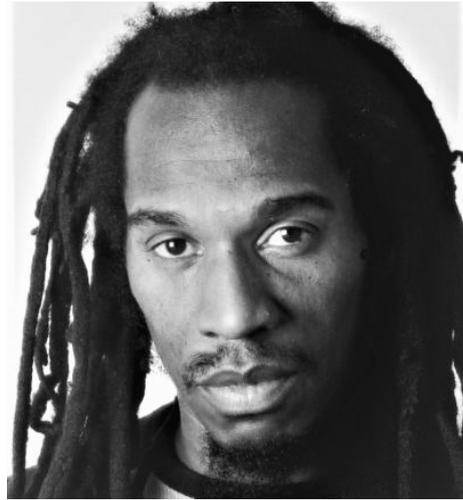


An A-Z of BZ: poet and novelist

By Elodie Thomas

Recently, I joined the Booklookers magazine; with the proposed focus being on black authors, I thought of an obvious choice: Benjamin Zephaniah. Despite having read some of his poems in previous years at George Tomlinson, I realised that I didn't know enough about this fascinating author. Working as part of the editorial team has provided me with the invaluable opportunity to research Zephaniah's life and to learn many interesting things about this inspirational poet and empowering figure in British literature. I am sure that the majority of GT have heard his name before, but do they really know his story?

Benjamin Zephaniah was born in Birmingham, April 15th 1958. He loved Handsworth, the neighbourhood of the city where he grew up. Part of the Windrush (a large ship which transported people from the Caribbean to England) generation, Zephaniah's parents decided to set sail for England in 1954. During colonial times, England was the mother country to Jamaica. After the war, there was a drive by the government to bring in members of the commonwealth over to England to help rebuild the war-damaged country. The family were poor and life was hard; Benjamin and his sister Velda attended school in Britain, but were constantly moving up and down the



country. This unsettled life no doubt contributed to the eventual split of his parents. Despite being dyslexic and being expelled from school at 13, he had a passion for sports and poetry which he carried with him into adulthood. When in Jamaica, from a young age he would sing and recite songs and poems in church. It was only when he was in his twenties that he began to write his own poems down. He's known as a 'Dub Poet' – someone who talks over a song and takes away the music track so that it sounds like a poem with a rhythm. Most well-known for his poetry, he has published many novels, too. One of these is called: *Refugee boy*; it was recommended to me by my friend. About a young boy called Alem Kelo, it is set during a war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. With an Eritrean mother and an Ethiopian father, the boy is safe nowhere. Escaping alone to London, he must learn to stand up for

himself. This book is so inspiring and interesting because it covers the topic of refugees. Not only is this unsung subject approached in a captivating way, it is based on real life stories, making it – in my opinion – one of his most page-turning books. As Zephaniah was visiting refugee camps in Gaza and Montenegro, he heard stories from boys who had to flee their country and be separated from their parents. This book is aimed at avid readers, aged 9 and up. Among the other novels he has written are: *Face* (1999), *The Life and Rhymes of Benjamin Zephaniah* (2018), and some poetry for younger readers are: *Wicked World* (2000), *Funky Chickens* (1996) and the poetry book with which some students might be familiar: *Talking Turkeys* (1994).

'The majority of GT will have heard his name before, but do they really know his story?'

One amazing thing he has done, among many others, is to turn down an MBE from the Queen! According to him, after fighting against colonialism all his life, it would have been hypocritical to be a Member of the British Empire, and he did what he thought was right. The words of Zephaniah were 'No way Mr Blair, no way Mrs Queen. I am profoundly anti-empire.'

Blackman's Best

By Ewelina Wiczorek

After hearing about the amazing black author, Malorie Blackman, in our school assembly, I rushed to Leytonstone Library and took out the book 'Hacker'. As I was reading it, I didn't even hear my sister asking me to wait for her. Incredibly absorbing, it sometimes felt like my hands were glued to the pages. All of her work is fabulous; in my opinion, *Hacker* is her best.

Revolving around a misfortune that befalls a black-British family, it features a family of four. It's about a dad who is accused of stealing one million pounds and is sent to jail. Despite this, his two children know he is innocent and try to prove it. What does he do? Well, he works with computers in a bank and makes new programs to match people's accounts. As he works in IT, he becomes the prime suspect after that £1,000,000 is found in his account. Unfortunately, he is taken to court. Once his children, Gib and Victoria, find out, they both know he isn't guilty and spring into action. They decide to log onto their

father's bank account only to find the message: 'THIS IS THE SYSTEM OPERATOR. WHO IS USING THIS ACCOUNT? PLEASE IDENTIFY YOURSELF.'

