EDITED BY JANIS JEFFERIES AND SARAH KEMBER

Whose Book is it Anyway?

A View from Elsewhere on Publishing,
Copyright and Creativity

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9. Diversity or Die: How the Face of Book Publishing Needs to Change if it Is to Have a Future

Danuta Kean

Imagine the UK in twenty-five years' time. The average young person will be mixed race, female and, if things don't change soon, she will not be a reader. Why? Because the Office of National Statistics predicts that by then one in five of the population of Britain will be Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME). It is a statistic of which the UK publishing industry seemed ignorant in 2016 when, of the many thousands of new titles published, fewer than one hundred were by writers of colour. As for the future of the industry, its failure to reflect social change in Britain seemed set to ensure that its workforce would remain ninety per cent white, educated at independent schools and Oxbridge, publishing books by people just like them.¹

As now, some Black and Asian authors will slip through the net, but they will be published as 'literary' fiction, which not only sells far less than genre fiction, but emphasises the Otherness of the writer and the world portrayed, a world dominated by themes of race and postcolonialism — essentially the intersection of white experience with that of other ethnicities — rather than wider, universal themes. It is a world that reflects white stereotypes of minority ethnic cultures.

1 Sarah Shaffi, 'Publishing Seeks to Address Industry's Lack of Diversity', *The Bookseller*, 4 November 2016, <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/publishing-seeks-address-industry-s-lack-diversity-426031>

This was a disturbing finding of *Writing the Future* (hereafter *WtF*), the 2016 report Mel Larsen and I were commissioned by Spread the Word to write about Black and Asian publishers and novelists in the UK marketplace.² The report was compiled over an eight month period and involved quantitative and qualitative research into the experiences of BAME writers and publishers, as well as the employment and publishing practices in the UK. It also covered the leading university courses and three biggest literary festivals.

I was chosen to head the research, because ten years earlier I edited *In Full Colour* (hereafter *IFC*), the first report into diversity in book publishing. Commissioned by decibel, an Arts Council diversity initiative, *IFC* found less than eight per cent of those working in publishing had a BAME background thanks to working practices that bred unconscious bias, actively excluded diverse people and, in some cases, tolerated outright racist attitudes. Black and Asian women workers reported colleagues' comments about their 'exoticism', while publishers commonly claimed that BAME people 'don't read' and don't engage with publishing either as readers or potential employees or novelists.

This puts into perspective what has happened since. When Mel Larsen and I began working on the new report, we expected to find that the diversity programmes set up ten years ago by decibel had matured and that percentages of BAME staff and writers on mainstream lists had significantly grown. This was because in the wake of *IFC* all the main publishers and publishing bodies, such as the Publishers Association, had committed to addressing the issue — not least because they recognised that by drawing in more BAME workers they would be better placed to reach BAME readers and take a share of their estimated £300bn in disposable income.

A networking organisation, prizes for culturally diverse writers and paid internships aimed at minority ethnic people were established quickly with Arts Council backing. With that level of support, it would be rational to expect that graduates from the earliest unpaid internship programmes had by now reached the boards of the main publishing houses.

2 Unless otherwise stated, statistics and interviews quoted in this chapter come from Danuta Kean and Mel Larsen (eds.), *Writing the Future* (hereafter *WtF*) (London: Spread the Word, 2016), <https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Writing-the-Future-Black-and-Asian-Authors-and-Publishers-in-the-UK-Marketplace-May-2015.pdf>

What we found was disappointing. Malorie Blackman, the former children's laureate and award-winning author, sums up the experience of those who have been around UK Books for the past twenty years. 'For the first few years of being published, I was always the sole face of colour at any publishing event I went to,' she recalled. 'About ten years ago that changed and there were a number of faces of colour at various events. It was wonderful. Progress was finally being made. But, over the last three or four years, I seem to have gone back to being the sole face of colour at literary events. What happened?'³

