

MALORIE BLACKMAN

Entrancing children on a school visit.

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The children's writer Malorie Blackman occupies a hallowed place in our family bookshelves. My stepson's interest in reading – minimal until the age of eleven – can be traced to the day when he sat down with her novel of racial tension, "Noughts and Crosses"; 48 hours later, he'd zipped through all 450 pages. So when I was offered the chance of hearing the new Children's Laureate talk at Skinners' Academy in Hackney, I needed no persuading.

Gleaming new and splendidly equipped, Skinners' is an Education Minister's dream. But the remote-controlled steel-barred gates are an admission that it stands in one of London's most deprived areas, which is why the Royal Society of Literature and the charity First Story had arranged for Blackman to visit it. By bringing top writers into 'challenging' state schools across the country, they aim to persuade teenagers that literature is for everybody.

Bouncing on red-gymshoed feet, the ebullient Blackman had no difficulty in connecting with her young audience. She told of packing her lunch each Saturday as a child so that she could spend the entire day in her local library; of her father's distrust of fiction ('You need to live in the real world, Malorie!'); of the rejection letters from publishers: 'Guess how many?'

The hands went up. 'Ten?'

'More!'

'Twenty?'

'More!'

'Fifty?'

'More!'

'Seventy-five?'

'That's the closest – 82!'

Her message was simple: 'If you keep trying, you'll get there. Even if other people don't believe in you, you can still believe in yourself.'

Among the multi-ethnic audience, the "Noughts and Crosses" series clearly struck a chord. Blackman showed footage of black schoolchildren facing hostile crowds in 1950s Arkansas, and Catholic children running the gauntlet of Protestant parents in Belfast ('That

look of hatred is always the same'). She herself had wanted to teach until she was told, as an A-level student in the 1970s, 'Black people don't become teachers.'

At the end of an hour her listeners were still hooked. One wanted to know about a plot twist ('I'm not answering that – spoiler alert!'); another, what creature Blackman would like to be ('An eagle, so no one could mess with me'). But there were practical questions, too, about making a living as a writer: a sense of possibility had obviously been awoken. As I left, several dozen pupils were still standing in line with books to be signed, oblivious to the dinner bell.

'Your voice is unique, so don't be afraid to use it,' Blackman advised. 'Choose something you're passionate about, and your passion will shine through.'