JAZ AMPAW-FARR

Because of You, This is Me

THE STORIES WE TELL, THE STORIES WE CHANGE
AND THE POWER OF EVERYDAY HEROES

Praise for *Because of You, This is Me*

An incredibly powerful book. Deeply moving yet inspirational, deeply personal yet incisive in its analysis of the education sector. More than anything, it provides a voice and an insight into the lives of children in classrooms that are often unseen and misunderstood by educators and policy makers. An essential read.

Professor Damien Page, Vice Chancellor, Buckinghamshire New University

Because of You, This is Me is more than a memoir, it's a masterclass in resilience, courage and the power of human connection. Jaz Ampaw-Farr's raw honesty, humour and unwavering determination leap off the page. Her story, rooted in childhood trauma, is heartbreaking, yet it's also an inspiring testament to the transformative power of small acts of kindness. This book is a love letter to the everyday heroes – teachers, mentors and friends – who saw past her circumstances and helped her build a different future. It's impossible to read this without reflecting on our own power to impact others. A must-read for anyone who believes in the strength of the human spirit.

Zara Janjua, presenter, journalist and writer

Jaz Ampaw-Farr's book is shocking, searing, moving and enraging yet ultimately uplifting. All the right feelings we should be feeling when confronted by a story as powerful and as honestly told as this. Jaz's USP is her honesty, her refusal to bend the truth so it can be palatable or 'presented', and this is why her work always leads us by the gut, galvanising us not to tolerate what is unfair, unequal and disrespectful, and to gather the courage to call out the unacceptable. The heroes in her world are teachers and not just because hers helped her, but because she recognises and celebrates the fact that a teacher has the most important job in the whole world: encouraging, nurturing and architecting the next generation.

Leslee Udwin, BAFTA multi-award-winning producer/director, human rights campaigner, founder and executive chair at Think Equal

Because of You, This is Me by Jaz Ampaw-Farr is one of the most inspiring, wonderful and informative books I have read in a long time. Jaz's openness and authenticity shine through as she bravely shares her story, taking us from the depths of despair in her upbringing to the remarkable person she is today. Her journey is nothing short of courageous, and it's a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

The narrative is a heartfelt love letter to the teachers who have shaped her life and career. Jaz reflects on her past with a raw honesty that is both touching

and enlightening. Rather than succumbing to the pain and heartache of her childhood, she transforms these struggles into powerful lessons of hope and strength. This remarkable ability to turn adversity into inspiration is what makes her story resonate so deeply.

Throughout the book, readers will laugh, cry and find themselves reflecting on their own experiences. Jaz's journey encourages us to look at our own lives with a new perspective, reminding us that our past does not define us but rather moulds us into who we can become.

I cannot recommend this book enough. It is a beautiful piece of writing that will linger in your heart and mind long after you've turned the last page. If you're seeking inspiration and a reminder of the power of resilience, *Because of You, This is Me* is a must-read.

Gemma Oaten, actress, TV and radio presenter, CEO of SEED

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independent thinking press

First published by

Independent Thinking Press
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.independentthinkingpress.com

and

Independent Thinking Press
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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First published 2025.

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Edited by Ian Gilbert.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178135298-4
Mobi ISBN 978-178135320-2
ePub ISBN 978-178135321-9
ePDF ISBN 978-178135322-6

LCCN 2025931343

Printed and bound in the UK by
CPi, Anthony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

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Introduction

The call came just after midnight.

On the same day I was booked to do seventeen TV and radio interviews promoting BBC's *The Apprentice*, I had to go and identify my little brother's body.

Paul had died alone. On the floor of a squat. Heroin overdose.

The phone call informing me of Paul's passing shattered my carefully constructed world. Instead of a week spent prancing around as a glitzy Z-list reality TV star, being a great sport as celebs made jokes about my first-week firing, I headed for my hometown. It was a place I'd avoided for years. Too many memories and a stark reminder of the truth I knew – I was a fraud.

Twenty-four hours after collapsing on my kitchen floor in grief and guilt, I stood outside the hospital. The same hospital Paul and I had been taken to on the first of several occasions when we were removed from our parents and placed into foster care. Still wearing the same outfit I'd worn in Lord Sugar's boardroom, I walked down the corridor looking like a successful adult but feeling like a broken child.

Paul and I shared more than DNA. I was more than Paul's big sister. I was his protector. We lived in a squat but inside my mind I was a knight trying to keep her four-year-old charge safe by standing in between him and danger. I'd failed. To unpick how I went on to survive, thrive, be truly alive we need to step back into the shadows of our shared past.

I wrote this book while locked in a cellar.

Crouching on damp stairs in the darkness was frightening but familiar.

I thought I was clever back then, developing what seemed like the perfect survival strategy – wrapping my arms around my bare knees, making myself as small as possible so as to avoid any other part of my body coming into contact with the wet brick stairs. My feet would shuffle from side to side, serving two critical purposes: fighting off the numbness from the freezing cold and scaring away the rats.

