Do you ever go along to a Shakespeare play and secretly think, *Oh no, doublets, complicated language, and puns I don’t get. Why am I here?* Even when the production is fresh and modern and trying hard to be clear, it is easy to get stuck inside complicated metaphors and obscure references and a lot of subplots hinging on mistaken identities. You have to concentrate at a Shakespeare play; it’s no place for slackers.

I’ve seen dozens of Shakespeare productions (it’s hard not to if you live in England, as I do) and I studied many of the plays when I was an English major, yet I still find them opaque at times. Which is why when Hogarth asked me to take part in its Shakespeare Project and write a novel inspired by one of his plays, I hesitated. Partly it was awe: how could I possibly follow in the Great Man’s footsteps? Partly I simply worried that readers would find it too hard to follow.

Then I took a decision that made the whole endeavor more promising. I would not try to imitate Shakespeare himself. No elaborate puns, no surprising and extended metaphors, no flowery tangents, no poetry. I would focus only on the story—for Shakespeare’s stories are universal and still speak to us today. For example:

- A young student suspects his mother is carrying on with his uncle behind his father’s back but doesn’t know what to do about it (*Hamlet*)
- A father demands the unconditional devotion of his children, who seem more interested in their inheritance (*King Lear*)
- A shy man gets a friend to talk to a woman he fancies and she falls for the friend (*Twelfth Night*)
- A man pushed by his ambitious wife muscles his way to the top (*Macbeth*)

Any of the above could describe dramas on TV today. Which to choose, though?

For a brief moment I considered *Romeo and Juliet*, the first Shakespeare play I ever studied. As a girl I was crazy about the 1968 Franco Zeffirelli film starring two very young actors. Then my teenage son set me straight. “It’s been done to death, Mum. Boring.” True. Also, doomed adolescent passion is great when you are an adolescent yourself. Now, in my fifties, I wanted a play that spoke more to my experience. That was when I fixed on *Othello*.

Now, the story of a black man who marries a white woman and is goaded into jealous rage by an evil man may not seem to be related to this white, middle-aged woman, happily married and long settled. However, *Othello* is not just about race and jealousy. Othello is the quintessential outsider, held at arm’s length by the Venetian society around him and constantly reminded that he is not one of them. I too have been an outsider all my adult life, moving from the United States to Britain over thirty years ago but retaining my American accent and corn-fed look.

More than that—and this I think is really why I chose *Othello*—I grew up in an integrated neighborhood in Washington, D.C., and attended an elementary school that was 90 percent black. I had the mostly benign but sometimes difficult experience of being a minority, at least during school hours.
Which is what gave me the setting for *New Boy*. Where better to set a novel based on *Othello* than on a school playground? Nascent passion, bullying, jealousy, violence: it’s all there, in an intense, closed world. Kids learn their prejudices from teachers and parents, and take it out on one another.

I set *New Boy* in the 1970s, when I was a kid, and the characters—Osei (Othello), Ian (Iago), Dee (Desdemona), Mimi (Emilia), Casper (Cassio), and Blanca (Bianca)—are all eleven years old. It’s that awkward age between childhood and full-blown adolescence, when you are trying out grown-up attitudes without really understanding them.

Readers may be surprised by the overt racism of both students and teachers in the book. “Oh, that’s just the 1970s,” you may think. “It’s not like that now. After all, we’ve had a black president!” Well . . . no. Racism and racial discrimination are still widespread in the U.S., and indeed all over the world. The Black Power movement of the 1970s has morphed into the current Black Lives Matter protests.

Today if a black boy walked onto an all-white playground, as Osei does at the beginning of *New Boy*, he may not have an Ian latch on to him and torment him into violence. But his difference will still be noted, and possibly acted upon. Four hundred years on from Shakespeare, humans have not changed much. That is why taking one of his stories and resetting it on a modern school playground was surprisingly easy—and, sadly, still relevant, not just to this older white woman in London, but to all of us.

— **TRACY CHEVALIER**
What was it about *Othello* that compelled you to select this particular play, over Shakespeare’s numerous others, as your contribution to the Hogarth Shakespeare series?

