

The book THEY didn't want you to read...

# Almost British

*Revisited*



**One Black Woman's Refusal  
to Being Silenced and Dimissed**

**Nairobi Thompson**

This book is a must-read if...

- you are interested in true-life stories;
- you are going through a racial bullying and unfair dismissal tribunal;
- you want to learn about the sharp end of the legal process of racial victimisation;
- you are interested in Diversity, Inclusion and Equality of Opportunity in the workplace;
- you want to be inspired by resilience and courage;
- you are interested in the *Black Lives Matter* movement;
- you want to explore race relations in the UK over the last 30 years;
- you are intrigued by personal journeys from victim to victor;
- you want to engage with justice for all and equality, and want to take action;
- you are committed to making a difference to your community and the world around you;
- you want to discover how to harness the secrets of grit and determination when all the odds are against you;
- you want to immerse yourself in a 'fly on the wall' perspective on racism;
- you want to learn about what it means to be an outsider in a predominantly white institution.

**‘This book has been banned for 12 years by  
the Ministry of Justice!’**

Some readers will find some of the words and phrases  
upsetting, degrading and racist.

## What people are saying about Nairobi Thompson

*'Almost British – Revisited* is one of those books that draws you in at the very beginning and compels you to read to the end. I couldn't put it down! I got to see what tenacity, resilience and commitment looks like and appreciate the huge advantage of being professional in a hostile environment. Of additional importance is the way the author conveys the need to demonstrate and document your journey. The book is powerful in its clear, unswerving accounting of relentless abuse. I felt I got to know the author, her pain, her hopes for better – her fight for justice. It is astonishing that after everything she has endured, she still has the energy and will to support others. I firmly believe this is essential reading for anyone who needs to understand institutional systems of oppression in the workplace.'

**Dr Karl George MBE**  
Thought Leader, International Speaker  
and author of the RACE Equality Code

*'Almost British – Revisited* is a compelling account of battle within the UK Prison Service and the Ministry of Justice that's centred in a sense of truth, resilience and unbelonging. It moves and stills in equal measure. One of the most important books to be written this century.'

**Nadine White**  
UK's first Race Correspondent

"A beautifully written account of one of the longest tenures in the civil service as a Black woman. Poetry matched with brutal honesty and a long journey to fight from within."

**Serena Barker-Singh**  
Political Reporter, Channel 4

‘From a place of cool waters, Nairobi Thompson wades through her pain and emerges to share the waves of her lived experience. With a brutal yet sensitive honesty, Nairobi shines a beacon of light on the persistent and pervasive culture of denial which permeated her place of work and threatened to drown her world. *Almost British – Revisited* is a clear, articulate and ultimately edifying chronicle of Nairobi’s turbulent journey as both victim and survivor. Nairobi is living proof that winning our own battles can make each of us stronger; this book also demonstrates that sharing our stories makes us wiser. Getting well, staying well and inspiring others to do the same is what *Almost British – Revisited* can do for you too.’

**Rob Neil OBE**  
Former Chair, Civil Service Race Forum  
and Director of Krystal Alliance

‘This book is an extraordinary read! It will help us to understand and appreciate how one, who was born to Caribbean parents in Britain, feels about being Black and British. I am a part of the post-war generation who helped to lay the foundation for our sons and daughters. We suffered many disadvantages; some stories are still too painful to share even today. We worked tirelessly for equality and justice in society, hoping for significant improvements. Things were different in my day; there was more extreme and blatant hate. It has taken decades to make the gains we have today. *Almost British – Revisited* has shown us how racism works with little hindrance in our institutions, and how it still harms and destroys lives. Encouragingly, the book also speaks to things we can do for ourselves, and the steps organisations can take to move the dial on race relations and equality. This book should be on every reading list for community advocates, and in every library.’

**Arthur Torrington CBE**  
Director, Windrush Foundation

‘As a Leader in Diversity and having worked in the Civil Service and Law Enforcement, I have seen many failures in diversity and issues in the flawed system and am genuinely excited and very interested in reading *Almost British – Revisited!*

In this book, the brave author shares her story, not holding back having expressed her workplace challenges and experiences hoping that there is someone who can build the bridge through diversity. In trying to do this, it shows her determination and commitment. For decades, leaders have been trying to break diversity barriers with poor results.

This is one of the truest encounters and raw experiences in the workplace. Well done!’

**Andrea Malam BEM**  
**Founder & Trustee @ Saving Dreams**  
**Leader in Diversity, Published Author**

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to Being Silenced and Dismissed**

**Nairobi Thompson**





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www.bookbrilliancepublishing.com  
admin@bookbrilliancepublishing.com

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## Foreword

Reading this book brought back memories of yesterday and today all rolled into one, as to how racism can manifest itself before you see it for what it is.

