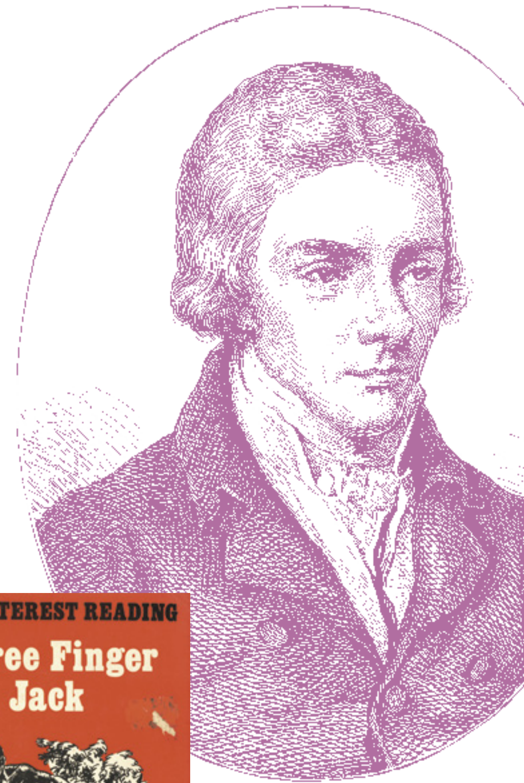
# Listen to this Story!
# From History to Our Story!

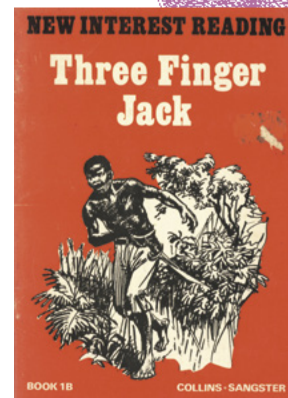
**Listen to this Story! From History to Our Story is an exhibition examining the representation of Black people in children's books from abolition onward. It is based on research done at Newcastle University by Professor Karen Sands-O'Connor, using materials drawn from her own and university special collections.**

# British enslavement, rebellion and abolition

England was involved in the trade of enslaved people from 1562, when naval commander John Hawkins organised the first English voyage to capture African people to sell for labour in the New World of America and the Caribbean. Britain continued to participate in the Atlantic slave trade until 1807, when the trade was abolished throughout the British Empire (although plantation use of forced labour continued legally until 1838).


WILLIAM WILBERFORCE.

The story told in British children's fiction published during this time rarely gives the full picture.The argument for abolition was designed for a primarily white child audience, and often suggested that the Black person should be pitied; alternatively, that abolition should be enacted because otherwise the Black population could rebel and bring destruction and violence to white British interests. Freedom was, in these texts, a gift that white people, including white children, could give to Black people. This is one reason why William Wilberforce, a white British politician, became the 'hero' of the abolition movement, despite the presence of free Black Britons in England such as the Sons of Africa agitating for freedom for Black people throughout the colonies. Anna Laetitia Barbauld's 'Master and Slave' from 1796 was a rare exception to the 'white gift of freedom' narrative in that it suggested that Black people have a natural right to freedom.




However, children's stories of this period did not entirely focus on enslaved Black people. They also included legendary historical figures, such as Jack Mansong (also known as Three Fingered Jack) who escaped enslavement and became a highwayman, robbing rich white Jamaicans and redistributing the funds to others who had escaped or were trying to do so. His story was turned into a British pantomime in the 19th century, with Jack as the villain of the piece.

