

Book Review

The Other Black Girl by Zakiya Dalila Harris

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Zakiya Dalila Harris's novel *The Other Black Girl* is a gripping tale that delves into the complex world of publishing, particularly through the lens of race and ethics. The story follows Nella Rogers, the only Black editorial assistant at a prestigious New York publishing house. As Nella finds herself tossed into navigating the corporate world rife with microaggressions, her isolation begins to ease when Hazel, another Black woman, is hired. However, what initially seems like a source of hope and solidarity soon takes a sinister turn. What unfolds is a thriller that exposes racial tensions, office politics, and the exploitation of Black identity in predominantly White spaces.

Harris blends social commentary with psychological suspense, adeptly capturing the nuances of tokenism and the pressures faced by Black women in predominantly White workspaces, particularly in the publishing industry. The novel's sharp critique of corporate performative diversity is both biting and insightful, making it a timely and relevant read. However, while the book begins as a perceptive exploration of race, identity, and representation, its transition into a chaotic thriller toward the end may not appeal to all readers.

One of the most significant themes in *The Other Black Girl* is the contrast between tokenism and authentic representation. The central tension between Nella and Hazel serves as a powerful lens through which Harris critiques the commodification of Blackness in corporate spaces. The portrayal of performative diversity resonated with me personally, reminding me of moments when I've felt that my presence in professional spaces as a "Black woman" was more about optics than my qualifications. Nella strives to maintain her

integrity and authenticity, while Hazel's rapid rise at the company suggests that success in White spaces often requires the performance of a role that fits the expectations of white colleagues and superiors. Hazel's ease at Wagner Books raises questions about the kind of Blackness being represented and consumed by white audiences.

Some readers may see how easy it is to fall into the trap of being "strategically Black," performing an identity that fits with the desires of White colleagues and superiors. Hazel's ascent is a stark reminder of the thin line between playing the game and losing oneself in the process. The novel prompts a bitter realization: success for Black women in these environments often comes at the cost of authenticity. Harris forces readers to critically examine how Black women are frequently rewarded for presenting versions of themselves that are palatable to White institutions, rather than for who they truly are.

The novel critiques performative diversity, where corporations promote superficial inclusion by hiring people of color, but without challenging the existing structures of power that maintain inequality. In recent years, there has been an increasing spotlight on the publishing industry's ethical shortcomings, particularly concerning diversity and representation. Numerous studies and essays have critiqued how the industry, despite its outward commitment to inclusion, remains overwhelmingly White at both executive and editorial levels.

Harris' *The Other Black Girl* contributes to this conversation by using fiction to explore similar issues. Through Nella's journey, the novel exposes how "diversity" more often prioritizes optics rather than real change, and how tokenism can isolate rather than foster genuine inclusion. Where academic or non-fiction works critique the publishing industry from an external perspective, *The Other Black Girl* brings readers inside, making them feel the emotional and psychological toll of these experiences.

By introducing a speculative thriller element, Harris pushes the conversation about race into new territory, offering readers a fresh way to process the uncomfortable realities of racism. The thriller aspect, which introduces a conspiracy subplot, feels rushed and less developed than the novel's earlier, more grounded social critique. This shift in tone may leave readers feeling that the novel loses focus on the more pressing issues raised in the beginning. Harris' storytelling is vivid, insightful, and engaging, particularly in the first half of the novel. The dialogue is sharp, and the internal struggles of Nella are relatable, making her a character that readers can empathize with. The somewhat jarring genre shift to a thriller causes a loss of depth in favor of plot twists and suspenseful elements. Regardless, the way Harris intertwines fiction with social critique can keep a reader engaged.

The work's exploration of tokenism, race, and the politics of representation makes it a valuable text for scholars studying race, identity, and diversity in the workplace. It offers critical insights into how corporate diversity initiatives often fail to address deeper systemic issues, sparking vital discussions about performative inclusion. For those in publishing, the novel sheds light on how Black voices are marginalized, commodified, or silenced. For general readers, it provides a suspenseful, thought-provoking read, though the shift from workplace drama to conspiracy thriller may not be for everyone.

Occupying an important space in contemporary literature on ethics in publishing, the book's examination of tokenism, performative diversity, and racial dynamics—delivered through a fictional lens—offers a compelling and accessible contribution to ongoing discussions about race and inclusion in creative industries. *The Other Black Girl* complements non-fiction critiques of the publishing industry and broader works on racial identity, adding a narrative-driven, emotionally charged perspective to the conversation.

References

Harris, Zakiya Dalila. 2022. *The Other Black Girl: A Novel*. New York: Simon & Schuster.