



Beyond the Secret Garden Protest and the British Children's Book

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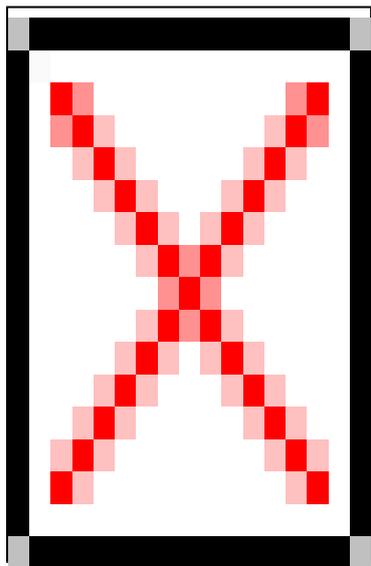
[Karen Sands-O'Connor](#) [2]

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Byline:

Darren Chetty and **Karen Sands-O'Connor** find rebellion and riot in children's literature.

*In the latest in their *Beyond the Secret Garden* series, Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor find rebellion and riot in children's literature.*



In *Emile* (1762) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, rejecting the prevailing Christian notion of original sin, argued that children are born innocent and only become corrupted through experience. This view influenced the so-called 'Golden Age of Children's Literature' and its legacy can be detected in contemporary children's fiction. If we are motivated to preserve childhood 'innocence', we are likely to avoid narratives of injustice and protest.

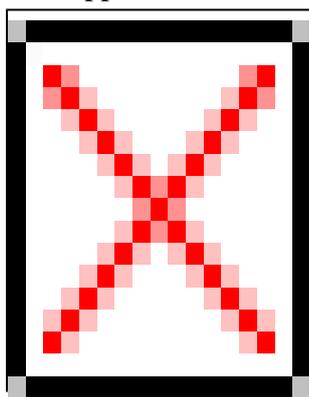
Writing about British children's books published in 1968, a year of global revolution, Lucy Pearson comments that 'the cultural revolution of the sixties was incompatible with the world of children's books - or at least with the wholesome 'butter and eggs' image of a mainstream publisher' (**The Right to Read: Children's Rights and Children's Publishing in Britain**). But as the 1960s turned into the 1970s, protest and even riots became more prominent in children's books, both fictional and nonfictional, and this is at least partly due to writers of colour and other citizens who increasingly stood up for their rights in Britain.

Many pre-1970 children's books dealing with protest and riots were written by authors who grew up in the Caribbean. V. S. Reid's 1960 novel **Sixty-Five**, about the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica, was published by Longmans primarily for Caribbean readers, although the book was printed in London. The historical nature of the book and its anti colonial stance responded to the independence and nationalist movements in the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean more than to the Caribbean migrants in Britain who were trying to assimilate into their new homeland. By the

late 1960s, however, the new migrants were looking for books that taught their (often British-born) children about their island roots, and they had the Jamaican-born Andrew Salkey's books to provide a picture of the world they had left behind. Salkey created his **Disaster Quartet** for Oxford University Press, and the books were published in Britain. The four books contrasted the difficulties of life in the Caribbean with the benefits of the warm family life that many experienced in the islands. The final book in the series, *Riot* (1967), depicts a modern-day workers' rights protest in Kingston that develops into a riot. Salkey's British audience would have been mostly white at the time of publication; although the narrative mostly focuses on the role of class (particularly the abject poverty of Kingston slums) in initiating the riot, the middle-class family who act as the book's protagonists suggest that there is an additional, underlying reason for the unrest. The father of the family, surveying the destruction caused, "thought of the Island's very early years of slavery, then he thought of its colonial status, and he recalled words like 'exploitation', 'inferiority' and 'despair'" (163). Salkey never directly blames British colonialism, but the implication is clear. Following the publication of this book, Salkey left Oxford University Press to work as editor and writer for the newly-established Black British press, Bogle L'Ouverture. His final work for children, published with Bogle L'Ouverture, *Danny Jones* (1980) moved the idea of protesting police harassment to London, but ultimately, the protagonist considers leaving Britain for Jamaica because he doesn't see the situation improving for his generation of young Black Britons. Class-based protest can be solved, according to Salkey, but racially-based protest is futile.

