



RE:THINKING
'Diversity' in
Publishing

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THE BOOKSELLER

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Executive Summary

Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing is the first in-depth academic study in the UK on diversity in trade fiction and the publishing industry. The project is a partnership between Goldsmiths, University of London, Spread the Word, and *The Bookseller*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The research entailed qualitative interviews with:

- 113 professionals in the publishing industry
- authors, agents, CEOs and managing directors, editors, designers, staff in marketing, PR and sales, as well as booksellers and literature festival organisers
- respondents from both big and small publishing houses, literary agencies, and booksellers. All the major publishing houses were represented in the research.

Interviewees were asked about their practices and their experience publishing writers of colour.

The research focused on three key areas: 1) acquisition; 2) promotion; 3) sales and retail. We explored how writers of colour are affected by each of these stages of production.

The Problem

The publishing industry concedes that it has a problem with a lack of diversity. Publishers recognise that writers of colour in particular have been historically excluded. Yet while publishers would like to publish more diversely, finding writers of colour and publishing them successfully remains a challenge.

The Project and its Aim

This research explores the obstacles that writers of colour face in trade publishing with a focus on literary, crime and YA fiction. We *rethink* 'diversity' by shifting the debate from a sole focus on the *quantity* of minorities who work in publishing to the *quality* of the experience, particularly for writers of colour. The project's aim was to examine the ways in which writers of colour are published and to reflect the findings back to the industry to make visible where the structural problems are.

Main Findings

General

- **Assumptions about audiences:** The core audience for publishers is white and middle-class. The whole industry is essentially set up to cater for this one audience. This affects how writers of colour and their books are treated, which are either *whitewashed* or *exoticised* in order to appeal to this segment.
- **Inability to reach diverse audiences:** Publishers claim that they would like to reach more diverse audiences but do not know how to, or are reluctant to expend resources on doing so.
- **We find that 'BAME' (black, Asian and minority ethnic)/working-class audiences are undervalued by publishers, both economically and culturally:** This in turn affects the acquisition, promotion, and selling of writers of colour.

Acquisition

- **Lack of creativity in looking for authors:** Agents would like more writers of colour on their lists but struggle to find them. While there is a new generation of agents adopting new strategies, it will take time for these initiatives to bear fruit. Senior agents tend to focus on their traditional networks that are not inclusive of the whole spectrum of writers.
- **Concepts of 'quality':** Publishers would like to publish more writers of colour but expressed concerns about their lack of 'quality'. Arguments around quality, however, often seemed disingenuous and showed how little reflection there was about how notions of 'quality' are shaped by an individual's particular class and education. Sometimes a writer of colour's supposed lack of 'quality' speaks more to a publisher's lack of confidence in how to reach non-white, non-middle-class audiences.
- **Fear of 'niche':** Across the acquisition process, we found that publishers fear that books by writers of colour are too niche and will not appeal to their core audience. This has implications for the selection and the treatment of writers of colour.

- **Comping practices:** i.e. the practice of comparing books to others that are deemed similar in order to predict audiences and sales, are another obstacle because, although they can be used creatively, they privilege books that repeat certain patterns and established authors, making it harder for ‘new voices’.

Promotion

- **Lack of creativity in promotion:** Communication departments still rely on traditional media channels, e.g. national newspapers and BBC Radio 4, which are used by a narrow segment of the population.
- **Lack of awareness:** While there is some awareness of the growing number of media – especially digital media – that target communities that have been neglected by mainstream media, these outlets are perceived as niche. Publishers see engaging with these media as a supplement to, rather than the core of, marketing campaigns.
- **Limited resources:** A narrow conception of their audience makes it harder for books by ‘BAME’ writers to break out as resources are distributed according to how well a book is expected to ‘perform’.
- **Complacency:** Publishers genuinely hope that books crossover to wider audiences, but we found little sign of proactive attempts to engage ‘BAME’ or working-class audiences.

Sales and retail

- **Few people in retail in decision-making positions:** The centralised nature of most book buying poses a challenge for books by writers of colour, especially when assumptions about book buyers are so narrow.
- **Narrow audience:** Brick-and-mortar booksellers, whether chains or independents, still tend to centre the white, middle-class audience, which is reflected in the aesthetic of these spaces.
- **Supermarkets can do more:** Supermarkets can reach diverse communities but they sell only a limited range of books. Books by writers of colour are seen as niche.

