

HANNAH IS... OUTSPOKEN

“Why shouldn’t Hermione Granger be black?”

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At a party the other day, discussion turned to the latest *James Bond* film and who should be the next actor to play the eponymous spy. As a red-blooded woman, I naturally gave my ardent support to the black British actor Idris Elba, who almost unanimously won the vote of my fellow party-goers. Except, that is, for one woman, who told me that Elba couldn't possibly play Bond: “Because he's not English enough,” she explained. And by “not English enough,” what she really meant was “not white.”

Now this shocked me for a number of reasons, and not only because it's my firm belief that most films would be drastically improved if *all* the characters were played by the devastatingly handsome Elba. And not just – though this was shocking, too – because it erased the huge numbers of black Brits who are as English as Winston Churchill. No, it really shocked me because, by most people's reckoning, Elba just *is* James Bond. He hasn't even played 007 yet, and already he exudes the suaveness, seductiveness and cool, well, Englishness that we expect from The Spy Who (I wish) Loved Me in almost every role he plays. And yet, for this young woman, all of that was irrelevant, purely because of the colour of his skin. It was as if, despite his suitability for the role, all she could see was his race.

Sadly, she isn't the only person who thinks this way. Recently, there was eye-rollingingly predictable outrage at the casting of South African actor Noma Dumezweni as Hermione Granger

in an upcoming theatre production of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. J.K. Rowling herself weighed in to support the decision to cast Dumezweni, tweeting: “White skin was never specified. Rowling loves black Hermione” (followed by a kissy face emoji – the ultimate seal of approval in 2016). And it's true that in Rowling's novels, Hermione's race is, perhaps deliberately, ambiguous. In fact, a mixed-race Hermione would make a lot of sense: much of the *Harry Potter* series can be read as an allegory about the dangers of Nazi insistence on racial purity and Hermione (who was born to non-magical parents) is marked out as ‘unpure’ by bullies who throw the slur ‘mudblood’ at her.

But no: these particular *Harry Potter* fans are perfectly happy to suspend disbelief and accept the premise of a magical school with talking portraits, flying broomstick-based sports and a postal service dependent on owls, but a black Hermione? Woah, now – that's pushing it.

It echoes the reaction to the first film adaptation of the equally fantastical *The Hunger Games*, when some fans tweeted that casting a black actor to play Rue had “ruined the movie,” or the bizarre anger at the sight of a black Stormtrooper in the recent *Star Wars*, another movie set in an entirely fictional world.

And yet, when there's a film based on characters from an explicitly non-white, real-life culture, producers have no problem casting white actors to play them. Take the forthcoming *Gods of Egypt*, a film set – you guessed it – in ancient Egypt and with Egyptian characters played

by – yup, you got it again – white actors. This rightly drew criticism, with one film critic saying, “Casting here stands out like a sore thumb leftover from 1950s Hollywood,” to the point that the director and production company were forced to issue an apology.

But the film will still be released this year, and I can't help but mourn another lost opportunity to cast North African and Middle Eastern actors. This kind of whitewashed casting is damaging, not only because there are so few non-white roles as there is without giving away the ones that *do* exist to white actors, but also because it assumes whiteness as a kind of cultural default. That it's ok for white actors to play every role, because we don't ‘see’ their race, but that when it comes to a black actor (like my beloved Idris) *all* we can see is their colour.

And that's why I did a little private fist pump when I read the news that Dumezweni had been cast as Hermione – because it challenges the notion that, in the absence of any explicit description of race (and sometimes even in spite of it), we assume that our heroes are white. Why shouldn't Hermione be black? Or Asian, or Arab, for that matter?

And James Bond? Well, he should definitely be Idris Elba. No question about it.”



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