edexcel

Contemporary Black British Literature: An Introduction for Students

Pearson

Contents

Introduction 3

Historical context 5

Introductions to selected prose

Incomparable World, S.I. Martin recommended by Dr Leila Kamali 9

NW, Zadie Smith recommended by Dr Malachi McIntosh 10

Strange Music, Laura Fish recommended by Dr Deirdre Osborne 11

Trumpet, Jackie Kay recommended by Heather Marks 12

Introductions to selected drama

Fallout, Roy Williams recommended by Dr Deirdre Osborne 13

nut, debbie tucker green recommended by Dr Valerie Kaneko-Lucas 14

Something Dark, Lemn Sissay recommended by Dr Fiona Peters 15

The Story of M, SuAndi recommended by Dr Elaine Aston 16

Introductions to selected poetry

Ship Shape, Dorothea Smartt recommended by Dr Suzanne Scafe 17

Telling Tales, Patience Agbabi recommended by Nazmia Jamal 18

The Rose of Toulouse, Fred D'Aguiar recommended by Dr Abigail Ward 19

Too Black, Too Strong, Benjamin Zephaniah recommended by Kadija Sesay 20

Bibliography 21

Introduction

Why have we produced a guide to Contemporary Black British Literature?

Think about what you understand by the idea of our English literary heritage. Whose names and faces come to mind when you hear these terms? Shakespeare? Dickens? Keats? Whichever authors you picture as stalwarts of the literary canon, do they have any physical characteristics in common? Are they men? Are they white? Are they dead? The answer may not always be yes to all of these questions, but we would be willing to bet that it is more often than it is not.

And perhaps we say, so what? The fact that Dickens was a white man does not mean that his personal experiences and literary representations of nineteenth-century life speak for every other white man of the time, let alone the myriad other individuals going about their business in Victorian Britain. Yet as much as these canonical authors are the creators of some of our greatest works of British literature, and rightly studied and celebrated, they also become imbued with more significance than that. They become (or personify) a defining quality of what 'greatness' and 'literature' mean, and ultimately what 'Britishness' means.

The cultural commentator Raymond Williams stated that the content of any education 'expresses, both consciously and unconsciously, certain basic elements in the culture, what is thought of as "an education" being in fact a particular selection, a set of emphases and omissions'. So if we think about how ideas of Britishness are constructed through our education, including by the books we read and study, we hope this *Guide* will broaden the content from which you can choose to study for your coursework, to address the current omissions in the A level specification, and to attempt to better reflect contemporary British culture.

Highlighting the significance of these issues in contemporary British culture, in March 2017 the *Guardian* website reported on a survey conducted for the Royal Society of Literature, which found that when 2000 people were asked to name people they regarded as 'writers of literature', only 7 per cent of the 400 writers named were from black, Asian or minority ethnic (known as BAME) backgrounds. In each example, where a BAME writer was named it was by only one respondent, whereas 210 people named Shakespeare. You might wonder how this selection could ever change if students of literature are never introduced to texts by authors from black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds.

This is why we developed a guide to Contemporary Black British Literature.

Dr Deirdre Osborne, co-founder of the first ever degree course in the world in Black British Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and author of our detailed resource

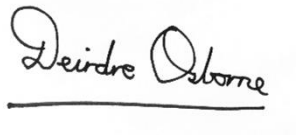
Contemporary Black British Literature: A Guide, outlines that: 'In this guide, "Black British literature" indicates a range of late-twentieth-century and contemporary work in a context of literary history, rather than as projecting racial restrictions upon the many possible identities that can comprise any individual, and to which they might subscribe personally and collectively. As a literary term, Black British can be asserted, disputed and problematised in turn. Nonetheless, it is an important strand within British literature that needs to be woven into educational curricula and its value recognised by current and future generations.'

Your coursework is the part of your A level where you have freedom to choose the texts that you want to study. *Contemporary Black British Literature: A Guide*, the first in our series of resources on diversifying the curriculum, has been created to encourage you to maximise the potential of this freedom, and to jump into some of these academic and political debates. We would like to introduce you to some texts by black British authors that you may not have encountered in your many years of English lessons. As is the case with most A level texts, the works in the *Guide* deal with more mature content and themes than those which you would encounter at GCSE, and their content can sometimes be challenging.

In this *Introduction for Students*, leading academics, educators and commentators in the field of contemporary black British literature introduce you to a handful of influential texts covering the genres of prose, drama and poetry as well as a wide range of contexts, settings, forms and themes. The *Introduction* aims to give you a taster of each text, and hopefully will inspire you to investigate further. If you would like to use any of these texts for your coursework submission, we've also offered some suggestions of possible pairings to kick-start your research of potential text combinations.