Bright hopes burned out quickly: not only had none of the earliest decibel internees reached board level, none remained in large houses, and those that remained in publishing had set up independent labels of their own rather than work for large publishers where they felt isolated. At entry level, the decibel unpaid internship programmes had fizzled out after the Arts Council withdrew match funding. Publishers claimed that in the post-recession environment, they simply didn't have the money to fully fund diversity-orientated paid internships.⁴

A handful of paid internships remained — notably at Profile Books, HarperCollins and at Penguin, through The Helen Fraser Fellowship. Of these only the latter was aimed at BAME candidates and, as far as I could ascertain, the graduates that had joined the programme had come from predominantly affluent backgrounds. This change coincided with a rapid rise in unpaid internships as a primary pipeline into book publishing and has formed a toxic combination that has undermined diversity, be that ethnic or social, in the industry (see Table 1).

Table 1. Survey of members of the Society of Young Publishers:
'How did you get your first paid job in publishing?' Source:
Writing the Future, p. 24.

Through personal contact (i.e. family)	12.5%
Through industry contact	6.25%
Through unpaid internship	18.75%
Through paid internship	12.5%
Through job ad in trade press	18.75%
Declined to answer	31.25%

3 *WtF* 2015, 'Plus ça change', p. 13.

4 *WtF*, 'Could Do Better', pp. 21–24.

While paid internships, especially those aimed at minority ethnic candidates through the four-year-old Creative Access programme, were welcomed, they were no guarantee of opening up the trade to a wider talent pool. Like decibel, Creative Access interns are co-funded by publishers, and questions over its long term funding may mean the programme goes the same way as decibel.

These programmes proved a vital pipeline for BAME candidates: SYP members who responded to the *WtF* survey into access into the trade had worked as many as nine unpaid internships before securing paid employment. That is nine work experience placements that required them to self-fund living, food and transportation costs in London. It should be a matter of grave concern for the industry that a primary route into the business poses a significant barrier to those outside the affluent professional classes, and explains why the industry remains dominated by white, public-school-educated, Oxbridge graduates, even though this group represent a tiny fragment of the overall UK population — only seven per cent of the UK population attended public schools and less than one per cent of those attended Oxbridge (source: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2014). A report in 2010 by the Race for Opportunity Campaign shows how much this discriminates against BAME people: it found that only 11.1 per cent of Oxford students and 10.5 per cent of Cambridge students have a BAME background.

To be fair, there is recognition within the senior ranks of publishing that unpaid internships are iniquitous. 'I don't like unpaid internships. They prohibit people who don't live in London or who don't have parents to support them working in publishing,' said Ann Woodall, HR director at Little, Brown.⁵ Over at Profile, founder and managing director Andrew Franklin did not mince his words: 'Unpaid internships are disgusting and should be banned.' Profile's commitment to diversity includes sponsoring a scholarship at City University, as well as paying all its internees the London Living Wage. As a result the small independent has an enviable record in recruiting diverse staff, though Franklin was not complacent. 'I'd like more, simple as that,' he added.

For those BAME publishers interviewed for *WtF*, there was a strong sense of isolation and a desire to network with others who understood the unique intersection of issues facing publishers and writers of colour.

5 *WtF*, 'No More Boom and Bust', pp. 26–29.

Even BAME internees complained about isolation. 'Everyone has been very nice, but you do look around and think you are the only one here who isn't like them,' one said. 'But they don't really get it, and sometimes they make you feel like you are a special case, as if you are only allowed in because you are Black or Asian and not for your skills. They don't realise how hard it was to get onto this scheme and how many people you had to compete against.'

In the wake of *IFC*, *DipNet*, the diversity networking organisation, had been set up by Black publishers Elise Dilsworth and the late Alison Morrison, but by the end of the decade it had faded through lack of top-line support within the industry. Furthermore, cultural awareness training that would tackle recruiters' unconscious bias and deal head on with exclusionist behaviour and outright racism, had been dropped due to financial pressures.