- **Opacity of online retail:** Online retailers provide another route to wider audiences though publishers find this an opaque process, not least because the retailers can and do change parameters without making transparent how this affects the algorithms.

Calls to Action

Rethinking ‘diversity’ is the first step; action needs to follow. The report strongly encourages professionals in the industry to reflect on their practices, challenge their assumptions, and change their behaviour to make the publishing industry fairer for all. Publishers, agents, and booksellers are urged to:

- **Value and engage directly with ‘BAME’ audiences:** To make publishing more diverse, publishers need to learn to value non-white, non-middle-class audiences.
- **Hire more diversely:** Hiring more people who belong to marginalised communities will help publishers to tap into new audiences – but *only* if staff are given the resources and freedom to do this work without being burdened to speak for these communities.
- **Develop strategic alliances:** There is already a network of writing agencies and audience engagement practitioners that publishers can use to reach new audiences. Publishers need to invest in establishing long-term partnerships with these organisations to find and develop talented writers of colour, bringing them to publication and to audiences.

Foreword

by Bernardine Evaristo



Every few years there is an urgent need for a new report on what has been a huge absence of the voices of people of colour in literature as practitioners, publishers, and festival curators. Commensurately, there are those who disagree that there is an absence, and point to a few famous names as testament to the fact that there is no problem. But those few famous names only serve to mask the paucity of our numbers in the industry.

Past reports on this very issue include *In Full Colour* (Kean, 2004), *Free Verse* (Spread the Word, 2005), initiated by myself, which took on the poetry sector, followed by *Writing the Future* (Spread the Word, 2015) and *Freed Verse* (Teitler, 2017). *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* arrives as another clarion call to an industry which, with all the apparent goodwill in the world, hasn't changed fast enough to become more inclusive. It's frustrating to read in its pages that the publishing industry is still run by the predominantly white, middle-class demographic of years ago, and that the perceived target reader is a middle-aged, middle-class white woman, who apparently does not have the imagination to want to engage with writings by people of colour, which is plainly untrue. There is also the misguided belief, still in the twenty-first century, that black and Asian people are not considered to be a substantial readership, or to even be readers.

All of this is ridiculous, but wait, it gets worse, unfortunately, for too many in the industry, books by writers of colour are still considered niche rather than having universal appeal, even when there are so many exceptions to prove otherwise. I was told that my 2013 novel, *Mr Loverman*, was negatively considered by some in the industry as triple niche because it was about an older, gay, black man. What were they saying? That whiteness reigns supreme, heteronormativity is acceptable and old people begone from the pages of our books because you are of little importance? The truth is that good literature

about anything can be enjoyed by all kinds of people. Literature transcends all perceived differences and barriers. It's partly the point of it.

I've been working professionally in the arts as a writer since the arid early Eighties when our books had not yet come into existence. There have been several developments since then to improve our representation in the industry. Some have been publisher-led; many more activist-driven. There have been progressive results so it's not all doom and gloom. In the past few years British writers of colour have forayed into the world of non-fiction with staggering success, publishing an array of titles around culture, gender, race, identity, class. Yet how many novels by black British male writers were published last year? I can think of one. How many black British women? I can think of eight. These figures are appalling and show us how much further we have to go to be integrated into British publishing. Because I'm a believer in the mantra, 'For the many not the few', I believe that my recent success winning the Booker Prize will only be truly meaningful if it opens doors for other writers of colour to break through, especially those who are forging their own creative paths and not seeking to replicate what already exists.

I hope that those who need to read this report pay attention to its recommendations on measuring diversity, target audiences, notions of quality, hiring practices, and partnerships for change. I look forward to a time when these reports are no longer necessary because the publishing industry reflects our society at large and is truly egalitarian with its staffing at every level, especially senior positions, and with a fully diverse and inclusive roster of authors. Then, and only then, can we say we've arrived.

