

Interview with Catherine Johnson

Conducted for the 'Reimagining the Restoration' project, funded by the AHRC. 25 April 2022

Speakers: Kate Loveman (KL) and Catherine Johnson (CJ)

KL: Hello, my name is Kate Loveman. I'm a researcher at the University of Leicester, where I work on literature in the 17th and the 18th centuries, and I particularly work on Samuel Pepys, who wrote a diary in the 1660s in the reign of Charles II. I'm the lead investigator for a project on Pepys's diary, which is called 'Reimagining the Restoration', and which investigates historical fiction written about the 17th and the 18th centuries.

Today I'm talking to Catherine Johnson, an award-winning author of books for young adults and children.

Many of Catherine's books are historical novels which are set in the 18th and the 19th centuries, and they feature the adventures of young people who are Black or of mixed heritage. To give you just a few examples of her acclaimed work: *Sawbones* is a murder mystery in which Ezra McAdams, who is an apprentice anatomist, encounters magicians and body snatchers in late eighteenth-century London. *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo* is based on a real-life news sensation from 1817 when Mary Wilcox, who was from Devon, tricked high society into believing that she was a princess from the East Indies – that novel was shortlisted for the Bookseller YA Prize and nominated for the Carnegie prize. And most recently Catherine has published *Queen of Freedom*, which is about Queen Nanny who was a real but also legendary figure in the fight against the British in 1720s Jamaica. As I said, these are just a few examples from a wealth of fascinating and complex stories which I've been really enjoying reading lately.

So Catherine, could you tell us how you first started writing?

CJ: Oh, I've been writing for 30 years, actually. Next year it would be 30 years since I was first published. I started writing for teenagers and I wasn't writing historical fiction. I was just writing contemporary fiction. When I started writing historical fiction, which was probably 20 years ago, the first book I wrote set in the past was set in 1812. So even though I didn't know at the time, it was "the long 18th century" which, from talking to historians, I now know that's what it's called! But the reason why I started writing historical fiction is because I read a copy -- and this is like 25 years ago, 20 years ago -- of Peter Fryer's *Staying Power*¹ and I'd never read a book like that, you know. It was a very important, I think, forerunner of David Olusoga's *Black and British* book² and I think it's very important for this generation.

You know, my parent's generation or my father's generation -- which was the Windrush generation, even though my dad came here before the Windrush -- who were very much West Indians and although

¹ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, first published in 1984.

² David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (2016)

they had been told that they were British, they were British West Indians. But people like me who were born here, this is the only home you have. You go to wherever it is your parents come from and whatever your skin colour, it is just obvious the minute you open your mouth – your mannerisms --you are not from there, so you are from *here*.

It was making me realise that people like me had been from here for hundreds of years and I really didn't know. My view of British history was like a Quality Street Chocolate lid: you know, you've got the lady, got the man with the hat.



Definitely we did not figure, and it was hard because I grew up with... on the telly -- although I did read, I'm really a child of the telly -- I'm the child of the 70s who watched lots of telly and I loved the historical dramas. I loved the outfits they had, you know, Leon Garfield family adaptations.³ I'm not talking about *Pride and Prejudice* or the older stuff, I'm talking about... it was child-centred, it was Sunday afternoon, family. And I wanted..... we'd play stuff at school that had been on the telly and very often it was like "oh, you know, *you* can't be somebody who's wearing a dress". That was it, really. I wanted to imagine me in a frock. I wanted to say that this is my country and people like me have been here. But obviously what got me was the lives that these people had and imagining the lives that these people had, and wanting to share the enthusiasm of finding stuff out. And then the more you get into historical fiction, especially when you're writing for children, it's life and death. You know, in a way that stories that happen nowadays in Britain are usually not, so there's opportunities for a lot of drama.

KL: You mentioned the term "the long 18th century", which is a strange term which, as you say, historians use. It kind of covers the period from about 1660 to the early 19th century.

CJ: Now I've heard its Victoria isn't it, when Victoria comes to the throne?⁴

KL: Yeah, sometimes about 1832.⁵ It takes us well into the 19th century. Is there a particular appeal of writing about that period for you?

³ Leon Garfield's novels for children, such as *Devil-in-the-Fog* (1966, tv adaptation 1968) and *Smith* (1967, tv adaptation 1970), and *John Diamond* (1980, adapted 1981), set in the eighteenth century.