Pretty innovative plan for a seven-year-old.

My parents didn't think I was that clever. In their words, I was a defiant, gobby, spiteful, f*cking useless, black b*tch whore and filthy n*gger. I didn't understand half the names they called me, but the venomous and angry way those words were spat at me left me in no doubt of the hate I seemed to provoke.

What I didn't understand was why. I invested countless hours trying to work out exactly what I said or did to cause their intense dislike of me. Even when I tried to be 'good' it made zero difference. The only thing I knew for sure was that none of it was fair.

Despite a strong and constant sense of injustice, I tried to accept my fate. I repeatedly struggled to keep my face from screwing up into a scowl when they shouted and screamed at me. Instead, I forced myself to nod in vigorous agreement with their words, hoping it would show that I accepted and believed I deserved everything I got. It never once worked. The lie was so big it made me physically sick to tell it.

Answering back guaranteed a day in the cellar – sometimes a night as well if they forgot to let me out before going to the pub – so I made the time go quicker by channelling my physical pain, intense fear and the promise from my stepfather that he would one day kill me and throw my broken body down the very stairs I was crouched on into writing a book.

This book.

Back then the title was '*The Truth According To Me*'. It was an indignant girl's attempt to explain to her world of teachers, social workers and other well-meaning adults why it was too big a risk to trust them.

I knew exactly how the book should be. Not in the least bit shouty or cross. I had already learned adults saw that as 'challenging behaviour' and were more likely to respond with a 'good talking to' than the 'good listening to' I needed. No, this book was going to be honest and it was going to be kind. It was going to describe clearly and patiently the gap that existed between people's understanding of what happened at home and what happened at school. It would outline what I needed and explain the exact steps in how to connect, engage and enrol me. Everyone would read it. Everyone would understand it. Everyone would make sure that what was happening to me would never happen to any other seven-year-old.

This book is an evolution of that book. It celebrates the five Everyday Heroes (and a cast of accidental saviours) who reached into the darkness and pulled me towards the light through seemingly small but transformative actions. While

Paul and I shared the same chaotic childhood at home, at school I had something he lacked: adults who made me feel like I belonged, who saw my worth, who refused to give up on me even when I'd given up on myself.

In the pages you're about to read, I've tried to answer the question that haunted me as I stood in that hospital corridor trying to force my feet to move forward: how does a child survive when the system fails? The answer includes the story of how a broken little girl blazes into a woman with a habit of being 10% braver. But more than that, it's a love letter acknowledging and shining a light on the extraordinary power of ordinary humans – in my case, five teachers who went beyond the curriculum to transform lives through seemingly small but profound acts of human connection.

I've attempted to describe exactly how these Everyday Heroes saw past my behaviour to my potential. How they met me where I was rather than where they needed me to be. How they stood shoulder to shoulder with me in the chaotic fire that was my life and refused to move, even when I pushed them away. In short, they were human first and professional second. There's no getting away from it, some of what I describe makes for a harrowing read. If you find it particularly difficult because it reminds you of experiences you've had yourself, please stay with me. I want to show you what it looks like on the other side of healing.

The book you're reading now isn't quite the one I imagined back then. Paul's death may have been the catalyst for this but it's my best attempt at a thank you. To the Everyday Heroes who changed, saved and totally transformed my life through seemingly small but highly impactful actions. It's an encouragement to anyone navigating chaos and ready to be 10% braver themselves. It's your roadmap for change.

And if you lead or work with children or young people in any sense, the answer to how I survived, thrived, drove change and became truly alive is simple:

Because of you.

Mrs Cook

The One Who Taught Me Bravery

There she stood. Older, yet styled in the same unmistakable 1970s vibe. Still wearing brown.

I had returned to my old primary school, now on my way to becoming a teacher myself, to find my first teacher. Mrs Cook. The one who has set me on my current path. The one who had taught me to fear less. The one who had unknowingly saved my *actual* life.

I had returned to tell her that I was finally on my way to fulfilling her prophecy and becoming a teacher myself. My heart started to race as I approached her in the playground, watching her comfort a crying boy with the same gentle encouragement I remembered being on the receiving end of. My legs felt like jelly. It was as if I was about to meet Beyoncé herself!

I'd been in the same state as that boy and, for a moment, I remembered the familiar taste of despair mixed with distress that I'd often turned up in at school. I arrived in many classrooms already broken. I was a nervous child without the words to describe what was happening when I wasn't in the safety of my school buildings. But Mrs Cook had a way of making every child feel seen, by converting fear into bravery.

I called her name, she turned and ... brace yourself for the big reveal ... I don't think she even remembered me!

