

# TLC Showcase

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PAUL CROOKS

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## Introduction to *The George Cross*

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**T**he *George Cross* is a follow-up to my previous book, *Ancestors*. I wanted to interpret and paint a picture of a social order, fettered by the legacy of slavery. My parents are from Jamaica. My father came to England during the late 1950's. The stories my father told me about growing up in Jamaica were often disconnected, embellished and contradicting. I heard much about African Caribbean's being persecuted and oppressed down through the ages to our arrival in Britain and beyond. I made up my mind that I would write a book that rings with not just authenticity and detail, but humour. Being the object of other people's mistreatment, they themselves would be taking action and shaping other people to their own needs.

I started reading general history texts and books to get an overview about what life was like for my father, a Windrush generationer. I visited relatives in Jamaica and held discussions with people attending my author events. These activities helped me gain further insight into what my characters' childhoods would have been like and their experience of London during the 1950's. From Library research I created a year-by-year listing of scientific, social, economic and political events to pinpoint events impacting my characters thoughts and beliefs.

Monique Roffey was appointed by The Literary Consultancy to provide a manuscript assessment and some brief feedback on my synopsis and pitch. Monique was extremely helpful, suggesting important changes to structure and plot and contributing ideas along the way. Monique boosted my confidence no end when I was told she had gone as far as referring my manuscript to The Literary Consultancy for consideration as a Quality Manuscript. This prompted The Literary Consultancy's Aki Schilz's offer to help me reach a readership using their contacts with the publishing industry, after I made a few edits.

Since making the changes and resubmitting my manuscript, The Literary Consultancy has been actively engaging with literary agents keeping me updated on progress all the way along.

## Extract from *The George Cross* by Paul Crooks

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I reach the St Johns Anglican church and as usual, all I can think about is death, especially when I catch sight of the stone wall and railings. I see the lovely coloured bible pictures in glass windows overlooking graves. I pray that when I am old, that God will come for me in my sleep. I don't want to feel any pain, like the drunkard must have when he split his head. I hope they lay me to rest under the gaze of the Virgin Mary, like the great and the not so great do. They lie beneath the earth, under tombstones where soon to be curried goat graze, pee and do number twos. Mother says the great and the not so great made Jamaica the land we love. Clifford says tombstones silently recall who these people were, and where and when they lived. 'Silently recall'. I like when Clifford talks like that. I have been meaning to ask him if Mother knows he talks to duppies in the churchyard. Clifford says the good and the not so good of Black River are the sons and daughters of the great and not so great ex-slave masters. Folk resting beneath the dirt made Jamaica what it is today - ignorant, illiterate and poor. It is only a matter of time before God, Norman Manley and the Peoples National Party right the wrongs of the past.

Two things you have to be, to be buried in the churchyard of the St Johns Anglican church. You have to have money, and you have to have - as Mother would say - brown skin. She means mulatto - almost white if not fully white. Ex-slave masters' could never rest peacefully if a Black man or woman lay down beside them in the church yard. The good and the not so good of Black River would never allow that. It doesn't seem right me; what folks allow goats to do in the churchyards, I mean. If it were me doing the same thing, Clifford would sure give me a clip around the ear.

The descendants of the great and the not so great, are the good and not so good. Some have yards named after them like Rams Yard, Wallace Yard, and Mullins yard. You only have to own a corner shop to have town folk call a street corner after you.

The grocer shop at George Lin corner sells everything, from Brilliantine hair oil to the latest Mandraker comic.

My bike has a puncture. I have the puncture repair kit. I just need a bowl of water.

Little Lin is George Lin's youngest son. Little Lin's hair is jet Black - not one kink in sight. Little Lin stares at me from behind the counter, his nose perched on top.

I watch him as I lean my old Coventry up against the counter. This scene reminds me of the flicks and of the shootout at the OK Corral. In a second I might grab a banana, throw it, and see if I can hit him.

Mother always says the Chiney man is not stupid. They always have their own people working for them. The Chiney watch how Black people behave when they work for the brown skin man. The Black man will keep dipping his fingers into the till, until he can afford to buy his own shop. Church folk say people shouldn't steal, not even to put food on the table. But the labourers do it because banks don't lend Black folk money.

Likkle Lin, you're almost as tall as your Puppa! I laugh. Where's yo' Puppa?

Puppa gone to War Office.

Boy, go 'round the back and fetch me a basin of water.

Little Lin looks at me with a confused look.

What wrong with you? You no' hear?

Puppa say, no vagabond, no dog and no bike in shop.

Wha'! Quick, boy. Go fetch de water before I give you one backhand across the side of y'h head?

What y'u need it for.

Boy! Your father never teach y'u not to ask big people questions?

No.

I show him the black of my hand, Just fetch the water before I cuff you!

Mandrake the Magician comics stretch out wall to wall along a string above the counter. Mother is in my head telling me comics are education blockers. Comics lead young children down the road to failure. Go outside John Crow Tavern and ask the jack asses about the last thing they read; it's either the latest comic strip in the Jamaican Gleaner or the results part of the betting slip. None can read nor write.

I have not one penny in my pocket and I am getting all worked up inside. Bad for Little Lin if he opens his mouth the wrong way again.

Little Lin struggles in from the back yard with the bucket of water.

Fool! Why you fill the bucket to the brim? I said half-fill the bucket! I can't be bothered to watch how long it takes him to go back and throw water off. So I tell the idiot to move out the way.

Little Lin stands over me watching as I go to work on my tire. Every minute he asks a question.

