the circle of blue sky through the roof's smoke hole. How am I going to rescue Tamara from the aunties and the long house? Tamara's mother interrupts my important thinking when she comes in and sits next to me.

'What's your name, child?'

'Tino.'

'Oh,' she says, and smiles.

'That's the nickname Tamara gave herself when she was little.'

'I know,' I say, because it's true. I know everything about Tamara.

'Are you one of the children she's teaching to read?'

'I'm her shadow. I'm supposed to go with her everywhere but I left her in the long house.'

Mother rubs my brow and says, very softly, 'You're far too young for the long house, Tino. Better run home before your mother misses you.'

No -one will miss me. I have Tamara and nobody else. Mother watches me for a while, and when I say nothing, she leaves the hut, returning with a blanket as soft as Tamara's.

I return to the long house the next day, and the day after that, and for many days after that. There's never anything to see. Whatever they're doing in there, it does not involve coming outside to have fun. I could dig a tunnel, and at night when the aunties are asleep, crawl in and bring Tamara out. Or I could climb the roof and throw a rope down for Tamara through the smoke hole.

I don't have a rope, though. I'll ask Tamara's father if he has one. I'll go and ask him right now.

I come across a group of girls on the dusty road to the compound. They're swinging empty plastic jerry cans. One of them has a skipping rope wrapped around her waist.

'May I borrow your rope?' I ask.

'No. Sorry.'

'But I need it for something important.'

'I already said no,' says Skipping Rope.

'Why not?'

'Because we're having a competition after we're done filling up at Water Share.'

A skipping competition? I can win, I know I can. I skip better than anyone, apart from Tamara.

'Can I play, too?' Skipping Rope shrugs.

It's not far to the pump. It was donated by Water Share, who also laid concrete on the village square so that the place wouldn't get muddy with all the people fetching water. The Headman made a speech to say

thank you for the pump, then he cut a ribbon and gave everyone a rock bun and a coca cola from the Widower's shop. I thought it was very nice of the Headman. Bordered by the clinic, the shop and the primary school, the square is especially busy during school holidays, like now.

There's a long queue for the pump, and a long queue at the clinic, and a lot of men sitting on upturned crates on the shop veranda. They're drinking beer and shouting to be heard over the music blaring from the speakers attached to the veranda's roof beams. Also, more interestingly, there are children playing on the square. Groups of girls mostly, each group holding their own skipping championships.

Skipping Rope nudges me. 'Hey, what's your name?'

'I'm Tino.'

She thrusts her ten litre jerry can at me. 'Fill this up then you can play with us.'

I drag the thing to the queue. How I'm supposed to lift it when it's full, I don't know. My turn at the pump comes. I cup my hands under the gushing water and drink until my belly begs me to stop. Then I duck my head under the spout so that the water cools my scalp and runs under my collar and down my back, washing away the sun's heat.

I abandon the jerry can by the pump and go over to where Skipping Rope and her friends are jumping together in a line. They touch the ground then turn around, singing to keep their feet in rhythm with the slap, slap of the rope hitting concrete. The rope arcs into the air again. I run in to join the line. I'm singing and turning around and touching the ground, laughing. Water sloshes around in my belly all the while.

My days go like this: I wake up early to help Tamara's mother sweep the compound. Then I help serve breakfast to Tamara's father and brothers. We'll join them sometimes, but most times Mother and I eat by the kitchen fire. After breakfast I offer to fetch drinking water.

'Here's some change, get a box of matches from the Widower,' says Mother. 'Hurry back.'

'Yes, Ma.'

Off I skip, swinging a five litre jerry can with coins jingling in my pocket. I dawdle to wave

at Tamara's father and brothers working in their field of waist-high maize. They wave back. I carry on, through the acacia forest to the long house. Nothing to see.

Press on to the village square, where I spend most of my day jumping rope or playing jacks with smooth, round stones. The other girls and I also collect empty beer bottles and sell them to the Widower. He pays two kwacha for a bottle in good condition, one kwacha for anything that's cracked or chipped. I buy a lunch of biscuits and Coca-Cola from the shop with the money I earn. On Fridays the shop sells sugar doughnuts, but those are expensive.

The Widower is bald and has grey in his beard. His first wife got sick and died. He married a new, young wife but she got sick and died, too. So did her baby, who had stick arms, a round belly and a bad cough. The Widower has stick arms, a round belly and a bad cough. His is the only house made of bricks and a tin roof. He is also the only one who owns a car – a pickup van. He's very kind, runs people to the nearest town once a week and only charges petrol money. There's no bus service to the village, so if you miss the Widower prepare for a long walk. I wish the Widower were kind enough to give me a free doughnut.

I arrive home from Water Share one afternoon to find Tamara's parents and the Widower talking in the shade of the grain silo. Raised on metal stilts, the silo looks like a massive mud-built cauldron. While the men sit on stools, Mother's sitting on a reed mat with her legs crossed at the ankles. I drop into a heap next to her and ask the Widower: 'Did you bring any doughnuts?' Mother frowns. 'Show some manners, Tino.'

'It's fine,' says the Widower. He coughs. 'You know how kids are.' He coughs some more; veins pop up on his forehead.

'Are you okay? Some water?' asks Father.

'No, no.' The Widower takes a hanky from his pocket and wipes his mouth. 'Now back to our discussion. I see that your kraal's empty, let's help one another, eh? I'll double my offer. Four cows, one in calf.'

'Very generous,' says Father. 'But as I said, I'd like her to complete secondary school, maybe go on to college. She wants to become a teacher.'

'College.' The Widower's snort turns into a cough. 'You must be a wealthy man, wasting money on educating a girl.'