Of course, that didn't matter. As soon as she saw me, she smiled that same sparkling smile and I was transported to being six years old again, off to retrieve my book from my tray so I could stand at her desk and read! I was overcome with the same complete and utter belonging I felt in her presence all those years ago. That smile was the smile that I'd seen in my mind's eye when, aged eleven, I had summoned the necessary bravery to escape the pimp I'd ended up living with.

I fought back the tears as I explained who I was and tried to describe the monumental impact on my life whilst being mindful that she was on break duty in my old school playground surrounded by several dishevelled six-year-olds, hot and sweaty from running around outside on a hot day.

Mrs Cook placed her hand on my arm, just like she used to when I was one of her 'ladies and gentlemen' in her Rainbow Class, and a feeling of overwhelming love surged through my body.

> **Mrs Cook: 'You're doing well?'**
>
> **Me (*unsuccessfully fighting back sobs*): 'Yes, I'm going to be a teacher, just like you said.'**
>
> **Mrs Cook: 'I am *so* proud of you.'**

Proud of me.

Recalling this moment and writing it for you makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. There's just no way that I could capture the full weight of that moment in a couple of paragraphs. Let me tell you how I got here. How one teacher, forever styled in brown, taught me how to be 10% braver.

The power of being seen

Mrs Cook was my first teacher. A true style queen whose whole wardrobe came in chocolate brown. Every day there was a different combination of chocolate brown smocks over chocolate brown turtleneck sweaters with chocolate brown tights and chocolate brown buckled shoes. Her warm smile and shining hazel eyes gave her the air of a children's TV presenter. She was softly spoken and quick to laugh. I don't remember her ever raising her voice, which was light and sparkly. When she read stories, it was like being wrapped in a cuddly blanket. Just being around Mrs Cook made you happy.

Besides being my teacher, Mrs Cook was the first Everyday Hero I ever met. She (literally) saved my life, but, like the other Everyday Heroes I'll be introducing you to in this book, she never knew it.

Mrs Cook's classroom reflected her personality (except with a more adventurous colour palette). It was a warm, psychedelic pink and blue safe extension of

herself in which we could all flourish. She made it 'our' space, whether she was in the room or not, and it was always full of interesting things to discover and cocooned corners to reset. The classroom I went on to set up as a teacher was directly modelled on the environment she created that made school feel like the home I dreamed of having.

In Mrs Cook's class, there were no pupils. She referred to us as 'ladies and gentlemen of Rainbow Class'. We were her 'authors' and 'inventors', and she encouraged – well, insisted on – our learning through making and celebrating our mistakes, knowing it would embed ambitious resilience or whatever it was called back then.[1] There was no question that she loved every one of us. In fact, I had a sneaky suspicion that I was her favourite – although she made every child lucky enough to come into contact with her feel like that. Many of my classmates also believed that they were her favourite.[2]

Mrs Cook had a way of making every child feel seen. When the fire alarm test was due, she'd quietly call me to her desk before it went off. Making reassuring eye contact with me, she'd hold my hand. A small act of kindness that meant so much to me I still vividly remember it today.

Thanks to Mrs Cook, I fell in love with learning. Her teaching provided so many adventures to get stuck into that school was a haven of hyperfocus. I spent hours on tasks and frequently became lost in an activity. For me, it was the transition out of those moments of bliss that I found challenging. They required me to 'just be', and I had no baseline for that. I needed a focus to pour myself into and disliked too many choices. My classmates enjoyed the freedom of choice. The same freedom that to me felt like chaos. My head was a 24/7 whirl of ideas and creativity, but with no map to guide me, I bit my nails, cried at the suggestion of any change to the routines of the school day and jumped at the slightest unfamiliar sound.

Mrs Cook sensed my discomfort and, aware that the last fire drill had resulted in me wetting myself in fear, she made sure to call me up to her desk to read the next time one was planned. She squeezed my hand and maintained eye contact just before it was due to start, to reassure me without alerting my friends that I was terrified and sparing me any embarrassment. I'm still grateful for that intuition and kindness – and not just when there was a fake fire.

Back then, I was far from brave. Anxiety was a familiar and constant companion even before I was plunged into a world of violence and criminality. As an adult, a doctor once advised me that the simple lack of nurturing physical

1 I think it was just called 'learning'.

2 They were wrong. It was me.

contact from my mother in my early years created a level of fear and uncertainty that my little girl brain would never be able to heal from. I thought it best not to freak him out, so opted not to fill him in on what happened after I left Mrs Cook's class.

What's Love Got To Do With It?

For as long as I can remember, I've thought in pictures then wrapped words around them to explain my thoughts to someone else. It turns out I was an expert in metaphors before I knew what a metaphor was. I'd remember events in technicolour as if they were scenes from a film I'd replayed countless times in my mind. This resulted in me creating alternative worlds in my mind, in order to make sense of the one I was fighting to exist in.

