



Malorie Blackman's 'Noughts & Crosses' Trilogy

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Errol Lloyd assesses its appeal.

Following on from **Noughts & Crosses** and **Knife Edge**, **Checkmate** concludes Malorie Blackman's acclaimed 'Noughts & Crosses' trilogy set in a fictional society split along racial lines in which everyday reality is subverted, with the black Crosses on top and the white Noughts at the bottom. The trilogy represents a more complex, demanding and hard hitting departure in Blackman's writing. How successful is it? **Errol Lloyd** discusses. <!--break-->

Although Malorie Blackman's fictional society is seemingly untroubled by complexities of class or the presence of ethnic groups other than the polarised Noughts and Crosses, her subversion of everyday reality serves as a useful ploy in providing insight, particularly for white or at any rate non-black readers, into what it feels like to be black in a white society. Some of the occurrences highlighted, such as 'Noughts' being subject to police harassment, being followed around stores by suspicious staff or store detectives, having little 'Nought' history being taught in schools etc, have their exact parallel in British society as many black people will confirm.

[image:Noughts and Crosses - 156.JPG:left]

Although there are references to solicitors and barristers, Queens Council, the Houses of Parliament etc. suggesting a British setting, other references draw on the deep south of the USA in the pre civil rights days, as well as South Africa under Apartheid. Thus in this fictional Noughts and Crosses world there are segregated schools in which 'Nought' children have very limited access to state education beyond the age of 14, ID cards, hanging and other oppressions not associated with contemporary Britain.

The association of the white 'Noughts' with black people in various parts of the real world is not convincingly sustained throughout however, as there are significant differences to the way the 'Noughts' respond to their oppression. They eschew broad alliances with 'Cross' sympathisers or trades unions, there are no 'Nought' political marches, demonstrations, petitions etc. and there is no 'Nought' equivalent to a Martin Luther King or a Nelson Mandela. They opt instead for terrorism through the activities of the Liberation Militia (LM). The LM is morally bankrupt having no ideals beyond a vague demand for equality, and their real motivation is seemingly based on nothing greater than hatred for the 'Crosses'. They fund their bombing and maiming activities through robbery, extortion, prostitution, kidnapping and murder.

Compelling and highly readable

[image:Knife Edge cover - 156.JPG:left]However, without being patronising, I imagine young readers are unlikely to be mindful of the underling subtleties regarding 'Nought' portrayal, and will enjoy the books at face value. In **Checkmate**, Jude McGregor, the psychopathic brother of Callum (who featured heavily in the first book, **Noughts & Crosses**), has risen to the position of leader of the LM after serving a jail sentence. He blames Persephone Hadley (Sephy), a rich 'Cross' girl, for Callum's sentence of death by hanging; for his own imprisonment and for the woes that have beset his family. He sets about planning his revenge in the most cold-blooded and circuitous manner, grooming his own niece,

Callie-Rose (the daughter of Callum and Sephy conceived in circumstances perilously close to constructive rape), over a six-year period starting at the age of 10, to become a member of the LM for the sole purpose of killing Sephy's father (her own grandfather father), a corrupt member of the Cross government, using the modus operandi of the suicide bomber. That Jude's plan is finally foiled and that he meets his comeuppance by the very bomb intended for his quarry, is due in great measure to the timely reconciliation of other members of the antagonistic Hadley and McGregor families.

Blackman has painted a broad canvas, handling the characters of two warring factions over three generations with exceptional skill and timing. She has broken the restrictive bounds of genteel middle-class respectability which permeates much of teenage fiction by creating a thriller in which characters are pushed to the very limits of their psychological capabilities and to the very edge of credibility, thus creating compelling and highly readable fiction. She has the uncanny ability to invest even the most mundane domestic events with dramatic significance, and has arranged her fiction (spanning some 1,300 pages over the span of the trilogy) into short digestible chunks as befits a generation of young readers weaned on film and television.

The redemptive power of love

[image:Checkmate cover - 156.JPG:left]

One powerful theme which runs unashamedly through the trilogy is the redemptive power of love. Though this often takes the form of assertions as opposed to demonstrations of love, the main characters (Jude apart) experience at last in **Checkmate** a form of salvation through a long and arduous journey from hate to love of the more enduring sort which binds individuals and families together. Romantic love there is too aplenty, fuelling the various sub-plots and compelling, no doubt, the interest of young readers.

Callie-Rose, the beautiful and engaging 'dual heritage' daughter of black 'Cross' Sephy and the white 'Nought' Callum, exemplifies the future reconciliation of the factious Noughts and Crosses and is held up as a beacon of hope for the future. Assimilation or individual redemption, rather than the transformation of society by collective action, seem the best bet for this polarised Noughts and Crosses society, for at the end of **Checkmate**, the Noughts as a group have barely disturbed the status quo.

The 'Noughts & Crosses' trilogy by Malorie Blackman is published in Doubleday hardback and in Corgi paperback.

Noughts & Crosses, 0 385 60008 9, £10.99 hbk, 0 552 54632 1, £6.99 pbk

Knife Edge, 0 385 60527 7, £12.99 hbk, 0 552 54892 8, £6.99 pbk

Checkmate, 0 385 60773 3, £12.99 hbk

Errol Lloyd is a writer and artist.

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