

# Women's Review *of Books*

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Celia Paul. *The Brontë Parsonage (with Charlotte's Pine and Emily's Path to the Moors)* 2017. Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 29 1/4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery.



# A Novel Thriller

*The Other Black Girl*

By Zakiya Dalila Harris

New York, NY; Atria, 2021, 368 pp., \$27.00, hardcover

*Reviewed by Eisa Ulen*

With page-turning, character-driven intrigue, and a thoughtful examination of middle class Black female life, Zakiya Dalila Harris's debut novel positions the author in a literary tradition helmed by the great Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen. Like her literary foremother, Harris examines compelling themes of disappearance, silence, and invisibility. Larsen centered bi-racial Black women in both her novels and so offered a unique perspective on race, the social construct that wears her protagonists, quite literally, down. In *The Other Black Girl*, Harris's characters are unambiguously African American, yet the main character still exists in a state of racial liminality, caught in-between, submerged in whiteness, forced to claw her way up to authentic Blackness, and so trapped in a perpetual loop of psychological violence. Despite these heavy themes, *The Other Black Girl* is accessible and enjoyable, as millennial characters navigate the exclusive world of New York's publishing elite

with a clever erudition that also references Larsen's 1920s sophisticates.

Harris's main character is even named Nella, an obvious homage to Larsen herself. Raised in Connecticut, where she was tracked in the classes populated by white and Asian students, Nella lives in Brooklyn with her white boyfriend. Her work life is much more important than her home life, however, and much of the novel is set at Wagner Books, where Nella brings meticulous dedication to her role as assistant to one of the company's top editors. The white woman for whom Nella works seems satisfied enough with her prodigious note taking, her prompt manner of answering the phone, her twice-as-good impeccability. Nella fits in, which is, of course, a way of saying she does not stand out. She is beige, even though she is Black. Yearning to ascend the publishing ladder and become an editor herself, she contacts a prominent Black intellectual, a man known in the mainstream for his fierce opposition to white supremacy. And then she waits, hoping half the time that he might

reply to her email, worried the other half about the repercussions on her career if he does.

Nella feels the aloneness that is inevitable in an industry that is among the most segregated, despite its left-of-center inclinations. *The Village Voice* identified the real-life world fictional Nella inhabits as "almost completely white" in a two-part 1995 article exposing "The Unbearable Whiteness of Publishing." Twenty-five years later, *The New York Times* found that "85 percent of the people who acquire and edit books" are still white. Nella throws her heart into spearheading Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work at Wagner, but no one attends her events. So, when another Black girl arrives on her floor, Nella is intrigued, even pleased. This other Black girl initially emerges as a fast friend, then quickly surfaces in the deepest wells of Nella's anguished fear. Does this other Black girl mean to support her, so that they might mutually benefit one another's careers—and sanity? Or is this other Black girl a competitor, lurking and plotting and striking awful blows to derail Nella's professional future—and her mental acuity?

Hazel is tricky. When Nella shares her concerns about the racist caricature submitted in a best-selling author's new manuscript, Hazel first bangs her fist on the table, bemoaning white fragility and the problem Black professionals face when we "just subtly imply that a white person is racist—especially a white man—they think it's the biggest slap in the face ever. They'd rather be called anything other than a racist." Hazel speaks with such force that "Nella sat stock-still, taken aback," and a "well-dressed Korean couple sitting at the table beside theirs... [was] curiously looking over at them between bites of food." Hazel then gaslights Nella, forcing her to confess to her middle-class status, as if the fact that "as a child, she hadn't wanted for anything" somehow erodes her authentic Blackness. Just as Nella is "unable to mask the defensiveness that was creeping into her voice and causing her to cross and recross her legs under the table," Hazel completely shifts her tone, making Nella wonder "where her lunch companion's Black Panther spirit had gone." Hazel's manipulations spur Nella to feel "energized" and "free" enough to voice her concerns regarding the submitted manuscript's sole Black character—with disastrous results. Nella's professional reputation begins to wobble, causing her to experience an anxiety that intensifies as mysterious letters suddenly appear on her desk, warning her to leave Wagner. The other Black girl seems genuinely concerned but could, in Nella's anguished mind, be the literal author of her demise.