I was six years old when I realised love came in different flavours. From the multi-faceted and alluring minty choccy chip to gloriously standard vanilla. All humans were ice-creams. On my part, I loved my nan, grandad and Mrs Cook back, but had zero warm fuzzy feelings for Paul – my new baby brother. He was an impractically small human whose only talents appeared to be crying, pooping and distracting my nan from looking after me.

My nan's love was practical, and her sole purpose in life seemed to be to defeat the evil of cold weather. Consumed with the prevention of anyone catching a chill, her love was delivered out in short sharp soundbites like 'N'ere cast a clout till May be out' that made you feel you should have disposed of something by June but were unsure exactly what it was!

Generous with her love, she offered everyone a slice of weathered wisdom, whether they asked for it or not. This embarrassingly included random passers-by dressed in outfits that indicated a clear lack of planning and rendered them woefully unprepared for the forthcoming ice age. In the gospel according to my nan, not tucking your vest into your pants was a crime roughly on par with bank robbery.

Nan was tall and strong with Dame Edna-style glasses that dangled on a chain around her neck. She made sure my baby brother and I had what we needed: food, clothes, a bed and a roof over our heads. I loved the simplicity of her black-and-white view of the world, even when it didn't make sense. She busied

herself with being one who works hard and 'speaks as I find'. I loved her no-nonsense straight talk – except for when that involved telling me or my grandad off. Then, not so much.

I loved how my nan kept a not-so-secret stash of rich tea biscuits in a battered tin under her pile of knitting and would sneak one to me with a sharp tap on the shoulder while I sat at her feet waiting for the latest addition to my raglan cardi collection to be finished. I loved how she devoured the Mills and Boon romantic novels she bought from the outdoor market, getting a little flustered and muttering 'Bleddi 'ell' every now and again. I loved bedtime with my nan, which meant being tucked in the top bunk so tight you could hardly move. It was a nightly race to fall asleep before your arms went numb.

It was my nan who stepped up and took care of me when my biological mother showed disinterest in doing so. It was my nan who claimed the 'little brown baby' left in a pram outside a pub for several hours on a cold winter night. It was my nan who stayed by the side of my hospital cot while I battled the bout of pneumonia that followed and nursed me back to health over the next few months. Most of all, I loved that my nan never let me miss a day of school, taking charge of the school run after the latest in the long line of 'uncles' my biological mother had sent to collect me went missing in action.

Nan's ongoing battle with 'the cold' was a success. She made me feel warm, both physically and emotionally.

My grandad's love was constantly present and connected. After school, I'd sit with my nose pressed up against the glass of the front room bay window to get the first glimpse of him walking around the corner from the bus stop. By the time his key was in the lock, I'd be at the door, squealing with excitement, ready to start our evening routine of wrapping my arms around one of his oil and grease-stained trouser legs and sitting on one of his steel-capped boots as he dragged me along with ease asking my nan where I was!

He didn't get a break from me at dinner time and was happy for me to sit on the arm of his favourite threadbare chair while he ate the meat and two veg dinner my nan had kept warm for him under the grill. He always pretended not to notice as I sneakily dipped my thumb in the congealed gravy around the edge of his plate.

I loved the smell of his ever-present Polo mints mingled with the rich liquorice odour of tobacco and the way he made me repeatedly promise that I would never smoke a pipe. I loved the way he tittered while we watched *Morcambe and Wise* on TV at the weekend and the way he squeezed my hand and whispered 'Try using more of that Brylcreem, love' to my nan as I screamed in pain

while she attempted to guide her old white-lady comb through my reluctant-to-be-tamed Afro hair.

My grandad never got cross, apart from the time I stumbled into the bathroom when he was getting out of the bath, and he covered himself with a towel, shouting at me to get out. 'Some parts of our body ...' he explained afterwards by way of an apology, '... are private. They're not for showing to other people.' I later learned that not every adult who came into my life felt the same way.

Grandad told me stories and made me memorise the Lord's Prayer with all the 'thys' and 'trespasses' (hard to remember and even harder to say when your two front teeth are missing) and instilled in me a sense of fairness and integrity. He stressed the importance of 'doing the right thing' and referenced his time in the army during World War Two. It was clear that the experience had clearly cost him, transforming him from the tall, handsome, happy and now almost unrecognisable young fella in the black-and-white photo on nan's dresser.

As I watched his health deteriorate, a lifetime of smoking – man and boy – taking its toll, the mood in the house changed. I couldn't explain it in words, but, ever sensitive to the countenance of the adults around me, I knew that I was losing something I would never get back. My grandad never got to see my seventh birthday.

Then there was Mrs Cook. Her love was on a whole different level and unlike anything I'd experienced in my short life. She wasn't related to me and had no obligation to love me and that made it all the more impactful. This was a different flavour of love – fun, sparkly (like her eyes) and firmly future-focused. Mrs Cook was enthralled about the exciting things we would go on to do and had every student enthralled too. She came from a place of unshakeable certainty that every one of us had the capacity to be fantastic adults. She expected nothing less, and the last thing I wanted to do was to let her down.