Father stares hard at the ground. Why do grown-ups do this? There's nothing interesting about dirt.

'Not wealthy but grateful that the rains have been good. We're expecting a bumper harvest,' says Mother.

The reed mat crackles as she rises to her feet. Manners, she said? What about her, standing above men like that? So mannerless! She cinches her faded red and yellow wrapper tighter around her waist.

'Come, Tino,' she says, her tone sharp. 'Let's go and find you one of Tamara's old uniforms. School starts back soon.' I drag my feet behind Mother. The Widower probably won't visit again because she has been rude to him, talking above his head. He won't visit again, and I won't get any doughnuts. It's not fair. Lucky, the dog trots up to me. His ears are crusty with sores. He shakes his head to chase away the flies buzzing around his sores. Droplets of blood fly off his ears and splatter my legs.

'Fuseki! Get away from me!'

Lucky scampers under the silo, whining.

Mother, Father and I wait with Tamara's brothers at the side of the only road leading out of the village. Lots of other teenagers and their parents are waiting too. Hoping to catch a lift south to the nearest town, from where they'll take a bus to boarding school.

'What about Tamara?' I ask Mother.

She hums as she checks the boys' luggage over, doesn't answer me.

'Shouldn't we go get her from the long house before the pickup comes?'

Mother keeps fussing with the bags. I glance at Father. He's standing off to one side talking to some other fathers. Soon, the Widower arrives in his pickup trailing a cloud of dust. Chaos as the teenagers scramble for seats in the back of his pickup.

Then there's all the good-

byes.

Mother says, ‘Make sure you text me when you get to school.’

And Father says, ‘I’ll send the rest of the fees when the harvest comes in.’

But nobody tells me why Tamara is not in the van with her brothers, smiling and waving, happy to be starting the new term.

With the boys gone, there’s only Mother, Father and I left to weed the huge maize field. Well, Mother and Father mainly. I join them in the afternoon after school. The other families are busy in their own fields and only offer to help when they have finished tending their maize.
‘I can’t pay you until after the harvest,’ Father tells them.

Some walk away. A few agree to be paid at the end of the season. I have my own hoe for digging up weeds. Father shortened the handle to make it easier for me. The maize plants are really tall now. They stretch up, up to the sky. Their tassels are nodding heads and their leaves are long, green fingers reaching for me. When the wind blows, the maize stalks sway, trying to pull their roots free of the red soil.

Sometimes Mother cuts down a maize stalk for me, and I sit with my back to the field so that the other maize plants can’t see me eating their friend. Chewing its flesh until I’ve sucked out all the sweet sap.

The leaves start to turn yellow during the weeks it takes us to finish weeding the field. Father waves one of these yellow-spotted leaves, smiling at Mother.

‘We’ll be harvesting soon,’ he says.

She steps in close. They stand shoulder to shoulder watching their yellowing field. I don’t see the fun in it, myself. I take off for Water Share before Mother can stop me.

Friday morning, and I’m at school looking out the window. The square’s buzzing more than usual. There’s meat roasting over charcoal, and a row of chairs set out on the shop veranda, and women laying out all kinds of food on tables that have been arranged end-to-end. Saliva floods my mouth at the smell of

sizzling meat coming in through the open window. Seems like all the adults in the village are milling on the square, all except teacher. She’s looking out the window, too.

Drumming starts up, and then singing, and the people outside move to clear a space in the centre of the square. That’s when I see Tamara: the first in a line of girls entering the village square. The aunties clap alongside the procession. Tamara’s oiled skin glints in the sun. Her hair is braided with white and red beads. Copper bracelets jangle on her forearms and ankles. She looks beautiful. I run outside to tell her so.

I try to push through the crowd. When that fails I drop down and crawl through people’s legs. Up front, I hop in place waving. ‘Hey, Tamara! You look beautiful.’

She flashes a smile but keeps her eyes downcast. The procession stops as the drumming and singing ends.

‘I’m sorry I left you,’ I call out.

Tamara doesn’t respond.

‘Tamara, I said I’m…’

‘She heard you, child. We all did. Now quiet.’

I shut my mouth, not about to disobey Boss Auntie. Can’t wait for the moment I’ll be allowed to speak again. I have so much to tell Tamara. The Headman also has much to say, stepping onto the shop veranda and shouting through a bullhorn. Welcoming everyone to, ‘This very special occasion to celebrate the initiation of these fine young women.’ He introduces them as such-and-such’s daughter starting with Tamara and all the way down the line.

When the speech ends, Mother dances up to Tamara and ties one, two, three… six new chitenge wrappers around her waist. Father brings her two squawking chickens. The other parents do the same, bring gifts to their daughters. Most of the other girls get goats instead of chickens. One of them even gets a cow.

The girls sit on the veranda where they’re served food and drink. Everyone else takes cover in the shadows cast by the buildings. A group of women bring round a fermented maize drink and then Nsima with stewed chicken, grilled beef and greens and rice and deep-fried dumplings. I need a little rest

after all that food, and lie down right there on the sun-warmed ground. When I wake up the party's still going on.

I lag behind Tamara, Mother and Father, too tired to catch up or call out for them to slow down. Partying is exhausting. Tamara's sorting through her school books when I finally make it to the hut.

I crawl into her bed and bleat, 'Good night.'

'Good night?' She sets her books down with care. 'Not in my bed. Who do you think you are, just turning up and moving in?'

'You're angry because I left you in the long house,' I say. My voice wobbles.

'Look, just get your skinny self out of my bed.'

I can't help it. The tears flow and the sobs break out and I can't stop even though I want to.