And even if you don't decide to use any of these texts for your coursework, we hope we've given you some food for thought and introduced you to some fantastic writers, whose work you will read for pleasure over the years.

Happy reading!



Deirdre Osborne
Goldsmiths University

Eva McManamon and Katy Lewis
Pearson English Team

Historical context

This guide consists of a selection of novels, poetry and drama by contemporary writers of African descent who were born and raised in Britain and who represent the generation who have been described (and importantly, who self-term) as Black British writers.

African descent people have lived in the British Isles since the Roman Empire, when Britannia was simply a dominion. However, the traces of these presences have become obscured in the dominance of the British Empire many centuries later. People, cultures and commerce circulated between Africa and Europe well before the systems of enslavement and colonization. Literature plays a vital role in correcting this imbalance in historical representation.

Sixteenth–nineteenth centuries

Until the eighteenth century in Britain, black people were represented primarily through white (and in the majority male) writers' works, and predominantly through the medium of plays. However, black characters were not played by black actors. Blackness was represented through prosthetics (black gloves, stockings, wigs) and the darkening of white performers' skin. This continued into twentieth-century film adaptations.

English pageants and morality plays evolved in the Middle Ages, when Christian iconography portrayed devils and pagans as black. In the Renaissance (the beginnings of England's imperial expansion) the term 'Moor' was used to describe African, Chinese, Indian, Arab and non-Christian people. The most famous of these depictions is the eponymous tragic hero of *Othello* (1604). Others include Niger in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* (1605), Toto in Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West* (1600–03?), and Zanche in John Webster's *The White Devil* (1611).

Laurence Olivier as Othello

A noteworthy step in these white cultural representations of blackness occurred when Restoration playwright Aphra Behn, the first English woman to earn her living as a writer, penned her prose fiction *Oroonoko: or The Royal Slave, a True Story* (1688). Albeit without challenging white Europeans' assumption of racial superiority, Behn employs a female narrative voice in what was then a rare account of the horrors of British colonisation and enslavement.

The earliest known pre-twentieth-century writing by black and mixed-race (but not necessarily British-born) people in Britain is exemplified in works by eighteenth-century figures such as Phyllis Wheatley, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, and in the nineteenth century, by Robert Wedderburn, Mary Prince, and Mary Seacole.

Mary Seacole

Prior to World War II

In the port cities of the United Kingdom, communities of black and mixed heritage families have been, incontestably, a longstanding presence throughout British history. However, there is no identifiable body of creative literature that was written by these British born citizens. What survives extends to letters, diaries, memoir, song lyrics, political pamphlets and journalism. Authors who might be described as pioneers of Black British writing prior to World War II were invariably from abroad. Figures of note who resided in Britain (ostensibly London) for various periods of time in the 1930s and 40s include the Trinidadians C.L.R. James and George Padmore, and Jamaican Una Marson, who, with fellow colonial intellectuals, circulated in Britain's elite cultural circles. The trio individually and with a collective activism provided vital cultural platforms, which were to remain influential antecedents for the post-war émigré writers – although until recent decades, their presence was ignored or marginalised in British literary histories.

Post-war

Male passengers disembarking from the Empire Windrush *after travelling from the Caribbean*

A flashpoint in British national memory has become fixed at the docking of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury in 1948. This moment now serves to identify mass migration from former colonies in the Caribbean and other regions as Britain embarked on rebuilding its war-damaged cities and infrastructure.

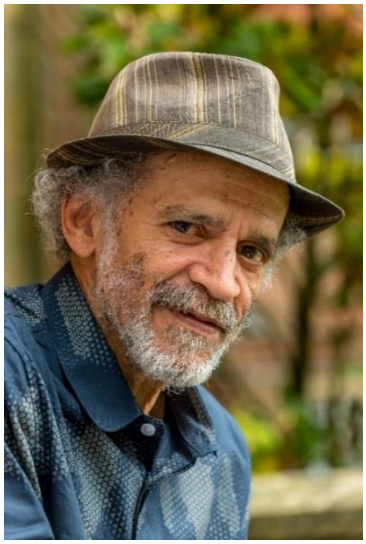
The immediate post-war decades were marked by the racist hostility that migrant generations faced daily, when it became evident that the Motherland did not permanently embrace their presence, even as it sought to benefit from their labour. This situation was fuelled by increasingly restrictive immigration policies concerning nationality, citizenship and the racist rhetoric of right-wing MPs such as Enoch Powell throughout the 1960s and 70s.

The uprisings of the 1980s in many urban locations emerged from the intolerable racism and disenfranchisement young black people experienced in the education system, poor employment prospects, and the second-class social and cultural citizenship this produced for both first- and second-generations.

