Black Literature ~ the timeline

BRITISH LIBRARY

Introducing the timeline...

This literary timeline explores the history of Black writing and literature in Britain through around 50 texts. It includes works by writers living and working in Britain, as well as titles first published here and authored by people who were born in former British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and Americas.

There is an online version of this Black literary timeline which includes additional historical entries plus links to further reading. To see it please go to: **bl.uk/black-literature-timeline**.

If in reading this timeline you pick just one book and that book inspires you to read on; then to go on to realise your deepest dreams, then it will have achieved its chief goal.

Gaverne Bennett, Creative director and timeline author

Alex Wheatle, author of the award-winning South Crongton series, writes...

When I emerged from prison in the autumn of 1981, I was eager to continue my reading education. It had begun with my cellmate, Simeon, pressing a copy of C L R James' *The Black Jacobins* into my hands.

My first port of call was Brixton Library. I had no idea of the treasure trove I was about to discover.

Many of the brilliant and innovative writers I had read at Brixton Library are listed in this timeline.

We hope that once you have unearthed these gems, it will lead you on to your own literary journey, where Black narratives will inform, teach, empower, politicise you, vex you, make you weep, laugh and uplift your spirit, just as it has done for me.

Read on and explore.

Early writing in Africa

Egypt 5000 years ago, ancient Egyptians in Africa invented one of humanity's earliest known writing systems. Egyptian hieroglyphs contain around 800 signs, which each represent individual sounds, syllables or words.

Timbuktu During the European medieval period, the city of Timbuktu was a centre for culture, learning and scholarship. At its height, it contained many thousands of manuscripts (including Islamic devotional texts, theology, philosophy, law, literature and maths) that were carefully preserved by schools, families and networks that revered knowledge. This ancient manuscript culture survives into the present.

Ethiopia It is thought that writing developed as a medium of communication in Ethiopia as far back as the 5th century BCE. Ethiopia's long manuscript culture spans many subjects including Biblical and religious texts, music and poetry, mathematics and astrology.

Black writing in Britain

1550

A traveller and scholar known as **John Leo Africanus** (born al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-Wazzān al-Zayyātī; c.1485–c. 1554) writes *A Geographical Historie of Africa*. Widely translated and read across Europe, it becomes an authoritative work on the geography of Africa. Born in the Emirate of Granada, Leo Africanus was educated in Morocco and travelled widely in Italy and North and West Africa.

1734

Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (c. 1701–1773) publishes his *Memoirs*, which impacts on how West African culture and identity is understood in Britain in the following centuries. Born in Bondu, now in Senegal, West Africa, Diallo was enslaved as a young man and transported to North America.

1773

"Imagination! who can sing thy force? / Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?"

Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753–1784) publishes her poems 'On Imagination' and 'On being brought from Africa to America' in the collection *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral*, becoming one of the first published Black women writers. Born in West Africa, Phillis was enslaved as a child and taken to America. In 1773 she accompanied the Wheatley family to London, where she published her poems.

1782

"Make human nature thy study—wherever thou residest—whatever the religion—or the complexion."

Ignatius Sancho's (c. 1729–1780) *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* becomes the first published correspondence by a writer of African descent. Sancho's letters capture a huge range of both personal and political insights, and he used his connections to write against transatlantic slavery. Born on a slave ship en route from Guinea to the Spanish West Indies, Sancho was brought to London as a young child. He later secured his freedom and settled in Westminster with his family.

1789

"I had a great curiosity to talk to the books…to learn all things had a beginning."

Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–1797) publishes his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, detailing his early life (in what is now Nigeria) and his experiences of enslavement in the Americas. He tours the UK to speak for abolition.

1825

Born in New York, Ira Aldridge (1807–1867) makes his debut as Othello and becomes the first Black actor to play a Shakespearean role in Britain.

1831

"The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery…that man is either ignorant or…lying..."

The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave: Related by herself is published, becoming one of the first autobiographies and accounts of enslavement described by a Black woman. **Mary Prince** was born into enslavement in Bermuda and later travelled to London with the Wood family.

