

## Brit(ish) by Afua Hirsch – island stories

A journalist sees a national identity crisis in Britain's failure to come to terms with its colonial past

Diana Evans FEBRUARY 2, 2018



Last summer the writer and broadcaster Afua Hirsch sparked controversy by likening Britain's imperial memorials to the Confederate statues being pulled down in the US. Leaping to the defence of Nelson's Column, former V&A director Sir Roy Strong retorted: "The past is the past. You can't rewrite history." In her hard-hitting non-fiction debut *Brit(ish)*, Hirsch attempts to do just that, filling in crucial gaps in Britain's myopic recollection of the colonial story, while assessing its impact on her personal history and embattled identity.

Born in Norway to a Ghanaian mother and a Jewish-English father, Hirsch grew up in Wimbledon in south-west London, enjoying the benefits of a privileged, "soft and silky" childhood of "berry-stained rambles on Wimbledon Common", summer holidays in the Alps and a private education culminating at Oxford. Yet it was a childhood marred by racism, with taunts such as "thunder thighs" and "Shaggy" bringing her to despise her fuller Afro features, her Ghanaian grandmother being subjected to daily deposits of dog excrement on her doorstep, and a general perception that blackness was bad. "Don't worry," a school friend once said with pity in her voice, "we don't see you as black." Alongside this was the eternal asking of "The Question" — "Where are you from?" — further confirming for Hirsch that Britain was not where she belonged.

So began a quest to find that place, which presumably must be somewhere in Africa, and the search for it is the loose thread that holds the strands of this expansive, ambitious book together. In

Senegal, her first stop after graduating, came the discovery of how very British she was after all. Same thing in Ghana, where she'd pictured herself slotting right in and speaking confidently in Twi like her grandmother.

Some of the most impressive passages here are on the landscape, the "breeze-kissed, fertile and misty town" of Aburi, to which her ancestors fled while the Ashanti Empire was at war with the British. This misty dream of belonging fades, though, with the realities of Ghanaian society: being scolded for failing to produce a daughter of lighter skin ("you didn't do well"), or her partner being urged to "control your wife" as Hirsch goes about her work in Accra as west Africa correspondent for the Guardian. Eventually her focus turns back to Britain, and the most important revelation of all is that the reason for feeling that she does not belong there is that Britain has an identity crisis of its own.

"Britain has no 'white history'," she writes. "British history is the multiracial, interracial story of a nation interdependent on trade, cultural influence and immigration from Africa, India, Central and East Asia, and other regions and continents populated by people who are not white, and before that, invasion by successive waves of European tribes most of whom, had the concept of whiteness existed at the time, would not have fitted into it either."

A large portion of the text is devoted to the brutalities of slavery and the colonial project of constructing race as an instrument for exploitation. We are reminded of Britain's shameful position as the world's leading slave nation, the mess of abolition which saw slavers using parliamentary loopholes to continue trading, and the slaves themselves having to work another four years for free to help foot the bill. Rather than citing William Wilberforce as the great alleviator of this suffering, she highlights the role played by lesser-known black abolitionists such as Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoana, whose memories have not been honoured with statues by the British establishment.

But this is less a polemic about the past than an attempt to illuminate the problems of the present. Hirsch is exacting in her observations of how this history manifests itself today, from the widespread use of skin-lightening creams in Africa to the mainstream media's disparaging treatment of Serena Williams and the higher rates of poverty among black people in the UK compared with whites. Her partner, also of Ghanaian heritage, was brought up in a low-income London household and climbed the social ladder to the legal profession where he eventually met Hirsch (she is a former barrister). Her account of the differences between them is funny and compelling: her, envious of the "silver spoon" of identity afforded him by the black community around him during his childhood, and he, scornful of her time-wasting, esoteric quest for belonging: "What kind of black person feels they actually have to write a *book* about being black?"

Hirsch's central argument is that Britain will never be able to "move on" from the problem of race until it has acknowledged how racial it has been. And within this is the idea that the concept of identity might be understood as something less to do with place and nation, than with inner space. Perhaps the condition of being "stateless" that Hirsch ascribes to being mixed race is also a kind of freedom. Who is British? What is Britishness? This is a fierce, thought-provoking and fervent take on the most urgent questions facing us today.

**[Brit\(ish\)](#): On Race, Identity and Belonging**, by Afua Hirsch, *Jonathan Cape*, £16.99, 384 pages

*Diana Evans's new novel 'Ordinary People' is published in April by Chatto & Windus*

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