She had a way of making you feel like you could do the impossible. She used to ask us, '*Who* are you going to *be* when you grow up?' Not '*What* are you going to *do*?' How powerful is that question – who are you going to be?[3]

The class heartthrob slightly embarrassed himself by shouting out 'I wanna be a daddy!' The rest of us broke out into laughter, but not Mrs Cook. She told us to protect our dreams, no matter how many people ridiculed them. When the gods of registration order dictated that it was my turn to speak up, I really wanted to get the answer right. The only problem was that I had no clue what the answer was. My 'mindset poverty' was already starting to consolidate, and

3 It's a great question for today. In a world where human connection is a currency and half the jobs seven-year-olds will go on to do haven't even been invented yet.

anything beyond surviving the next day seemed too audacious to dream of. I looked at her with a blank expression on my face, masking the summersault circus of turmoil and panic inside my mind and forcing my thoughts into silent movies, just like I'd practised at home. Mrs Cook just smiled and confidently waited for an answer.

That's when it came. The truth. I blurted out, 'I want to be just like you!' My classmates roared with laughter. I immediately felt embarrassed, stupid and, well, wrong. It scared me because that level of panic was a feeling I hadn't experienced before in the safe haven that was Mrs Cook's classroom. My heartbeat quickened but Mrs Cook didn't flinch. She looked straight back at me and asked/told me in a clear, kind but firm tone, 'You mean you want to be a teacher?'

I recognised the words she spoke as belonging to the English language but wasn't able to comprehend, let alone process, what she had just said. A teacher? Had she lost her mind? People like me don't grow up to be teachers. Even if I was a good enough human (which I wasn't), there was one obvious problem.

Teachers. Aren't. Brown.

I'd internalised information from my surroundings so deeply they became facts. My world was pretty much exclusively white and included a large contingent of people inside and outside of my family who were unafraid to speak their minds about their perceived lack of value attached to my skin colour. The only brown adult I'd seen in school was the lady with the lovely lilac Afro who came in to hoover the glitter from the carpet as we left for home. Representation wasn't lacking – it was non-existent.

Everyone in my family was white and the only other person I'd seen with my skin colour was the children's TV presenter Derek Griffiths, who I spent my early years assuming was my actual dad (while secretly praying that Floella Benjamin was my real mum). It wasn't difficult to overhear my nan's friends advise of the shame associated with having a granddaughter who was a 'filthy half-breed' as they weren't 'backwards in coming forward', as my nan would say, with their opinions. Nan never responded to them and silently dismissed what she described as 'silly boggers' but she did start letting go of my hand and telling me to walk behind her when we went past certain shops. So yeah, the idea of teachers (aka the best adults to walk the planet) being brown was way outside of what I could consider plausible. Unconsciously, I'd drawn the conclusion and accepted that people like me weren't allowed to do things like that. If anyone told me anything different, I hadn't heard them.

Mrs Cook's statement presented a huge problem. I believed and trusted her even though it felt like lying. I looked down at my knees and bit my bottom lip, buying time and trying to conjure up a more realistic movie franchise in my mind. Mrs Cook was having none of it. She pressed on and sealed the deal by bolstering my bravery with her next statement. With a relaxed certainty in her voice, she asserted, 'That's a great idea because *you* are going to make a *fantastic teacher*!'

Not just a teacher – a 'fantastic' one!

Her statement had the ring of a fairytale to it and my scepticism gave way to worry as I realised the one thing that stood in the way of this amazing dream:

I didn't own enough brown clothes to pull that off!

Nevertheless, it was decided. Mrs Cook drove a stake into the ground that was my unknown future, attached a piece of elastic to it and tied the other end around my waist to be sure. Simple as that. She believed that every child who arrived in her class was gifted and talented and it was her job to uncover what those gifts and talents were. If she had spotted the inner teacher in me, then my job was to make it happen and prove her confidence in me was well founded. I knew my nan only knitted clothes in navy wool, so there was only one course of action I could take – I immediately started collecting toilet rolls and egg boxes. After all, one of the defining factors of teachers seemed to be that they had an endless supply of both.[4]

The strongest memories I have of Mrs Cook's love involved asserting how brave I was and finding ways to reward me for that bravery. I didn't feel brave, but she painted me in a colour that I didn't have in my palette. She gave me new bright colours and encouraged me to use them in paintings that spoke of a world outside of my own garden of possibility. Looking at a paintbox of familiar grey and choosing to dip your brush in an audacious bright yellow takes bravery. That's what she taught me. To use that bright yellow bravery to paint safety and stability.