'Tamara?' Mother calls. 'What's going on in there?'
'Nothing,' Tamara says, the next second hissing at me, 'Sshh! Quiet, or I swear I'll… '
I cry even louder.

'Okay, okay, okay. You can share my bed, okay? Stop screaming now, please.'

But Mother's already at the door, frowning at Tamara. 'Did they not teach you kindness in the long house? Let the child be.'
Tamara lights a mosquito coil. Its glowing tip sends a trail of foul smoke up to the rafters where the mosquitoes whine. After lighting a lamp, Tamara hunches over writing in an exercise book. She'll occasionally read from a big book then write some more. My eyes stay closed a little longer each time I blink.

'Homework?' asks Mother.

'Just finishing a book report," says Tamara. 'It was due at the start of term, but I'm sure teacher will understand if I explain.'

Mother rubs my head. Her palm moves in gentle circles and her calluses snag on my hair. 'You can't go back just yet, Tamara. Your father owes the Widower for the maize seed and fertilizer. He owes the neighbours for some work they did. Then there was the ceremony and your brothers' fees. I'm sorry, but we need you here, helping with the harvest.'

Tamara stops writing. She doesn't look at Mother or move at all, not even a tiny bit. Tears

prickle my eyes once more.

My days go like this: I have given up school and skipping at Water Share. I work morning and afternoon at Tamara's side, and still the field stretches long and wide and full of maize. We have only harvested enough to fill up the silo for our own use when the other families finish harvesting. They'll soon start tilling their fields for the new crop.

I break a dried up ear of corn off a lifeless stalk. Toss it in my basket and reach for another ear, pausing at a flash in the mountains. Another silver streak, followed by the faintest rumble. Tamara, Mother and Father have stopped to watch the lightning, too.

'Back to work everyone,' says Father. 'Last thing we need is rain.'

We break off ears of corn. Faster, faster, faster. But the field of tinder-dry maize is bigger than when we started.

And even after a hard day under the sun, Tamara still works on her book report at night when her parents have gone to bed. She writes by lamp-light, with the oily smell of paraffin in the air and mosquitoes quarrelling in the rafters, lizards scrambling in the thatched roof and her two chickens huddled together in the corner.

'I'll teach you to read one day,' she tells me.

'I can read,' I say, curled up in bed.

Tamara smiles. 'Really?'

'Ah, eh, ee, oh, oo. See?' I'm very bright. Maybe when I'm older I'll be as bright as Tamara.

Mother sends Tamara and I ahead to make a start on the evening meal so that she can work alongside Father till night fall. Ten minutes into our walk home, the Widower drives past. He stops, reverses and winds his window down.

'Good evening, ladies. Where are you off to?'

'Just going home,' says Tamara.

'Get in. I'll drive you.' Tamara grips my hand and pulls me along. She quickens her step when the pickup crawls beside us, engine growling. Get in, the Widower demands. Get in, get in. He won't quit even though Tamara says no. Even though she keeps saying no. I slip my hand out of her sweaty grip, scoop up a rock, and hurl it at the pickup.

'She said no.' I launch an-

other rock, and another. ‘Leave her alone.’

‘Iwe!’ The Widower throws open his now dented door. ‘Come here, you. I’m going to thrash you, see if I don’t.’

I dart into the bush. Tamara keeps close beside me. The Widower follows, crashing through the long grass. His breathing is loud and raspy. He starts coughing, stops running. I turn to look at him. He is bent over with his hands on his knees, lips wet.

‘You can’t catch me.’ I laugh and point at him. ‘Welu! Can’t catch me.’

Tamara puts her hand on my shoulder as we walk on. ‘Thanks, Tino.’

Later, before bed, our little family sits around the fire drinking weak tea and munching on dry-roasted peanuts. Tamara tells us about her book report. She says it’s about a great man’s long walk to freedom. I’m not as interested in book reports as I am in the orange glow in the distance.

‘What’s that?’ I ask.

Father jumps up. He races out of the compound. We all run after him. I can barely keep sight of him in the dark. I pick up the smell of burning. Soon Father is easy to see, silhouetted against huge flames. Red, orange and violent, the fire rips through our field. It roars. Stalks collapse. Leaves curl into black wisps.

Sparks shoot into the air. Maize kernels pop all over the field, and it is the sound of money burning. I stumble back from the heat.

My throat’s sore from the smoke and shouting, yet I still shout some more. ‘Help! Help! Please help us!’

The gathered people are no help. They can do nothing against the fire. It harvests the field in minutes.

Next morning the Widower pays us a visit. He says sorry about our field and shakes his head several times then says to Father, ‘My marriage proposal still stands, you know. I’ll look after Tamara well, don’t worry about that.’

Father draws him to one side. The men talk in lowered voices. Mother clutters dishes in the kitchen. I glance at Tamara and she at me, and in the space between us vibrates the sound of a million tiny hummingbird wings beating like a single frightened heart.

books that have influenced me

by Mbozi Haimbe

The short story collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* by Raymond Carver - I admire his very concise style and how the bulk of what he says is in the unstated.

The short story, ‘Miss Brill’ by Katherine Mansfield - a quiet story that crept up on me and refused to let go. I'm in awe of how Ms Mansfield introduces her character and demonstrates power in the seemingly mundane.

The Grass Is Singing by Doris Lessing - One of my all-time favourites, it evokes a strong sense of place, and talks about an Africa that I recognize. The vivid descriptions made a lasting impression on me.

The Old Drift by Namwali Serpell - a more recent read, and one that left me truly inspired. Set mainly in Zambia, *The Old Drift* is a genre-defying, epic saga.