The Brixton riots, early 1980s

The migratory-settler generation's works can be sampled in a range of writers who moved to Britain as adults after 1945, or came as children with their parents. This includes novels by Beryl Gilroy, Joan Riley, Buchi Emecheta, Abdulrazak Gurnah, David Dabydeen, Lauretta Ngcobo, Caryl Phillips; poetry by James Berry, E.A. Markham, Grace Nichols, John Agard, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Valerie Bloom; plays by Barry Reckord, Mustapha Matura, Alfred Fagon, Jacqueline Rudet, and Zindika.

Black British writing emerged as a literary category from the mid-1990s, and is a term that distinguishes second- and third-generation literary voices and their British-born perspectives, from the migratory and settler sensibilities that had so transformed post-war anglophone literature. Parental and grandparental homelands were geographically alien to this indigene generation, even as cultural practices provided a powerful legacy in surviving a context of racism and rejection by white-dominant British society and its institutions.



John Agard

These writers sought to explore identities that had evolved from being born and raised in Britain, and in the main, city environments such as London, Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester, Cardiff, Glasgow, Sheffield, Derby and Leicester. Without any forerunners, some black British writers such as Caryl Phillips turned to US black-heritage models of cultural politics to seek comparable ways of rendering unique British-born diasporic inheritances. A number of black American women writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Ntozake Shange and Audre Lorde are acknowledged inspirations for many of the contemporary black British writers, such as Andrea Levy, Zadie Smith, Laura Fish, Jackie Kay, SuAndi, Dorothea Smartt, Winsome Pinnock and debbie tucker green.

Maya Angelou

In this reading guide, ‘Black British literature’ indicates a range of late-twentieth-century and contemporary work in the context of literary history, rather than projecting racial restrictions upon the many possible identities that can comprise any individual, and to which they might subscribe personally and collectively. As a literary term, ‘Black British’ can be asserted, disputed and problematised in turn. Nonetheless, it is an important strand within British literature that needs to be woven into educational curricula and to have its value recognised by current and future generations.

Incomparable World, S.I. Martin

Recommended by **Dr Leila Kamali**, Lecturer in American & English Literature, King's College London

'if you want to read a book set in London at the same time as Jane Austen's novels, but without the manners, why don't you try Incomparable World*...'*

Meet Buckram, a former African American slave who has bought his freedom in exchange for defending the British in the American War of Independence. Three years after his arrival with his comrades in London, Buckram has just been released from a stint in Bridewell prison. His friend William, meanwhile, is making a comfortable, if insecure, living in Covent Garden's gambling dens, while Georgie George, the 'King of the Beggars', is dreaming up his next get-rich-quick scheme, which might just be the ruin of them all. S.I. Martin's *Incomparable World* sets the semi-forgotten presence of eighteenth-century black Londoners amid the rookeries of Tottenham Court Road; in the filth of the city's alleyways, and the social whirl of its public houses and pleasure gardens, we follow the fates of these 'Blackbirds', a motley group composed of intellectuals as well as escaped convicts, runaway slaves, ex-sailors, and free-born black Britons.

Making frequent, arch comparisons with the late-twentieth-century moment of its publication, the majority of this narrative plays out in the year 1787, in the shadow of the 'Sierra Leone resettlement scheme', a plan presented by the British government at the time, to send three ships to Africa as a way of removing the 'burden' of the black poor from London forever. The perversity of this suggestion, coming so quickly after African American soldiers were openly welcomed to the city, is not lost on our savvy protagonists, whose fates present an ironic comment upon British race relations throughout the centuries. Taking in the sights, sounds and smells of Georgian London, this novel reimagines the moment when the history of transatlantic slavery, and its abolition, was shaping social relations between blacks and whites, and forming Britain's conflicted image of itself, even managing an encounter with a historical black British celebrity or two...

Possible coursework pairings:
The Lonely Londoners, Sam Selvon
A Brief History of Seven Killings, Marlon James
The Bricks that Built the Houses, Kate Tempest
Oliver Twist, Charles Dickens
Hawksmoor, Peter Ackroyd
Ordinary Thunderstorms, William Boyd

NW, Zadie Smith

Recommended by **Dr Malachi McIntosh**, Lecturer, Goldsmiths, University of London

'Why do some people stay in their home town for life, and others want to escape their roots and reinvent themselves? Explore the stories of these choices in NW*.'*

What's wrong with Natalie Blake? Born into a working-class Caribbean family in Northwest London, Natalie has fought hard to change her circumstances and her name. After success in university and at the bar, she's now a barrister, married to a beautiful man with two seemingly perfect children. But still, something is missing. The question of what that is can only be answered by considering the place where she grew up, Caldwell Estate, and the lives of the people who live in and near it: her best friend Leah; Nathan, the boy – now man – that Natalie and Leah used to lust after at school; and Felix, a man Natalie never meets, whose name flashes up, briefly and tragically, on the news.