This is borne out in other children's books published around the same time. A. Sivanandan, head of the Institute of Race Relations, began publishing a series about racism in Britain in the early 1980s; the third book in the series, **How Racism Came to Britain** (1985) included depictions of Black British protest "to resist racist attacks in light of police indifference" (40). The book, which was used in London schools, was singled out by Secretary for Education Ken Baker as "aggressive"; he called for its removal from school libraries. Marjorie Darke's [A Long Way to Go](#) [4] (Kestrel 1978) is an unusually early depiction in children's books of a Black British family during World War I (and part of Darke's sequence of books depicting a Black British family from slavery to the twentieth century). Luke Knight, the book's male protagonist, refuses to sign up for military service, because "I can't do what ain't right" (99). Luke is at first alone in his protest, and because his brown skin makes him more visible, he receives considerable verbal and physical abuse. However, he holds his ground and gains supporters and friends. Although he is nearly killed several times, he survives to the end of the war to become a sculptor, creating rather than destroying. His race makes him stand out, but because he is not protesting racial inequity, his protest is ultimately successful.

Among Luke's supporters in *A Long Way to Go* are the suffragettes, particularly the real-life suffragette Sylvia



Pankhurst. While Emmeline Pankhurst supported the war in the hopes of gaining parliament's support for women's suffrage after the war (she succeeded in this), Emmeline's daughter Sylvia was a known anti-war campaigner, who argued that the war was a class issue—since most of the men who died were poor and working-class. The women's suffrage movement is often seen as a white British protest movement, but recently, several children's books have been published that include the protest of Indian princess Sophia Duleep Singh. Two recent books that include Singh are David Roberts' [Suffragette: The Battle for Equality](#) [5] (Two Hoots 2018), which pictures Singh (presumably) on the front cover as well as giving her a two-page spread inside, and Kira Cochrane's **Modern Women: 52 Pioneers** (Frances Lincoln 2017). Roberts keeps the focus of Singh's transformation to radicalism on being "troubled" (36) by the way the British had treated her family, but Cochrane's book specifically mentions Singh's "loathing" for the British Empire after her visit to India. For women of colour, suffrage was not just about the right to vote; it was about the right to represent themselves and be heard as people of subjugated nations. For years, Singh's

story was lost to child readers, and those that do depict her often shy away from her anti-colonial attitudes. It is acceptable to depict Singh as part of a battle that white British women dominated, but rarely is her post-war work to raise awareness of the contribution of Indian soldiers recognized, an effort which, [according to Manmeet Bali Nag](#) [6], 'triggered near-panic among the stalwarts of Whitehall and New Delhi'. Singh, like the fictional Luke Knight, is celebrated for her radicalism, but only when the issue is not racially based.

Recently, Angie Thomas's YA debut **The Hate U Give**, and Breanna J. McDaniels's debut picture-book **Hands Up** (in the USA) and Mohammed Khan's debut [I am Thunder](#) [7] and Sita Bramachari's **Tender Earth** (in the UK) all offer narratives where children and young people of colour engage in protest over injustices they have experienced.

Onjali Q. Rauf's 2018 debut, the Blue Peter Book Award winning **The Boy at the Back of the Class** can be read as a careful negotiation between ideas of 'childhood innocence' and a narrative of protest against injustice. When the nine-year-old protagonist learns that her new classmate Ahmet is a refugee who has been separated from his parents, she wishes to help. An unlikely plan to visit the Queen proves to be the catalyst for a happy ending. This may not seem like the most realistic portrayal of social protest. Yet Rauf deftly includes neighbours and politicians with racist views whilst refraining from using racist epithets for her middle-grade audience. The first person narrative offers us light hearted moments of innocence 'just what *does* a deputy headteacher do if the headteacher is never absent?' yet we get a sense that our mixed-race narrator has grown up with some sense of injustice and that her friendship with Ahmet leads not to a rude awakening but rather an extension of her understanding of the world.

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 Making of Modern Children's Literature in Britain: Publishing and Criticism in the 1960s and 1970s (Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present), Lucy Pearson, Routledge, 978-1138252189, £37.99

Suffragette: The Battle for Equality, David Roberts, Two Hoots, 978-1509839674, £18.99 hbk

Modern Women: 52 Pioneers, Kira Cochrane, Frances Lincoln, 978-0711237896, £20.00 hbk

I Am Thunder, Mohammed Khan, Macmillan Children's Books, 9781509874057, £7.99 pbk

The Boy at the Back of the Class, Onjali Rauf, Orion Children's Books, 978-1510105010, £6.99 pbk

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Source URL (retrieved on Jun '19): <http://reviewwww.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/235/childrens-books/articles/beyond-the-secret-garden-protest-and-the-british-children%E2%80%99s-book>

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