Because then she would land where her father is - prison - she had to quickly log off not to get caught. The next day, some officers came and took the device she was using. She had nothing to use now; her brother Gib had an idea. They secretly entered their school and used the computing room to log onto David's account and print some details off. Suddenly, the boy found a clue in the names and dates. He might know who the secret dealer was...

Of the four main characters in the book, Victoria is very gracious, clever and has an easy-going personality – unlike Gib. She is more kind-hearted; she's also great at hacking. Sadly, she never knew her real parents, since they died after her birth on a trip to Scotland. Because of the special bond between them and the way they are both great at hacking, she is most similar to her dad. An angel in the eyes of his parents, Gib is outwardly a normal boy. In some scenes, however, he is very harsh towards his sister. Although he likes to argue a lot and is also quite stubborn, it doesn't mean he has bad ideas. Actually, he is

very sly, a very good liar and can pretend to be someone who he isn't.

'All of her work is fabulous; in my opinion, *Hacker* is her best.'

Of course, the most imperilled character is David – the thoughtful, good humoured father. Even though he ends up in prison, despite being innocent of any wrong-doing, he is an especially resilient individual. However, he is actually innocent. It is he who teaches Victoria how to hack and his special skill in this gives the book its title.

As I was reading, I noticed that one character stood out for me the most: Gib. Not because of his harshness, but because of his perseverance and helpfulness. Sometimes he is actually quite funny, always making people laugh. I also like how he is described in such a way to make him different from all the others. I really like how Blackman gave each of her characters their own personalities and their own special hidden talents. As you read one page, you can't help yourself read the next so you end up reading the whole book in one go. This is what happened with me, anyway. I wonder how it will be for you.

Should-have-been Nobel prizewinners

By Orson Suarez King

On the back of the recent Black History Month – and while the current controversy over Black Lives Matter is still raging – now seemed a good moment to dig deeper into why there have been only three black recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature. These are: Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian playwright, poet and activist (who was the first black winner to be awarded with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986), Derek Walcott, in 1992 and Toni Morrison, in 1993. Given the prize has been awarded 114 times to 117 Nobel Laureates, between 1901 and 2020, why have so few black authors been cited, seeing as they make up 40% of the writing population published in English? Perhaps, like the film industry, we could ensure that we have a more diverse judging panel. In places like Nigeria and Ghana, and all across Africa, storytelling and writing are part of their culture and has been for thousands of years. Additionally, Nigeria has the most literature on the planet and that is a big deal. Quite simply, we should read, publish and celebrate more books by black people.

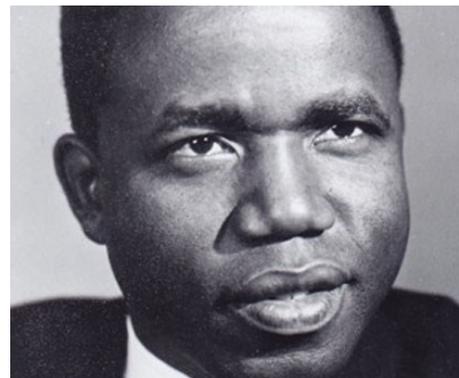
Just have a look in your book corner; count how many books you can see by black writers. Are there enough do you think? Why do we even need a month in order to appreciate these books? We should appreciate them all the time. Why do only 4% of children's books have black lead characters? It is very depressing how racism is still in the world and governments aren't doing enough about it. In order to address this, Black Knight publishing has been founded by people who only publish black authors. Teachers and educators could also make sure books either by BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) authors, or with a black lead character, are part of the curriculum. In this way young black children

can identify with books and would want to start writing ones themselves that, who knows, might then go on to become classics and win awards.

This is a prodigiously important matter. We need to do so much more. Worldwide, it is not something that can wait. Mankind has been writing novels since *Robinson Crusoe*, supposedly the first novel ever written. Except, the black peoples of the world were the first to ever write and yet they are the least represented in international literature. Across the globe, hundreds of thousands of books have been published and a significant majority of them have been by white authors. For example, James Baldwin was an inspirational writer and deserved so much more. More black writers, like him and Chinua Achebe, should have won awards for their wonderful books (such as the latter's novel 'Things Fall Apart', which is an all-time great, in my opinion). For myself, I never want to stop reading works by authors from different cultures; I love them because they open my eyes to the rest of the world.