NW is a novel about success and failure. From beginning to end it thinks about what it takes to have the life that you want, and what might be lost along the way to attaining it. Splintered into five fragmented sections that focus on its four main characters, the novel presents a common place of origin – Caldwell Estate – that flings people in completely different directions. Through the hopeful, hopeless, and sometimes meandering lives of Natalie, Leah, Nathan and Felix, the novel asks how much the place you come from affects the person you are, and how far what happens in your life is yours to choose. More so than any of Zadie Smith's other works, *NW* tries to find the universals in very particular experiences, returning again and again to the unique Natalie, a black British woman struggling with race, place, selfhood and desire, and desperate to find new ways to live.

Read the *New York Times* review here.

Possible coursework pairings:
Americanah, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
The Buddha of Suburbia, Hanif Kureshi
Mrs Dalloway, Virginia Woolf
The Wasteland, T S Eliot
The Great Gatsby, F Scott Fitzgerald
Great Expectations, Charles Dickens

Strange Music, Laura Fish

Recommended by **Dr Deirdre Osborne**, Reader in English Literature and Drama, Goldsmiths, University of London

'If you enjoy the blurring of lines between fact and fiction in historical novels, then Strange Music is for you with its imaginative leaps across time to restore the herstory in history.'

Fish's absorbing and affecting tale re-presents the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett before she has met and married Robert Browning, (known on school curricula for his dramatic monologues 'My Last Duchess' and 'Porphyria's Lover' among other poems). As the musical *West Side Story* retells Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, so *Strange Music* reimagines Elizabeth's life to suggest how and why she came to write her famous abolitionist poem, 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'. Fish's fiction imaginatively weaves together three first-person narratives: using Elizabeth's actual letters written during semi-invalid seclusion in Torquay, England, (and restoring) creole and black women's perspectives of nineteenth-century Caribbean plantation heritage, in this case, the Barrett family's Cinnamon Hill Estate, in her fictional characters, the sisters Kaydia and Sheba.

Click here to read a review of *Strange Music* published by the *Independent*.

Fish herself writes how she was inspired by the haunting refrain, 'I am not mad: I am black', in Barrett's poem (reprinted in full at the end of the novel). She creates multiple viewpoints through Kaydia and Sheba, survivors of enslavement and its incomprehensible violence (especially towards women) as time jumps back and forth in Kaydia's, Elizabeth's and Sheba's narrative voices which construct the book. Although the subject matter of enslavement is undeniably grim and its major consequence, racism, continues to exist today, Fish's novel's experimental form in combining letters, prose and a variety of vernaculars cannot fail to bring to our attention how women experienced the institution of slavery, and survived against the odds in ways that literature can imaginatively restore.

Possible coursework pairings:
Wide Sargasso Sea, Jean Rhys
The Last Runaway, Tracy Chevalier
In Love and Trouble, Alice Walker
A Harlot's Progress, David Dabydeen
The Help, Kathryn Stockett
Hinterland edited, E.A. Markham

Trumpet, Jackie Kay

Recommended by **Heather Marks**, MA Black British Writing, Goldsmiths, University of London, Freelance Writer

'If you enjoy a love story, but are also interested in how racial identities intersect with gender and sexual identities, try Trumpet *by Jackie Kay.'*

The death of famous jazz musician Joss Moody rocks the world, not only because his band have lost their frontman, but because in death, Moody is revealed to have been born anatomically female. It is a transgender revelation which shocks Moody's son, Colman, but not his wife Millie, who flees to their holiday home in Scotland to get away from the press, who are hounding her for salacious details. Colman however is not so lucky, and ends up in the snares of hack journalist Sophie Stones, who is determined to get her big break as the ghost-writer of Colman's autobiography. Will Colman side with Sophie and sell out? Or will he come to terms with the truth of his father's identity? As Sophie Stones needles those closest to the great trumpet player, it turns out not everyone is keen to give him up. Friends rally round to protect the memory of Joss Moody, as Stones and the arbiters of state seek to overwrite and diminish his true legacy.

Read the *Guardian*'s review here.