A florid letter figures prominently in Nella Larsen's 1929 *Passing*. Like Larsen's twin protagonists, Irene and Claire, the other Black girl is a threatening counterpart to Nella. The other Black girl is so much like herself, that Nella's growing fear is the only thing making her Other. Nella must struggle against this Other that is also the Self. Similarly, in Larsen's *Passing*, Irene struggles against Claire, whose first name symbolizes the clarity with which careful readers see so much of one character in the other. Indeed, Claire embodies the most provocative aspects of Irene's personality. Claire even appropriates the I—for identity—in Irene's name, calling her, unlike anyone else in the book, the less dignified 'Rene.

Harris's other Black girl also has a symbolic name, Hazel, an eye (I) color that is not quite brown,



Nicole Mondesir

Zakya Dalila Harris

but certainly not green. A color in-between. And like Claire, Irene's other Black girl, Hazel shortens Nella's name, a seemingly innocent, even affectionate act that is made more significant and more sinister in Harris's book because Nella's true friend adamantly resists Hazel's bossy appropriation of the last letter in her name. Hazel calls her Nell, and "Nella could feel the chill coming off her friend a few feet away as she waited to be greeted." This friend's name is also significant, and beautiful—Malaika—but Hazel pokes the bear, calling her Melanie instead. Malaika instantly corrects Hazel, telling her she's wrong because her own name "is a little Blacker." The exchange makes Nella feel "a bit like a child who had stupidly rounded up her divorced parents for a dreaded school function." Like a white person who struggles with words of African origin but psychologically needs to wield a certain haughty power, Hazel then lands on the shortened Mal, which in various languages means crazy (Afrikaans), wrong (French), and bad (Spanish), and is the root of a list of English words with awful denotations (malfeasance, malpractice, malaise, malign, maladjusted, etc.).

Hazel's chomping off a bit of both friends' names is at worst creepy and at best way too familiar. And it is deliberate, meant to provoke and irritate, as scrambling Black folks' names is entirely white and also utterly exasperating, so it is also a clue. This absurd renaming scene foreshadows the book's stunning conclusion. Indeed, long before she ever meets Hazel, Malaika predicts what will happen at Wagner, telling Nella, "one of your coworkers is gonna mix you and the new Black girl up at least once. I promise you." One of them does. To Nella's white co-worker, the error is a simple mix-up, but to African Americans, and in the narrative, it is actually complex and significant—a mix that is at the same time confusing, stirring, and in a heartbreaking *denouement*, a combining of both Black girls.

Amid this on-the-job anxiety, Nella finds refuge in Malaika, her sister friend, a woman her age who

always has her back. Malaika is her sounding board, her confidant, the one character that tries to help her untangle the thrilling mystery that drives the novel's plot: Who is trying to push Nella out of Wagner—and why? Malaika is the girl every Black girl needs, but she is not the other Black girl.

Malaika is an homage to former Atria powerhouse Malaika Adero, the real-life woman who might have edited *The Other Black Girl* had she not left the Simon & Schuster imprint less than a decade ago. There are so few Black women in book publishing. Names like Marie Brown, Stacey Barney, Dawn Davis, Tracy Sherrod, and Linda Duggins come to mind. There are others, but only a precious few more. Harris tributes them all by naming her most keep-it-real character after the one Black woman editor who worked at the very imprint that published Harris's book.

