

# Noughts and Crosses – Malorie Blackman

## The Author



Malorie Blackman was born in Clapham, London in 1962. She has lived in London most of her life. Her parents migrated to England from Barbados in 1960. Malorie is the middle child in a large family and her books for children often focus on family life and relationships. She married Neil Morrison in 1992 and their daughter was born in 1995. Malorie Blackman lives with her husband Neil and daughter Elizabeth in Kent, England. In her free time, she likes to play her piano, compose, play computer games and write poetry. She is the subject of a biography for children by Verna Wilkins.

At school, she wanted to be an English teacher, but she grew up to become a systems programmer instead. She studied computer science at Thames Polytechnic, working in computing until 1990, when her first book was published. She is also a graduate of the National Film and Television School. She has been a full-time writer since then. Malorie Blackman has published many different kinds of books for children, including picture books and easy readers for young children; the *Girl Wonder* and *Betsy Bigelow* series; novels for older children and teenagers. She has also written scripts for TV, film and theatre, with several of her works screened on primetime children's television. She has won many awards for her work.

Malorie Blackman often tackles controversial and difficult themes in her work, carefully researching her subjects. For example, *Pig Heart Boy* raises the issue of cross-species organ transplants: Malorie Blackman says this took her three to four months to research in medical books and on the internet. Her fiction takes these difficult themes and weaves them into accessible stories for young people.

In Verna Wilkins' biography of the author, more is made of Malorie Blackman's use of black characters. Wilkins notes that in spite of being a compulsive reader as a child, Malorie only discovered the work of black writers who became her role models, in her twenties.

## Plot Summary



Sephy is a Cross - a member of the dark-skinned ruling class. Callum is a nought - a 'colourless' member of the underclass who were once slaves to the Crosses. The two have been friends since early childhood. But that's as far as it can go. Until the first steps are taken towards more social equality and a limited number of Noughts are allowed into Cross schools. Against a background of prejudice and distrust, intensely highlighted by violent terrorist activity by Noughts, a romance builds between Sephy and Callum - a romance that is to lead both of them into terrible danger.

*Noughts and Crosses* is set in a fictional dystopia. It is a society filled with racism and prejudice, where people with black skin are seen as the 'ruling' class. The two central characters, Sephy and Callum, grow up together as friends, when Callum's mother works for Sephy's family. However, in a story reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*, their friendship faces difficulty as they grow older and Callum joins Sephy's school. Relationships between Noughts and Crosses are frowned upon, and so begins an emotional and tumultuous story of friendship, love, betrayal and power.

Callum's older brother and father join a terrorist group called 'The Liberation Militia' – a group, using any means possible, to highlight the plight of the Noughts. When Callum and Sephy get caught up in its goings on, our characters' lives change forever. Callum and Sephy are separated and their lives take different paths. However, Callum's brother Jude is determined to use Sephy and her father's powerful political influence to change things and Sephy becomes the target of an elaborate kidnap plot by the Liberation Militia. We are left wondering if Callum has betrayed her or whether they will finally be together. When Sephy becomes pregnant, Callum is accused of rape and sentenced to death.

## Alternate Reality Fiction Conventions

REALISTIC FICTION is a genre consisting of stories that could have actually occurred to people or animals in a believable setting. These stories resemble real life, and fictional characters within these stories react similarly to real people. Stories that are classified as realistic fiction have plots that highlight social or personal events or issues that mirror contemporary life, such as falling in love, marriage, finding a job, divorce, alcoholism, etc.

- Realistic fiction stories tend to take place in the present or recent past.
- Characters are involved in events that could happen.
- Characters live in places that could be or are real.
- The characters seem like real people with real issues solved in a realistic way
- The events portrayed in realistic fiction conjure questions that a reader could face in everyday life

## Characters

- **Persephone Hadley:** Nicknamed Sephy, the daughter of a powerful Cross, Kamal Hadley.
- **Callum McGregor:** A Nought who is best friends with Sephy.
- **Kamal Hadley:** A powerful, ruthless Cross politician and father of Sephy and Minerva
- **Jasmine Hadley:** Sephy and Minerva's mother, who became an alcoholic.
- **Minerva Hadley:** Sephy's older sister.
- **Ryan McGregor:** Callum's father.
- **Meggie McGregor:** Callum's mother, who was Sephy's 'nanny' when younger.
- **Lynette McGregor:** Callum's older sister, who has a mental health condition after an attack.
- **Jude McGregor:** Callum's determined and outspoken older brother.