⁴ 1837.

⁵ The year of the Reform Act, which saw major changes to the UK's electoral laws.

CJ: Well, it is partly the wealth of experience of Black Britons at the time. The minute the laws about the end of slavery⁶ came in, in fact, there was a lot less to-ing and fro-ing. There were a load of different ranges of experiences to explore. It's not just -- it's not about enslavement, it's a range of experiences. I think there's only one book I have written in which someone does begin their life enslaved, out of all the historical fiction I have written. So you know, obviously it's massive and it's an important part of how one is perceived -- not necessarily in Britain, because slavery wasn't something that was seen to happen *in* Britain. It was something that happened far away. And it's just so interesting for me and it's not just ... it's not Black history, it's all of our histories. It was the fundamentals, it was the engine of the industrial revolution, the capital that was produced, and then the experience, and then the meeting point and the melting point of all the different people within the island of Britain. And I think we ignore it. It's like a sort of amnesia.

KL: One of the things that I found really exciting about your work was the kinds of communities that you develop, and often they develop across the course of the novels so *Nest of Vipers*, for example, has a range of young characters in it. This is a novel about a group of largely teenage and young people who are thieves in the early 18th century, and the hero is Cato Hopkins, but he's accompanied by a whole range of different people: some of whom are young women who are good at pretending to be aristocracy; he encounters a young man who is a prince from Africa who's been at boarding school, if I remember rightly, and has run away. So that's just one example of kind of ways that they're not just about race, but about class, and about a range of people finding their feet.

CJ: It's always about class. It is never just about race. This is British history we're talking about and really class because there are circumstances -- and this is the thing when you look at [it], I had a TV job which was looking at Miranda Kaufman's *Black Tudors*,⁷ and doing an adaptation (a dramatic thing) and you look at pre-industrial slavery race relations when it was other and race did not determine your class. You know, it's always going to be class with British history; it's so important and working class alliances between the marginalised -- which even in my parents' own experience, 50, 60 years ago, was very much working classes. I mean, then you go further back the Battle of Cable Street in the 30s.⁸ It's about the coming together of marginalized -- the Jews and the Irish dockers -- together and realising that actually they've got more in common.

KL: Can I ask you about *The Lady Caraboo* because I think that was one that particularly struck me that it was very carefully structured in a lot of ways. This is, as I mentioned at the start, based on the real life story of Mary Wilcox, but you have a number of viewpoint characters there: you have Mary Wilcox who's whose view is the main protagonist; but also Cassandra, who is introduced early in the narrative, who is your typical -- "typical" inverted commas -- early 19th century country-house well-brought-up young woman; and her brother, who starts the novel with very misogynistic views and he develops as a character. But I was interested in the kind of ways the characters bounced off each other in that novel. So Cassandra really doesn't undergo that much of a character change: she continues to be somebody

⁶ In 1807 an act was passed banning the slave trade within the British empire, although slavery continued to be legal. 1833 saw the passing of an Act that made slavery illegal in the majority of British colonies.

⁷ Miranda Kaufman, *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (2017).

⁸ In October 1936, demonstrators from a variety of backgrounds successfully resisted a march by the British Union of Fascists through London's East End, fighting with police who were protecting the BUF route.

who is interested in marriage and hasn't really developed much self-reflection; and Caraboo (who is creating her narrative) as a young working class woman

CJ: A modern woman, yeah.

KL: but she's able to pass off some of her skills she'd learned from living in Devon, hunting, as being "exotic" royal skills from the East Indies.⁹

CJ: That book, actually, has a direct relationship -- although there were lots of books in between -- so I wrote *Nest of Vipers* and then I did a short non-fiction book with the research, which was about confidence tricksters for a small children's publisher, and they were doing publicity for that book, and they said "Who's your favourite female confidence trickster from history?" and I was like, "Oh my God!". And then it took me years to write that book because it is based on reality, because I had to sort of squidge it into a narrative format, because a lot of the characters are real. Cassandra is not real. A lot of the other characters are real, but it's that thing where people want to believe something and people want to believe things about themselves and about other people. And growing up in London, especially when you are indeterminately brown -- I mean my hair is grey now, but I did have black hair -- a lot of people project onto you whatever they want you to be, you know, "oh, you're from Tahiti!", "you're from North Africa", "You're Egyptian", "You're South American", "You're Israeli".....