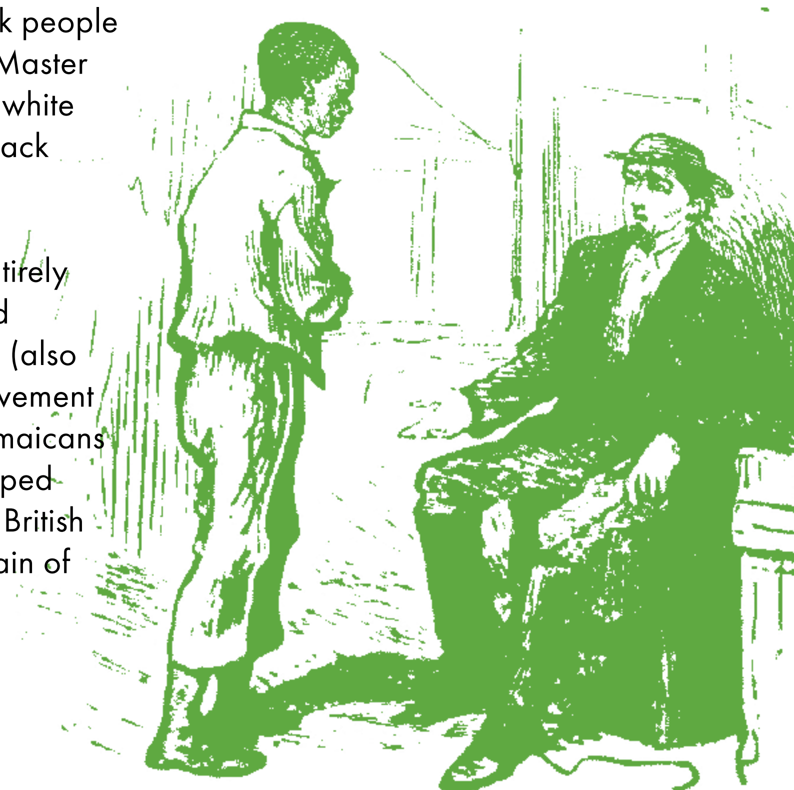
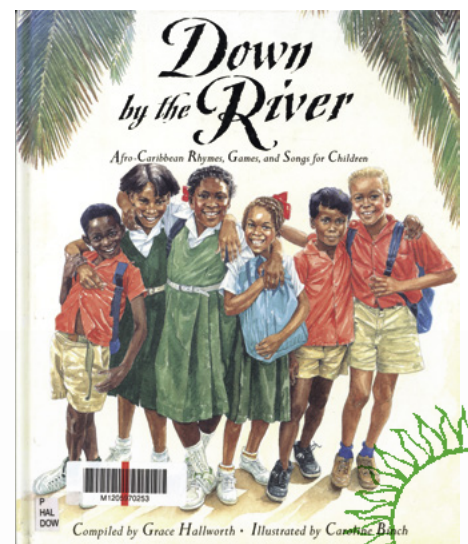


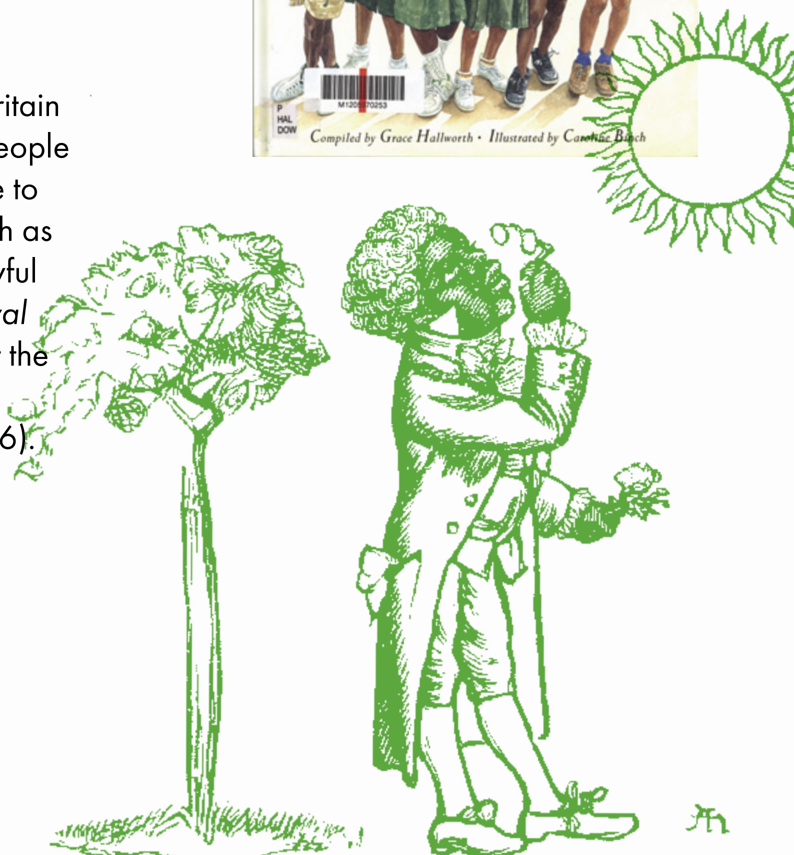
Image: *Evenings at Home, or, The Juvenile Budget Opened* by John Aikin and Anna Laetitia Barbauld (Routledge, 1892 version).

