

Reflections on publishing difficulties for writers of colour



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At the start of this year, much before the rage about Black Lives Matter erupted, I was having a quiet lunch in London with an

““ We can write romance and chick lit, but if we are black our books must have an element of race thrown in. ””

weighty work, preferably about something dark, engaged with very deeply. They have no appetite for anything else.’

At first I was surprised by her comment and then outraged. But looking back, I am grateful to her for confirming something I had long suspected of an industry dominated by white decision makers. Writers of colour are not afforded the same creative latitude as their white counterparts. White authors can write about whatever they please because their experiences are considered universal. But ours are not. Our primary purpose is to educate white audiences. So after 9/11 it became the responsibility of brown authors from Muslim countries to churn out ‘urgent’ novels that enlightened white readers on the hows and whys of Islamism. Never mind that most of us, easy-going liberals ourselves, had no insight into extremism or any personal experience of it. It still fell to us by dint of our race or religion or culture or whatever to burrow into the hearts and minds of jihadists for the benefit of our white readers. White authors, by contrast, are not required to explain to the rest of the world the beliefs animating their culture’s centuries old practice of white supremacy.

And if we were not going to engage with Islamism, then the least we could do was to shed light on subjects like female oppression, hunger, child labour, our dreadful slums and our corrupt and broken politics. Our tone had to be grave, our engagement profound and our purpose educational. We must not presume to do anything else. So not only are we discouraged from writing humour, but also

risky to take a punt on a non-white novelist holding forth on a subject about which the average reader simply does not care. But this makes two, to my mind, erroneous assumptions – that the average reader (according to publishers she is a white, middle class, middle aged woman) has limited horizons and is utterly resistant to new ideas. And second, that non-white people don't read.

Of course, there are high profile mould breaking novels such as *My Sister the Serial Killer*