And, you know, it is that thing when one is mixed race, there's the old trope about being mixed race: you're not one thing or the other, therefore you are a liar because your appearance is lying, because it doesn't necessarily say "oh, this is a black person I'm encountering", therefore, I will, you know.....

So it was a lot about that, and *Caraboo* just took a long time because I knew I wanted to write the story, but I didn't know how to approach it, so I kept trying different points of view, and in the end I had to write it that way because I couldn't get it out any other way.

KL: There's some great reflection in that novel, some comments that the characters make about the power of fiction to improve on truth -- to be less ugly. I think one of them says, than truth -- but also to *create* truth. So Caraboo feels that this character she has created, that she's living, is in some ways more true to herself than the oppressed life she's in. In your story, she's suffered the birth of a stillborn child, she's suffered a sexual assault, so she's escaping into a fictional world but she finds it more true. Could you say a bit more about what you think historical fiction can do that history can't?

CJ: Well, I think we love a story -- well, most people love a story. History for children, for young people, been made a lot more palatable than it was in my day. I don't mean palatable -- because it's fascinating, it's wonderful and I love it -- but I don't even have a History O level because I had the worst mark in my whole class, because we were writing essays on the Corn Laws and, you know, the 1840 Reform Bill and I was not very good at essays. I think if I'd had *Horrible Histories*¹⁰ I've probably been a lot more...! Because what is interesting is people. What is interesting is "How would I?", "What would I have done?", "How would I have lived?", "What was it like?", "What was it like to have so little

⁹ In *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo* Mary Wilcox is dark skinned. White characters in the book speculate that her father or grandfather must have been Black. Mary herself is unsure as she can't remember her parents, but she thinks her mother 'was no darker than I' (p. 235).

¹⁰ A series of entertaining books for children by Terry Deary, published from 1993, which became an equally entertaining BBC children's series.

choices?", "How would I have managed?", "How would I have survived?", "How would I have lived?" "What would I...?" All those. It's a way of exploring those questions because obviously the one thing that a writer -- that anybody, actually, not just writers -- know, is that fundamentally people are very similar, at that absolute base: wanting interaction, childbirth, death, all those things. We're fundamentally the same. We cannot imagine -- we don't know what people said to each other. We don't know the exact words they used, but it's really nice to explore those things. That's what you want historical fiction for.

KL: Do you have a method for going about finding things? Do you usually get drawn into stories or to the historical stories in particular ways?

CJ: It's cumulative usually, so [with] *Nest of Vipers* there's a direct line to *Caraboo*. *Sawbones*, in the intermediate period, what happened was I went to a museum. You know when you're a Londoner -- I'm not a Londoner now, but I was a Londoner -- and I'd never been to the Hunterian Museum. It's the collection of John and William Hunter who were anatomists in the 18th century. They set up the Royal College of Surgeons and there's all things in jars, and there was a big tumour and the writing, you know the copperplate,¹¹ says "Tumour cut off the face of a boy in Saint Kitts",¹² and I thought, "Oooh, who was that boy? What?". And then, you know, that came. So *Sawbones* was just like [clicks fingers], it took me like six weeks to write the rough draught. I got totally sucked in.

KL: Do you go to historians or do you go to novels of the period or people's diaries, or is it a mix?

CJ: I go to maps a lot.

KL: Aaah!

CJ: I have some lovely, lovely maps which I think came from the Museum of London archive or something. Obviously I try my hardest to make sure things are right. Sometimes there are things that are wrong. You know, I wanted to have a letter box in *Sawbones* and letter boxes were in some houses in London in the 1790s, but they weren't universal, but I just thought, you know what, he's having a letter box!

I am not a historian. I'm not an academic. I read a lot -- if it's easy because I'm not an academic. This is what put me off academia, I think, when I was younger, the fact that a lot of books -- I think a lot of things -- are written because they're an academic paper, so they're written in language which is not accessible. And part of the thing that you do if you're writing for young people is to make that language accessible. That is your *raison d'être*.

KL: You mentioned language a minute ago. Is language something that is particularly tricky to negotiate?

