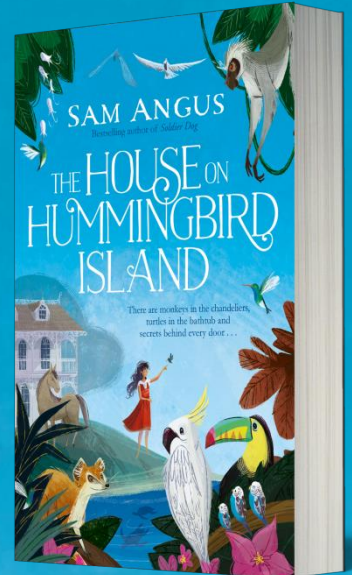


# Sam Angus and the Inspiration Behind *The House on Hummingbird Island*

When I began researching this book, the only thing I knew about the story was that it would begin with a young girl, with a horse at her side, on the deck of a large ship. I knew the ship was travelling from England to the West Indies, but why the girl, who I came to call Idie, was going there, I didn't know for quite a while.

I began to delve into the story by researching the West Indies, and I collected images and postcards to try to understand what the world Idie would encounter when she disembarked would be like.

I read books by Charles Kingsley, Anthony Trollope, Matthew 'Monk' Lewis and many others, but it was an account I found in Kingsley's *At Last*, of a house he stayed in at Port of Spain, Trinidad, that seemed to hold the key to Idie's story. In this house, mongooses, monkeys, a bear, a Guazipita deer and a pair of toucans all roamed free, and I thought that was wonderful because it was exactly the kind of house that I would want to stay in, and also because Idie, being the kind of girl who takes her horse up on to the deck of a ship, was definitely the kind of girl who would fill her home with toucans and monkeys.