Beloved by Toni Morrison - a difficult subject matter; I was drawn in by the compelling voice, strong characters and the layering of realism with the surreal.

black lives matter at woodbridge emporium

by Jacquie Knott

One of the singular events in this extraordinary year was the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of a Black American man George Floyd while being arrested in Minneapolis, USA. Here in Suffolk, local people who responded to this event included Jules Button. Jules runs Woodbridge Emporium, an independent bookshop which provides the bookstall for Suffolk Book League meetings.

Jules regularly uses the window displays in her shop to explore themes and ideas of the day. 'I've never played safe,' she told me. 'I've wanted to be the community bookshop that embraces everyone. To be that bookshop you have to push the boundaries. We've done it with religion, spirituality and gay pride.' Jules put a 'Black Lives Matter' poster in her shop window and, with it, a display of books by Black writers and books about racism. Jules also put a picture of the display on her shop's Twitter and Facebook pages.

She soon noticed that some people who usually support her by sharing and 'liking' her social media messages ignored this one. 'I didn't think much more about it until I woke the next morning to a message from a customer telling me to check Twitter.' The number of responses was huge. Some were supportive, but others said they would no longer be buying books from her. Several people came into the shop to tell her they had shopped there in the past but would not now do so because of the display. This came to a head when she had a threatening letter put through her door and she had to involve the police.

Jules' young assistant, Hannah, spoke at a Black Lives Matter event in Woodbridge about what had happened, emphasising how proud she was to work in the Emporium. 'The next morning,' Jules remembers, there was a knock on the door. A man came in and said that he wanted a copy of every book in the window. 'Are you sure?' I asked him. 'There are fifteen of them!' And he said, 'Yes!' And from then on it gradually turned around. Young people came in and said they'd heard Hannah speak. They asked why books like this weren't in their school library.' Other people came into the shop to thank her for taking a stand, including several grateful members of the local Black community. Two Woodbridge schools and even one in Manchester have bought from that selection to enhance their libraries. Someone from Brighton rang to offer their support. Jules says the whole experience has been an education for her. 'I didn't take it down because it was bullying,' she says. 'I've only put up with this for two weeks, but the people I'm trying to support put up with it for their whole lives.'

The Stubborn Light of Things: a Nature Diary

(Faber and Faber: 2020)
by Melissa Harrison

I was an outdoor child, but I didn't think it was unusual – after all, weren't we all back then? In the late 70s and early 80s everyone played outside, unsupervised; we went out on our bikes all day, climbed trees, dammed streams and, at school, enjoyed the last years of the Nature Table. Many children's books had a strong nature focus, too: *The Wind in the Willows*, *Tarka the Otter*, *Watership Down* and, for me, *A Black Fox Running*, by Brian Carter. Developing a relationship with nature was the norm, rather than an exception – and given recent research into the mental and physical health benefits of such a connection, I'm glad to have grown up then.
As an adult, it's been my mission to inspire that sense of connection through fiction, non-fiction, journalism, children's books, broadcasting and social media. So I was thrilled when, in 2014, *The Times* invited me to become one of their Nature Notebookers, writing a monthly column on Saturdays. I was excited to reach a large new audience, but the fact that *The Times* was paywalled meant that non-subscribers missed out.

In 2020, not only did I have enough columns to make a book, but by then they covered a major transition: I'd moved from London to Suffolk, the setting for my novel, *All Among the Barley*, and that gave the narrative a shape, a hook. I called the collection *'The Stubborn Light of Things'*, the final line from a favourite poem by Alison Brackenbury.

Faber were keen to make some audio to go with the book's launch – and when lockdown hit, I knew what to do. My high-risk niece was shielding in a tiny gardenless flat, while I could walk out into open countryside: it didn't seem fair. I wanted to share my good fortune and make something people needed, something soothing and beautiful for a stressful and frightening time.

I roped in the brilliant producer Peter Rogers, who worked on the sound files remotely as well as writing all the music, and the first episode of the 'Stubborn Light' podcast went out on 6 April 2020. Those early episodes were a little rough around the edges, but we've both learned fast since then!

It quickly became Apple's all-time #1 podcast for nature in the UK, and charted highly in countries around the world. I've loved bringing Suffolk's beautiful landscapes to people who are isolating, and I hope the book will continue the podcast's work by opening people's eyes to the wonder of the natural world, as well our deep need for it – and its need for us, too.

A STATEMENT FROM JACQUIE KNOTT, CHAIR OF SUFFOLK BOOK LEAGUE, ON BEHALF OF THE SBL COMMITTEE

The Suffolk Book League is committed to embedding equality and inclusion in all of its practices. SBL works hard to make the pleasure of reading available to all. We believe that reading is one of the most powerful means of bringing us into contact with other lives, building empathy and understanding.

SBL has always supported diverse writers but we feel that we need to do more. We aim to further develop inclusive programmes and events that bring people together from different communities, with different experiences and backgrounds. We offer a set of guiding principles:

We believe that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect.

We value the contributions that people from diverse backgrounds make to the reading community.

We encourage and welcome people from all backgrounds to our events and into our membership.

We respect other people's opinions and create open communication channels. As part of our commitment to respect, we will not tolerate racism or sexism in any form.

We showcase the contribution that people from different backgrounds make to the league.

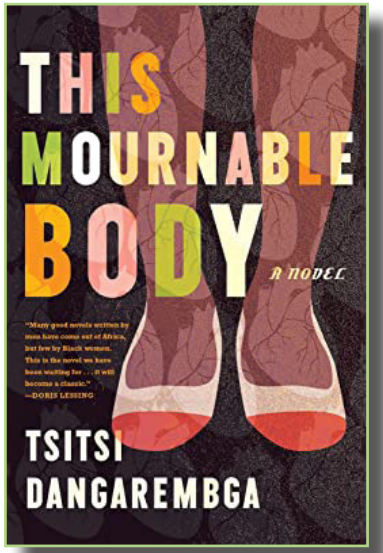
We aspire to work with and to develop closer working relationships with local communities and beyond.

