



# JUDGING THE COSTA: BALI RAI ON CROSSFIRE BY MALORIE BLACKMAN

Article Author:

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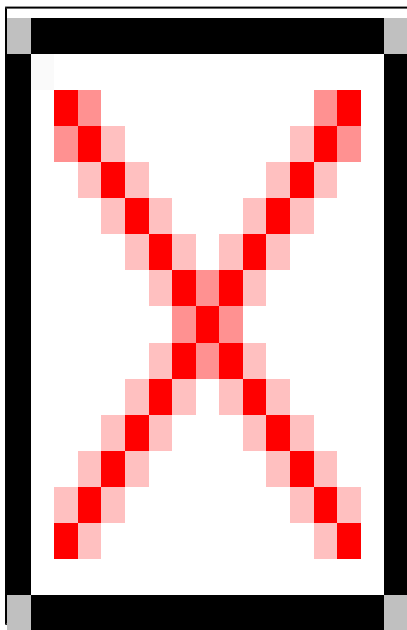
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**Bali Rai** discusses **Crossfire** by Malorie Blackman and explains why it's the perfect book for our times.

In the fourth of our features on the books and authors shortlisted for the **2019 Costa Children's Book Award**, judge **Bali Rai** discusses **Crossfire** by Malorie Blackman, and explains why it's the perfect book for our times.



The **Costa Book Award** judging process gave me a chance to read authors that were new to me. Entirely welcome of course, and huge fun. However, when I saw Malorie Blackman's [Crossfire](#) [3], I smiled. Not only is Malorie awesome, the **Noughts & Crosses** series is a big favourite of mine. Judging is difficult enough at times and to assess the book of such a dear and gifted friend impartially takes some doing. So, I set aside my friendship with Malorie and if anything, I was a little extra critical of her book. Not just Malorie's either. After two decades in the industry, you tend to make a lot of friends, and the boxes I received contained books by a few of mine.

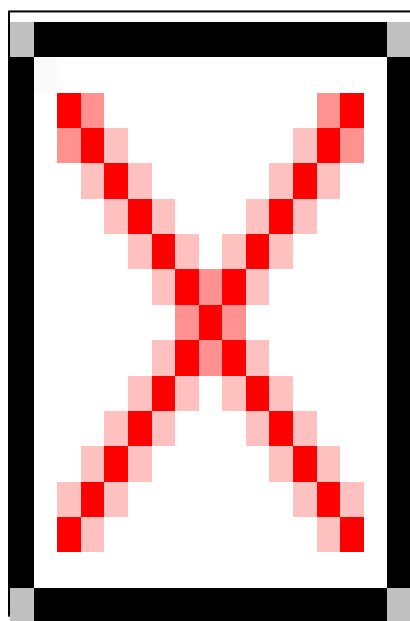
Thing is, it didn't matter. **Crossfire** is a fantastic addition to the **Noughts & Crosses** series yet manages to stand alone too. It is tense and exciting and a proper page turner, one that leaves you thrilled and eager to learn more. The split narrative works brilliantly and adds to the ever-increasing levels of tension, especially towards the finale. It is well written, has real pace, and is entirely realistic in that unique Malorie Blackman sense.

As usual, Malorie's characters are also finely drawn. They are believable and genuine, and their dialogue is never wasted. At times, the wit and sparkle caused me to smile (and feel a little envious too). I love great dialogue and **Crossfire** is peppered with it. Troy and Libby's complicated interaction is intriguing from the beginning, and they are

both immensely relatable human beings that will appeal to all readers, and especially teenagers and young adults. Their voices are fresh and real. When they clash during their school elections, you get a wonderful sense of their love/hate relationship and the drama to come when they find themselves in severe peril.

Even more fascinating is the continuing relationship between Callie and Tobey. This was the arc that really excited me. Malorie prefaces the story by highlighting the dangerous nature of hate and division within politics and society. The way in which we are part of the political process, whether we choose to take part or not, and how we all pay some kind of price. And by giving both Callie and Tobey high-profile careers, she manages to nail the current political climate. From the sleaze and the spin, to the power games and the backroom deals ? it?s all there. Absorbing, alarming and all too depressing.

Tobey is Prime Minister, which is clever enough, but by making Callie the lawyer defending him against a murder charge, Malorie has upped the game. As though their relationship wasn?t complicated enough, now we get twist after twist. Not only does history haunt them, the present is also highly toxic and extremely treacherous. Every decision they make is loaded with danger. Every moment between them feels visceral and each is charged with deep emotions. For me, that is what takes [Crossfire](#) [3] to a different level entirely. Malorie is trusting her younger readers to engage with, follow and enjoy the adult character arcs. She doesn?t pull her punches or shy away from the more controversial elements ? she never would ? so we get a genuinely current and timely story that resonates with our times.



Malorie manages to write in a way that makes the reader think and question, but never does she moralise or attempt to lead us. There are no easy solutions, no magic words that might make things better. There is modern life and all that comes with it, and you either cope or you don?t. That lack of moralising, whilst simultaneously highlighting the devastating effects of prejudice, hatred and lust for power, is entirely welcome. I?ve always maintained that the original in the series, [Noughts & Crosses](#) [4], is a modern classic and **Crossfire** is a fitting and wonderful addition to the long-running saga.

**Crossfire** deserves a wide readership. Our current political climate is poisonous and dangerous, and we need books like **Crossfire** to gauge these uncertain times for us. We need it to truly represent British social history, and the issues that affect us all, and some more than others. It is much needed and utterly timely, and that alone makes the novel welcome. More than that, however, it is superb writing from an incredible author. It is thought-provoking and a true page-turner, and I am a huge fan.

[Bali Rai](#) [5] is the multi-award-winning author of over forty YA, teen and children's books. A passionate advocate for reading and literacy, he has worked with the **Reading Agency** on their **Reading Ahead** project, on the **BBC?s Love to Read** campaign, and with the **National Literacy Trust**, **Booktrust**, **RNIB** and **British Library**.

**Jenny Downham** talks about writing [Furious Thing here](#) [6], and we have interviews too with [Jasbinder Bilan](#) [7] and [Nicholas Bowling](#) [8].

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