1857

"Unless I am allowed to tell the story of my life in my own way, I cannot tell it at all."

Jamaican-born **Mary Seacole** (1805-1881) publishes her autobiography *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, capturing her travels, career and experiences in the Crimean War.

"There are at least 80,000 good reasons why we believe a West Indian newspaper is necessary and will be welcomed. They are the 80,000-odd West Indians now resident here. Together we form a community with its own wants and problems..."

Claudia Jones (1901–1964), pioneering Black feminist activist, writer and editor, launches *The West Indian Gazette*, one of Britain's first major Black newspapers.

1958

"One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if is not London at all but some strange place on another planet..."

Samuel Selvon (1923–1994) publishes *The Lonely Londoners*, a landmark novel chronicling the lives of Caribbean and African migrants as they strive to establish themselves in London.

1956

Amos Tutuola (1920–1997) publishes *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, an adventurous tale of a hero based on Yoruba oral traditions and folktales. It became the first Nigerian and African novel published in English in Britain and internationally.

1952

"Freedom is creative universality, not utility."

C L R James (1901–1989) publishes *The Black Jacobins*, detailing the successful uprising led by enslaved Africans in Haiti between 1791 and 1804. It establishes James' worldwide reputation as a critical scholar and historian. Born in Trinidad, James migrated to Britain in the 1930s.

1938

"Let me be free to wander by yon stream, / And sit beneath the trees and dream and dream"

Una Marson (1905–1965) publishes her best-known poetry collection, *Heights and Depths*. In 1932, Marson moves from Jamaica to London where her plays, such as *London Calling*, add to her later renown as a pioneering writer, editor, activist and broadcaster.

1931

"the colonies...having, in intelligence and every form of civilized progress, outgrown the stage of political tutelage, should be accorded some measure of emancipation."

JJ Thomas (1840–1889) publishes *Froudacity*, a work arguing for self-government and illustrating how the impoverished position of Black people in the Caribbean was the result of the racial and class oppression they faced. Born in Trinidad, which was then a British colony, Thomas later travelled to Britain where he published *Froudacity*.

1889

1958

"Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which has been given to him."

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) publishes *Things Fall Apart*, an acclaimed novel set in Nigeria which follows champion wrestler and warrior Okonkwo and explores themes including colonialism and resistance. It was first published in Britain, two years before Nigeria gained independence from British colonial rule.

Errol John's (1924–1988) *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, a play that explores themes of migration from its setting of Trinidad, premieres at London's Royal Court Theatre. He wins the Observer Award for Best New Playwright.

1959

"So long as we learn it doesn't matter who teaches us, does it?"

E R Braithwaite (1912–2016) publishes *To Sir, With Love*, a novel based on his experiences serving in the RAF in World War Two and later as a Black teacher in Britain.

1966

"There is no problem in this world that cannot be solved."

Flora Nwapa (1931–1993) publishes *Efuru*, the first novel by a Nigerian and African woman writer to be published in Britain, and pioneering in breaking the silence of Black African female writers about their lives.

1966–69

John La Rose and Sarah White establish New Beacon Books, the UK's first Black publishing house; Margaret Busby becomes Britain's first female Black publisher, co-founding Allison & Busby in 1967; Jessica and Eric Huntley establish Bogle L'Ouverture Publications in 1969.

1971

Bernard Coard (1944–) publishes *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System*, highlighting how educational inequality led to Black children being disproportionately placed in 'educationally sub-normal' schools.

1973

"I done wit' you. / I into history, now."

Andrew Salkey (1928–1995) publishes 'Jamaica', a powerful poem that explores the impacts of colonialism on the island, but of a world before colonialism, too.

1974

Buchi Emecheta (1944–2017) publishes *Second Class Citizen*, a novel that explores a driven Nigerian woman's search for independence for herself and her family.

Ben Okri (1959–) publishes *The Famished Road*, a Booker Prize-winning novel that follows the story of Azaro, a spirit child. The novel skilfully moves between our world and a spirit world rooted in Yoruba tradition, navigating the line between life and death.