Why you do dat?

Do what?

Soak deh tyre in deh water?

I'm trying to find where the puncture is, Fool!

How?

Well, you have to press the tyre, like so. Look, see it? See the bubbles?

Can I have a go?

No!

Why not?

Because, you have work to do for Puppa!

No, he says

Boy, go back inside, before I run you!

A tear drop breaks free. I tell him he can watch only if he keeps his mouth shut. Puppa Lin gives Little Lin everything he wants. He cry for donkey – Puppa Lin buy him donkey. He cry for sick – Puppa don't send him to school for the whole week. He cry for bicycle, Puppa buys him bicycle. The worse thing about Little Lin is he

never says 'excuse' when pushing pass old folk. One day a little old lady told him off for it.

Boy you have no manners! She shouted.

Little Lin ran home to tell Puppa. He cried like someone crossed his backside with a cat o nine whip. That day, I see Puppa Lin march to the market to tell the old lady off – right in front of Little Lin. But that is where Puppa Lin made a wrong move. Clifford catches Puppa Lin telling off the old lady.

Hear Clifford, Man! What y' telling the old lady off for! Don't let you and me have something in the street here today! Since when children start to rule Black River. If your son was my son I would find the longest Cucoo Macka stick break his behind with it. He is rude!

If I had a little brother like Little Lin. I wouldn't let anybody trouble him - except me. If I was Little Lin's big brother, I would beat the never ending list of questions out of him. No more idiotic questions about fixing this puncture. Lord Jesus, I wish I had a little brother. But I am the Wash Belly; the last born.

It is a wickedly hot day in July. The steps leading up to the entrance to Courthouse reminds me of the day somebody tapped me on the shoulder. Three times that somebody tapped. A dog barked. All I remember is it happened on the day Dadda left us to fend for ourselves.

The man loading the cart outside Couthouse tells me he saw the Colonel heading towards the pastry shop.

Brother. That is what Mother tells me to call the Colonel. But I don't know what kind of older brother he is. The one thing good about him is he does not go on like a bad man trying to drop licks on me every minute. He doesn't trouble any of the older boys who trouble me; he can't fight. But, he always tells me off. He is too quick to wring my ear when town folk tell on me. My brother spends most of his time studying in Savanna La Mar. He stays with Dadda's sister Marjorie who works there in the tax office. The Colonel is going to be a top lawyer one day, so Mother tells everybody in Black River. She never talks about me like she does my brother. I don't like it. It is as if everybody in town thinks I am going to be the ragamuffin when I grow up.

I'm almost ten years old and I haven't the faintest idea how old the Colonel is. People always talk about Mother as if she's my granny. Country folk, who only know about goats and cows, think the Colonel is my Dadda. It is funny how I never hear the Colonel correct them.

The Colonel calls to me from the middle of the street. He shouts, George, I thought I told you to go home and put your head in a book! His eye brows drop casting a shadow that reaches for his nose bridge. The Colonel strides the high street like a man with a number two lodged tightly up his behind. He holds his brimmed hat in his hand by his side – it's only for show. The Colonel kisses his teeth and turns his nose to the sky as children pass; no shirt on their back or shoes on their feet.

When rude boys and lawless men see him, they step back into the dark shade of shop fronts.

I feel my free-paper burn when his eyes swipe left to catch me about ready to move on.

Devil find work for idle hands, he says, handing me the Jamaican Gleaner.

I take it. I want to read the court cases starring the best in Black River. I like finding out about how Black River lawyers are doing in Kingston's courts. But I don't want to start it in front of the Colonel. He might start thinking I want to be like him when I grow up.

The Colonel complains about people who have lived all their lives in the yards and can barely read or write; men like Colossus, Lamby and Israel Brown. He says nothing good about bare foot boys and girls who can barely tie shoe lace. His eye brows dip as he starts on how poor folk spend their money. He says when the PNP in power they should do more to make sure yard children have read Charles Dickens by the time they are eleven years old. I still have time. Pigs will fly! Mother always says, Everybody is everybody else's biggest riddle. The man mother says I must call brother is definitely mine. The Colonel says if I don't educate myself I'll end up like Israel Brown; bad, lawless and propertyless. Mother always says every race in life has a starting gate. But I would not dare tell that to the Colonel - a flea bite can turn the meekest dog into a rebel. I do not want to open the door to the rebel in him.

At least men like Colossus know how fight and fix bikes. Colossus even knows how to get me into the flicks without paying a penny. My brother would not have the job at Courthouse if it was not for men like Colossus, Lamby and Israel Brown.



## About the Writer

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Paul Crooks was raised in North West London, England. He attended a local comprehensive school and left at the age of 18 to work for the National Health Service. He attended the University of Birmingham where he gained a Masters in Healthcare Commissioning.

Paul pioneered research into African Caribbean genealogy during the 1990s. He traced his family history from London, back 6 generations, to ancestors captured of the West African coast and enslaved on a sugar plantation in Jamaica. He gained national recognition for his work when his acclaimed historical novel *Ancestors* (based on the true story of the author's African ancestors) was published in 2002. He appeared on *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Moira Stuart) as the expert in African Caribbean genealogy. His second book *A Tree Without Roots is the seminal guide to tracing African, British and Asian Caribbean ancestry*.



The Literary Consultancy recently assessed the manuscript and provided editorial advice for his new work *The George Cross*; a biographical novel of two men, one displaced with the Windrush Generation, the other trying to understand his place in the contemporary world.