Again, the impact of this on senior management levels was visible: a survey of boards and, especially, the powerful C Circle of chief officers, revealed that the generational handover caused by the retirement of high-profile women such as Helen Fraser at Penguin and Gail Rebutck at Random House had not resulted in greater diversity. In fact, the recession appeared to have led to a retrenchment of white, middle class masculine power at the top level of publishing, with more white, public-school-educated men in the boardroom than had been seen for twenty years.

Interviews undertaken with senior personnel in all the biggest traditional publishing houses and a survey of Human Resources directors for *WtF* found that a step change took place after 2008. This change was not only fuelled by uncertainty over the economy, but over emerging digital formats for books and retail, as well as a fiercely competitive retail landscape that placed heavy pressure on publishers' already tight profit margins. Programmes to promote diversity and cultural awareness were seen as secondary to survival and were among the first things cut back in the recession. Though there is no firm evidence that this reflected a lack of commitment at senior level within publishing houses, it was taken that way by both writers and publishers of colour.⁶

Poor data collection at the most basic level in publishing houses offered further evidence of the failure by the industry to adequately own the problem of diversity and to recognise the considerable financial benefits

6 Ibid.

to having a diverse business. None of the HRs in the biggest publishing houses interviewed for the report had reliable data on diversity at recruitment level or higher, or on the number of writers of colour on their lists. The excuse given was that businesses relied on self-reporting and not every new employee wished to submit data. There was no data about the career progress of diverse employees or exit interviews that addressed any cultural issues that may have led employees to decide to leave.

As a result, HRs relied on educated guesses about the number of people of colour employed in-house. These guesses can be deemed reasonably accurate because the number of BAME publishers remains very low: between four and twelve per cent, still well below the forty per cent of minority ethnic people living in London, the hub of the British book trade.⁷

Within publishing there was widespread recognition among white and non-white staff that diversity is a problem (see Table 2 below), although it was only among white and BAME employees at middle and junior levels that it was regarded as symptomatic of a failure by directors, especially chief executive officers, to recognise the importance of diversity for more than ethical and PR value.

Typical of many in the trade was the comment of one white senior editor, who said: ‘What we see time and again is a reaction to guilt privilege. The reason that these initiatives start up and then die again and again is that the issue of diversity is not taken up properly by those with strategic decision-making authority. They are paying lip service to the issue rather than bringing in effective change, because that could attack their privileged position.’

Table 2. ‘How culturally diverse is the industry according to Publishers and Literary Agents?’ Source: *Writing the Future*, p. 24.

	Publishers	Literary Agents
Very culturally diverse	3.13%	0%
Quite diverse	3.13%	0%
Moderately diverse	6.25%	0%
A little diverse	28.13%	45.95%
Not diverse at all	56.25%	51.35%
Don’t know	3.13%	2.7%

7 WtF, ‘Could Do Better’, p. 23.

Well-meaning initiatives that shudder to a halt without bringing lasting change cause both minority-ethnic authors and publishers to be burned out by the fight for recognition. In-house, this plays out in the ignorance and even low-level racism experienced by many BAME publishers. One literary agent interviewed for *WtF* said: 'I recently had feedback on memoir by a Black author where several editors asked me — 'Do enough Black people buy books?' I was gobsmacked.' The problem, the agent said, was not limited to one publisher. It was endemic throughout the industry. 'The title didn't sell to a publisher,' he added.

One young publisher recalled that at the end of an interview for an entry-level job in editorial at a major house she was taken to one side by her interviewer, a senior publisher. She had failed the interview, for which the publisher apologised then offered advice that she hoped the candidate 'wouldn't take the wrong way'. 'If you don't mind me saying, if you want to get on in publishing, you need to lose your London accent.'⁸

Mel Larsen and I found that the impact of this lack of diversity is far greater than a handful of BAME employees feeling isolated: it affected how Black and Asian authors were treated. Many felt that the prevailing white, public school educated Oxbridge culture of the trade influences editorial decisions about their work and how it is marketed. That publishers are keenly aware of the problem is reflected in the anecdote told by one writer of colour: 'There is a story about one well known Asian author. Every time she goes in to meet her publisher, the accounts person comes along, because there are no other Asian or Black people working there.'

