



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Patrice Lawrence

Q1. What are your earliest memories of books and reading? For example, did you have a favourite or inspirational book?

My mother and father weren't married and split up before I was born. My mum had only recently come to England to train as a nurse. She had no family in the UK, but seven sisters in Trinidad who would have gladly looked after me. She didn't want to send me away, so I was privately fostered. My foster family taught me to read when I was young and signed me up to Whitehawk Library, in Brighton.

I can't remember a time before books. I'm sure I was read to from young then took over reading duties myself. I used to have three Disney hardback books that my mum bought me – one with a yellow spine, one with a red spine and one with a blue spine. They were basically distillations of Disney films. I loved them until some git nicked the one with the red spine, my favourite..

My mum's a big reader and read many children's classics that she passed on to me. Some I loved – Wind In The Willows, Heidi, Black Beauty, Anne of Green Gables, Little Women. Others were bewildering – The Water Babies. And others I gave up on – I'm looking at you Children of The New Forest.

I also remember being completely transfixed by Enid Blyton's 'The Wishing Chair'. I HAD to finish it! It was an early introduction into how a story can make you cry. I was so glad when (SPOILERS) the wishing chair's wings grew back.

Q2. What inspired you to become an author / illustrator?

I always wrote. I used to record our family's adventures in rhyming couplets from an early age. The evening the coffee percolator blew up is an enduring highlight.

I was encouraged to write by secondary school teachers who helped me enter poetry and stories into local competitions. My first paying gig was a poem published by the Brighton Evening Argus when I was 13. I received a postal order for £1.

However, virtually every character I wrote about was white. I'd never seen people like me and my family in books. In 1999, when I was nursing a newborn baby, I turned on the TV and saw the adaptation of Malorie Blackman's 'Pig Heart Boy'. *What was this? A story about a black family that wasn't about racism?* A door opened for me. I hope I can push it open even further for the next generation of writers.

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book or illustration?

World-building and authenticity of character. I need to believe in the character carrying the story and the world they live in. For instance, I love China Miéville's books for the world-building – their detail, consistency, vibrancy. From the politics to the architecture, I completely buy in to it.

Flawed characters are great. Even obnoxious characters have their thrill, especially if I can imagine them jumping off the page and cadging a drink off me.

Q4. Do you have a specific audience in mind when you write your books / plan your illustrations?

I write books with teenage characters as opposed to books for teenagers, though books with teen protagonists are marketed as YA. However, I think authentic representation is vital. I want to write about strong young women and young black men who make stupid decisions, but are also empathetic and kind. I want readers who have felt excluded from stories to be able to recognise a detail from their lives in my books.

Q5. What future do you think the physical book has? For example, do you think the electronic book will replace the physical book?

I think humans love objects too much to give up books quite yet. When I'm struggling with writing, I switch from computer to notebook. It feels like a different part of my brain is sparking. It's the same with physical books, a different sensory experience. It's interesting that magazines such as *Consented* are publishing physical copies for its younger audience. A physical copy feels more grounded in the real world, less transient.

Q6. Are you a book collector? Is there a special book you'd love to own?

I still have that Heidi from my childhood years, so the answer must be yes! My biological father (I was brought up by my stepfather from an early age) was, like my mother, a consummate reader. His shelves were full of philosophy and sci fi. When I

was about seven, he gave me a book of love poetry. Most of it was too ambitious for me to understand, though I loved Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

I didn't see my father for many years and when he finally got in touch, he was homeless, bouncing between squats and hostels. He died in a house fire in his mid-40s. I never knew what happened to his massive book collection. I wish I could own one of them.