4 I collected these for years, although later I would get into trouble in one foster home for unravelling whole rolls of toilet paper and hiding the evidence under my bed. The 'theft and vandalism', as one of my adults called it, was actually an attempt at soothing myself when I felt scared. My plan was to collect enough empty tubes until I finally had enough to run away, prove that I was an acceptable human and become a teacher. I still struggle to simply chuck a toilet roll tube in the recycling today!

Jazanory!

The only thing Mrs Cook and I disagreed on was the book *Where The Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. She loved it, and I hated it. The muted colours, the wild things being too scary, even Max gave me the pip! It looked like one long argument with sulking at the end, which was far too close to my home life for me to enjoy a book about it in school. I'd go on to intensely dislike the Enid Blyton books I was encouraged to read in school later. Picnicking middle-class white children who had parents who loved them and spent their days having adventures in fields felt too far-fetched to me.

Roald Dahl was also problematic as the stories had cruel adults front and centre. Bear with me here, because I know these stories are beloved and for good reason. However, as a child, the neglect and abuse of Matilda was kind of triggering, only not as a memory from the past but as my current reality at home. I found it too close to my actual experience and felt stupid for not being able to enjoy the stories like my friends seemed to. I assumed everyone was experiencing the same things as me, but I was rubbish at pushing it down. It left me feeling genuinely confused as to why I was expected to read and enjoy books that depicted similar treatment to what I was being subjected to at home.

One of Mrs Cook's strategies for increasing our confidence was to encourage us to use the stories she had read as springboard inspiration for our own. This included zero focus on the incessant use of semi-colons.[5] Listening to Mrs Cook read a story was like living the adventure. She would help us become lost in the narrative, and then, after reading, she would ask great questions that gave us permission to retrace our steps to expand the story even more.

It was because of this that I told her I would no longer be taking part in any 'Wild Things' related activities! Looking back, it was a testament to the culture she created in our class that allowed me to speak out. When she asked me what I didn't like about the story, all I could come up with was that, in some way, I felt that the story was 'broken'. She just smiled her usual smile and suggested I write one that wasn't.

I was, she reminded me, already an experienced author. Encouraged by the contained freedom she created for me, I knew exactly what I would write about.

Her.

5 Mrs Cook wasn't a rogue revolutionary. This was pre national curriculum. Also, I manage to reach the ripe old age of forty without ever needing to use a semi-colon, so go figure.

Mrs Cook was always sharing little snippets from her life outside the classroom. For example, we all knew she loved daisies, lived at the bottom of a hill and had a husband called 'Mr Cook'. All the important stuff. One winter's day, when it was icy, she told us how she had left Mr Cook trying to drive up the hill and had walked to school instead. At that moment, I had the quite frankly hilarious notion of writing about her husband in his car on an icy hill.

From the second I came up with that idea, I couldn't stop smiling. I was about to do something that would amaze and delight my teacher. What's more, I already knew I was a literary genius – Mrs Cook had said so. I knew that all I needed to do was set about writing this bestselling work of comedy gold. However, there was just one problem – I didn't fully understand how writing worked.

Reading wasn't a problem. My grandad had taught me how to attach phonemes to graphemes and blend words. I memorised the words that didn't play by the rules and, as a result, smashed the Schonell Reading Test. My reward was the prestige of being a red table reader. The obstacle I was up against was that I had no idea how this process worked in reverse. Of course, Mrs Cook was always on hand to help, but this was one story I wanted to do all by myself.

Undaunted, I put pencil to paper, trying to work out what letters I needed. When I got stuck, I asked around for help. I became consumed with this and went as far as asking different friends how to write different words. That way, no one could guess the full story, steal my idea and become a bestselling author on the back of my toil! I spent several days in stealth mode, and it was a slow process. In the evenings, I asked my nan and grandad how to write certain words at home and snuck them in on crumpled pieces of paper to copy into my book. I was engaged, persistent, a little obsessed and determined to finish. I enjoyed feeling like I was on an important mission that, once complete, would change the world – well, my world.

With my story finally finished, it was time for the big reveal. I could barely contain myself as I explained how funny my story was and how much Mrs Cook was going to laugh. I was convinced that my three sentences were as unique as they were spectacular. My masterpiece went something like this:

> **Mr Cook is in his car and Mrs Cook lives at the bottom of the hill and Mrs Cook has a car with Mr Cook and Mr Cook goes up the hill but it is icy so the car slides back down because it's icy!**

I know what you're thinking. Two words, eh? Booker. Prize.

Mrs Cook traced the words with her eyes while I watched her expectantly. When she reached the end, she threw her head back and lit up the sky with laughter. 'What a funny story! You are such a talented author!'

I believed her, 100%. And now you're reading my book, so I guess she was right!

A Christmas miracle

The best time in Mrs Cook's class was easily the preparation for Christmas – which, as all teachers of young children know, starts no later than the third week of September.