It also affects what appears in print and how it is marketed. Contends novelist and poet Bernardine Evaristo: 'Sometimes people assume that if you write stories about people of colour that you must be writing about racism, which is ridiculous.' The majority of published BAME novelists interviewed for *WtF* said they felt restricted by such expectations. One respected African Caribbean literary writer comments: 'There is a sense that if you are a Black writer, you should be writing about that [being Black]. I have heard publishers say: 'She's Black, what is she doing writing about Australia?''⁹

8 *WtF*, 'No More Boom and Bust', p. 26.

9 *WtF*, 'Plus ça change', pp. 13–16.

In part, she concedes, this reflects a risk-averse culture in publishing that focuses on the most obvious aspects of an author's life for marketing and publicity. 'There is a sense that there is now a certain book that they want from you,' adds the author, who has been publishing acclaimed novels for twenty years. 'So, no it hasn't changed. That is what was happening before when they were scrambling around for the next Walter Moseley or *Joy Luck Club*.'

BAME authors could be falling victim to the same marketing pressures as their white counterparts, driven by the demands of major retailers and under pressure to focus on obvious marketing tropes, such as the banyan tree at sunset that graces the cover of many books set in Africa. But the focus on ethnicity rather than universality makes writers of colour feel alienated from the wider commercial market. No-one interviewed was convinced that evidence exists for a market that separates Black and Asian readers from white ones, or that white readers only wanted to read about 'race' issues. 'There is an orthodoxy whereby the presumed reader is totally mono-cultural, white middle England,' said Arimatta Forma. 'We know from looking at Census data that that is a very outdated view. I think sometimes a paradigm gets created and everyone starts to subscribe to it.'

The impact of such thinking on Black and Asian novelists is that universality in their work is trumped by 'exoticism'. 'Colonialism is the lens through which they want to look at Africa and Asia, because it is all about them (white publishers and literary critics). It is not about us,' is the bitter commentary of one well-known name who asked to be kept anonymous. Writers at all stages in their career had experienced an expectation within the trade that they should reflect assumptions about race and colonialism — whether the tension of the ghetto or the fragrance of the mango grove. An ex-creative-writing student sums up the feeling: 'Maybe America is a slightly more liberal place towards the arts — there are writers there who are not white who don't 'have' to write about their race — but, I feel I'm supposed to be placed somehow because of my race and that I 'should' write about race, exoticism, immigrant stories.' This is why increasing numbers of BAME novelist are turning to US or Indian-sub-continent publishers to get book deals.¹⁰

10 Ibid.

The most pernicious way this stereotyping manifested itself was in the use of the word ‘authentic’ to either validate or dismiss a BAME writer’s work. “‘Authenticity’ is used as an excuse to deny opportunities for people outside the cliché,’ one respected literary name with an African heritage said. He added that the use of the word turns Black and Asian writers into totems for their communities, which emphasises the sense that they are outsiders to a white literary culture. ‘Many of us simply wish to tell stories rather than represent our entire race,’ the author claimed.

For many BAME novelists the word ‘authentic’ is interchangeable with ‘exotic’ — and is equally resented because it seems to emphasise difference rather than universality. ‘If an unusual novel about minorities is an exposé of weird rituals or traditions it creates a special appeal: see also female infanticide, holy men molesting children, forced marriages, honour killings and so on. Add to that a thriller element, and you stand a much better chance of publication,’ one established Indian author explains. ‘If you have that, then your ethnicity becomes a license of “authenticity” and fair comment.’¹¹

The most insidious use of the word we found when researching *WtF* was when it was used to undermine a Black or Asian author’s ability to write about their community. For instance the critical reception of Gautam Malkani’s *Londonstani*, a comic novel acquired with much brouhaha by Fourth Estate, included personal references to his education and supposed background. ‘I’d open newspapers and I would actually hope for bad reviews of the book, because at least they’d be reviews of the book rather than a take-down of my publisher for being suckered by a ‘brown phony’ author who was too middle-class and too educated to meet the literary editor’s criteria for being authentically Asian,’ he recalled. Malkani could have pulled the ‘right credentials’ for his background: though he went to Cambridge, he is from a working class London family that struggled to get him there. He chose not to, because, he said: ‘It was fiction for fuck’s sake — Thomas Harris never had to prove he was an authentic cannibal serial killer.’¹²