We believe that these actions will make all members' experiences richer and we hope that in this way Suffolk Book League will contribute to building a more inclusive society.

15.09.2020

This Mournable Body (Faber and Faber: 2020) by Tsitsi Dangarembga

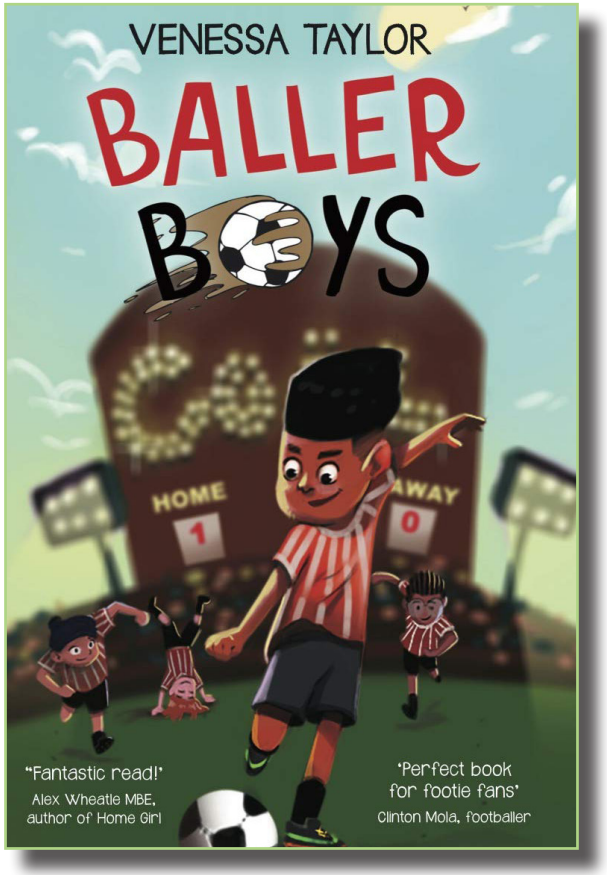
Whether Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* wins the Booker Prize this year or not, this book is worth reading. Good novels take us deep into worlds different from our own, and this one has taken me far into the world of Mugabe's Zimbabwe, and the mind and body of a feisty, hard woman, trying to make her way in an unkind place and time. It is not an immersion I am likely to forget, and I don't want to forget it either.



Tambu, the woman with whom I have been allowed to share some living, was the central character of Dangarembga's earlier novel, *Nervous Conditions*. But that was long ago, and now Tambu is struggling with her life, and losing. A brilliant device of the book is to narrate Tambu's story in the second person. 'You cannot look at yourself', the novel says in its second paragraph. And page by page we as well as Tambu are addressed by this voice, which neither passes judgement nor flinches from the truth. Her frightening, alienating world becomes ours, with its textures and its tragedy but also its surprises and its hopefulness. Tambu experiences change.

Our sympathies are always easily engaged with the leading character of a novel. But by putting Tambu under this constant, steady scrutiny, we ourselves are questioned. Both Tambu and the reader have to reflect: Can this woman, the one who has said and done these things, really be you? Is this the truth you can acknowledge, Tambu? And gradually we realize that the action of this book is a searching judgment of this embodied person, not just a body but a soul who must find herself. If she can. And you, reader, what have you made of your life?

Reviewed by Keith Jones



Baller Boys (Hashtag Press: 2020) by Venessa Taylor

The #ownvoices movement aims to increase the representation of voices from all cultures and backgrounds in children's books so that all children can see themselves reflected within and on the covers of a book. This aim has certainly been fulfilled with *Baller Boys*, a book about two best friends who have the chance to play for a football team.

Baller Boys has a well-portrayed, multicultural cast which reflects Venessa's experiences of growing up and teaching in London. Shay and Frankie are best friends, but when they try out for All Cultures United, Shay gets chosen to play for the main under nines team, and Frankie for the 'development squad'. This is the first time they haven't done everything together, and dilemmas arise which threaten their friendship. Having been a teacher myself, I know that young readers would value seeing their own struggles with similar problems reflected here. Every character in *Baller Boys* has their own challenge or flaw.

Venessa Taylor portrays the wider community and the children's home life alongside the training and the football matches. I enjoyed this aspect, but I would have liked to see her stick more tightly to the children's point of view rather than occasionally writing about what was going on in adults' heads too, as I think young readers might find this confusing.

Venessa Taylor has a passionate interest in engaging reluctant readers and does this through a simple short story in a clear typeface, and illustrations such as the 'football cards' which introduce the characters. Venessa Taylor is planning to show the Baller Boys growing up through future books in the series, and said, 'I'd like to develop a *Baller Boys* journal where children can record their goals, feelings, thoughts and experiences, as well as collect their ideas and observations etc. to help improve their wellbeing.' This is a great project and I wish her luck with it.

