

My little black book – book review

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The pocket guide to the language of race by Jane Oremosu and Dr Maggie Semple OBE

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‘This A-Z pocket guide is for people entering the workplace and finding their identity, for leaders and managers who feel overwhelmed by ever-evolving definitions and phrases and then the fear of saying the wrong thing.’

Black history event

In 2023, Thames Valley Police (TVP) held a Black history event. When I saw Dr Maggie Semple OBE and Jane Oremosu arrive to do a talk about their book, I was transfixed. As a Black female living and working in a predominately white environment, this was a refreshing change. I see confident, intelligent Black and of colour women at TVP events, on TV and on social media. But to be in a room together was on another level, as my early upbringing and career was devoid of this experience.

It was a huge treat to be with other people who understand microaggressions, racism and being different to others they work with. How can I explain the joy of finally seeing another Black person in the work car park, who is a stranger but still smiles and waves, even if one of us is on the phone?

Favourite headings

One of my favourite headings in the book is ‘Name Bias’. It explains how there is a tendency to discriminate and make judgments with a name that is not English sounding. I thought about how call handlers may react to names that are different to their norm. If I find a name difficult to pronounce, I ask for the correct way to say it and I write it down phonetically so I can get it right. People appreciate this. It’s reassuring to learn that organisations are now redacting candidates’ names from job applications to ensure fairer representation.

I like how this book does not just provide the authors' opinions. They ask thought-provoking questions and give advice about what you can do, as a colleague or hopefully an ally, to help Black people.

Code-switching was a new term to me – 'Adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behaviour...' I didn't think it applied much to me at first. However, when I look back on school experiences and at work, I remembered that I had not explained my favourite food out of embarrassment for how it sounded (cou-cou).

Something that sticks in my memory is not defending a dual-heritage colleague who was being ridiculed when explaining she only washed her hair once a week, which is normal for Black people with natural hair. The book has made me realise how my own confidence has grown, as I will now challenge what is wrong.

Dialect

D for dialect (or patois) was missing for me. A phrase can be derogatory but missed when vocalised to the untrained ear. An officer could walk away from a hate crime not understanding the seriousness of the slur used against a victim. There may already be a book out there on Black/African dialects, but I would happily wait for Jane and Maggie to write one for me to read.

'The purpose of this book is to provide a starting point for conversations off the page. You will learn things, but remember your learning doesn't stop at the back cover.' I loved this passage. We are all responsible for educating ourselves about how language is changing. I am Black and I have still learnt so much from this little gem.

- Peer reviewed by Sandra Smith, Temporary Sergeant, Bedfordshire Police

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