# Nursery Rhymes and Picture Books

One of the common misconceptions about Black people is that they were absent from British life in the Victorian period. A consideration of nursery rhymes and children's picture books shows this not to be the case. Walter Crane's *Alphabet of Old Friends* includes a Black man as one of Old King Cole's fiddlers three. He is dressed in the typical costume of a seaside minstrel from the Victorian period. Minstrel groups, some of which were made up of Black people and some of white people in blackface, were a regular part of seaside entertainment. They typically dressed in striped red or blue pants with a contrasting blue or red shirt, jacket or waistcoat. This outfit would later appear on golliwog figures, both as dolls and in children's stories. In many ways, Black people moved from being ordinary in children's books of the Victorian period to being gross caricatures. In William Nicholson's *The Pirate Twins* (1929), the Black pirates are tiny, doll-like characters, requiring the teaching and assistance of the white British child Mary. Books like this matter because they remain available to children today; Maurice Sendak, author of *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) called this his favourite children's book and it was reprinted in 2005.

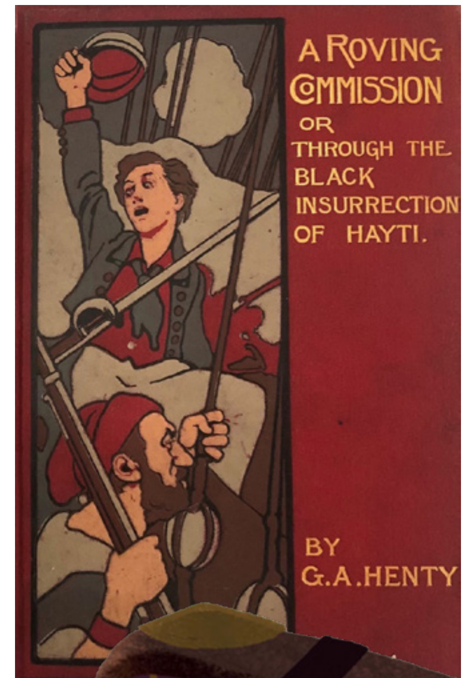



When the Windrush Generation began arriving in Britain after 1948, they found that the caricature of Black people had become normalised in British culture, in part due to British children's books and comics. Black artists, such as Errol Lloyd, countered these images with positive, joyful images of Black children in books like *Nini at Carnival* (1978); and Black storytellers and librarians brought the folktales and rhymes of their homelands to Britain, as Grace Hallworth does in *Down by the River* (1996).



# Black and British History

In the late Victorian period and the early twentieth century, Britain's empire was increasingly large and required the support of British people to finance and govern it. Children's authors wrote histories and adventure stories that justified and even glorified British colonial expansion, treating the Empire as a space for white youths to prove themselves against dangers and challenges of unfamiliar landscapes. Colonised people in these books were depicted as childlike and often violent, in need of British civilisation. The works of popular authors like G. A. Henty and Bessie Marchant cemented attitudes toward Black people that children might already have encountered in school history books.




In contrast, Black people's own stories were seldom told to British children. Mary Seacole, the Crimean War era nurse, wrote her autobiography for adults but wasn't the subject of biographies for children until the twentieth century. The founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Marcus Garvey, was a hero to Black people all over the world but, like Seacole, also rarely featured in children's history texts until late in the twentieth century. When Black people from the Caribbean and Africa came to Britain in the hundreds of thousands between 1948 and 1973, they made it a priority to restore Black people to British history. The Windrush Generation, as they became known, had been taught British history, literature and culture, and they were surprised at how little the British knew about the cultures of their (former) empire. The Windrush generation told stories of Black heroes like Seacole and Garvey, and their children told stories of the Windrush Generation, carrying on the celebration of Black history.