Reviewed by Tricia Gilbey

For a list of children's books, recommended by the National Literacy Trust, please see: Black Lives Matter: Book lists for ages 0-16+

Awakening of Spies (RedDoor Press: 2020) by Brian Landers

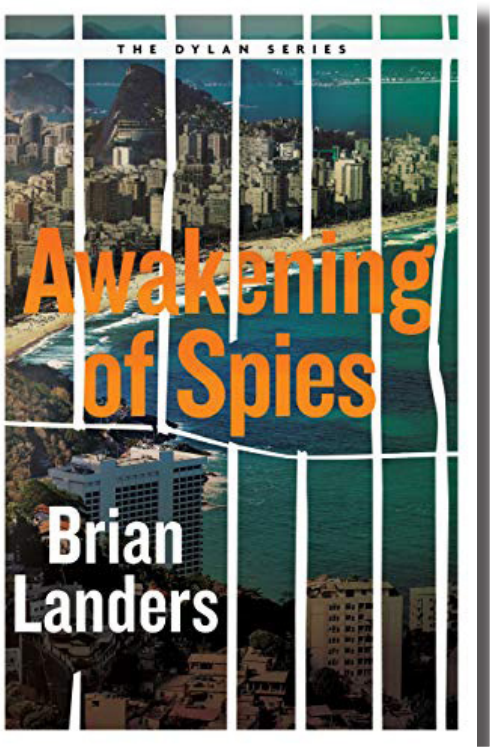
Thomas Dylan is an unlikely protagonist for an espionage thriller. He stumbles into being a spy in a way akin to Charlie Chaplin playing a drunkard. He keeps getting promoted despite a massive level of incompetence in the field of spy work, and soon finds himself at the centre of one of the most important handovers in recent history. Set in the 1970s at the inception of an exciting new development in interrogation techniques; *Awakening of Spies* is the first globetrotting adventure in the Thomas Dylan series. It treads familiar ground for the genre but keeps things fresh enough to be a captivating self-contained adventure.

Landers clearly understands spy tropes and uses them to his advantage; never taking himself too seriously. Expect: double crossings, chase scenes, paranoia, sporadic outbursts of graphic violence, and of course a love interest or two (move over 007). These are all to be expected from the genre but Landers writes with a gracious authority and efficiency that keeps the story moving at a breakneck pace. The plot is campy and fun but that never detracts from the visceral tension present in many of the grittier scenes.

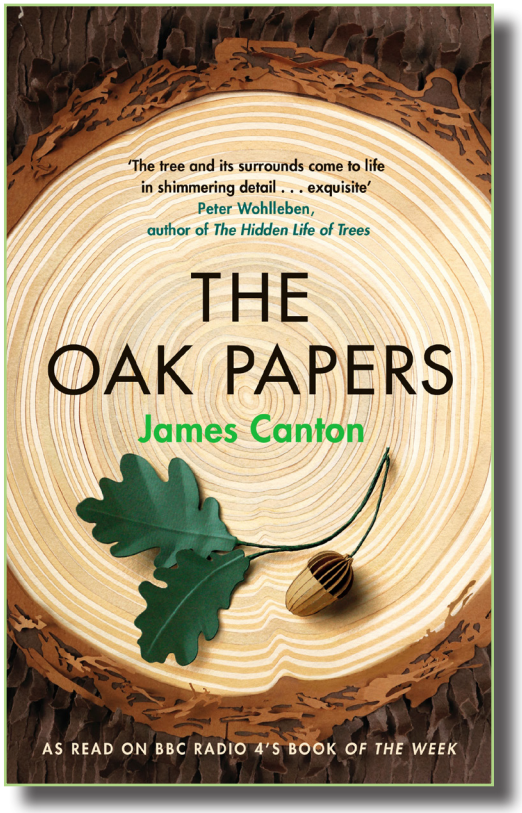
A light level of social commentary is peppered throughout the novel that takes advantage of its Rio de Janeiro setting to comment on systematic government corruption, police torture, and the faults of the class system. It doesn't go too in depth with it but I appreciated its inclusion nonetheless. It helped with the novel's verisimilitude hugely.

This stands as an excellent introduction to Thomas Dylan and Julia French whose relationship is at the heart of this series. Their chemistry holds the story together. Whenever the plot began to get a little too 'standard spy thriller twisty' for my liking; their witty back and forth 'will they? won't they?' tension kept the story from ever crossing the line into outright pretension.

This is a huge departure from Landers' debut, *Empires Apart*; a parallel drawing historical epic, and a polarising piece in its own right. Landers makes the leap into spy fiction with relative ease. If you're not already a fan of the genre then I doubt this'll be the one to convert you but if you are then this is definitely one to check out. *Awakening of Spies* is a fresh new addition to what can be a stale, repetitious genre; showing that espionage can still be done with some gravitas.



Reviewed by Solomon Holmes



The Oak Papers (Canongate Books: 2020) by James Canton

Within the increasingly popular field of nature writing, I have noticed a couple of distinct offshoots emerging in recent years. One concerns writing about trees and their significance in our lives. In this strand, I would include Roger Deakin's *Wildwood: a Journey Through Trees* (2007), Richard Mabey's *Beechcombings: the Narratives of Trees* (also 2007) and Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016). Another strand is nature as solace and titles in this strand include Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* (2014), Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* (2016) and what must surely count as the urtext of nature writing and wellbeing; Mabey's *Nature Cure* (2005). James Canton has deftly woven these two strands together in his compelling, illuminating and wonderfully meditative *The Oak Papers*.

In August of this year, the author gave a fascinating interview exclusively for members of Suffolk Book League and the resulting film is available for members to view at www.suffolkbookleague.org. After logging on, a members' area will open up where you can view this and future filmed author interviews.

When he began writing what would become *The Oak Papers*, James Canton was teaching at a secondary school and was battling with the fallout of a personal relationship that had faltered. Instinct drove him to 'seek solace from the ways of the world' and he found himself spending increasing amounts of time in and around the 800-year-old Honywood Oak at the Marks Hall Estate in north Essex. By getting to know the oak and by researching the historical significance of oaks across the globe, Canton falls under its spell. One of the chief lessons the oak teaches him is the importance of slowing down and being attentive.