*Othello’s* themes of jealousy and discrimination are universal and tantalizing. In particular, I was drawn to write about the idea of the outsider, as I am a bit of an outsider myself—I grew up in the U.S. and moved to Britain when I was 22. Over 30 years later, I still have an American accent and am still treated like a foreigner. But we all feel like outsiders at some time and place, so it applies to everyone—as does how we treat people different from ourselves.

What was your process in tackling such a well-known work? As a writer, did you find it intimidating to follow in the footsteps of Shakespeare?

It was intimidating until I decided I would not try to tackle the unique way Shakespeare uses language. That would be impossible, and foolish. Instead I focused on the story, and once I was reminded that Shakespeare himself took his stories from other sources, I became less worried about stealing from him. I had read the play before and seen many productions. Before writing, I reread the play twice, then set it aside and didn’t look at it again. I decided it was better not to be too slavish to the original.

*New Boy* is a bit of a departure for you in terms of your work as a novelist. Can you speak a bit to this?

Yeah. Wow, very different. Normally I do months of research before I start writing, and during that time the characters and story are formulating in my head, in a bit of a swirl. By the time I put pen to paper, I know them. With *New Boy*, first I reread the play, then went to the British Library and got out a couple of critical studies of *Othello* to brush up on the issues. I read those, taking notes. After two days I was done and thought: Now what should I research? And I realized there was nothing to research; I just had to start.

The first draft felt a bit like an intellectual exercise. Shakespeare gave me the characters and the plot; I chose the setting and just had to marry them together. What I needed was to feel it coming from the gut. That is when setting it in a time and place I personally knew helped a lot. Setting it on a playground in D.C. in the 1970s made it feel more like my book, though it took a second draft to feel I engaged my gut.

Discrimination, betrayal, alienation, and jealousy are central themes in *Othello*. How did you go about incorporating these facets into *New Boy*?

In thinking about the central themes, it came to me quickly that these are things children feel deeply—and without the filters adults carefully construct to appear neutral. I thought about where children have some control over their own world, and the school playground became the obvious choice. It is a very intense place, full of passion and intrigue, where adults have only nominal control. Things also happen fast on a playground. It’s like a laboratory. Kids test out romance, switch friends, fight, make allegiances, and start wars—all in the course of a day. Once I chose that setting, it was easy to bring out discrimination, betrayal, jealousy. Kids live through those things every day and they feel them hard.
*New Boy* features a full cast of characters of different races, genders, and ages. As a novelist, how do you craft distinct characters with their own voices?

That’s part of the mysterious craft of writing. I begin formulating characters in my head, and the more time I spend with them—in my head, then on the page—the better I get to know them. At some point something happens to the character—a moment of recognition, of understanding—that makes me realize they’ve grown into a person, not just an idea in my head. It’s like one of those little spongy pellets you put in a glass of hot water, and the membrane holding it together melts and the pellet turns into a dinosaur, or an ice cream cone, or a rocket. It’s like, Oh, you’ve just become three-dimensional. How did *that* happen?

With the differences between the characters—race, age, gender—I try not to think too much about those obvious differences, but focus more on the differences of personality, of character. Look, that character notices things beyond the school fence, while that character hears a buzzing sound and notices the smell of things. Why is that? It’s something fundamental to their character.

*New Boy* is set in a suburban Washington, D.C., elementary school in the 1970s. You yourself grew up in D.C. during the same era. Does the novel draw inspiration from your own experiences at that time?

In thinking about the themes of *Othello*—namely the idea of the outsider—I was reminded of my own childhood. I had an unusual experience, in that I lived in an integrated neighborhood and went to a school that was mostly black. I often felt different, though it was not always about race. Sometimes I was teased for being fat and wearing glasses. I was able to reference some of those feelings in the novel.

On a lighter note, I also used funny parts of my school experience—swinging on a rope around a flagpole, jumping double-dutch, making fun of the school art teacher. I also got to reference lots of stuff from the 1970s: the embroidered bell bottoms we wore, *Partridge Family* lunch boxes, the candy we ate, the Top 40 music we listened to, the terrible cafeteria food, the open classroom experimental reading corner.

Over the years, there have been numerous interpretations of *Othello* in literature, on stage, and on the screen. Having now spent so much time living with and intimately studying the play to craft your own vision, in your opinion, what is it about *Othello* that has allowed it to stand the test of time?