For what seemed like an eternity, our whole class screwed up little pieces of tissue paper and stuck them alongside bottle tops, dried pasta and bits of shiny paper to create beige camels, yellow straw for the manger and unpronounceable gifts for the baby Jesus – who for some unknown reason was always bright pink.

The finished collage covered an entire wall from floor to ceiling. Each evening, Mrs Cook would assemble the parts of the display we had made so far. In the morning, we ran into the classroom to admire and coo at the masterpiece we were creating. Our display included everything that Christmas stood for and more. If one of my classmates came in with a Spiderman sticker, Mrs Cook would find a space for that too.

As the Christmas holidays approached, there was only one piece of bare wall left – the spot reserved for our special star. While twenty-nine other children were busy covering themselves in glue, Mrs Cook called me over, placed her arm gently on my shoulder and whispered, 'Oh dear, we have a little problem on our hands and I need your help.' I was concerned but also intrigued. She was looking at the Christmas display – our classroom's central and most important element. What was wrong?

Mrs Cook increased the drama by instructing me not to panic so as not to worry the rest of the class. She told me that she was sure my 'superb' problem-solving skills would help her find a solution. I didn't know what superb meant but it sounded like an important word and made me feel braver. Her confidence more than made up for the lack of my own. Plus, her scheming tone both engaged and enrolled me. I had no idea what was required but I was already 100% in.

The daily investment Mrs Cook had paid into my emotional bank account had earned my trust and loyalty and I was ready to follow her to the ends of the earth.

She went on to explain, 'Oh, it's terrible. We've spent so much time working on this display and put in so much hard work, but I can't get the most important thing – the star – to stay up. I was here for hours last night. I've tried stapling it, I've tried sticky tape, I've tried glue. Nothing will make this star stay in place!'

The dilemma was compelling, and I wanted to help the human who had encouraged me so much. I took a deep breath and looked around the display and the room, searching for a spark of inspiration.

Nothing.

Mrs Cook filled the silence by pointing at the wall and saying things like, 'If only there were some way to fix the star to the wall. You know, something strong that could hold it. I don't know, like a nail ...' Never slow to take a hint, I shifted my attention to the space where the wall met the ceiling. Here I suddenly spotted what must have been a three-inch nail poking out of the wall! Mrs Cook was right! I was going to solve this!

An idea slowly formed in my mind. Caught up in the excitement of what my discovery might mean, I summoned all the courage I had, pointed to the nail and ventured, 'Mrs Cook, what about that nail there?'

'Oh, that's very funny,' Mrs Cook replied, standing up and looking down at me with a smile. 'Thank you for trying to cheer me up.' She was pretending she thought I was doing the 'Not *that* nail, *this* nail, the one on my finger' joke, which the class loved so much. Did she not know I was trying to save the day? 'Right now, though, we really need a solution to this difficult star problem?'

Had I made a mistake? Was I wrong? No, there was definitely a nail there, and it did look strong enough to hold a mixed-media collaged star. But pressing the issue would mean contradicting a teacher – my favourite teacher. What to do?

I struggled to find the inner confidence needed to press my point home.

'I'm not doing the nail joke, honest, Mrs Cook. There really is a nail. Look, it's that massive one there!'

I pointed again, imploring her to look at the wall. She sighed and turned her head slowly towards the wall, only to pause for a moment, clutching a string of imaginary pearls around her neck and letting out a dramatic gasp that attracted the attention of the rest of the class.

'Ladies and gentlemen! Please stop what you're doing and look this way! This girl has only gone and saved Christmas!'

I grew three inches right there on the spot.

As I stood with her hand resting on my shoulder, facing my classmates, Mrs Cook went on to explain how I had single-handedly saved Christmas, leaving out the part where she stayed late the previous evening, stood on a chair and hammered a nail into the wall herself!

Not only was Mrs Cook's little Yuletide ruse such a massive boost to my confidence and self-esteem, an experience that has remained with me all these years later, but she also used it to illustrate that if you see something that could solve a problem, you should always speak up. More than once if necessary. As she was fond of saying: 'Champions never give up!'

To hammer (see what I did there?) the point home, as the bell rang for break time, this previously nervous six-year-old stood at the front of the class, next to the best teacher in the world, arms in the air and swaying from side to side, leading twenty-nine residually sticky children in a chorus of 'We Are the Champions' by Queen. Every time I hear that song today, it makes me cry with gratitude for the woman who knew that for me to become a champion, first, I had to believe it was possible. And then creatively applied her Oscar-winning acting ability, unconditional positive regard and plain and simple love to make it so.

The sanctuary of school toilets

'So, they get a ginormous sucker, right, and they put it on your face, yeah, and they yank it back and they suck your eye out, then they look at it from all angles, then they put it in their mouth and suck all the dirt off, and then they shove it back in the socket.'