Bernardine Evaristo

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Statement from Spread the Word

Spread the Word welcomes this research. *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* shines a penetrating light on many of the issues at the heart of the book industry, and further explores concerns raised by our [Writing the Future report](#) (Spread the Word, 2015). The new research unravels the assumptions around quality, the lack of supply, and the perceived risk associated with publishing writers of colour, and challenges the industry's tunnel vision about the audiences for the adult fiction it publishes.

Even so, our experience is that much has changed since 2015, with the industry actively seeking 'BAME' authors, setting up their own schemes to support unpublished talented writers and recruiting more 'BAME' staff in editorial and other areas. There is also increasing awareness by agents and editors of writers of colour emerging from development schemes offered by the network of literature development organisations and other not-for-profit writer organisations.

Reflecting now, as the nation is in COVID-19 lockdown, we at Spread the Word are very concerned that the book industry does not lose sight of its drive for greater inclusion as it seeks to survive in the new, hugely uncertain social and economic landscape. There is precedent for this, Writing the Future found, as the industry's attempts to become more diverse (in response to *The Bookseller's In Full Colour* research of 2004 (Kean, 2004)) were negatively impacted during the turbulent years surrounding the rise of digital, online retail, and the 2008 financial crisis.

Now is the time to double down on inclusion and equalities across the board – for writers, workforce, books produced, and audiences – and an acknowledgement that 'one-off' initiatives are not going to make the change that needs to happen. On demographic changes alone, publishers will need 'BAME' writers and audiences if they want to survive and flourish and be culturally relevant.

Strategic partnerships need to be built with the not-for-profit and wider literature sector, such as the literature development organisations, to ensure that the industry finds the writers and continues to build and reach new

audiences. On a macro level, there needs to be more transparency across the industry to benchmark change, with ongoing research being put in place providing data on the adult fiction and non-fiction titles by UK 'BAME' writers being published.

We welcome the renewed focus on equalities that *Rethinking 'Diversity'* provides, and the impetus it gives to the publishing and literature sectors to refresh and redesign how we work together for the benefit of writers and audiences. We look forward to taking the recommendations forward with the industry and wider literature sector to ensure that sustained systemic change happens.

Rishi Dastidar, Chair of Trustees

Ruth Harrison, Director

Eva Lewin, Writer Development Manager

Spread the Word is the writer development agency for London, established in 1995 by Bernardine Evaristo and Ruth Borthwick, a charity and an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. Alumnae of our ground-breaking development schemes for under-represented writers include: Inua Ellams, Irenosen Okojie, Dean Atta, Malika Booker, and Roger Robinson. Nine writers from our current scheme, the London Writers Awards, have secured representation with three book deals in place.

www.spreadtheword.org.uk

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Statement from

The Bookseller

Today, as our society changes, and reader demographics shift, there is no more important an issue facing the book business than the diversity of its workforce and the make-up of the books that are published.

This is a moral crisis first, but also a business one. Publishers need to find new readers, and they need to find authors who speak to those readers in ways that empathise with who they are, and the experiences they have had. They then need to publish these books commercially, tapping into demand across 'Brexit' Britain and beyond.

First, a little history. That UK publishing is out of step with the wider society it inhabits and serves has been long known. Back in 2004, *The Bookseller's In Full Colour* supplement (Kean, 2004), produced as part of the Arts Council's Decibel programme, found that the industry was an 'overwhelmingly white profession', with 87% of employees white.

Yet despite the warm words uttered at that time, today, 15 whole years on, it is (statistically anyway) little different. According to the Publishers Association (PA), as of 2019, 86% of publishing staff are white, and while the number of 'BAME' employees is growing, it is still below the PA's own target of 15%, and well below London, where most of publishing is based. The numbers infect every bit of the business: from the titles bought from agents, to how the books are marketed through bookstores.

The Bookseller began working with Dr Anamik Saha in early 2017 on his research project 'Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing'. Why? Because it promised answers to some of the questions the data could not address: what happens to books by writers of colour when they go into a publishing house staffed mainly by white, middle-class people? What stops these books breaking out beyond that core middle-class publishing readership? How can such books be better published so that more follow in their wake? How do we make sure the current initiatives tackling this issue become a pipeline to meaningful change?

