



Red Dust Road: An Autobiographical Journey

Jackie Kay

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From the moment when, as a little girl, she realizes that her skin is a different colour from that of her beloved mum and dad, to the tracing and finding of her birth parents, her Highland mother and Nigerian father, the journey that Jackie Kay undertakes in *Red Dust Road* is full of unexpected twists, turns and deep emotions. In a book shining with warmth, humour and compassion, she discovers that inheritance is about much more than genes: that we are shaped by songs as much as by cells, and that our internal landscapes are as important as those through which we move. Taking the reader from Glasgow to Lagos and beyond, *Red Dust Road* is revelatory, redemptive and courageous, unique in its voice and universal in its reach. It is a heart-stopping story of parents and siblings, friends and strangers, belonging and beliefs, biology and destiny, and love.

Red Dust Road: An Autobiographical Journey Details

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Author : Jackie Kay

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From Reader Review *Red Dust Road: An Autobiographical Journey* for online ebook

Andrea says

good book it changed one story to the next the character is strong in this book,

Liz says

I think at the moment I'm really into books that take their political commitments for granted, that aren't about trying to persuade you into them or explain them, that don't assume you don't already share those values, where radical politics is the setting, not the jewel. Human stories about and for politicised people.

I came across Jackie Kay in a book of women's poetry -- she'd written a poem about a woman frantically trying to hide all traces of her left-wing political commitments from her home before a social worker visits. I loved the straightforwardness and humour of it. I did a little research and found that Jackie Kay was a black lesbian Scottish poet, adopted and raised by white communists. She'd written this book about tracking down her birth parents. I had to check it out.

It turns out that her birth mother was a white Scottish woman of nervous temperament, pressured to give up the baby she conceived with a Nigerian student who returned home shortly thereafter. Kay's search for some kind of relationship with her birth parents and their families is bittersweet, funny, hopeful, sweet but not saccharine. I sometimes thought she went too easy on her sometimes-clueless adoptive parents, but she obviously loves them, plus they're probably still alive, so I'm not going to make too many criticisms of that. Plus I really liked Jackie herself. The last few chapters made me laugh out loud with delight. Check it out.

Bettie? says

blurb - It was the imminent birth of her son that prompted the poet and novelist Jackie Kay to try and trace the parents who had given her up for adoption in the 1960s.

Her own childhood had been a profoundly happy one with open and loving parents . They had always made it clear to her that she and her elder brother, both mixed race, were 'special' because they had been 'chosen'. But Scotland and indeed Britain was not always an easy place to be, particularly in those early years, if your skin colour happened to be several shades darker than everybody else's.

The casual offensiveness of the oft-phrased question "where are you from?" - which looked beyond her obviously Scottish accent and saw only her non-white skin - provoked a defiant assertion: "Here." School lessons about Africa were always an uncomfortable experience as classmates trotted out the dancing, drumming, mud-hut cliches.

Eventually, with the solid support of her family and her partner and friends, Kay decided that she needed to know the story of where she was from, and embarked on the complex emotional and physical journey.

Her Mum was a great storyteller and had often shared imaginings of a tragic romance broken off by an arranged betrothal, a princely heritage and a Sidney Poitier-like figure for a father. The truth, as Kay discovers, never quite matches the fantasies - sometimes it outdoes them. As for the jigsaw puzzle of heritage, family and identity, assembling the pieces doesn't always provide answers.

Read by the author.

Producer/Abridger: Jill Waters

Jackie is a real life private investigator of traditional build - wonderful story.

Marc Livingstone says

I got this book free at an event for world book night, I'd heard Jackie Kay on radio 4 before and liked her and since bought some of her poetry which I enjoyed. I was pleased when she was appointed makar, and thought I'd give this a go.

There are so many really moving moments, mainly to do with her tracking down her biological family, but I wanted to highlight one thing specifically: the warmth with which she describes her upbringing and her communist parents, the humanitarian values they taught her, the support and encouragement they gave her throughout her life. Also the descriptions of CP socials and the comrades she met at them.

It is in sharp contrast to the communist misery memoirs currently being punted by David Aaronovitch and Alexei Sayle.

Sarah says

Great memoir, beautifully written and giving real insight into Jackie Kay's life, and how she feels about herself. I have already read and enjoyed Trumpet, I think I will try some of her poetry now.