Another consequence for Black and Asian novelists of this treatment of their work as Other, rather than genre, is that they are less likely to

11 Ibid., p. 14.

12 Ibid.

be published in the most commercial markets capable of sustaining a professional career. In the same survey for *WtF*, we found that forty-two per cent were published in literary fiction, compared to twenty-seven per cent of the white novelists who responded to our survey (See Table 3).¹³

Table 3. 'Under what genre is your work classified?' Source: *Writing the Future*, pp. 8–11.

Genre	BAME novelists	White novelists
Literary	42%	27%
Young adult (YA)	26%	23%
Romance / commercial women's	4%	16%
Crime	4%	16%
Other genres (science fiction and fantasy; erotica; historical; horror)	24%	18%

Spread the Word did not push against a closed door when it presented this research in April 2016. Already a number of tentative initiatives had begun, such as the Creative Access internships mentioned above and a company-wide diversity forum at HarperCollins to address the issue from all levels and seek out creative and lasting solutions.¹⁴ Over at Hachette, which owns, among others, Little, Brown Book Group, Orion, Hodder and Headline, they had begun to run open days at non-Russell Group universities, which actively targeted non-English-Literature or History students.¹⁵ In addition the Publishers Association had launched Equip, a charter to encourage diversity in book publishing, and to foster networking and best practice throughout the industry.¹⁶

13 *WtF*, 'Written off', pp. 8–11.

14 Natasha Onwuemezi, 'HarperCollins Honoured in Race and Inclusivity Awards', *The Bookseller*, 12 October 2016, <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/hc-honoured-race-equality-awards-412516>

15 Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust, 'Hachette UK worked with the Stephen Lawrence Foundation's Graduate Career Pathway to Reach more Diverse Potential Recruits', <http://www.stephenlawrence.org.uk/category/hachette-uk/>

16 Publishers Association, 'PA Launches 10 Point Inclusivity Action Plan', <https://www.publishers.org.uk/news/releases/2017/pa-launches-10-point-inclusivity-action-plan/>

These initiatives were all aimed at entry level and not at tackling the problem of retention of BAME staff or drawing in more Black and Asian novelists. Significantly no publisher had introduced internal monitoring for unconscious bias that may explain why various initiatives had failed to bring lasting change to the publishing monoculture. On the evidence of the research for *WtF*, we felt it was crucial to recommend that publishers sign up to a cultural audit, which would monitor everything from recruitment and retention to promotion, pay and reward for staff. If the experiences of BAME staff proved to be very different to white staff, it would suggest there was a problem with either who was recruited or the culture of the employer, and that could then be addressed.¹⁷

This matters because the identity of the gatekeepers has a material impact on the diversity of lists and the ability of publishers to gauge and interact with diverse markets. 'If all the gatekeepers have a certain way of looking at things and they are all of a certain type, it's very hard,' one writer pointed out about the impact of the monoculture. 'If you are a Black person allowed in and are from a lower-middle-class background you have to know how to negotiate the class system as well and that is possibly harder than anything because it is really invisible and entrenched.'

Monocultures are self-perpetuating and, by concentrating at entry level rather than retention of existing staff, the trade is effectively failing to tackle any bias that undermines its relevance, longevity and profitability in the twenty-first century. Another way to ensure greater diversity within the industry is to address poor rates of pay in the lower ranks that affect the ability of employees to stay in the trade. Not only would this mean that unpaid internships are phased out, but that publishers would fund their own paid internships, rather than rely on third parties whose funding may be withdrawn, as happened with decibel.

The reaction from publishers has been mixed. At HarperCollins and Penguin Random House there has been a recognition that, in a global market, the industry needs staff whose strong cultural as well as linguistic ties underpin business relationships with emerging markets, notably India and China. There is also recognition that though UK Publishing PLC is a world leader, it needs to be 'future-fit' to compete with competition from emerging markets.