"Angela Davis is the only female person / I've seen (except for a nurse on TV) / who looks like me."

Jackie Kay (1961–) publishes her award-winning first book, *The Adoption Papers*, a powerful, semi-autobiographical poetry collection that explores adoption from the perspectives of the birth mother, the adoptive mother and the daughter.

1991

James Berry (1924–2017) publishes *Anancy-Spiderman*, a set of stories about Anansi, the god and folk hero who is revered in both West Africa and Jamaica. Drawing on the many stories he heard growing up, Berry introduced Anansi to a larger audience. His late poetry collection *Windrush Songs* (2007) is full of vivid imagery and interspersed with the voices of others who made the same journey from the Caribbean to Britain.

1988

Winsome Pinnock's (1961–) *Leave Taking* premieres at the National Theatre. The award-winning play focuses on the lives of three Black women living in North London in the 1980s.

1987

"I have crossed an ocean / I have lost my tongue / from the root of the old / one / a new one has sprung."

Grace Nichols (1950–) publishes her award-winning first poetry collection, *I is a long-memoried woman*, in which she follows the journey of an unnamed Black woman during the era of transatlantic slavery. Nichols says, 'The book is a celebration of the endurance, vitality, and spiritual strength of the black woman.'

1983

"There had been…To Sir with Love... but the woman's experiences had never been stated."

Beryl Gilroy (1924–2001) publishes *Black Teacher*, outlining for the first time the experience of what it was to be a Black woman teacher in London.

1976

"From extension of other voices / We became voices of our own."

Linton Kwesi Johnson (1952–) publishes his poetry collection *Voices of the Living and the Dead*. He becomes one of the most powerful poetic voices of resistance to racism, combining Jamaican patois and standard English in his works.

1974

1995

Patience Agbabi (1965–) publishes her first poetry collection, *R.A.W.* Her poetry mixes diverse influences including Public Enemy, Sylvia Plath and Geoffrey Chaucer.

1997

Courttia Newland (1973–) publishes his first novel *The Scholar*, a work set in late '90s London. He goes on to write a number of novels and screenplays, including scripts for film director Steve McQueen's *Small Axe*, a five-part drama series (BBC, 2020).

1999

"Floyd...smelt the aroma of uprising and revolution in the Brixton air."

Alex Wheatle (1963–) publishes his debut novel *Brixton Rock*. His award-winning *South Crongton* series is followed by *Cane Warriors* (2020), a novel that narrates the story of an uprising of enslaved Africans in Jamaica in the 1760s.

2000

"And underneath it all, there remained an ever-present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere."

Zadie Smith (1975–) publishes *White Teeth*, her multi-award-winning debut novel that explores the lives of three families of different cultures and ethnicities in post-war London.

Jacqueline Roy publishes *The Fat Lady Sings*, a novel that explores the experiences of two British women of Jamaican descent living on a psychiatric ward. Navigating mental health with poignancy and tenderness, it is also a story of friendship, strength and all-powerful hope.

2001

"...things that go unsaid soon get forgotten"

Malorie Blackman (1962–) publishes *Noughts and Crosses*, the first novel in an award-winning series that explores race and racism, as well as love and friendship, in a dystopian London. Blackman is acknowledged as one of today's most captivating writers for children and young people.

"Nothing is as it seems. Seeing is not believing. Sometimes…you have to feel, touch, experience… and use your intelligence."

Benjamin Zephaniah (1958–) publishes his poem, 'What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us', in the collection *Too Black, Too Strong*. An outstanding dub poet and activist, Zephaniah's work has made an indelible mark on literature.

Jay Bernard (1988–) publishes *Surge*, a powerful debut poetry collection documenting the impact of the tragic death of 13 Black teenagers in New Cross in 1981, through the lens of a later generation that is itself coming to terms with the Grenfell Tower fire and the Windrush scandal.