The approach of Dr Saha and his colleague, Dr Sandra van Lente, who worked on the project with him, takes

us beyond the numbers. Raising the proportion of 'BAME' staff from 14% to 15% will do little unless it comes with an understanding of what difference means, how it manifests in a working environment, and what these new voices bring with them.

The report is also timely. There are now rafts of initiatives launched by major publishers and small ones: these include commitments on hiring more broadly, and discovering and publishing more writers of colour. All are to be applauded, and some are already making a difference. Most noticeably, the broadening of publisher output is moving forwards at a pace, with the launch of Dialogue Books (within the big publishing group Hachette) and Knights Of as a standalone indie just two recent examples, that can sit alongside established companies such as Jacaranda Books, Hope Road, Peepal Tree Press, and the work done over the past 30 years by publisher Margaret Busby. In 2019 Bernardine Evaristo became the first black woman to win the Booker Prize. Late though it arrives, we should not ignore progress when it occurs.

But there is also resistance to change. A sense that to push too fast results in poor publishing, or more simply push-back from those not convinced by the arguments. This is where Dr Saha and Dr van Lente's research really adds value: it examines where these views come from and suggests approaches to tackling them. It demonstrates what slows things down, and how to navigate around them.

It is to be hoped that the *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* report becomes the road-map to lasting change for an industry that is desperate to show it can change. The report is everything *The Bookseller* could have wanted, when we first engaged with the project back in 2017.

Philip Jones, editor

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Introduction

Why do we need to *rethink* 'diversity'?

The publishing industry, perhaps more than any other creative/cultural industry, recognises it has a problem with diversity.

This is mostly made sense of in terms of the ethnic and racial composition of its workforce. According to the 2019 [Publishers Association Workforce Survey](#), while 13% of the respondents surveyed identified as 'BAME', i.e. black, Asian or minority ethnic, which is just less than the UK average (14%), this was significantly lower than in London (40.2%) where most of the publishing industry is based. The same survey shows a significant lack of class diversity, too, with almost half of respondents' parent/s or carer/s in higher managerial and professional occupations, while one in three had intermediate occupations. Almost one in five respondents attended independent or fee-paying schools, which is almost three times that of the UK average.

Why does this matter? It matters in terms of whether people from racial and ethnic minorities are getting the same opportunities as their white peers in publishing, in terms of their access to the industry, and their ability to rise up through the ranks (the PA survey shows that representation of 'BAME' respondents declines as seniority of role increases). But it also matters in terms of the diversity of books being published. While there remains little data on the racial and ethnic diversity of authors in trade fiction – which is the subject of this research – according to Dr Melanie Ramdarshan Bold's [Book Trust survey on children's books](#) (2019), just 5% of children's book creators were people of colour behind 4% of unique titles (2% of children's book creators were *British* people of colour, creating 1.6% of unique titles). We predict that the picture is not much better for adult fiction. Certainly, based on our research, nearly all of the 100+ people working in publishing who we interviewed admitted that, at the very least, the publishing industry could do better in publishing more writers of colour.

One reason we need to rethink diversity is because of the assumption that increasing the number of ethnic and racial minorities among the publishing workforce will

automatically lead to ‘better’ representation of racial and ethnic minorities in the books being published. But is it as simple as that? The influential *Writing the Future* report (Spread the Word, 2015) found that black and Asian authors felt that they were steered into reproducing ethnic and racial stereotypes, whether in their stories or in the way their books were packaged and promoted. The publishing industry’s institutionalised *middle-class whiteness* was explained as one factor for this. But to what extent does the publishing process itself hinder (or not) writers of colour?

Despite the successes of writers of colour, from Malorie Blackman to Zadie Smith, writers from minority backgrounds nonetheless struggle to get their books published or reach certain audiences. Indeed, from our research we found that publishers experience anxieties when publishing writers of colour. The purpose of this research was to unpack these anxieties and identify the particular challenges that publishers face (or believe they will face) when working with authors from ‘BAME’ backgrounds. It also considers the opportunities that such authors are encountering – with diversity so high on the agenda, there certainly seems like there is heightened demand for new talent from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. In other words, the aim of the research was to delve deeply into the publishing process and see how it affects writers of colour.