I think *Othello* continues to resonate because we are fascinated by a good person turning bad so easily. Iago’s manipulation of Othello is appalling, and it’s like a car crash we cover our eyes from but then peek through our fingers because it’s so mesmerizing and irresistible. And because all of us have felt like outsiders at some point, we wonder if we are that vulnerable and easily manipulated.

What do you hope readers will take away from reading *New Boy*?

I hope *New Boy* will remind readers of what it is like to be different from those around you. Whether it’s skin color, religion, age, accent, size, shape, gender, or whatever, we have all felt out of it, and sensed people treating us as different. Conversely, we have mostly all been in situations where we are in the majority. I don’t mean to preach, but that is a position of power and we need to remember to use it wisely and empathically.
**Othello Timeline**

1603

*Othello* is believed to have been written in 1603, based on the story *Un Capitano Moro* (“A Moorish Captain”) by Cinthio, a disciple of Boccaccio, first published in 1565.

1604

First certainly known performance occurred at Whitehall Palace in London.

1829

As Shakespeare regained popularity among nineteenth-century French Romantics, Alfred de Vigny premiered a French translation of *Othello*, titled *Le More de Venise*.

1943

Margaret Webster stages *Othello* starring Paul Robeson as Othello and José Ferrer as Iago, the first production ever in America to feature a black actor playing *Othello* with an otherwise all-black cast.

1997

Patrick Stewart took the role of Othello with the Shakespeare Theatre Company (Washington, D.C.) in a race-bending performance, in a “photo negative” production of a white Othello with an otherwise all-black cast.

1991

New York City’s Shakespeare in the Park puts on a production of *Othello* starring Christopher Walken as Iago.

1987

The BBC adapts *Othello* as part of their BBC Television Shakespeare series, starring Anthony Hopkins and Bob Hoskins.

1965

The film adaptation of *Othello* holds the record for the most Oscar nominations for acting ever given to a Shakespeare film—Laurence Olivier (Othello), Frank Finlay (Iago), Maggie Smith (Desdemona), and Joyce Redman (Emilia) were all nominated for Academy Awards.

2001

A modern film adaptation of *Othello*, entitled *O*, is set in an American high school, starring Mekhi Phifer, Julia Stiles, and Martin Sheen.

2012

*I, Iago*, an adaptation of *Othello* told from the perspective of villain Iago, written by Nicole Galland, is published.

2017

Hogarth publishes *New Boy* by Tracy Chevalier, the fifth installment in the Hogarth Shakespeare series, where *Othello* is reimagined as taking place in a Washington, D.C., schoolyard.
Reading Group Questions for New Boy

1. How closely does New Boy follow the original Othello story line? Which parts are different? How does that affect how you read it?

2. Why do you think Chevalier chose to make the main characters eleven years old? How would the book be different if they were, say, sixteen?

3. A few adults make appearances in New Boy. What part do they play?

4. The 1970s is evoked through cultural references to music, fashion, books, even candy; and political references are made to the Black Panthers and to Watergate. How does setting the story in 1974 affect how we perceive it? How would the story change if it was set in 2017? Which attitudes have changed and which have remained the same?

5. In Shakespeare’s Othello the parts of Desdemona and Emilia are minor. In New Boy the equivalent characters play much larger roles. How does that affect the balance of the story?

6. Osei’s sister Sisi plays an off-stage role but her presence is strongly felt. Why is she part of the story?

7. Shakespeare scholar Harold Bloom called Iago in Othello “an artist in evil,” in part because Shakespeare does not spell out his motivation for tormenting Othello. Would you say Ian in New Boy is evil? How does his age and the little background Chevalier gives him shape what we think of him?

8. One of the issues that productions of Othello struggle with is making Othello turn so quickly from love to jealousy. How does Chevalier handle this problem in New Boy? Is it believable?

9. Although Chevalier has chosen to make Osei black, is race the primary issue in New Boy or a means to an end?

10. Chevalier’s choice to set New Boy in a schoolyard is a dramatic departure from the story’s original setting. Can you imagine other ways of retelling the story of Othello?