The latter parts of the book see Canton getting to know other oaks that are closer to his home and do not require a drive. Climbing into the comforting branches of nearby oaks such as the Field Oak offer him a wider, deep-time perspective on life. The book becomes a spiritual journey to the heart of the oak, the writing frequently lyrical and ruminative, in the best traditions of nature writing.

Many of us have learned to pay greater attention to the natural world during the coronavirus global pandemic. *The Oak Papers* beautifully illustrates the benefits that flow from such attentiveness. I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is curious about the natural world and heedful of our place in it.

Reviewed by Andrew Burton

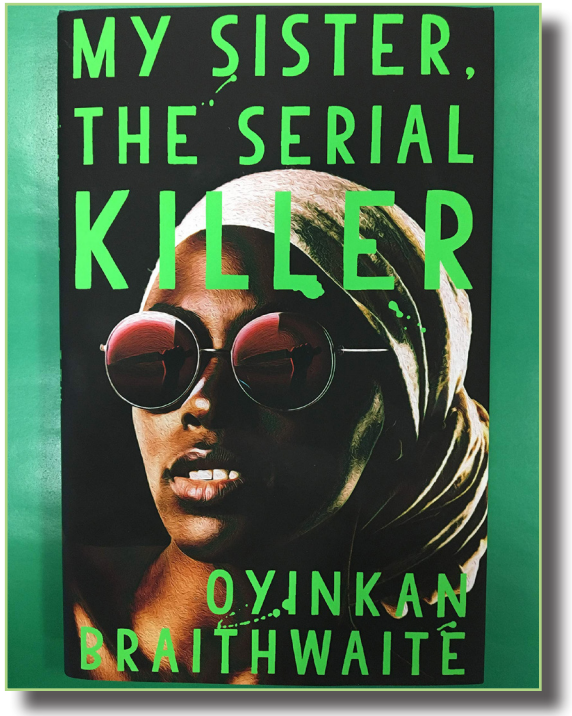
Oyinkan Braithwaite's book was published in 2018, and created an immediate impact, including being longlisted/shortlisted for several prestigious prizes. The title itself is provocative and possibly subversive – women are not often serial killers, never mind one's sister!

Korede helps clear up when her little sister Ayoola decides to get rid of any boyfriend who has begun to irritate her. We are treated to some rather brutal, disturbing scenes before the main story kicks in – what will Korede do when beautiful Ayoola takes a fancy to the man she loves? Can she prevent him from becoming the next victim? The story, often funny, darkens as we progress through brief, tautly written chapters, where the relationships in this wealthy family are slowly revealed. The reaction to beauty in a person itself becomes an issue – how it can cause pain and exploitation as well as drawing attention and adoration. Braithwaite has said that she wrote the novel wanting to explore this, and she does, in disturbing ways. However, the main fascination of the book is the nature of the co-dependent relationship between the two sisters, and the wonderful depiction of life in Lagos.

Oyinkan Braithwaite is a Black writer, who spent her childhood in both Britain and Nigeria. I write this review as a white woman, conscious of my own privilege in having access to a lifetime of books which help me understand myself and reflect my place in the world. This has not necessarily been the case for people in Africa or for Black British people.

Consequently, Black writers have often felt they have to speak for the whole of Black experience. For example, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is seen as one of the first novels to truly reflect the perspective, experience and history of Nigerians, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has continued this in her novels, of which *Half of the Yellow Sun* is the best known.

But Oyinkan Braithwaite says in the interview that ends her book that she doesn't want people to feel that she is speaking to Nigerian experience – 'I'm speaking to my experience, to the things I'm interested in, and that's all I can do.' She delights

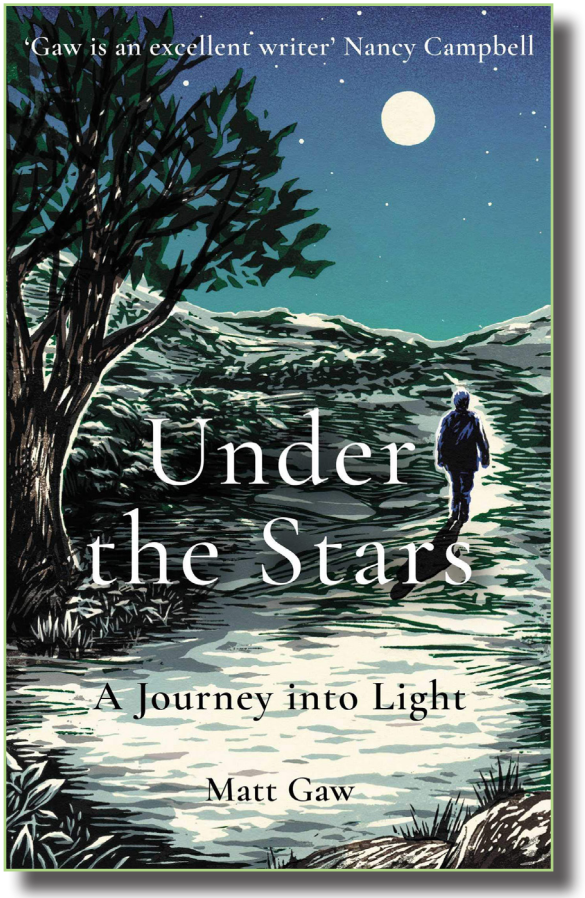


My Sister, the Serial Killer
(Penguin Random House: 2018)
by Oyinkan Braithwaite

in the fact that she has written a genre novel, one that is purely for the enjoyment of its readers. In fact, she achieves much more.

