



Guest editorial: Everyone's History

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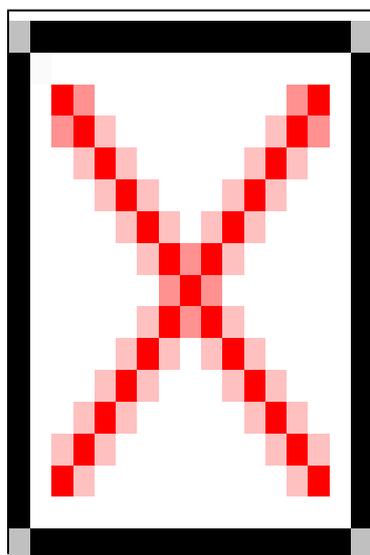
[232](#) [2]

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By Catherine Johnson



I know, I know, it's still September. And isn't **Black History Month** in October? Yes, yes it is. But please, keep reading. This is about Black History but it's about everyone's history.

Everyone's history, got it? Good.

I've been writing books for young readers for twenty-five years. And I love history. I hated it at school, in fact I was so rubbish it was suggested (very firmly I might add) that I shouldn't study history for O Level as I managed the worst mark in the whole year?

But my teachers – if they were alive – would have to be a little impressed at my post-school achievements. I've not only written several well-received historical novels, I've even done the dramatic inserts for one of historian Simon Schama's TV series. So that must count. Mustn't it?

I am sure many of us are used to feeling imposterish, I bet I'm not alone in thinking that whatever it is I am doing is undeserved or unimportant.

Whereas, we all know, with children's books, the opposite is true. I love writing about our past. And I do it to say to young readers who may or may not look like me, that as well as belonging in the present and the future, we belong in our country's history too.

As someone who shares Jamaican and Welsh heritage but was born and grew up in London in the 1960s and 70s, I was used to not belonging and not seeing any kind of representation. I did not expect it in stories or books. In fact the first

time I ever read about people like me was in **To Kill A Mockingbird**, where the mixed race children are labelled by Scout as 'The saddest folk in the whole world'. I knew that wasn't me.

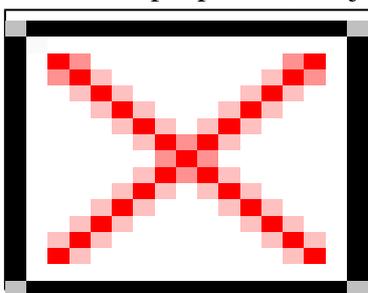
And earlier watching the Sunday afternoon serials, the adaptations of Leon Garfield and other classics and then going into school on Monday and wanting to play those stories in the playground, but being told I couldn't play the heroine because they never looked like me, was more than annoying.

But as I grew I knew, more and more, that I did belong in London. It was my city and as I followed trails of stories ' that of John Ystumllyn from Criccieth in North Wales, Edward Doney in Cassiobury Park, Joseph Emidy from Truro, Ignatius Sancho ' I realised people like me had been here, not just in London but all over.

And it was finding out about those people, in wonderful books like **Staying Power** by Peter Fryer that led me to write my own stories. Authentic, adventurous, exciting (I hope!) stories in which people like me can play the heroes in the playground if they want.

And the more I got stuck into the past the more I uncovered. Real lives are more fantastic than anything I could have made up. Princess Caraboo, a cobbler's daughter who pretended to be Javanese royalty, became a cause celebre and fooled a nation. My book, **The Curious Tale of The Lady Caraboo**, uses her life as a jumping off point to explore themes of love and lies and pretence.

And I found out about other people too, not just British folk. The incredible storybook life of Colonel Alexandre

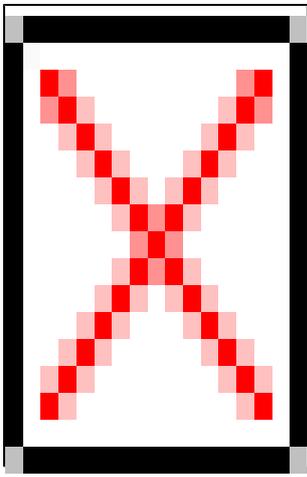


Thomas Dumas, born in Saint Domingue and the highest-ranking black soldier in any European army for over two hundred and fifty years. There are paintings of him on a horse, looking phenomenal. He was, in fact, the model for not only the Count of Monte Cristo, but also every one of the Three Musketeers. He has walk on appearances in my novel **Blade and Bone**, set against the French revolution.

And finally Mathew Henson. I had written about him already, in my first non-fiction book, just about ten years ago. He's hugely well known in the USA, but much less so here. And his life story combines two threads of my disparate interests, black history and polar exploration. (I owe the interest in polar exploration to my brother's **Blue Peter** annual and an article about Scott and frostbite and dead bodies in tents?)

I've written about Mathew Henson again in **Race To The Frozen North**. And this is a very different book. It's a dramatic retelling, rather than a straight information book. And his life ' from illiterate child, beaten and abused, in post slavery Maryland, to being the first man at the North Pole ' is a rags-to-riches and then back to not quite-rags story. It's a real rollercoaster. Mathew Henson's achievement was not recognised until the very end of his life, by which time he was living in New York, working parking cars.

Mathew Henson's life was one characterised by a love of learning and doing and exploring. Reading about him one couldn't



help but think of all the children growing up right now, across the earth, denied opportunities and education, and the great loss, not only to them as individuals, but to the whole world.

So it's a plus that this book is published by Barrington Stoke, who publish such brilliantly accessible books. And I hope it will help more young people find their way into reading, and also, maybe be the first step to find the place where they belong.

Race to The Frozen North is published by Barrington Stoke, 978-1781128404, £6.99pbk

Freedom is published by Scholastic UK, 978-1407185484, £4.99 pbk

The Curious Tale of The Lady Caraboo is published by Walker, 978-0552557634, £7.99pbk

Page Number:

2

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