

Andrea Levy obituary¹

Prize-winning author of *Small Island* and *The Long Song* whose novels explored the intertwined histories of Britain and Jamaica



[Lyn Innes](#)

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Andrea Levy, who has died of cancer aged 62, gained wide recognition as a writer with the publication of her fourth novel, *Small Island*, in 2004. [...]

Levy's fifth novel, *The Long Song* (2010), explores an earlier shared

history of slaves and slave owners in 19th-century Jamaica, and was awarded [the Walter Scott prize for historical fiction](#). It was also shortlisted for the 2010 Man Booker prize. Last year the BBC showed a [television adaptation](#), allowing viewers to see the tropical landscape and hear the "exotic" birds that the novel deliberately eschews². The fictional narrator is July, a house slave, daughter of a white overseer and the woman slave he has raped. "Waxing³ on the nature of trees when all know they are green and lush upon this island," July's Jamaican voice declares, "or birds which are plainly plentiful and raucous, or taking good words to whine upon the cruelly hot sun, is neither prudent nor my fancy."

It is the people that July's narrative concentrates on, both "black" and "white", and the many colours in between, often carefully distinguished by July and others who take pride in having degrees of whiteness. Nor are the characters depicted in simple black and white: the slaves are not merely passive victims, for they are capable of outsmarting and tricking their masters, whose behaviour is often monstrous.

Born in London, Andrea was the daughter of immigrants from Jamaica. Her father, Winston Levy, travelled to Britain on the Empire Windrush in 1948, and was joined six months later by his wife, Amy (nee Ridguard), who had been trained as a schoolteacher in Kingston, Jamaica. Both parents were of mixed race. [...] They came to England expecting greater opportunities, but found that their qualifications were rejected.

The youngest of four children, Andrea grew up on a council estate in Highbury, and attended Highbury Hill grammar school. She was not particularly good at English (she claimed she got an E). Nor was she interested in reading. She went to art school to study textile design, and there discovered friends who introduced her to books. [...] She also began to read African-American writers such as [Alice Walker](#) and [Toni Morrison](#), and they in

40 turn made her feel the need
for novels reflecting her own
experience of being black and
British. So she thought she
would try to create
45 something, and joined a
writing class at the City Lit.
She received encouragement
both from her tutor, Alison
Fell, and from Bill Mayblin,
50 her partner and later her
husband, with whom she had
formed a graphic design
company. However, she had considerable difficulty finding publishers who
were willing to believe that novels about the lives of black British families
would be of interest to a general readership.



55 [...] Although she hoped that her novels would encourage conversations
about Britain's colonial and postcolonial history, including its involvement in
slavery, Levy did not wish to be seen as someone who wrote about race. She
wished to create stories which sought not to change people's minds but to
open them. "For me, writing has always been a journey of discovery about my
60 past and my family," she said in a 2015 interview. "All my books look at what
it is to be black and British, trying to make the invisible visible, and to put back
into history the people who got left out – people like my dad."

Andrea Doreen Levy, writer, born 7 March 1956; died 14 February 2019

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/15/andrea-levy-obituary>

1 obituary = when someone dies, they are remembered in a newspaper
article/note

2 to eschew = to avoid deliberately

3 to wax (lyrical) = *partir dans une envolée lyrique*

Reporter 1 (easiest task): Prepare to discuss the ideas from this document. You should look up any difficult vocabulary and prepare your answers to the following questions (at least!) You will have only about 2-3 minutes to present as many details as possible to your group, so you must be efficient!

- 1) What does the novel *The Long Song* NOT deal with and why?
- 2) What does the novel concentrate on? Why is that different from other narratives about enslaved people?
- 3) What sort of stories did Andrea Levy want to create and was it an easy task?