CJ: Yeah, I wrote *Nest of Vipers* a long time ago and I think the language there's a bit of a chasm between the language and the readership. Because it's not really heavy on the eighteenth-century

¹¹ A style of handwriting developed in the 17th and 18th centuries.

¹² An island in the West Indies, colonized by the British and the French who used enslaved Africans to labour in the sugar industry.

cant,¹³ you know, but I think there's quite a rhythm of it and so you do need to be quite a good reader. But it's because it's so rich and lovely -- that language, you know, is so lovely.

KL: Yes.

CJ: And, I think it was easier, obviously, with *Sawbones* because Ezra was educated anyway. It was not from a different milieu. But it's what you do when you're writing a character: you inhabit that character, that whole culture.

KL: I think it's a period where we've got suddenly a lot more information on people who are not gentry and middle class and that's partly because the number of people who can read has increased, and so the number of people who can write has also increased.

CJ: And the money that has come into the country, which made London a place where... you know, Tudor times *was* much more buttoned up compared with the 18th century where you're like [gasps] life is short, life is exciting -- you know -- you've got a chance to make some money or not, or live or die, everything is ... it feels ... it's very vital. I mean, not to say it's not awful and terrible and -- I wouldn't want to live there! But, you know, it's full of stories.

KL: Yeah, it is. Do you feel a responsibility when you're writing about characters who are real to *them*? To "get it right" in some sense?

CJ: Yeah, I think you do. Less so when they're completely not alive, but still, I mean... Obviously, the Nanny¹⁴ thing is different because there's so little that's written about her -- absolutely so little -- that you've got to make stuff up, and half the stuff that's known about her is absolutely ridiculous. But then again, you think of all the books that are about Robin Hood and it's similar. It's that territory. Well, I did a short bio of Thomas-Alexandre Dumas,¹⁵ who was Dumas père's father -- the father of the writer -- and it's very important that you get things right. *Caraboo*.... yes, but no. I wanted to be true to the spirit of her and you're not going to go completely off piste, but you have got to make ... fiction is a different beast. If you're writing something that is fictional it's going to be arranged, it's going to be formed in a particular sort of way, because that's what we demand of fiction and I think most readers are aware of that.

KL: Yes, and you get at the end of historical novels, very often, the sort of notes that separate out the fiction and the fact as we know it. And as you mentioned, sometimes, like with Nanny in *Queen of Freedom*, the Jamaican freedom fighter, there is very little but also quite deeply felt views about how people should be portrayed are going around.

You handle some quite difficult subject matter, so I mentioned there's quite a lot of misogyny in *Princess Caraboo*. One of the viewpoint characters who becomes a sort of ally of Caraboo, starts off as a young man of privilege, and the first time we see him he's in a brothel. And you said a bit earlier that only one

¹³ Thieves' slang.

¹⁴ Nanny, the heroine of *Queen of Freedom*.

¹⁵ A general in late eighteenth-century France, who was the son of an enslaved African woman and a French aristocrat. His son, Alexandre Dumas (known as Dumas père to distinguish him from *his* son), wrote *The Three Musketeers*. Catherine's book about Thomas-Alexandre is *To Liberty! The Adventures of Thomas-Alexandre Dumas* (2020).

of your characters actually begins the narrative enslaved, so I wonder if there's decisions that you make about how to leave material out, or to keep it on the edges of the story you're telling, or how to foreground it -- that you could say a bit about handling the very difficult subjects that come up?

CJ: The most important thing is this story, and it's like, what are you saying about these people? And I wanted him¹⁶ to be horrible. And what's the most horrible thing that he could [do]? And it is also showing how women were thought of at the time, again, and how little power women had at the time. It was a truth that if you were a wealthy man you could have mistresses, who did mean nothing to you and were like disposable, like shoes, or a coat. So you've got to illustrate those things in a way that is accessible and clear.

It's important that people realise what a debt this country -- *we*, me included -- owes to the labour, the kidnap and labour, of all those people, because that made it possible for us to have lovely roads and lovely houses, and flushing toilets, and all that kind of stuff. So, you know, to *not* look at it...?!

