

∞ READING ROUND ∞

Life-Changing Books

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THE FIRST, MOST LIFE-CHANGING book, was my reading the Bible at home, and Sunday school as a youngster. In the large Bible my mother owned I found the pages of the Song of Songs, (after the Hebrew rather than the Book of Solomon), to be particularly fascinating.

This, an early encounter for me, with long-form erotic poetry. The second book was *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, given to me by my red-brick-university-trained teacher, at my inner-city junior school, in the 1960s. This book influenced me completely as to my own narrative writing of magic realist choreopoetry, for page and stage.

Mr Holliman, my teacher, noticed I wasn't reading any of the books at school. It appeared to him that I showed no interest in reading at all. This was partly because my father told me stories from Greek myths at home, which I found thrilling. I would read more of these Greek myths, stories for myself, in books from my local library.

However, the books at school, for example Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*, or Eric Kastner's *Emile and the Detectives*, which other schoolchildren read avidly, held little interest for me in comparison to the drama of monsters, trials of heroes, goddesses and gods of Greek myths. Mr. Holliman, by giving me *The Hobbit* book, awakened my lifelong continuing interest in fantasy, magic and speculative fiction overall.

This is very important: as a professional writer now I've continued to

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incorporate myths, modern myth-making, magic realism, as part of my own writing. It manifests in my drama for theatre and screen, and both short and the long-form choreopoetry that I write. It all stems from this very formative, influential period as a young child in my junior years.

From *Song of Songs*, some of the lines that struck a chord with me as a young girl are ‘Do not look at me for I am dark skinned’ (Song of Solomon 1:6) and ‘I am black but comely’ (1:5–6). Both of these aforementioned passages reflected, firstly, my own negative experiences, and secondly, gave an important, positive representation and affirmation. In both cases, with regards to my identity, growing up as a Black, young girl, in 1960s Britain, experiencing the debilitating effects of systematic racism, both at school and elsewhere in the community.

In *Song of Songs*, I felt then, as I do now, that I could identify myself in an important book narrative historically important the the world. A book that went back beyond the onset of the African Holocaust, the Transatlantic Chattel Slave Trade, from its beginning in the sixteenth century, down centuries, and its toxic legacies to date.

Conversely, Tolkien’s book *The Hobbit* provided underdog Bilbo Baggins, the ‘other’, all the joy of pure escapism, adventure, dangers and thrills, which I very much needed. In a narrative set in a completely imaginary world, the world building is so complete with maps, the hero’s quest, the moral dilemmas, good conquers evil, all of which greatly fuelled my young imagination.