Sarah says

I love this woman ?

David says

It's impossible to dislike Jackie Kay. Have you ever heard her on the radio? She's instantly super-likable. She's so calm, ordinary, unpretentious and open and kind. And, of course, creatively exciting and engaging. Her poetry is amazing. But she's someone you think you'd just like to have a chat with. She seems very interesting. Whereas, say...Philip Larkin...I love his poetry, but probably wouldn't have been all that bothered if I'd missed out on having a cup of tea with the great man. So, Jackie Kay has this engaging, likable quality. Charisma is mysterious, but it seems to come from her

openness and delight in everything. At one point in the book she talks about how she almost cultivates a naivety in regards to people. There's a hilarious story in *Red Dust Road* where she takes a perverse pleasure in being comically ripped-off by three men in a Nigerian airport while someone from the British consul looks on with despair.

Although this book is about Jackie Kay meeting her biological family, it seems like more of a love song to her adoptive parents, who fly off the page as an amazing couple of people. I was left wanting to know more about her adoptive brother who doesn't appear all that often, but who seems equally interesting.

I mentioned about her kindness, and there was one point in the book where her friend, the equally brilliant poet Liz Lockhead, is swearily disrespecting the town Aberdeen. Because of the overall 'niceness' of the book, this grumpiness was refreshing and made me wonder if Jackie Kay is ever mean and grumpy and unfair herself. Is there a danger that she's just too fair and kind and nice? Is there a danger that her tone might seem a bit ineffectual, weak and eager to please? Well, no actually, and I think it's because of what I mentioned earlier about her naivety. Her kindness has a hardcore, radical feel to it. She's hardcore-nice! I completely loved this book, I suppose because I completely love Jackie Kay.

Claire McAlpine says

Outstanding, brilliant, what a wonderful book and beautifully articulated story. A favourite for 2012, a hidden treasure absolutely. Can't wait to read more from her.

Read my full review on my blog 'Word by Word'

Michael Rumney says

Comes across very well that Kaye is looking for a sense of place other than Scotland as she searches for her birth parents. Her journey takes her from Glasgow to Nigeria via Aberdeen An easy and engaging read and you question inheritance or nurture in what we become. How accidents can send us on different paths is explored. I hope a second biography is published to tell us what happens next.

Pauline Ross says

I knew nothing about Jackie Kay before opening this book, so it was a bit of a leap in the dark. She writes poetry, it turns out, and has obviously attracted some attention with it because she has an MBE. But this book is not about her writing, it's about how she was adopted and came to find her natural parents. Not that there's much to say about that - they never really become three dimensional, glimpsed in rather fraught occasional meetings in their old age. But if the central focus of the book is a little hazy, the decorative curlicues around the edges, the snippets of life with her adoptive parents, are what bring the story to vivid life, rich with humour and deep affection.

To be honest, I often wonder with a book of this type just why the author decided to write it. Fiction and poetry I can understand - there's a desire to tell a story, to create something new and original, to say something. But a memoir? Why would an author think these little vignettes from an ordinary life, however well written, would be interesting? Is it catharsis? It's clear that meeting her birth parents was a traumatic experience, on both sides, so maybe Kay felt the need for some kind of release, a kind of blood-letting, or

perhaps a way of packaging it all up neatly into something small and manageable like a book, so it can be tidily shelved away. But what exactly do all her friends and relations (long-standing or newly discovered) feel to be written about in this tell-all way - the family's secrets spread out in the open for people like me to maul and comment on and make judgments about.

Maybe the author intended it partly as a celebration of her adoptive parents. Certainly the contrast with her birth parents could hardly be more stark, and makes their own eccentricities (they were active socialists and atheists) seem trivial and positively benign by comparison. It is also clear that, whatever the emotional ups and downs and physical difficulties involved in meeting her birth family, and however great her euphoria when things went well, it was always her adoptive parents who grounded her, and formed the solid bedrock of her life.

This is not a particularly original book, in many ways. There are many other works written by people tracing their roots and finding out surprising things about themselves and their families. There are many other works about the experience of being black or lesbian or adopted. Some of them are far more profound or moving than this one. Kay had, after all, a fairly sheltered upbringing in a loving family. Nevertheless, however lightweight the subject matter, Kay's writing skills shine through, and there's enough humour and charm here to make the book an interesting, if not compelling, read.