## Context

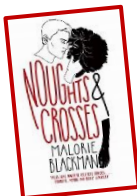
*Noughts + Crosses* reveals a world where a white underclass is in conflict with a specific subset of ruling black people. This is in stark contrast with the real world, not just because it is whiteness that dominates in reality, but because we discuss racism in a much clumsier way.

Because it inverts the racial totem pole, *Noughts + Crosses*' visual language is alien to most British viewers – the prime minister, Opal Folami, leading a recognisably African cabinet is an unfamiliar sight to a country that has had only white prime ministers and politicians of colour who wear predominantly western clothes. Victimised Noughts, however, feel very familiar; while the black cultural domination required for the former to take place in the real UK is just a myth, our reality does produce marginalised white people like those in Albion, even if they aren't marginalised because of their race.



*Noughts + Crosses* was partly inspired by Stephen Lawrence's murder and how it was handled by a racist police force. Stephen Lawrence (13 September 1974 – 22 April 1993) was a black British teenager from Plumstead, southeast London, who was murdered in a racially motivated attack while waiting for a bus in Well Hall Road, Eltham on the evening of 22 April 1993, when he was 18 years old.

There are differences in how black and poorer white people experience oppression, and *Noughts + Crosses* is full of allusions to the specific realities of being a racialised minority – dark plasters on pink skin is just the start. But by building a whole world on the logic of African supremacy, and showing how it produces conditions for white people that are so similar to poor white people in the real world, *Noughts + Crosses* posits that, not only is race a myth, but a society based on believing in racial supremacy inevitably produces marginalised white people, no matter what culture is dominant. What's more, it highlights the challenges that working-class white people and people of colour share in the real world.



# Noughts and Crosses – Malorie Blackman

## Key Quotations

- *That's just the way it is. Some things will never change. That's just the way it is. But don't you believe them.'*
- *'It was a typical early summer's day, light and bright and, in the Hadley household anyway, not a cloud in their sky.'*
- *'They were good friends playing together. Real good friends. No barriers. No boundaries. Not yet anyway.'*
- *'Being around Crosses was like walking on eggshells.'*
- *'It makes it sound like ... you're in one place and I'm in another, with a huge, great wall between us.'*
- *'If only Callum wasn't a Nought.'*
- *'I live in a palace with golden walls and silver turrets and marble floors... I opened my eyes and looked at my house. My heart sunk.'*
- **'YOU'RE ALL BEHAVING LIKE ANIMALS! WORSE THAN ANIMALS – LIKE BLANKERS!'**
- *'I'm not a blanker. I may be a Nought but I'm worth more than nothing. I'm not a blanker. A waste of time and space. A zero. I'm not a blanker. I'M NOT A BLANKER.'*
- *'Even the word was negative. Nothing. Nil. Zero. Nonentities. It wasn't a name we'd chosen for ourselves. It was a name we'd been given.'*
- *'Wishing me and every other Cross as dead as dead could be. I'd seen that look on other's faces – Noughts looking at Crosses, Crosses looking at Noughts. But I'd never seen it on Callum's face before.'*
- *'Love doesn't exist. Friendship doesn't exist - not between a Nought and a Cross.'*
- *'Callum and I were like two sides of the same coin.'*
- *'I also realised what you'd been telling me all these years. You're a Nought and I'm a Cross and there's nowhere for us to be where we'd be left in peace.'*
- *'I'm a Nought who dared to fall in love with a Cross.'*
- *'I used to think about it a lot. Dreams of living in a world with no more discrimination, no more prejudice, an equal justice system, equality of education, equality of life, a fair playing field...'*

## Key Themes

### Racism, Division, and Tragedy

Noughts & Crosses takes place in an alternate universe where, instead of Europe colonizing other parts of the world, people from Africa colonized Europe. This means that Black people (Crosses) are the dominant racial group across the world, and they subjugate white people (Noughts). Though the Noughts' enslavement ended about 50 years before the novel begins, the world that 13-year-old Cross Sephy and 15-year-old nought Callum inhabit is still extremely racist and segregated. Through Sephy and Callum's relationship, Noughts & Crosses shows how racist beliefs and government policies sow division and fear, even between people who once considered themselves close friends. Racism, the novel shows, is a tragedy capable of destroying friendships, romantic relationships, families and communities.

### Awareness and Privilege

Teenage Sephy is a Cross (a Black person) – and she's wealthier than most, as her father, Kamal Hadley, is the home minister in the government. Because of her racial and financial privilege, Sephy has grown up lacking nothing; she looks at the world fearlessly and expects other people to be good, kind, and helpful to her. Because of this, it's hard for Sephy to sympathize with her best friend Callum, who's a nought (a white person). Noughts & Crosses thus suggests that a person's perception of racism is closely linked to how privileged they are, and how much they themselves suffer racism. Someone who suffers racism, like Callum, has no choice but to notice it everywhere – but for someone privileged like Sephy, acknowledging and then trying to understand racism is a choice.