We'll come to the sex ed lesson later but, in the meantime, the above description of how an impending eye test would be carried out was definitely the most terrifying thing I'd heard at school.

It was described to me by a classmate, possibly hell-bent on revenge after an unfortunate incident involving half a packet of Spangles that resulted in her

being fired from Brownies. Her description was all the information I needed for the thin layer of protection I had built around myself to be breached. My fear rose, I panicked and, in response to a teaching assistant simply inviting me to finish the activity I was doing in time for break, I threw my chair to the ground, ran out of the classroom and locked myself in the abiding sanctuary known to all us traumatised kids – the toilet cubicle.

Once there, time stalled. Even though the doors were low enough for a decent-sized adult to peer over, I felt safe. I banked on locking the door and ramming my feet up against it being enough to render the cubicle safe – or at least ginormous sucker-proof! If anyone did come in, I'd see them first and scream blue murder! I waited in terror and held my breath when I heard my name called out a couple of times. As time passed, I didn't know how to go back. It slowly dawned on me that my plan to stay in the cubicle forever had several flaws, but I was too afraid to deviate from it.

During the peace of assembly, Mrs Cook came into the toilets and sat in the cubical next to the only one that was closed. With the general lack of self-regulation in our class, I'm sure she probably fancied locking the door, claiming 'sanctuary' and having a little cry herself. Instead, she spoke gently to me, explaining that everyone gets scared, just like everyone gets hungry or tired. She reminded me of how brave I was and listed triumphs from my learning journey – my story of the car on the hill, Christmas Stargate. I sat listening to her telling me that she was proud of me, and painting a picture of me as a strong, capable and clever little girl. She took the time to listen to my counterargument before reasserting what she believed to be true. It was as if she saw me at that moment as a tangled ball of string and set about painstakingly unravelling me, smoothing me out and winding me back up neatly before asking for anything from me.

Only once some form of equilibrium had been re-established did she broach the subject of the eye test, listen to me rambling on about suckers and Spangles and eyes being yanked out in between snotty sobs, and invite me out of the cubicle.

I must have looked a sorry state when I finally opened the toilet door. She stood looking at me, her head tilted slightly to one side, and then she smiled that same smile of genuine delight and opened her arms. I ran to her and hugged her as if she was my grandad's leg. Enveloped in one of her furry brown sweaters I was overwhelmed with relief and gratitude. Her light created a way out of the darkness for me and it didn't require the effort of wrapping words around the dripping wet splodge of a picture in my head.

Growing up in poverty, and neglected and abused by her own mother and stepfather, Jaz Ampaw-Farr was destined to become a statistic. Her story was changed, however, by five teachers who made a point of putting human connection first – despite the challenges of the education system.

Because of these people, Jaz went on to become a teacher, writer and award-winning speaker who, through celebration and provocation, galvanises educators into embracing the difference that they can make when they too put being a human first.

In *Because of You, This is Me* Jaz shares her story – often harrowing but always uplifting – to show how the Everyday Heroes in our schools can transform the lives of the children who need their help the most.

Essential reading for all educators.

I've been eagerly anticipating this book for a long time, and it truly lives up to my expectations. I'm thrilled to say it does not disappoint! I believe it has the power to change lives.

Gemma Oaten, actress, TV and radio presenter, CEO of SEED

A gut-punch of a memoir – raw, hilarious and deeply moving. Jaz Ampaw-Farr proves that resilience isn't just about survival but about thriving against all odds. A must-read for anyone who believes in the power of human connection.

Zara Janjua, presenter, journalist and writer

An incredibly powerful book. Deeply moving yet inspirational, deeply personal yet incisive in its analysis of the education sector. More than anything, it provides a voice and an insight into the lives of children in classrooms that are often unseen and misunderstood by educators and policy makers. An essential read.

Professor Damien Page, Vice Chancellor, Buckinghamshire New University

Jaz Ampaw-Farr's book is shocking, searing, moving and enraging yet ultimately uplifting. The heroes in her world are teachers and not just because hers helped her, but because she recognises and celebrates the fact that a teacher has the most important job in the whole world: encouraging, nurturing and architecting the next generation.

Leslee Udwin, BAFTA multi-award-winning producer/director, human rights campaigner, founder and executive chair at Think Equal

be human first

Trigger Warning: This book deals with themes of child abuse and neglect, which may be distressing for some readers. If you or someone you know has been affected, please read with caution and consider seeking support.

Jaz Ampaw-Farr is a writer, international speaker and self-described 'resilience ninja' whose enthusiasm is both infectious and hugely motivating. Named 'the British Oprah' by US audiences, and three-time winner of Speaker of the Year, Jaz's raw honesty and humour have already inspired millions through her viral TEDx Talk and headline keynotes for organisations from Google to Gucci.

independentthinkingpress.com

ISBN-13: 978-1781352984-4

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