Illustration by Camilla Sucre from Patrice Lawrence's *Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush* (Nosy Crow 2022)

# Una Marson in London and the Caribbean

Poet, playwright and broadcaster Una Marson came to London in the 1930s to seek new opportunities to publish and produce her work. London was the metropole, the centre of the British Empire, and as a Jamaican, Marson had been brought up to believe that Britain offered the best of literature and culture. Although she succeeded in her work—publishing her poetry, producing the first play with an all-Black cast in the West End, and hosting her own programme on the BBC—Marson also faced casual and deliberate everyday racism. In poems like “Little Brown Girl” (1937), Marson described the bewildering experience of being Black in Britain.

Following the Second World War, Marson returned to Jamaica. Her experience in Britain, and the emphasis in Jamaican schools on British history and cultural production, led her to establish the Pioneer Press. Beginning in 1950, Marson published Black Jamaican authors writing poetry, animal stories, and history from a Jamaican point of view.

Marson organised a book club for young readers to both advertise Pioneer Press books and give children an opportunity to talk with each other about why these books mattered. She also supported young writers, such as Andrew Salkey. Like Marson, Salkey would eventually travel to London to find greater publishing opportunities, and there he helped found the Caribbean Artists Movement and supported independent Black British publishing. He became one of the first Black writers for children to be published by Oxford University Press.

# Listen to this Story! From Our Story to Everyone's Story!

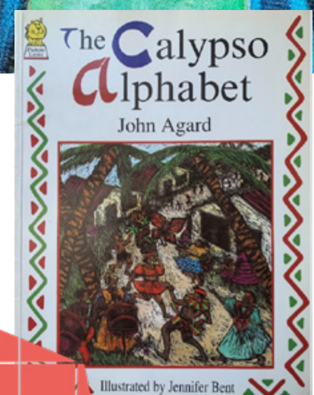
**Come along with us as we take a walk through the history of Black British Children's Literature and the stories behind the spines that sparked a movement...**

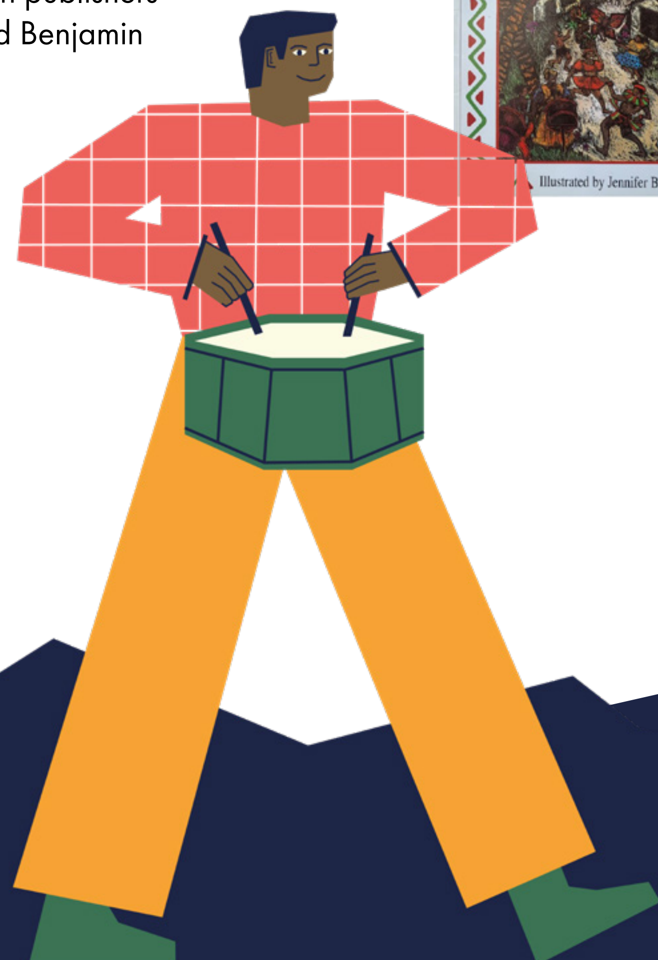
**Discover more about the history of modern Black British books and their creators in the sections that follow.**

# Voice

Everyone has a story, big or small, and everyone has their own way of telling that story. When the Windrush Generation arrived in Britain, many felt that no one was listening to their stories. Few books or television shows featured contemporary Black British people, and the media was filled with negative portrayals of the new migrants to Britain. While authors like Andrew Salkey had some success in mainstream publishing, many other authors and illustrators struggled. Salkey supported Black writers, artists and publishers in getting Black stories told—much as Una Marson had helped him in Jamaica. Young people expressing themselves in print mattered to many Black Britons, including Salkey. As the children's editor for the independent Black British publisher Bogle L'Ouverture, he wrote the introduction to ten-year-old Accabre Huntley's first book of poetry.

