

# My little black book – book review

Published on 8 December 2024

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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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This article is from the ninth issue of Going equipped.

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