The things Olivea (now Nairobi Thompson) was exposed to are being experienced by many people up and down the country. The publication of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry in 1999 was meant to address institutional racism in all its forms. The Inquiry report not only uncovered the facts of the past, but also laid foundations for the future. It was hoped that a set of recommendations would help repair a very broken system and the deeply flawed attitudes embedded in institutions.

What I have noticed in the past is that officers seemed to get promoted even when there are ongoing related issues with regards to their professionalism. The same issues are highlighted in *Almost British – Revisited* and in many respects, gives much cause for concern. Institutions need to look at how they treat victims of discrimination and make sure procedures that are supposed to address the welfare of its staff, actually do so.

Many people believe that racism no longer exists and that we have become a more tolerant society. How wrong they are! I have spent nearly three decades since my son's death working to improve the lives of the Black community in the workplace and in society as a whole. The improvements that we have been longing for are still a long way off from being sustainable.

On reading *Almost British – Revisited*, the question to be asked is why do Black people have to work twice as hard to be accepted in the

same way that their white counterparts are, when doing the same job? Is it because Black people even now are not viewed as human beings, needing respect and needing to be valued? Since reading this book, I find it difficult to believe that things have not moved on enough to enable Black employees to be respected, treated well and valued in the same manner as their white counterparts.

A lot has happened since the first edition of *Almost British*. Two of Stephen's killers were found guilty in 2012. We have a Stephen Lawrence Day and Foundation working with young people who have been impacted by social and economic inequality. In collaboration with employers, we help young people find their career paths via high quality, industry-led professional training and development so the workforce, at all levels, can truly reflect our society.

The events of 2020, George Floyd's death, and the subsequent resurgence of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, along with societal inequalities exposed and exacerbated by COVID, has made us reflect on how we engage with our communities. This brought a sharp focus on what I want to be achieved in Stephen's name. I want Stephen Lawrence Day to be a reflective learning experience, as well as a celebration and a journey towards greater equality and inclusion for all.

I am a grandmother now, and I was ennobled in 2013 for my charity work in Stephen's name but there is not a day we don't remember Stephen – not a day I wouldn't rather just have Stephen back with us.

This brings me back to *Almost British – Revisited*. Even when we suffer great loss, the fight continues; there's always more work to do. When Sir Keir Starmer asked me to be the Race Relations Advisor in 2020 and asked me to lead a review into the impact of Coronavirus on Black and Asian communities and other ethnic groups disproportionately affected, I was supposed to be stepping back from public roles. I accepted the role because I think the voice of the people needs to be heard. I think Olivea's voice needs to be heard. She had to change her name to Nairobi Thompson – just to be heard!

I was saddened to read about the differential treatment of a senior Black manager in the Prison Service and further disappointed by the way in which this poor treatment was endorsed by those who were in

positions of power. I find it incredible that they did not put a stop to it, but allowed it to continue for years!

I believe this book will bring the racism and suffering of individuals in the Prison Service and in other institutions to the attention of the public and ministers. I believe the contents of this book will help to highlight the struggle of those facing discrimination and that this will bring about the kind of change that will benefit not just the staff but the institutions as a whole.

*Baroness Doreen Lawrence of Clarendon*

Sample

# **Part One**

**Setting the Scene...**

Sample

## Five Score Years Ago...

‘[This census] is proof of the necessity of slavery. The African is incapable of self-care and sinks into lunacy under the burden of freedom. It is a mercy to give him the guardianship and protection from mental death.’

**John C. Calhoun (1844), Secretary of State, arguing for the extension of slavery**

‘[Black and other ethnic minority children] are uneducable beyond the nearest rudiments of training. No amount of school instruction will ever make them intelligent voters or capable citizens in the sense of the world ... their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stock from which they come ... Children of this group should be segregated in special classes and be given instruction which is concrete and practical. They cannot master abstractions, but they can be made efficient workers ... There is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusual prolific breeding.’

**Lewis Terman (1916), *The Measurement of Intelligence***

‘... Instability of character is ascribed to the Negro, involving a lack of foresight, an improvidence, a lack of persistence, small power of serious initiative, a tendency to be content with immediate satisfactions, deficient ambition ... along with high emotionality and instability of character, defective morality is held to be a Negro characteristic.’

**G. O. Ferguson (1916), *The Psychology of the Negro***



‘His lips are thick, his zygomatic muscles, large and full\* (\* “These muscles are always in action during laughter and the extreme enlargement of them indicates a low mind.” Lavater) ... his jaws large and projecting, ... his chin retreating ... his forehead low, flat and slanting, and (as a consequence of this latter character) his eyeballs are very prominent, ... apparently larger than those of white men; ... all of these peculiarities at the same time contributing to reduce his facial angle almost to a level with that of the brute ... Can any such man become great or elevated?’