Many Black British people spoke and wrote in forms of English not familiar to white British people, such as patois, creole, and pidgin. While many white British publishers saw these forms of English as 'broken', Black British publishers celebrated it. Valerie Bloom, John Agard, and Benjamin Zephaniah all use patois in their poetry.



# Identity

Many Black children grew up around the cultures they, their parents or grandparents were born into, while also trying to feel at home in the UK. To help them better understand themselves and their heritage, pioneering publishing companies like Bogle L'Ouverture and Tamarind Press produced books by Black writers on themes like food, culture, identity and belonging.

Lots of other books have since been published that explore culture and identity. *Leslyn in London* (1984) by Grace Nichols describes the culture shock of moving to a new country, *A is For Africa* (1996) by Ifeoma Onyefulu looks at everyday life in societies across Africa, and *Fruits* (1997), by Valerie Bloom, is a playful glimpse into Jamaican culture.

It can be difficult to feel like you belong somewhere when you don't see people who look like you. Books that Black children can relate to and identify with help build understanding and belonging.

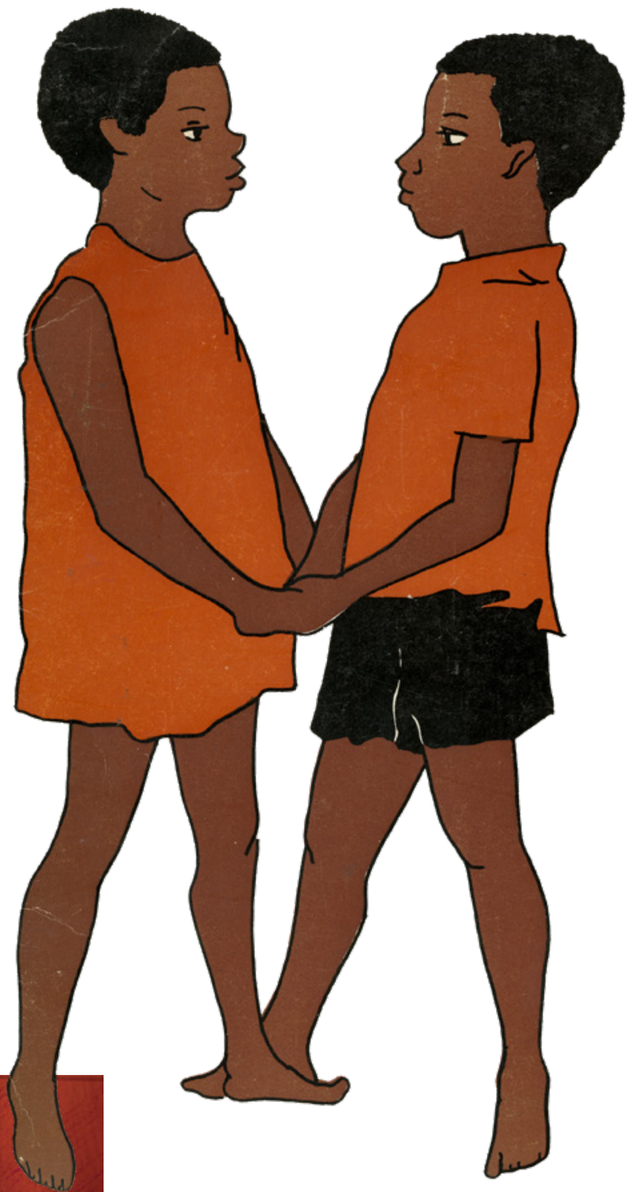


Illustration by Ricardo Wilkins for Phyllis and Bernard Coard's *Getting to Know Ourselves* (Bogle L'Ouverture 1972)