The beauty of *Trumpet* lies in the overwhelming triumph of love, and its ability to render as ordinary the apparent subversiveness that the Moodys – a queer, multi-ethnic, adoptive family – present to projected ideas of family norms. Despite the manipulations of others, the Moodys emerge intact, defying traditional conventions of gender, sexuality and familial aesthetics. Jackie Kay intricately weaves the perspectives of the different characters together to create a multi-voiced narrative that reads like a jazz riff, with the reappearances of Joss Moody – the man, the lover, the trumpet player, the father and, most poignantly, the child – ringing out as a refrain, drawing the characters who loved him closer together in their remembrance. The novel concludes on a hopeful note: Joss's final letter to Colman. Joss's last words to his adopted son are a treatise on love and fate, and a keen reminder that water can be thicker than blood.

Possible coursework pairings:

Jazz, Toni Morrison
The Wasp Factory, Iain Banks
Swing Time, Zadie Smith
The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy
The Paying Guests, Sarah Waters
The Well of Loneliness, Radclyffe Hall

Fallout, Roy Williams

Recommended by **Dr Deirdre Osborne**, Reader in English Literature and Drama, Goldsmiths, University of London

'If you want to read a tense thriller that immerses you in urban youth subculture, where loyalties are tested in bringing killers to justice, try Fallout *by Roy Williams'*

Fallout opens blisteringly with a group of black youths, Dwayne (the dangerous and charismatic leader), Clinton, Emile and Perry attacking Kwame, an African 'straight-A student' who dies two days later. Emile's alpha girlfriend Shanice was the last person to see Kwame alive, while her best friend, the unpopular Ronnie, witnessed the crime. Everyone knows who the killers are, but no one will speak out. To access this closed world of allegiances, the Metropolitan Police deploy Joe – a black policeman who grew up on the same housing estate where the suspects live – to 'Make the Met look good' – and offer a £30,000 reward for information.

Click here to read Michael Billington's favourable review.

Williams creates a racially related homicide investigation that echoes aspects of the real-life Damilola Taylor case. Joe confronts the liberal hypocrisy of white colleagues and faces the youth gang culture that controls the housing estate. Shanice and Ronnie are in Joe's sights as key witnesses, but also have to survive in a world where unconditional loyalty is expected.

The 'fallout' of the title indicates the wider consequences of young people's social marginalisation, where aspirations are scuttled by racism, poverty, negative school experiences and the absence of strong role models. Substitute attachments are laced with male violence and desensitisation. Ronnie's questionable method to rescue herself and Shanice from this life is an attempt to fulfil their dreams against the odds.

Click here to read Rhoda Koenig's critique.

Possible coursework pairings:
Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe
A Clockwork Orange, Anthony Burgess
Black Roses: the Killing of Sophie Lancaster, Simon Armitage
Tsotsi, Athol Fugard
True History of the Kelly Gang, Peter Carey
Macbeth, William Shakespeare

nut, debbie tucker green

Recommended by **Dr Valerie Kaneko-Lucas**,
Regent's University, London

'If you have been fascinated by the destructive relationships in Shakespeare's tragedies, try a very modern perspective on friends and family in nut *by debbie tucker green'*

Divided into three storylines, *nut* traces intimacy gone wrong between friends, spouses and siblings. Reclusive Elayne wants to write her own eulogy, but her unwelcome visitors launch into a fierce competition about who will have the best send-off: celebrity event, musical concert or grandiose feast. In the second storyline, Elayne's sister and her ex-husband engage in a vicious dissection of their marriage; tucker green adroitly captures the complexity of lost hopes fuelled by bitter disappointment. The third storyline shows a woman coping with her sister's self-harm, delicately balancing between empathy and frustration. At the heart of *nut* lie the recurrent motifs of damage inflicted upon those we have loved, of fleeting hopes for redemption.

nut was first produced in 2013 at the National Theatre's NT Shed, directed by the author. The play captures the suppressed rage of the clinically depressed Elayne, and the ill-timed remarks of her so-called friends are clever put-downs with a sting in the tail. The scenes between the Ex-Wife and Tyrone have a compelling intensity as each struggles to maintain their dignity and status in their tug-of-love battle over their daughter. *nut* shows – with compassion, wit and black humour – how those nearest to us can fail to understand or appreciate us. tucker green's writing captures the rhythms of everyday conversation, with a sharp eye for the unspoken vulnerability and loss at the heart of failed relationships.

Possible coursework pairings:
The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath
The Yellow Wallpaper, Charlotte Gilman-Perkins
Short Cuts, Raymond Carver
The Homecoming, Harold Pinter
Long Day's Journey into Night, Eugene O'Neill
What Maisie Knew, Henry James

Something Dark, Lemn Sissay

Recommended by **Dr Fiona Peters**,
Writer/Social Researcher

'Imagine finding out your English name was not your real name and your Ethiopian birth mother had been stopped from finding you. Read how this shocking revelation felt for the playwright Lemn Sissay.'