**Richard H. Colfax (1833), An Excerpt from: Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes**

‘A merrier being does not exist on the face of the globe, than the negro slave ... Why then, since the slave is happy, and happiness is the great object of all animated creation, should we endeavour to disturb his contentment by infusing into his mind a vain and indefinite desire for liberty—a something which he cannot comprehend, and which must inevitably dry up the very sources of his happiness.’

**Thomas Dew (1832), *An Essay in Favor of Slavery***

## One Score Years Ago...

I don't ever remember wanting to be white as a child; I do, however, remember wanting to be distinctive. In my formative years, I had no clear sense that my blackness was a problem to anyone. Whatever change I envisaged, whether that meant being darker or lighter, didn't matter much to me, as long as I was striking and exotic. I loved the many shades of black – there was far more to choose from. What I wanted was to be pretty! Prejudice was not something that I understood per se; yet I understood favouritism. As I grew up, I could see that others were preferred to me, although I have very little recollection of putting it down to colour. If there was any discontent, it was never remedied by thoughts about a distant homeland, because I was home and didn't know any different. Instead, I remember wondering if I were more talented, more beautiful, would that have made the difference.

My first memorable experience of racism in adulthood was when I went for my first interview after leaving college. I was 19 years old. It was a junior researcher job and as I had just finished my A-levels, I felt it would be perfect. I had enjoyed pouring over theory books for psychology and sociology and finding links to answer assignment and exam questions. I figured a research job would draw on the same set of skills. Having filled in the application form, I got a call from the company and spoke to the director over the phone. The conversation was a good thirty minutes and it was fun. He explained the company researched thoroughbred horses. Naturally, I disclosed I didn't know anything about horses. Thankfully, he told me that would not be a problem: it was my skill as a researcher that was of interest. We talked at length about a great many things. It didn't feel like an interview at all, it felt like a conversation with someone whom I had just met with mutual interests, and together we were just happy to talk.

The telephone interview ended with what he called ‘a formality’: the invitation to come in and meet face to face. I was surprised when he asked if I could come in the very next day.

I enthusiastically said, ‘Yes’.

He said I would be given a tour of the premises and be introduced to the staff. Then I would meet with him and he would make a decision.

The next day, I was eager and excited. He seemed so nice on the phone. We really hit it off and I was especially motivated as I considered that by the end of the day I could have my first job. On arrival, I was met by the office manager. She showed me around and introduced me to the staff. I had a quick chat with a couple of them. The offices were spacious and the people looked happy. I could see myself fitting in and working there. I didn’t notice throughout the tour that I was the only black person anywhere. But then, what was there to notice, when to date that had largely been my life’s experience? It was normal to be the only one.

After the tour, the office manager handed me over to the director’s secretary who made me aware that the director was on the phone. I waited. A few minutes passed and she ushered me into his office. On entry, I saw him sitting at his large desk writing furiously. His secretary politely announced, ‘This is Olivea.’

Without looking up and whilst continuing to scribble, he said quite lightly, ‘Hello, Olivea. Won’t keep you a moment.’

His secretary smiled at me reassuringly and left the office. As she drew the door softly shut, the director cleared his throat and elongated the word ‘o-o-ok-a-ay’ as if stretching out the vowels gave him a few extra seconds to finish what he was doing. As he spoke, he began to stand whilst pushing his chair back with his knees. He dropped the pen onto his desk blotter and stretched out his hand to greet me. With his hand outstretched, he lifted his head with a smile that simply froze on his face when he saw me. Almost instantly, the hand I was about to grasp in the firm handshake I had always been taught was an essential part of creating a good first impression, was being withdrawn. Instead, it became an icy indication to take a seat.

His whole demeanour changed. The smile was gone and the chatty, informal person I had spoken to the day before was replaced

by this officious, no-nonsense man. I suddenly felt much smaller than my 5'1" stature, standing in front of this man who was no more than 5'7" but now seemed unnaturally lofty. When I had entered his office, the room was large and impressive with modern furniture and colour-coordinated fixtures. It was light and airy with two big windows. But as I walked towards the chair, the room grew dark and claustrophobic. It became oppressive and the air was thinning. With the anxiety rising in my throat, I sat down as non-verbally directed.

'Thanks for coming along,' he said coldly. 'Presumably you've had a look round and had a chat with some of the staff.'

It was not a question. There was no customary speech inflection at the end of the sentence. He was not looking at me anymore. He was not inviting me to respond.

I couldn't help myself and said 'yes' anyway. My response was followed by a silence that gave me no indication as to what was going to happen next and offered no assurance that the situation was about to thaw out. I became rigid in my seat. I clasped my hands and pressed my feet into the floor to stop myself from fidgeting or tapping my heels. I was very nervous now.