### Love, Lust, Power, and Violence and Rebellion

Noughts & Crosses is very concerned with love and romance. It also explores what happens when people are oppressed. The romance between privileged Cross Sephy and nought Callum starts off innocently enough, but their romance is forbidden because they're of two different races, and their relationship grows increasingly passionate and violent as racism and segregation reshape their lives and start to pull them apart. Some sections of the nought community are not prepared to accept their disadvantaged situation and fight back with bombs and kidnapping. Callum is in the middle; he is in love with a person he is supposed to be at war with.

### Friendship and Betrayal

Noughts & Crosses focuses on the friendship between privileged Cross Sephy and the Nought Callum, whose family lives in poverty. The novel begins when the two are still young teenagers, but Sephy and Callum have been best friends since Sephy was born. As children, Sephy and Callum can have a genuine, fulfilling friendship precisely because neither of them understands that, due to their different skin colors, they're not supposed to be friends. But as they get older, their friendship is jeopardized, especially through an act of betrayal by Callum, who lures Sephy into being captured by the Liberation Militia.

### Youth, Innocence, and Growing Up

At its heart, Noughts & Crosses is a story of how Sephy, a wealthy Cross, and Callum, her poor Nought best friend, grow up. Sephy is 13 and Callum is 15 when the novel begins, and it follows them for the next three and a half years, as their lives take wildly different paths than they expected. For both Sephy and Callum, but to differing degrees, growing up entails becoming increasingly aware of the darker aspects of their world, which is racially segregated.

### Family

In addition to exploring Sephy and Callum's friendship and eventual romance, Noughts & Crosses also focuses on Sephy and Callum's families. On the one hand, Sephy's family has never been very supportive: her father, Kamal Hadley, is a high-ranking government official who prioritizes his job over family, while Mother is an alcoholic and is arguably as checked-out as her husband. Callum's family, on the other hand, initially seems tight-knit and supportive. Through these failures, Noughts & Crosses portrays families whose members don't support or trust one another as not just dysfunctional and destructive, but also woefully incapable of protecting people from the horrors of the outside world.

## Key Vocabulary

abolished	courage	empathy	interracial	radicalisation
abortion	crosses	equality	liberation	relationship
alcoholism	cultural	friendship	militia	revolution
apartheid	dagger	hatred	noughts	shame
betrayal	discrimination	history	oppression	slavery
blanker	dominance	identity	perspective	suicide
bullying	dystopia	inferior	prejudice	superior
contrast	education	injustice	racism	terrorism

## Weekly Spelling

Revolution	Peculiar	Palpable	Euphemism	Hemisphere	Ineffectual	Effervescent	Annihilate	Unconscious	Prominent	Resentment	Patronizing	Trestle
Prejudice	Exasperation	Implacable	Liberation	Ruin	Umpteenth	Scintillating	Talkative	Punctured	Syndrome	Disguise	Genuinely	Burgundy
Discrimination	Cynical	Satellite	Serene	Cursory	Consolation	Incessant	Duress	Correspondent	Empathize	Compulsory	Viciously	Frisson
Stereotyping	Interracial	Spontaneous	Eureka	Delectation	Bereavement	Indignation	Beckon	Ostentatious	Shimmering	Confirmation	Abdomen	Turmoil
Racism	Placatory	Ambled	Python	Officious	Insensitive	Barbaric	Spontaneous	Stiletto	Scaffold	Beanstalk	Combustion	Sombre
Courage	Dignified	Ruefully	Tentative	Betrayal	Suicide	Forlorn	Corroborate	Fervently	Incredulous	Kilometres	Spontaneous	Largesse
Betrayal	Terrorism	Translucent	Irrevocable	Bullying	Murmuring	Vengeance	Corroborate	Scheming	Maximum	Impromptu	Ominously	Swivelled
Relationship	Dour	Precious	Terrorism	Posterior	Sombrely	Legitimate	Pulverized	Calculating	Philosophy	Breathe	Bracken	Temperamental
Friendship	Curiosity	Spectator	Parliament	Moustache	Platitudes	Maimed	Objection	Poisonous	Echelons	Crucifying	Abruptly	Charcoal
Prologue	Fragment	Reluctantly	Pompous	Prevarication	Tautly	Defiance	Credibility	Magnanimous	Denial	Premature	Crunching	Thesis