It is 1967 in Wigan, Lancashire, and a boy is born to an Ethiopian student. His birth is to reveal the enduring impact of transrace adoption on belonging and identity. Lemn is given up soon after birth and adopted by the Greenwood family. He is renamed Norman and lives for the first eleven years of his life happily embedded in his white Baptist family. Abruptly, the family return him to residential care and casually suggest they will not contact him again.

After a difficult adolescence he leaves care; receiving his birth certificate, revealing his birth name Lemn Sissay, along with a letter from his mother (dated 1968) pleading for his return. Lemn's search for his mother begins. Will she accept him? And will she ever reveal the name of his father? This searing autobiographical solo piece of drama took twenty years to write. Its stage performance is excruciatingly honest, funny and tragic, and powerfully written to excavate the ghosts of a difficult past. The impact and beauty of *Something Dark* is in weaving loss, longing and love with forgiveness and acceptance.

Transrace adoptees often give testimony relating to complex feelings of belonging as they grow up with little everyday experience or connection to their race, ethnic heritage or culture. How these aspects of identity inform and shape belonging underpin current debates relating to the ways that children in care are matched for fostering and adoption. The current local authority and government guidelines disregard ethnic matching for adoption, but it remains a consideration for fostering. How would Lemn's autobiography differ if he had been matched for race, ethnic heritage and culture?

Possible coursework pairings:
Red Dust Road, Jackie Kay
The Bluest Eye or *Beloved*, Toni Morrison
The Intended, David Dabydeen
The Dust Diaries, Owen Sheers

The Story of M, SuAndi

Recommended by **Dr Elaine Aston**, Professor of Contemporary Performance, Lancaster University

'If you ponder on the relationships between mothers and daughters, and their link to class and race, prepare to be moved by SuAndi's heartwarming The Story of M'

The Story of M is a solo performance based on the life of SuAndi's working-class mother, Margaret/M. Performed by SuAndi, the drama begins at the end of Margaret's life: dying of cancer, a wheelchair-bound M sits reminiscing in a hospital ward. Her story is told through a series of monologues, punctuated by slides that project images from Margaret's past on to a narrative of maternal privation and racial abuse. Located in the northern cities of Liverpool and Manchester, and spanning the mid- to late twentieth century, this biographical story forms an epic, poetic, and political tale of race, gender and class relations. We hear about Margaret's racist neighbours, the shops that will not give her credit, or how, during her time in a Magdalene laundry, she managed to keep her first-born child from enforced adoption because nobody wanted a black baby. Despite this discrimination, Margaret does not retreat into self-pity or a state of victimisation: hers is a rebellious spirit that laughs rather than cries in the face of adversity.

Each time I have seen SuAndi performing the role of her mother, I have been moved to think about the hardships that women in Margaret's position must have endured. The way SuAndi writes and performs this maternal-themed story is poignant, darkly funny, and politically charged. When laughing along with M, we are invited to question: why the laughter when racism means it is 'not funny to be called dirty and smelly'? Moreover, there is a dramatic twist to the performance (withheld so as not to spoil any first-time encounter with the piece) that unsettles binary thinking between 'black' and 'white'. All told, *The Story of M* speaks racially marked truths to the power of those who would sooner white-out the past, present, and future.

Possible coursework pairings:

Small Island, Andrea Levy
A Thousand Splendid Suns, Khaled Hosseini
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou
The Color Purple, Alice Walker
Top Girls, Caryl Churchill

Ship Shape, Dorothea Smartt

Recommended by **Dr Suzanne Scafe**, Reader in Caribbean and Postcolonial Literatures, Course Director (English Studies), London South Bank University

'If you want to learn more about the experience and politics of black people who were shipped from their country to England, immerse yourself in the lives of Ship Shape *by Dorothea Smartt.*

Ship Shape was inspired by Dorothea Smartt's visit, in 2003, to the gravestone of an African boy named Samboo, who had arrived at Sunderland Point, Lancashire in 1736 with his master, the ship's captain. Samboo died shortly after arriving in Sunderland, but his death was not commemorated until several decades later, with the headstone that stands there today. The poems in the first section of *Ship Shape* reimagine Samboo's early life in Gambia, his forced removal by slave traders to Barbados, and his eventual arrival in northwest England. The poems in the second section, 'Just a Part', describe the lives of Samboo's imagined descendants, now living in Britain but connected across the world: 'a distant lot/scattered around migratory paths; from Barbados/landing up in London, Birmingham, New York ... Miami' (74).

