

EXTRA EXTRA!

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Bringing diversity into children's books

This is an edited version of a story from © BBC News [17/4/2019]

Author Sharna Jackson is something of a rarity.

As a Black children's writer, she's already in a minority. But her debut book *High-Rise Mystery*, a detective story starring young Black sisters and featuring a diverse cast, puts Jackson in an extra select league. An AI expert with medical knowledge to 'teach' drones to help emergency rescue teams.

"When I was young, I kept on reading and watching but the representation wasn't there," Jackson says. "It was hard to find role models outside popular culture."

According to the recent report *BookTrust Represents*, covering 2007 to 2017, just 5.6% of published UK children's authors and illustrators are from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background.

And in 2018, figures from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) showed that of the 9,115 children's books published over the previous 12 months, 4% featured BAME characters.

Only 1% had a character of colour as lead. In many cases, the stories were about social justice issues or conflict rather than mystery, magic or fun.



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Jackson confirms she struggled in her formative years to find anyone to associate with on the page.

"All children need to see themselves and others reflected in culture - representation leads to empathy. That visibility is extremely important, but so is moving away from stereotypes and one-note, 'prop' characters.

"I don't just want to read about Black children in 'issue-based' narratives. Why can't Black children exist in 'White' genres? Why can't they see themselves being clever, creative and having fun?"

"I also thought it's important to be writing stories where young diverse people can see themselves — and doing interesting things."

High-Rise Mystery stars Black sleuthing sisters Norva, 13, and Nik, 11, living on a London council estate. Their latest, and biggest, case is uncovering who killed Hugo, the much-liked art teacher and antiques dealer.

"I thought it'd be really interesting to take a traditional murder mystery and set it in a council estate and see what happened," says Jackson.

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