Adero, who rose from Editorial Assistant to Vice President and Senior Editor, generated millions for Atria from the 1980s through 2014, the year she exited the company. She edited the work of some of our finest writers, including Maryse Conde and Tananarive Due. Adero acquired the work of Mexican American writer Reyna Grande years before *American Dirt*. She used her power to reissue *The Black Woman*, Toni Cade Bambara's groundbreaking anthology containing work by Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, and Nikki Giovanni. She also cultivated the voices of Gen X writers Farai Chideya, Carl Hancock Rux, and Kevin Powell. Along with these more literary authors, Adero published, and thus amplified, Black voices as widely diverse as Civil Rights leader James Meredith, Hip Hop artist Common, pastor T. D. Jakes, actress Victoria Rowell, and international icon Nelson Mandela. But the real money came from Zane, a breakout voice of the 1990s, whose steamy novels landed on the New York Times bestseller list more than a dozen times. A generation of what were called Urban Lit writers followed Zane, as well as Sister Souljah, who wrote the huge bestseller, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, also published by Atria. Street Lit authors filled the coffers at Atria and made quick millionaires out of writers who, without Adero, would likely never have been published at all.

Adero's real-life career is one the fictional Nella could only dream of in her cubicle in the sky, where she battles the floor's coffee machine, nervously pulls her hair, and languishes. Nella does dream of one day meeting a character whose influence on Wagner (the publishing house at the center of Harris's book) mirrors Adero's influence on Atria (the house that published Harris's book). In her most vivid aspirations, Nella would become Wagner's next Kendra Rae, one of the rare Black women in the fictionalized world of publishing Harris renders. In the book, Kendra Rae edited one of the company's most important novels, a work by a Black woman who was also her friend before suddenly and mysteriously disappearing. Rae's disappearance means she is not present or secure in her role and thus able to mentor Nella to achieve her career goal to publish more important books about Black life.

Thankfully, Adero's real-life career was decades longer than the fictional Kendra Rae's, and Adero's former assistant, Krishan Trotman, is now an Executive Editor at Hachette. Scaffolding other Black women is consistent with who Adero is—a culture worker who ran the Up South Book

Festival, is a folklorist and vernacular dancer, and paints. She is what we call a sistah, meaning a down Black woman, one who, in Larsen's time, might have been called a Race Woman and definitely would have been called an artist. So, it's altogether fitting that Harris's novel would include a woman actually named Malaika who, like her real-life namesake, embodies The Culture. And it's significant that Harris's Malaika is one of the few characters in the book who does not work in the publishing industry or in some other rarefied space in the literary world. The author suggests that true Black female artistic and intellectual freedom only exists outside the industry gates, which is the direction Harris fled when she quit her own job at Knopf to write this stunning debut novel.

The timing of this book's June 2021 pub date couldn't be better. *The Other Black Girl* is perfect summer reading: smart, engaging, and meaningful. Larsen wrote about the horrors of American racism as Ida B. Wells-Barnett's journalism fueled and organized the Anti-Lynching Campaign. Harris's novel does the same in the year following the George Floyd protests, the largest public demonstrations in world history and an international cry in support of Black Lives Matter, the movement fueled and organized by the online writing of Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi.

The dystopian reality of Black life in white spaces is four hundred years old and also just last week, an enduring contemporary theme, one explored by Black creatives in work as different as Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and the first season of Issa Rae's *Insecure*. The anxiety and dread Harris's female protagonist experiences also position the author in the ranks of her living literary sister and first daughter of Nella Larsen, Danzy Senna. Senna's award-winning *Caucasia* launched her career as a writer who examines the Black-white binary with tense narratives that center women characters who fit in neither racial category. In *Symptomatic*, Senna's second novel, the first chapter concludes with her main character collapsed on a bathroom floor. Harris's novel concludes in a similar setting, but the character that provokes the protagonist into submission is the other Black girl.

*The Other Black Girl* is for Black women who want books that help them make sense of the ways we are trapped and, through art, encourage us to think carefully about ways to be free. Harris interrogates white supremacy in fresh ways, identifying, as Larsen did, the terror of American racism as it forces Black women to mask their authentic selves before they can move, literally and figuratively, up. What happens, Harris asks, when the mask becomes the wearer, and the nine-to-five performance of corporate assimilation becomes a permanent condition? With her witty conclusion, Harris also examines white supremacy as it enters Black women, poisoning the Black woman's head, and turning them against their counterparts, the other Black girls who are, in fact, them. 📖

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