'The black peoples of the world were the first to ever write and yet they are the least represented in international literature.'

1986 was the first time a black writer won the Nobel Prize for Literature and that really makes me annoyed, especially



Chinua Achebe

because today it isn't much better. Martin Luther King, an author as well as a preacher and civil-rights activist, did get a Nobel Prize, but that was the Nobel Peace Prize. I think the real problem is that too many people still reject even the idea of helping black voices. Not only is my own class book corner lacking in works by black Nobel prize-winning authors, it only has two books by black authors full stop. This isn't good enough. If our government did more, others would follow, meaning there would be a big flow of young black writers. Even if such an initiative didn't get rid of racism, it would be a move in the right direction. Black writers are just as good as white writers and if teachers keep encouraging us to read good books, we should remain both colour blind and open to the full range of possibilities that a truly multi-cultural library can offer.



James Baldwin

Is GT reading enough black authors?

By Samantha Sharpe

When I joined the Booklookers magazine, I instantly knew what I wanted to investigate: just how many books by black authors does our school have? Black History Month is important because it gives us an opportunity to reflect on the unsung contributions that black people have made to society and culture. Last October, I thought to myself how come there are so many books by white British authors when the school should have a much better representation of ones written by people of a BAME background. Therefore, I set myself a task on behalf of the Booklookers magazine, to go and explore some different key stage 2 student's opinions on this important matter. Perhaps while you're reading this you can answer the questions yourself or even discuss them with your friends and family. Remember: anyone can make a difference. Firstly, I asked: do you think children of your age are sufficiently aware of black authors? Mary from year 3 Caesar told me, "Not really because sometimes children just pick a book without knowing who it's by." Nadia from year

6 said "It's not like you can find a book by a black author on a daily basis."

Next, I asked the obvious question: if not, what should be done about it? "Maybe we could write down the names of the black authors that we find and make a list of books you might like to read," Mary, from Year 3 Caesar suggested. "If one person reads a book by a black author and recommends it to their friends and then they recommend it to theirs, and so on, we can make a difference together," was the view of Nadia from year 6. "We should definitely read more and be more aware of authors from different cultures," was how Penelope from year 4 put it.

'We should definitely read more and be more aware of authors from different cultures.'

Wanting the interviewees to reveal more about how they felt about this important matter, I thought of a bigger and better question: Do you think there are enough books by black authors in our school library? "Not enough, we should have more." Mary said. "We should add a new section for books by black authors for more people to read." Nadia added. "I certainly don't think there are enough," was what Penelope thought.

Finally, I wanted to know whether children thought that the school encourages us to read a sufficient variety of different books. I was really intrigued by these answers. "Yes – I have read *Young, Gifted & Black*, but they should put books by black authors everywhere around the school, including in classrooms." Mary told me. "I think that the school should give us more suggestions for books by black authors and encourage us more," said Nadia. "Yes, maybe they could do more?" Penelope agreed.

Conducting this survey demonstrated to me that perhaps the school could do some more thinking about what we at GT can do to encourage the children to discover more black authors. In my opinion, we should have more books by black authors; my survey showed that the children think the same. One idea could be to take Nadia's suggestion of recommending more black authors and books to one another. There are many great black authors to choose from such as: Malorie Blackman, Alex Wheatley and Jewell Parker Rhode. If you are an avid reader, you have got to try, Maya Angelou or Benjamin Zephaniah. During the course of my interviews, Mary from year 3 gave us our first recommendation: *Tell Me No Lies* by Malorie Blackman. Being an avid bookworm myself I love it when I see children sharing their recommendations. If you read a book you love, always share it with your friends because, you never know, it might become your favourite book, too.

The versatile and inspirational Maya Angelou

By Leo McCarthy

A truly inspirational woman, Maya Angelou had many careers and was a trail-blazer with her various literary works. With Black Lives Matter still at the forefront of our minds, I settled on Maya Angelou to write about for this special issue of the magazine. During the course of my researches, I discovered much about her many achievements. I soon realised the extent to which her life was jam-packed with all the amazing things she did and experienced. In what follows, I set out to answer the question, "Why is Maya Angelou so inspirational?"

Maya Angelou is probably most famous for the seven volumes of autobiography that she produced. Her first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was one of the first books by an African-American female writer to garner worldwide fame. However, she had many more strings to her bow. For example, she wrote several collections of poetry, the first being released in 1971. One of these, *On the Pulse of Morning*, was read at US President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993.