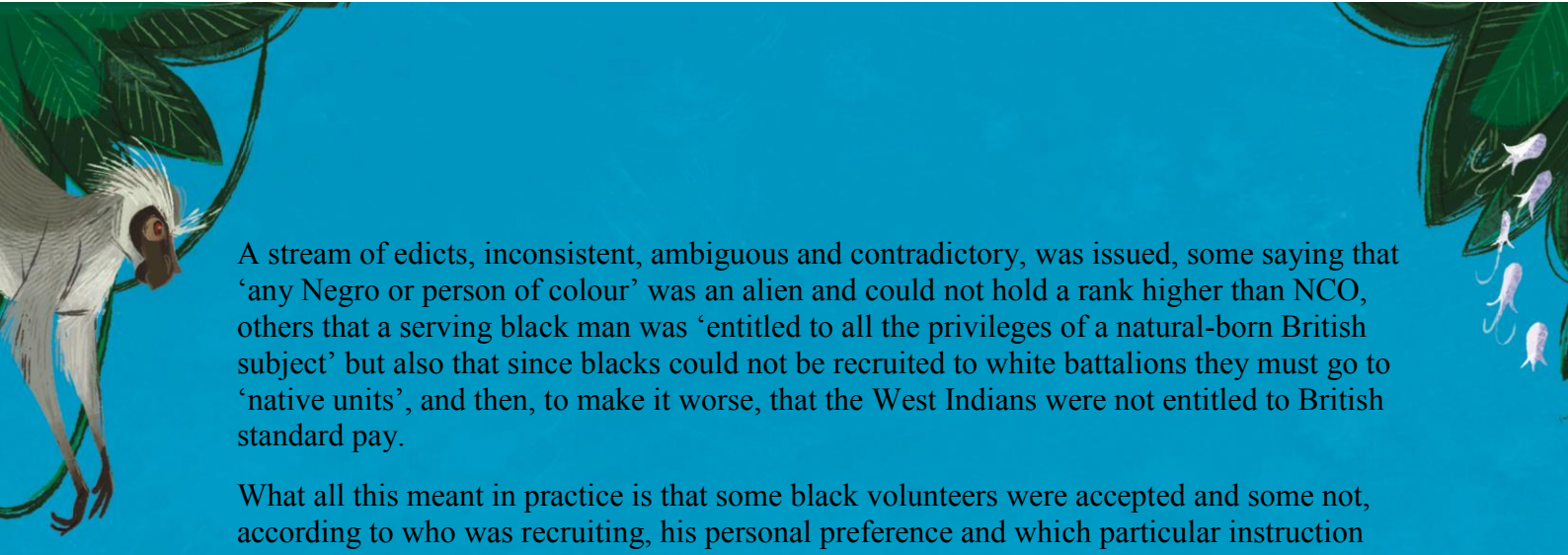


As it happens, Kingsley had set off on that journey from Devon, where I also live, so I thought that Idie too might be leaving her cousins in Devon to go to the Indies, but for quite a while I didn't know why Idie had left them, but that it might be something to do with an inheritance.

I reread Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and realized that the shadow of mental illness would come into my story. Perhaps Idie had been separated from her mother as a baby and sent to England, and now that Mother had died Idie was returning to the Indies to claim her inheritance, but knew nothing of her mother's illness. Because mental illness was then thought to have no cure, people would have been unwilling to talk to her about it, but they would have gossiped and whispered among themselves and perhaps avoided her, so it was because of her loneliness that she would fill her house with animals. I began to pin photographs of all sorts of animals on to my desk top and to read about toucans and parakeets and spider monkeys and so on.

I also knew that I would need to bring Idie's two worlds together: her England and her West Indies, and that the First World War would be the moment these two worlds would collide, and so I began to do some more reading around the First World War.

I'd always known that the West Indians had volunteered to fight for the country they still regarded as the Motherland, but I'd never realized how they were treated by the British Army when they arrived. To put their treatment at our hands into perspective: when George V's King's Appeal was read out in all the churches in the British West Indies, men were urged to volunteer, brothers 'to know each other as brother without thinking of race, nationality, colour, class, or complexion . . . to join hands and hearts together'. What actually happened when they arrived and tried to sign up was that there were no firm guidelines regarding the recruitment of 'men of colour'.



A stream of edicts, inconsistent, ambiguous and contradictory, was issued, some saying that ‘any Negro or person of colour’ was an alien and could not hold a rank higher than NCO, others that a serving black man was ‘entitled to all the privileges of a natural-born British subject’ but also that since blacks could not be recruited to white battalions they must go to ‘native units’, and then, to make it worse, that the West Indians were not entitled to British standard pay.

What all this meant in practice is that some black volunteers were accepted and some not, according to who was recruiting, his personal preference and which particular instruction he had come across. Most West Indians that were recruited never saw the front-line fighting for which they longed, but were deployed as labour units on fatigues, loading the kit of white regiments, unloading shells from supply trains, building roads, mixing concrete or digging trenches. The German guns had a range of sixteen to twenty miles, so wherever the West Indians were they were in the firing line and suffered many casualties. Yet they were not allowed to handle a weapon nor to fire a shot in anger themselves. Their pay was unequal, they were not allowed to join in the athletics and cricket matches of the white troops and they were made to share substandard hospitals with labourers from China, Fiji and Egypt.

So these two things, the mental illness and the treatment of the West Indians by an army that was designed to perpetuate the social hierarchy of empire, are the dark heart of this book. Yet it also has a whimsy, a mood of near-fantasy to it which makes it lighter in tone than my previous books.

Idie’s island is ‘shimmering as a fairy tale’, the stars aren’t ‘in their proper places’, clocks don’t work; it is almost *out* of time and hence the name. The hummingbird symbolizes freedom from time and, while many of the events in the story are drawn from fact, this book inches a little closer to wish fulfilment or fantasy than anything else I have written.

# SAM ANGUS

## THE HOUSE ON HUMMINGBIRD ISLAND

Find out more at [www.panmacmillan.com/hummingbird](http://www.panmacmillan.com/hummingbird)