It's very funny... it's the sort of stuff that my dad would go on about all the time in my house as a child. But I did get it, you know, the English learned to oppress, from practising on the Welsh and the Irish (which is the other part of my heritage, the Welsh, so that's what they had in common). But you need to know these things because it's so important, and it then it makes sense of why we are where we are now. How did we get to suck all this produce and people -- which was fabulous -- from all over the world into our country, which made this country interesting and vibrant and different? And especially now we're a period where the walls are going up.

KL: Do you have any particular tips for people who are writing or wanting to write historical fiction?

CJ: Well, it's the story first, then the research. I think people can just do research and do research and do research. I'd say start writing and when you find gaps in your knowledge then do the research, because otherwise you'll never stop.

You know the most important thing is the story, I think. You're entertaining yourself first of all. You're entertaining yourself. It's got to be whatever made you want to write that story, whatever fired you up about that circumstance, those characters, *that's* what's got to take you through really. Nowadays, I think there's such a lot of focus on -- apart from the Tudors and the Victorians -- World War One and World War Two, you know! And that really is this blanket of what is offered. Because I think readers -- young and old readers -- are open minded. It's what to put in front of them and what people think is appropriate, and it's much better to read a book that is on the National Curriculum where you might get some knowledge about the time rather than not.

So the sensible thing if you want to write a historical fiction: first of all, yes, know when, know where, but those are just jumping off points really.

There are points in *Nest of Vipers* that it wasn't later in the century because of certain rules. So there were reasons for it being then. Likewise with *Sawbones*: there were reasons for it being then because of

¹⁶ Fred, brother of Cassandra and Caraboo's antagonist turned ally.

what was going on in scientific whatever and before laws changed. And *Caraboo*, I moved it, I think, a year later because I wanted *Frankenstein* to have been published.¹⁷

KL: [gasps] I was going to ask you, actually! This was on my list of questions: had it been moved because of *Frankenstein*? That was the main reason I could think you might have [moved it].

CJ: [laughing] It was because of *Frankenstein*, yes!

KL: So, yes, the event is 1817 that you're describing, but it's because one of the characters Cassandra, at least, has read *Frankenstein*: a novel about the creation of identity and...

CJ: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

KL: Yeah, so this is an example of how people might slightly adjust the circumstances for literary reasons.

CJ: Well it is. It is to make it into a novel. It's like the reason why -- one of the questions I am asked about *Caraboo* is "Why have you got that assault at the front there?".¹⁸ And the reason I have is because it's standing in for 10 years of trauma. I am packaging 10 years of trauma into one act so that the reader can see why she does what she does, you know, without writing a big "oh, this happened and this". So that was the point of it. And when you write something like that you need to know what's happening, but without it being a gratuitous thing because the act in itself is not what is important, it's *her* change you know.

KL: Yes.

CJ: ... what's important: her running away psychologically from that act.

KL: I think what you were saying about telling the stories -- your novels quite often start at points where people are having a dramatic switch in their life. So Cato from *Nest of Vipers* is narrating his life to a chaplain in Newgate, because he's facing execution (which is a very eighteenth-century thief thing to do). *Caraboo* is escaping really a series of traumas, and that's one of the reasons she's creating her narrative. And Nat in *Freedom* -- which is a novel we've not mentioned about a young boy who comes to London who is enslaved, and his attempt to find freedom -- that novel starts just at the point that his mother and his sister are sold, so we never get to meet them, but we're getting his response to losing them as part of the story.

CJ: You know, that's classic storytelling. It's storytelling 101, isn't it? I mean, I don't mean to sound cynical, but you have to -- especially if you're writing for young people -- you have to engage the reader right away. If you are somebody who they know and they are fans of yours, you can have a big long rambling start. But if they just pick that book up off the shelf, that's how it goes.

¹⁷ Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* was published in 1818. *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo* is set in 1819, whereas the events it is based on happened in 1817.

¹⁸ In the first chapter of *The Curious Tale of the Lady Caraboo*, Mary Wilcox is raped while walking from London back to her family's home in Devon.

KL: An entrance to the story that is the story and not the history -- if you see what I mean? -- is a good tip.

Well, I'm going to draw us to a close here, but it's been absolutely fascinating to talk to you, and I know I've learned a lot. I hope the people who are listening have enjoyed hearing this. And thank you very much!

CJ: Thank you.