Dorothy says

I had not heard of this writer until I was given the audio CD version of this book for Christmas. Jackie Kay is a poet and a professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University in the UK.

Many people have written about the evil effects of discrimination and this author has encountered more than most. She was born to a white Scottish woman and a black Nigerian father and adopted by a white Scottish couple in the 1960s in Glasgow where most people were hostile to anyone with a darker skin. She is also gay, and while she does not dwell on this aspect of her life, it must surely have meant that she faced more bigoted people who disapproved of her lifestyle. Her accounts of bullying in school are very moving and she was lucky that she had an older brother who defended her.

This memoir is not only about her childhood but the main theme is her appreciation of the her adoptive parents and her search for her birth parents...an emotionally challenging prospect. Jackie meets her birth mother who later re-married and had more children. It is not an entirely satisfactory experience and the mother does not want her family to know that Jackie exists as she still feels shame about being pregnant with little support in 1960s Glasgow.

Her search for her father takes her to Nigeria where she does manage one meeting with him. The father also feels shame about impregnating his girlfriend and abandoning her to return to Africa. After that one meeting he does not want any more contact with her and does not want his children to know she exists. With the help of friends she makes in Nigeria, she makes a rather hair-raising expedition to her Ancestral Villages and the book ends on a very positive note.

I highly recommend the audio edition of this book. It is read by Jackie herself and I found her Glasgow accent, and the parts that she reads in Ebo accent really enhance the experience of reading this book. Caution, once you have started, you will find it hard to put down!

Barbara says

Jackie Kay is a novelist and poet and recipient of an MBE from the Queen. Her birth mother was from the Scottish Highlands and her birth father was a Nigerian studying in Aberdeen when they met. Their baby was put up for adoption and brought up by wonderful parents, who adopted another child, a boy who was perceived as being biracial, though his racial background was not known. Her parents were socialists (members of the Communist Party), and Jackie and her brother were brought up surrounded by activists and union members, and not in any religion.

Starting in childhood and through her adult life Jackie experienced racism. Black people weren't common in 1960's Scotland, particularly Scottish people who were Black. While children were often the perpetrators, she was shocked when men in business suits, and elderly men in parks, revealed racist attitudes.

Jackie is also a lesbian. She mentions this and describes experiences meeting other black lesbians, who were rare in Scotland. In her autobiography, she doesn't explore the intersectionality of her life, but she wrote this several years before the term was everywhere.

A lot of the book tells the story of Jackie's searches for her birth parents. She has the help of her parents in her searches. For me, the most interesting parts of the book describes her trips to Nigeria and what happens in her search to find and get to know her family. She discovers she has a great deal of Ibo in her. Despite the widespread corruption in Nigeria, and the failing to non-existing infrastructure. Jackie comes to love the country, adopting what seems to be a Nigerian view of life.

This was a 4.5 read for me. In the beginning it was a bit slow, but soon picks up. Her search for her birth parents may be of interest to adopted children and adopting parents. It is a great story in that respect.

Bellish says

This was my first audiobook for a very long time indeed, and it is difficult to judge against other books since the experience is so different. Some parts were very affecting and I found myself laughing out loud and with occasional tears in my eyes. I also really enjoyed some of the poetic imagery.

I can see why some other reviewers found the family anecdotes to be a bit too everyday for them, but I think there is some real value in seeing someone else's everyday, and it is interesting to see Kay reflect on how her life might have been different. For me, the fact that I loved reading about her adoptive parents really helped. I found them extremely endearing, and her reflections on them ageing were really touching. I have heard her speak about them in fact, and the amount of love she has for them is wonderful. It was also interesting to hear her reflections on the racism she has experienced in her lifetime. I have never read the recollections of any other adopted person tracing their blood family, so that was novel for me.

Overall, it was somewhat less than I expected, but still well worth my time.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Book at the Week:

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Read by the author.

Producer/Abridger: Jill Waters.

Susan says

I have never felt as intensely mirrored or seen as I did from reading this book. I'm actually kind of shaking a little. Thank you Jackie.
