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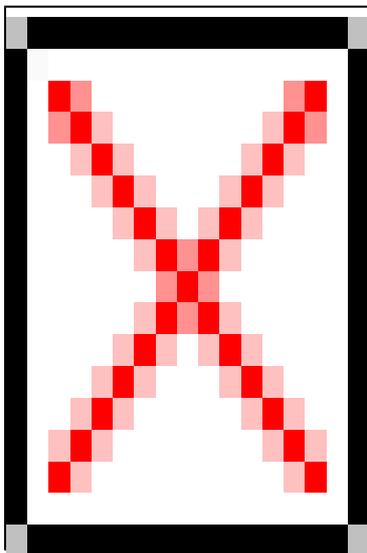
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Guest Editorial by Little Rebels judge Patrice Lawrence

Little Rebels, Big Change, says Patrice Lawrence



I would love to say that I was a rebellious child. I would love to claim that I was a critical reader, questioning the social structures depicted in the books that filled my world. I would love you to believe that I questioned **The Famous Five's** Anne's enthusiastic domesticity or the original Doctor Doolittle's blatant racism. Actually, even the conservative eight-year-old me raised an eyebrow at that one. Generally, though I took what I was reading as 'well - read'. In books, the hierarchies of class and 'race', the stereotypes of gendered behaviour, the unarguable truth that a straight married couple was the only 'right' shape for a family and the fact that 'Mowgli apart' you could only be the star of your adventure if you were white 'simply reinforced my belief that this was the unjust, but unalterable nature of the world. As the first in my family to be born in the UK, way down the hierarchy in skin colour, sex and class, who was I to say otherwise?

We often praise books for widening our horizons and showing us new worlds. But as organisations such as [Let Books Be Books](#) [3] argue, they can so easily narrow down our worlds as well. That's why the **Little Rebels Award** is so important. It draws on children's and young people's empathy, but also offers the power to reflect on and challenge injustice.

Do I need to spell out here why this feels so important right now? Far right movements across Europe seem to be gaining strength. People are being murdered in their places of worship. In the UK, the painful fractures caused by Brexit seem to be fuelling vicious acts of racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Our planet is struggling with the impact of human-generated pollution and climate change. The challenges feel overwhelming.

The **Little Rebels Award** gives me hope. Last year, was my first on judge duty and the books I read were life-affirming and splendid. They challenged gender stereotypes; celebrated children and young people's activism; humanised the

stories of children in refugee camps; made a chocolatey swipe at ruthless industrialists and explored the impact of poverty and lack of opportunity in poorer white communities. The winner, Zanib Mian's **The Muslims**, has soared. A laugh out loud book that pushes at stereotypes, it has since been republished by the Hachette imprint, Hodder, as **Planet Omar: Accidental Trouble Magnet** (illustrations by Nasaya Mafaridik). A lucrative US deal has recently been announced taking Omar transatlantic. I smile at the thought of the Muslim children who finally see themselves in a book that isn't about Ramadan, Eid or terrorism. I smile even harder thinking about the non-Muslim children who see themselves in Omar and his siblings.

I have just opened the rather neat brown package containing this year's entries. Oh my! AJ, in Sue Durrant's **Running on Empty** [4], is passionate about running and his parents, who have learning difficulties. Nathaniel Barratt, in Catherine Johnson's **Freedom**, is fleeing enslavement and the horror of the slave ship, Zong. Anne Booth's **Across the Divide** [5] offers a much-needed mediation on how people with polarised views can try and understand each other. Jamal, in Bridget Blankley's **The Ghosts of Jamal** is a young man who has been isolated because of his seizures but must draw on his inner resources after he is the only survivor of a terrorist attack. Two picture books, **The New Neighbours** written and illustrated by Sarah McIntyre and **The King Who Banned the Dark** written and illustrated by Emily Haworth-Booth offer witty takes on the myths, assumptions and deliberate machinations that fuel prejudice. Nadine Kaadan's **Tomorrow**, is a picture book about Yazan, who just wants to go to the park, but must stay inside to avoid danger.

I recently read a few snarky comments about 'issue' books. I still don't quite understand what that means. All books are about issues. If not, they would be rather short. Perhaps, the complaint was about books that overtly explore modern challenges, books that fight back against injustice, books that remind children and young people that their questions are valid, their rebellion essential.

I regret the fact I wasn't a child rebel, but reading these books reminds me that even my middle-aged self can be part of change for the good.

Patrice Lawrence won the Waterstone's Book Prize for Older Readers and the YA Book Prize with her debut novel, **Orangeboy** [6], and her second novel, **Indigo Donut**, won the Crime Fest Best Crime Fiction for Young Adults and was shortlisted for the YA Book Prize. Her new novel, **Rose, Interrupted**, will publish in July.

The **Little Rebels Award** recognises fiction for ages 0-12 which promotes or celebrates social justice and equality. It is run by **Housmans Bookshop** and **Letterbox Library** [7] and is awarded by the **Alliance of Radical Booksellers (ARB)**. The 2019 winner will be announced on 10th July.

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