The Black Lives Matter movement challenges us to examine equality and diversity in all areas of society, and we can be happy that so many Black writers have begun to cut through the inertia that denies that equality. Braithwaite does so in a way that gives us both a good read, and a new perspective.

Reviewed by Joy Bounds



Under the Stars: a Journey into Light
(Elliott and Thompson: 2020)
by Matt Gaw

One of the comments on the back cover of this book describes this title as 'lyrical', but I am not sure whether this does the book complete justice. This is a book that is in part a hymn in praise of the joys of natural darkness and light, and which includes some poetic passages from the author's personal experience of being under the moon and stars. However, it is also a wake-up call to the extent that the darkness of night is threatened or indeed, in places, obliterated by the activities of human beings and how this affects animals, plants and the environment generally. The book offers a cogent argument for the importance of recovering the power of the night and halting the spread of what is generally known as 'light pollution'.

The book is comparatively short, but packs a big punch in terms of its thesis and how it is argued. It is divided into six chapters, each dealing with a particular theme related to aspects of the night and the way human activity has pushed it back, covering such subjects as the myth and reality of moonlight; stars, starlight and the constellations; and a cautionary tale of the author's trip to London to sample the artificially lit scenes in the centre of the capital.

Following this, one of the chapters deals with his forays into his home town of Bury St Edmunds after dark. Sublime descriptive passages nestle cheek by jowl with some clear explication of research findings and the science behind how the natural world is affected by the retreat of night. Interspersed with this are reflections on the folklore and myth of darkness, the moon and stars, and some philosophical consideration of quite why human beings have over the centuries found the night so frightening. I must admit I found the author's range of knowledge and use of language impressive: who knew that the nightjar was also known as the 'lich fowl' or that, for criminals, the moon was known as 'the tatler'?

I found this book absorbing, thought-provoking, at times challenging, and it certainly made me realise that the unstoppable spread of human-created artificial light is far more than just an astronomy problem.

Reviewed by Janet Bayliss

Beyond The Wall

by Mbozi Haimbe

The year I turned ten, my family moved to a farm during a time when my parents' finances became lean. My siblings and I had to find entertainment in the disused, roofless piggery and acres of wild, uncultivated land because the days of shop-bought toys and holidays abroad were over.

It seemed natural that we should conquer the incomplete piggery by scrambling up its walls. Balancing high up, we'd teeter along the wall's perimeter, our goal the highest point, the gable end.

I think my story-telling began then. Elaborate tales about how Superman was waiting to rescue us just beyond the gable end. If not Superman, then Batman, or Wonder Woman. Or any number of science fiction and fantasy heroes and heroines. I had no idea that, spinning those stories, I was a mouthpiece perpetuating an injustice.

Fast-forward thirty years later. I hit a snag while completing the critical component of my Masters' dissertation. I was reflecting on my creative piece, the first fifteen thousand words of a science fantasy novel. Here's what caught my attention: all my characters were white. In thirty years, I had made no movement from a narrative I had so innocently parroted.

This narrative? That the main players in science fiction and fantasy, those who would swoop in and do the rescuing, those who would push the plot, would always be white and never members of my own community. In discussing my creative choices for the dissertation, I pointed to James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* as an example of a black writer excluding a black presence from their story. And thus justified, I thought no more of it.

I'm not suggesting that writers should not write outside their race or gender or other aspects of their lived experiences, a different debate altogether. My contention is that in crafting my dissertation, I had not merely written outside my race, but had erased my community.

Thoroughly inculcated by the mainstream under-representation of black characters in science fiction and fantasy (SFF), I could not conceive of black characters inhabiting my story's world. So, I wrote about two white male protagonists supported by an all-white cast.

I did not deeply examine my creative choice until I was awarded a Milford bursary for SFF writers of colour to attend the 2019 Milford conference. I had to submit a story, which would be critiqued by fourteen other SFF writers. I got to work editing the creative component of my dissertation. Here I was, the fortunate recipient of a bursary aimed at promoting diverse voices, and what fare was I bringing to the table? Not a diverse voice but stale parroting that began in my formative years.

The bursary sparked a lightbulb moment.

I extensively redrafted my submission, replacing the white protagonists with African characters, one of them female. I expanded my reading list to include Afrofuturist fiction such as Tade Thompson's *Rosewater* and N. K. Jemisin's short story collection, *How Long 'til Black Future Month*? Also influential in reframing my perspective of the relationship between SFF or speculative fiction and BAME characters were Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl In The Ring*, Karen Lord's *Redemption In Indigo*, Irenosen Okojie's short story collection *Speak Gigantular*, and Jesmyn Ward's poignant *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Although not Afrofuturist, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, a science fiction novel with compelling elements of inexorably unfolding horror, was another key influence.

I cannot end without mentioning Marvel's cultural phenomenon, *Black Panther*. If I could meet my ten-year old self now, I'd tell her to look for T'Chala beyond the wall. I'd tell her to escape to Wakanda. I'd say to her what no-one told to me all those years ago: black characters belong in science fiction and fantasy too.

Work continues on my dissertation piece, which I'm expanding into my debut novel. My Afrofuturist voice is not quite there yet, but I renew my dedication to refine it each time I sit down to write.

endnote...

book recommendations from our recent speakers

James Canton recommends:

The Overstory
by Richard Powers

The Hidden Life of Trees
by Peter Wohlleben

Braiding Sweetgrass
by Robin Wall Kimmerer

The Peregrine
by J. A. Baker

Silent Spring
by Rachel Carson

Matt Gaw recommends:

Lanny
by Max Porter

A Sand County Almanac
by Aldo Leopold

Notes from Walnut Tree Farm
by Roger Deakin

Into the Wild
by Jon Krakauer

Ring of Bright Water
by Gavin Maxwell