17 *WtF*, 'Key Recommendations', p. 37.

Writing the Future was published at a time when other sectors, notably in the financial sector, were beginning to recognise that diversity creates profitable future-proof twenty-first century businesses. In January 2016 the management consultants McKinsey released research comparing businesses in the US, UK and Brazil. It found that companies in the top quartile for diversity significantly outperformed their rivals. Gender diverse companies were 15% more likely to outperform those in the bottom quartile for diversity. Ethnically diverse companies were 35% more likely to outperform those in bottom quartile.

Those in the bottom quartile for diversity were also in the bottom quartile for profitability. In the US a direct relationship was found to exist between diversity and financial performance — for every 10 per cent increase in ethnic diversity at senior executive level, pre-tax profits are 0.8 per cent higher. Research by Harvard Business School found that ‘employees at [diverse] companies are 45 per cent likelier to report that their firm’s market share grew over the previous year and 70 per cent likelier to report that the firm captured a new market’.

The Harvard research also showed how diversity creates a virtuous circle. ‘Without diverse leadership, women are 20 per cent less likely than straight white men to win endorsement for their ideas; people of color are 24 per cent less likely; and LGBTs are 21 per cent less likely,’ it reported. It concluded: ‘This costs their companies crucial market opportunities, because inherently diverse contributors understand the unmet needs in under-leveraged markets.’¹⁸

Widespread coverage of the report, which even reached the *New York Times*, seems to have galvanised some publishers into action. Spread the Word is working across the spectrum to bring about change. ‘Overall, I think the research — and the justifiably forthright tone of the report — caught the industry on the back foot and they have been bounced or shamed into taking a hard look at how they can make changes — regarding their recruitment, staffing and promotion, but also in finding/publishing diverse authors,’ said Eva Lewin, StW writer and development manager, who oversaw the report.

From a writers’ perspective, the report created a stronger sense that there are other routes to publication and readership than exclusively

18 Vivian Hunt, Dennis Layton, and Sara Prince, ‘Diversity Matters’, McKinsey & Co., 2015, <https://assets.mckinsey.com/~media/857F440109AA4D13A54D9C496D86ED58.ashx>

through mainstream trade publishing, as well as a sense that writers need to build their own profile (brand) through social media and so on, so that they have more control of how publishers mediate between them and the public when they do get a publishing deal.

At the time of writing this a number of more concrete initiatives had been announced by publishers. In February 2016 Penguin Random House launched its 'creative responsibility manifesto' based around a ten-point plan to improve the diversity of its workforce and lists. It was also introducing more robust diversity data-monitoring and training in unconscious bias. At HarperCollins, as well as existing schemes such as its joint venture with the disabled children's charity WhizzKidz to provide work experience and fundraising support¹⁹ and a partnership programme aimed at disadvantaged children in Tower Hamlets, it introduced unconscious bias training and schemes to drive greater diversity across all areas, including a full staff survey.²⁰

This is a snapshot of the findings and results of the research and impact of *Writing the Future*. There remains much to be done before UK publishing is future-fit. However it is encouraging that there has been a positive reaction in some quarters and that businesses finally seem to understand that diversity is not an option if they wish to survive. As the editor of *In Full Colour*, I know too well how easily early gains can be lost. But it feels as if *WtF* has focused minds more clearly on the business case for driving diversity, and that makes me cautiously optimistic about the ability of UK publishing to remain relevant to an increasingly diverse readership.

19 Natasha Onwuemezi, 'HarperCollins Partners with Whizz-Kidz', *The Bookseller*, 13 January 2016, <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/hc-partner-disabled-childrens-charity-whizz-kidz-320294>

20 'How HarperCollins is Setting the Diversity Standard within Publishing', *Vercida*, 7 July 2017, <https://www.vercida.com/uk/articles/how-harpercollins-is-setting-the-diversity-standard-within-publishing>

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