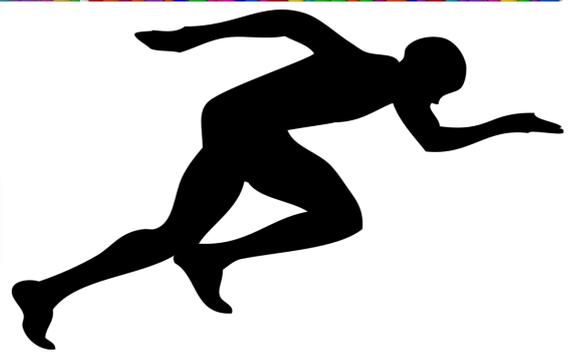
'I see myself as a very interested person. I've never been bored in my life.'

Besides her career in writing, she was a civil-rights activist. In fact, as the Northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, she worked with Malcolm X. As testament to her incredible versatility, she was also a performer. As well as a stint

as a cabaret artiste in San Francisco, she enjoyed a spell as a dance partner to the legendary choreographer Alvin Ailey. Appearing in films such as '*Calypso's Heatwave*', and '*How to Make an American Quilt*', it was for her performance in *The Blacks*, that she received an Emmy nomination. In her later life, she would become a distinguished visiting professor, lecturing at Universities across America.

Why was she so inspirational? Perhaps she should answer this question herself. "*Most of the time, I see myself as wanting to know. And I see myself as a very interested person. I've never been bored in my life... if I were bored, now that would interest me. I'd think, how did that happen and what's going on? I'd be caught up in it. Are you kidding? Bored?*" Dying in 2013 at the grand old age of 86, Maya Angelou should be remembered as a truly inspirational person in so many different ways.

Ghost: world champion



An original story inspired by *Ghost Boy*

By Sarina Shaikh

In a desolate neighbourhood called Glass Manor, all the houses were falling apart. Despite their poverty, most of the residents were kind and friendly. Amongst them lived a boy who was always angry and whose name was 'Castle'. Whether it was to do with his clothes, the haircuts his mother gives him or his indigent neighbourhood, he felt as if everyone knew about his unfortunate experience. The truth was that it's not every day that a child and their mother experienced their drunken father/husband attempting to murder them. Notoriously, this is what happened one day to Castle and his mum. Fleeing from his threats of violence, they took refuge in a corner shop. After the owner described them both as, "white as a ghost," the name stuck. From then on, Castle decided to call himself 'Ghost'. It was a few years later when, one day, after being suspended once again from high school, Ghost decided to go for a run. At a certain point, he came across a junior running team out doing some training. After falling in with them and instantly feeling at his ease in their company, he ended up becoming a regular member of the ranks. Before long, the team's coach, whose name was Brody, became so impressed with Ghost's athletic potential that he started to prepare him for elite competitions. Increasingly determined and resilient, day after day, Ghost would pound up and down the running track of the local training ground, pushing himself to the limit. "C'mon Ghost!" Coach Brody would often be heard roaring from the sidelines. He was now in his forties and had dedicated a large part of his life to this sports club. With the help and support of his team, Ghost soon became a champion junior runner, winning numerous gold medals and trophies just like Coach Brody had in his younger days. Now, for a better reason than his old reputation as a troublemaker and victim of abuse, he was recognised

everywhere he went in the neighbourhood. Nodding at everyone he knew, he walked down the bustling streets with a certain swagger. Besides marking himself out due to his tall, lean, muscly figure, he had smooth nut-brown skin and soft, kind hazel eyes. If you looked closely at his sturdy ankles, you would straight away see that he was a runner. Covered in cuts, scratches and scars from continual scraps and falls during his never less than intensive training, despite all of this, it never once crossed his mind to give up. Then came the crucial occasion. Ghost was aiming to beat Usain Bolt's world record for the hundred metres, which was 9.58 seconds. He'd made the final of the annual national junior track and field event. Though the quickest he had ever run was 10.51 seconds, he was determined to give it his all. For all the harshness of Coach Brody's approach, Ghost trusted that his methods would always bring out the best in him.

'It never once crossed his mind to give up.'

That memorable day, while the oppressive mid-summer sun was beating down, Ghost sweated buckets. Coach Brody watched from the track edge as the finalists placed themselves in the starting blocks. After a shaky start, Ghost gradually started to pick up speed. In a matter of seconds, he was running like the wind. Coach watched with his heart in his throat. In the blink of an eye, almost, it was over. Along the track at the finish line, who was that human streak of lightning with their arms raised victoriously in the air? It wasn't Bolt this time, but his very own Ghost.

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