When he eventually spoke, it was not to ease the tension deliberately hanging in the air. He said, 'Most of the people out there,' he motioned with his eyes to the office behind me, 'either own a horse or have access to a horse. It's a very important part of the job.'

I was confused and began to say, 'But yesterday when we spoke you said—'

He interrupted me. 'Owning a horse and understanding horse owners is integral to the role.' His words had an incontrovertible finality to them.

He looked at me with expressionless eyes. I had been disarmed and conquered without realising I had gone to war. Before I could consider retreating, advancing or terms for surrender, he was already standing and holding his office door open. Somewhat dazed, I stood up and walked towards the door he was holding open with a feigned courtesy that barely masked his contempt for me. Then with the most animation I had seen in him since my arrival, he smiled, thanked me very much for coming and he wished me luck in my hunt for a job. This was quickly followed by an almost apologetic reiteration, as if his

hands were tied by some invisible cords of modus operandi that he really needed to offer the job to someone with knowledge of horses.

Before I knew it, I was in the car park waiting for a taxi home.

As the years have gone on, I have made a conscious effort to make myself more appealing – at least as appealing as my voice, which has consistently fuelled a perception of height and shade that is immediately contradicted by my actual appearance on arrival. I have looked at my personality traits and learnt new behaviours to counterbalance personality preferences. I have adjusted my attitude. I have upgraded my skills and education and put myself ‘out there’. When required, I have been the quiet, unassuming one; at other times the forthright, assertive one. Yet still today, I find myself asking: if my face was white, even for a moment and I relived a particular episode, would it have made a difference?

Sample

## Preface: Defying the Odds

This is a story of triumph. In January 2008, I took the Prison Service to court for direct racial discrimination, harassment and victimisation. My journey was arduous, terrifying, and painful. I endured racial comments and ostracism. Then I was deliberately forgotten, and put on 'garden leave' for 19 months whilst simultaneously being accused of aggressive and anti-social behaviour as a poor performer. I was unsupported by a national institution that was not only flush with money from the public purse, but was fortified by its familiarity with the law. Nevertheless, I stood alone; I represented myself in a 15-day hearing and won!

I came across the aforementioned pro-slavery arguments when I was looking for legal discourse to support myself through the court case. Aside from the shock that a simple search could throw up such incendiary 'finds', when looking for information about the devastating effects of stereotyping black people in the workplace, I was immediately struck by horror and offence. The statements perfectly crystallised what I was up against: fearful, misinformed, archaic thinking. I found it incomprehensible that anyone could make such damning indictments about me and mine, for no other reason than the colour of my skin.

Having only ever been confronted and repulsed by slavery in my early teens after watching Alex Haley's *Roots*, I had never made my own personal journey of discovery in relation to who I am or how others see me. Growing up, my mind had not been furnished with balanced views and a sense of self, gained by studying my history. Even though watching *Roots* generated complex emotions, they were

never explored with our parents and we were too young to unravel and challenge them for ourselves.

Shortly after the screening, the storyline and messages were archived in vaulted memory and surfaced only in indefinable form whenever we were wronged by white people. Yet now my eyes were being forced to undress every sentence of these obsolete arguments with a strange mix of incredulity and sickness.

As my brain struggled to process the information and my heart wrestled with whether picking at such ancient wounds would distract me from making my points, I found no such reprieve. Neither could I excuse them as if they had been spoken in some back street by a drunken, disorderly and unlearned rabble. These words were carefully spoken with calculated intention by an organised people, parliaments and legislators. Somehow, I should have been able to derive comfort in knowing some of these words were hundreds of years old, and say confidently that their potency and relevance is vilified by both the passing of time and common sense, if I were not able easily to find evidence that they are still being spoken in various forms as truth and argument today. Indeed, had I not found myself on the receiving end of the same sentiments, whilst working for the Prison Service? Had I not battled to dispel perceptions of me as black, therefore lazy and aggressive? Despite centuries passing and the apparent progress made, there seems to be no escape from people who will take one look at me and decide that I do not belong.

I have lived my life in Britain consciously avoiding the crippling effects of mistrust brought on by being obsessed about which of the white people I meet every day hold putrid views like these. Is it the train steward who, no matter how many white people board the train at the same time as me and sit in the same first-class carriage, will only ask *me* if *I* have a ticket? Is it the white person I consider a friend, who will not come to the get-together I have invited them to because they think they will be the only white person there and it would be 'awkward' for them, or they would 'feel funny about being the only one'? And whilst they are conveying their concern, the irony is completely lost on them that I am the only black person in the room, or on the board or in the company. Yet I am still expected to function and automatically feel that I belong, without any special effort to include me being made. I have learnt to dismiss these indiscretions,