The poems in *Ship Shape* are moving, powerful evocations of childhood, separation, hardship and love. Smartt's poetry presents a dazzling array of voices and poetic registers. She uses the ballad form, blues rhythms, the sea shanty and free verse: each voice and poetic form creates the distinct identity of the speaker, and provides the cultural and historical context of the poem's subject. She describes the shock of a young sailor, press-ganged into working aboard a slave ship and transformed into a man by the violence he is made to witness, and in contrast voices the anxious bewilderment of the captain's wife, who learns almost casually that her husband's vessel is a slave ship. She recreates both the raw emotions of loss and loneliness and the beauty of young black boys, 'aubergine angels' shining amidst the crowds at Waterloo station. The poems connect places, cultures and geographies; they intersect the past and present and are a lyrical testament to suffering and survival.

Possible coursework pairings:
Turner, David Dabydeen
Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad
The Lamplighter, Jackie Kay
I is a Long-memoried woman, Grace Nicholls
Feeding the Ghosts, Fred D'Aguiar

Telling Tales, Patience Agbabi

Recommended by **Nazmia Jamal**, Education Manager at The Poetry Society and former English teacher

'If you were shocked by your first reading of Agbabi's 'Eat Me', listen to the voices of her 'Canterbury Tales' pilgrims. They are off to the modern shrine of the pub and their tales will move you to outrage, compassion and laughter.'

Telling Tales comprises twenty-four poems by pilgrims (now poets from all walks of life whose sharp, often wildly funny, biographies appear at the end of the book) book-ended by Harry 'Bells' Bailey, still the landlord of the Tabard Inn and now a grime artist who hosts a monthly story-telling night – this time on a bus headed for Canterbury – which provides the frame for these tales.

You can read an interview with Patience Agbabi here.

Classroom favourites are all present. 'The Miller's Tale' stays lewdly true to form as told by Robyn Miller, a 'bolshy big bi redhead' who now 'lives, drinks, fights in Deptford.' The Wife of Bath is Mrs Alice Ebi Bafa from Nigeria who tells us, 'My father had four wives/so I've had five husband.' The Merchant is now a Northern Soul record dealer who tells his sorry tale through song titles.

Agbabi's characters are diverse. There is a barrister from Zimbabwe, a Medieval English scholar born in Singapore and a French-Canadian author of self-help books. There are serious poems and raucous poems – each with its own style and structure. Dr Kiranjeet Singh, a former plastic surgeon who 'now prefers to reconstruct lines on the page rather than the face', offers a poem in response to an 'honour' killing and the 'Tale of Melibee' is a dark palindrome told by Mel O'Brien, a secondary-school English teacher.

Possible coursework pairings:
'The General Prologue', Geoffrey Chaucer
The Bloody Chamber and other stories, Angela Carter
The World's Wife, Carol Ann Duffy
White Ravens, Owen Sheers
The Gap of Time: A Winter's Tale Retold, Jeanette Winterson
Refugee Tales, Ali Smith and Marina Lewycka

Click here for *Telling Tales* in performance.

The Rose of Toulouse, Fred D'Aguiar

Recommended by **Dr Abigail Ward**, Assistant Professor, University of Nottingham

'Might you, at some point, turn into your mother or your father? How will your roots or time affect your adult life? Immerse yourself in the collection The Rose of Toulouse *by D'Aguiar for a thoughtful perspective on these and other issues.'*

Fred D'Aguiar's *The Rose of Toulouse* is an eclectic, thoughtful and often moving collection of poetry from a versatile and engaging writer. Poems range from snapshots of life in the United States, to the plight of child soldiers, love, fear, and coping with a son's diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. Written in a range of poetic forms, using free verse alongside more traditional forms like the sonnet and ballad, this collection moves from the personal to the philosophical seamlessly and with style.

Many poems in *The Rose of Toulouse* take identity as a central theme. D'Aguiar was born in England, but raised for several years in Guyana, and his poems articulate a sense of identity that is at times conflicted and at others multiple and liberating. In the poem 'English', he dreams of an identity without labels, 'moving freely / between places'. Other poems recognise how identity continues to change as we get older; in 'Excise', the persona acknowledges 'Each year I travel, my passport photo / looks less like me', whereas in 'Shoes My Father Wore', he reflects that we all eventually become versions of our parents. Memory features not just in exploring the personal, but is also used to think imaginatively about historical pasts, such as the slave trade. In the poem 'Dreamboat' he remembers those who did not survive the slave-ship voyage from Africa to the Caribbean or United States alongside those who did, and in 'Wish' he traces what he refers to as an 'Atlantic road of bones'.

You can read reviews of *The Rose of Toulouse* here and here.

The Rose of Toulouse is a collection reflecting on D'Aguiar's life as a writer, child, lover and father. At times melancholy, at others hauntingly ethereal, it comes from an experienced and accomplished poet, whose poems often reveal beauty in unexpected moments.