Candice Carty-Williams (1989–) publishes *Queenie*, a novel in which she explores the complexities of its young Black female protagonist, Queenie Jenkins, combining joy, humour and moving vulnerability.

2019

"If you are disgusted by what you see, and if you feel the fire coursing through your veins, then it's up to you. You don't have to be the leader of a global movement or a household name."

Reni Eddo Lodge (1989–) publishes *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, a work that examines the racial landscape in Britain and becomes a bestseller, striking a chord with thousands of readers.

2017

David Olusoga (1970–), a historian and Professor of Public History at Manchester University, publishes *Black & British: A Forgotten History*, a work now seen as a modern classic. He says his mission is "making history inclusive, expansive and diverse".

2016

debbie tucker green's *nut* premieres at The Shed, National Theatre. Focussing on Elayne, a young Black woman who wants to withdraw from the world, the play navigates friendships, family relationships and mental health.

2013

Michaela Coel (1987–) writes and performs *Chewing Gum Dreams*, an award-winning coming-of-age drama that examines the complexities of a young Black woman finding her identity and place.

2012

"Dem tell me bout Lord Nelson and Waterloo / but dem never tell me bout Shaka de great Zulu."

John Agard (1949–) publishes 'Checking Out Me History'. In this poem and his other award-winning works, Agard highlights the erasure of Black history from the study of history in general.

2005

"There are some words that once spoken will split the world in two."

Andrea Levy (1956–2019) publishes her award-winning novel *Small Island* in which she explores the lives of the Windrush generation in post-war London, and later in *The Long Song* (2010) turns her attention to their ancestors in the 19th-century Caribbean.

2004

2019

"I was not born with an opinion of the world but it clearly seemed that the world had an opinion of people like me."

Akala (1983–) publishes *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*, a work that combines biography and polemic, finding an immediate audience.

"…be a person with knowledge, not just opinions."

Bernardine Evaristo (1959–) publishes *Girl, Woman, Other*, a novel that follows the personal journeys of 12 interconnected characters from across Britain, offering multiple perspectives on identity, family, relationships and more. She becomes the first Black British winner of the prestigious Booker Prize.

"I am not defined by darkness… Each dawn I am reminded / I am defined by light."

Lemn Sissay (1967–) publishes *My Name is Why: A Memoir* that reflects on the care system, childhood, family, race and self-expression. He is awarded the 2019 PEN Pinter Prize.

2020

Paul Mendez (1982–) publishes *Rainbow Milk*, a debut novel that explores migration, sexuality and racial identity between three generations of a family living in Wolverhampton and London.

"If you write something, and you can really hear your voice in it, really see yourself in it, that's a triumph."

Caleb Femi (1990–) publishes his first poetry collection *Poor*, which explores the lives of young Black boys in Peckham. In 2016, he was chosen as the first Young People's Poet Laureate for London.

2021

"I want you to know that there are people out there who believe in you."

Marcus Rashford (1997–), an international footballer and campaigner to end child food poverty, publishes *You are a Champion: How to Be the Best You Can Be* (co-authored with Carl Anka) and starts a book club for all children to enjoy the 'escapism of reading'.

"That's the stuff, darling, the love. Love, the love, the love. LOVE. That's what living was always about."

Salena Godden (1972–) publishes *Mrs Death Misses Death*, a novel that tells the story of Death personified as an overworked Black woman. It has been described as a modern-day version of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

"...things that go unsaid soon get forgotten"

...and beyond 2021

The growth of Black British literature in recent years has extended an already rich Black literary tradition. New names will continue to join these pioneers and groundbreaking writers, together building a past, present and future full of creative innovation, self-expression and possibility.

"You have a voice that has the power to change the world. How you use that is up to you."

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Consultants: Dr Cecily Jones (co-editor, Oxford Companion to Black British History) & Dr Deirdre Osborne, Reader in English Literature and Drama, Goldsmiths, University of London (editor, Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010). With thanks to British Library colleagues including Sandra Agard, Victoria Ogunsanya and Andrea Varney.
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