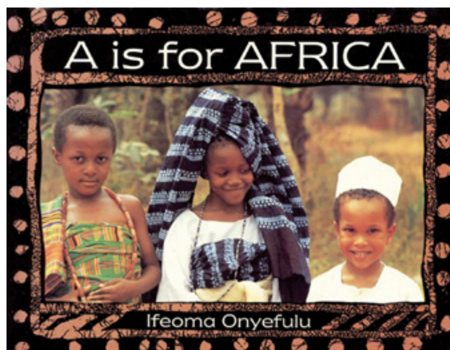


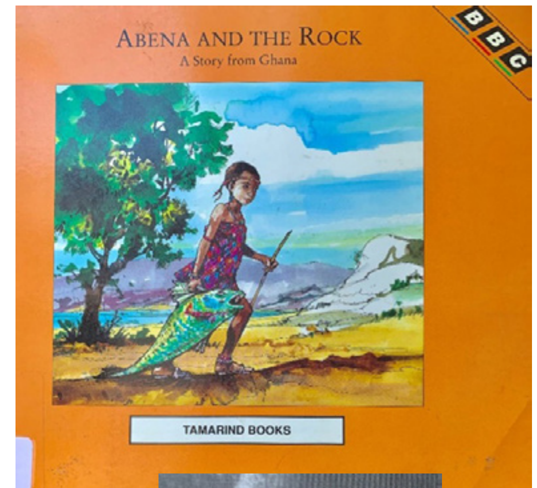
Illustration by Camille Sucre for Patrice Lawrence's *Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush* (Nosy Crow 2022).

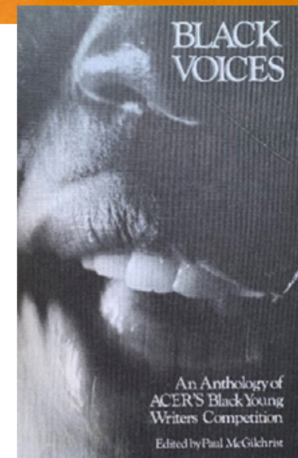
# Community

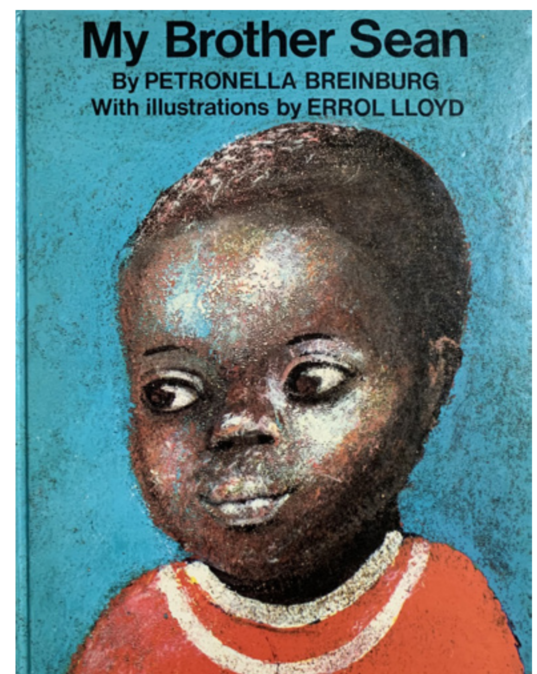
*My Brother Sean* by Petronella Breinburg and Errol Lloyd (Bodley Head 1973); was one of the first mainstream children's books written and illustrated by Black creators to feature a positive representation of a Black child on its front cover. It went on to inspire a generation of Black writers and artists to create books for children. While the books on the shelves of British bookshops and libraries had started to become more diverse by the late 1970s, there was still a lot of work needed to make sure that all children had access to books they could relate to.

Grassroots organisations like the Afro Caribbean Educational Resource (ACER) Centre, founded by Len Garrison, teamed up with the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) to get Black stories into children's hands, and help them to write their own. Independent publishers like Tamarind, founded by Verna Wilkins, partnered with the BBC to bring scientific concepts to children through Black and Asian folktales. Increasingly, Black British book creators looked for recognition as part of the wider British community, but it remains difficult even today for many Black book creators to feel like they belong in the British children's publishing world. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) began publishing statistics in 2018 on how representative of the British population the children's book world is, and even now publishing falls well short.

But people like author-illustrator-editor Ken Wilson-Max continue to try to improve the publishing community. Co-founder of Alanna Max Books, he became an editor at mainstream press HarperCollins in 2022 with his own imprint, Kumusha Books. His community extends to his home country of Zimbabwe as well, for whom he produces books and magazine articles.



# Acknowledgements

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