Possible coursework pairings:
The Longest Memory, Fred D'Aguiar
A Child in Time, Ian McEwan
Collected Poems, Sylvia Plath
The Adoption Papers, Jackie Kay

Too Black Too Strong, Benjamin Zephaniah

Recommended by **Kadija Sesay**, poet, editor, publisher, doctoral researcher, University of Brighton

'Veganism, Black rights, police harassment and the death penalty – Zephaniah is a man with strong political views. If you enjoyed his novel Face *when you were younger, or sampled his poems, try this collection.'*

Benjamin Zephaniah is a British poet, a Jamaican poet, a Rastafarian poet, and it is evident in his poetry that he is all three, equally. Within *Too Black, Too Strong* are poems that derive from his experience as a black man from the streets of Birmingham and London. Zephaniah is a socially conscious poet who addresses bullying – from police harassment to family harassment ('honour' killings) – as well as a concern for animals, vulnerable people in our communities, (im)migrants and the status of the working class. His poems reflect how he views multicultural Britain from a Black British perspective. They also reflect his worldview on issues that he is passionate about: Zephaniah attacks colonialism, capitalism, and other 'isms'. He addresses topics employing poetic styles such as rant, rap and free verse with techniques of repetition, rhythm and rhyme. He also experiments with echoing the styles of 'classic' poems to create his own form and content, such as Kipling's 'If' ('What If') and Larkin's 'This Be The Verse' ('This Be The Worst'). He explores the use of language extensively in the way it is written and the way it sounds. In some poems he uses a mix of standard English and patois, in others, he makes up his own words.

Benjamin Zephaniah reads 'Naked', from *Too Black, Too Strong*, and discusses what it means to him here.

As a Black British person who has experienced a family member dying in police custody, Zephaniah's poems for victims like 'Ricky Reel' ring true, yet they link to experiences to enable us to think of other incidents that provoke our consciousness. A poem such as 'One Minute of Silence' is as potent for those who have died in natural disasters as it is for war veterans. A 'one-minute silence' has no class, colour or creed. Most of all, he challenges the reader to think of their place as a world citizen; a humanist who cares about planet earth.

Possible coursework pairings:
The Grapes of Wrath, John Steinbeck
Nineteen Eighty-Four, George Orwell
Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift
Harvest, Jim Crace
The Handmaid's Tale or *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood

Bibliography

Prose

Incomparable World, S.I. Martin (Quartet Books, 1997)
NW, Zadie Smith (Penguin, 2012)
Strange Music, Laura Fish (Vintage, 2009)
Trumpet, Jackie Kay (Picador, 2016)

Drama

Fallout, Roy Williams (Bloomsbury 3PL, 2003)
nut, debbie tucker green (Nick Hern Books, 2013)
Something Dark, Lemn Sissay in *Hidden Gems: Contemporary Black British Plays: Six Experimental New Plays by Black British Writers* ed. Deirdre Osborne (Oberon Books, 2008)
The Story of M, SuAndi (Oberon Books, 2017)

Poetry

Ship Shape, Dorothea Smartt (Peepal Tree Press, 2011)
Telling Tales, Patience Agbabi (Canongate Books, 2015)
The Rose of Toulouse, Fred D'Aguiar (Carcanet Press, 2013)
Too Black, Too Strong, Benjamin Zephaniah (Bloodaxe Books, 2001)

Picture Credits

The publisher would like to thank the following for their kind permission to reproduce their photographs:

(Key: b-bottom; c-centre; l-left; r-right; t-top)

Abigail Ward: 19; **Alamy Stock Photo:** Adrian Sherratt 7b, Andrew Hasson 7c, Gary DOAK 31; **Chris Scott:** 34; **Deirdre Osborne:** 13l; **Dr Malachi McIntosh:** 10l; **Dr Valerie Kaneko Lucas:** 14; **Fiona Peters:** 15t; **Getty Images:** Planet News 6b; **Hamish Brown:** 25; **Heather Marks:** 12; **Kadija George Sesay:** 20; **Laura Fish:** 13; **Nazmia Jamal:** 18; **Patience Agbabi:** 37; **Professor Elaine Aston:** 16; **Roy Williams:** 27; **Royal Literary Society:** Stuart Owen 23; **S I Martin:** 11; **Shutterstock.com:** Images Group / REX 6t, Jonathan Hordle / REX 10, 17, REX 40, Sima Press / REX 7t, Steve Black / REX 15; **Suzanne Scafe:** 17r; **TopFoto:** Angus McBean / Mander and Mitchenson / University of Bristol / ArenaPA 5

Cover images: *Front:* **Shutterstock.com:** VectorOK

All other images © Pearson Education