The Research

This report is one of the first academic studies of ‘diversity’ in publishing. Rather than looking at workforce diversity its focus is the publishing of writers of colour. Our focus was trade fiction, specifically three genres: literary fiction, crime/thriller, and young adult (YA). We picked these genres because of the way in which they varied in terms of the racial and ethnic diversity of the authors published.

According to [Writing the Future](#) (Spread the Word, 2015), 42% of the writers of colour surveyed published in literary fiction, 26% in YA, and just 4% in crime/thriller.

The research is based on in-depth interviews, each lasting an hour on average, with people who work at each stage of publishing. This included agents, publishers, editors, people who work in marketing, design, publicity and sales, and booksellers. We also interviewed authors and festival organisers. Our research subjects included a mix of white and ‘BAME’ respondents and different levels of seniority. Our initial aim was to interview 80 people working across these genres, though the research went better than we anticipated and we ended up interviewing 113 people who work in publishing, 66 of whom were white, and 47 ‘BAME’ (see Appendix). The aim of each interview was to get an insight into how each respondent approaches their role, particularly in relation to their experience of working with writers of colour (if at all). Our broad research interest was in exploring the challenges and opportunities that writers of colour encounter during the publishing process. All respondents were anonymised. While job roles are stated when using quotes from white respondents, because there are so few ‘BAME’ people working in publishing we omitted their job roles in order to protect their identities.

We focused on the core publishing industry, including all the big publishers and some independents. Because of a lack of time and resources we did not investigate important issues such as self-publishing, literary prizes, international rights, journalism, and book fairs. One significant gap in the research is online retailers; while we did make contact with an online retailer, we were disappointed that they declined to participate in the research.

This report presents the research findings. It consists of three main sections where we focus on a general stage of publishing: 1) acquisition; 2) promotion; 3) sales and retail. Interspersed among these sections are smaller pieces that tackle specific issues related to writers of

“Until the publishing industry diversifies its audience, writers of colour will always be ‘othered.’”

colour, including meritocracy in publishing, comping books, book jacket design, and book festivals.

Introducing the Main Findings

The research found that *writers of colour are disadvantaged during each key stage of the publishing process*. It produced three key findings that we introduce here.

Our first main finding is that publishers have a very narrow sense of their audience. The idea of the core reader as a white, middle-class older woman (sardonically referred to as 'Susan' by several of our respondents) remains dominant. There also remain suspicions over whether racial and ethnic minorities read, or at least to the same extent. As such we find that the core publishing industry is set up essentially to cater for this one white reader. While this does not rule out opportunities for writers from minority backgrounds, until the publishing industry diversifies its audience, writers of colour will always be 'othered'. This is a recurring theme throughout the report.

The second main finding is the ambiguity of 'diversity' as *both* a moral and economic imperative. In our interviews respondents articulated strong moral/ethical and commercial cases for why the industry needs to publish more 'diversely'. In terms of the moral case, as one white, female agent put it, 'it is important to me to make sure my list is reflective of the world in which I live and the world that I see around me'. On the other hand, we encountered agents and editors who are *desperate* for more diverse voices – especially in crime/thriller, where the field is so white that having a black or Asian author/protagonist would help the book immediately stand out in a crowded market. As a 'BAME' respondent said to us, 'even if you have zero morals around diversity in publishing it makes economic sense'. However, as we shall show, we are not convinced that publishers really believe in the economic value of diversity. Or more precisely, they are not convinced that their core audience is fully interested in books by writers of colour. The counter-argument then follows that publishers could make more money by engaging new – more

diverse – audiences. But we are not convinced they are really motivated to do so on a larger scale. After all, the traditional market remains very lucrative: according to Nielsen Total Consumer Market (TCM) data, the turnover for print books in 2019 was £1.67 billion. As such, while interviewees recognised they could do better to seek out new audiences, to what extent is there a genuine *inclination* to do so?

Related to this point, our third main finding is that while publishers would like to publish more writers of colour, they believe it is too commercially risky to do so. Publishing, like all forms of cultural production, is an inherently unpredictable business. Because of the intense competition of publishing – according to Nielsen there were 202,078 print books published in the UK in 2019 – we find it mostly produces risk-averse behaviours, rather than risk-taking ones, especially with the big publishers. Against this backdrop, writers of colour become seen as a particularly dangerous investment, which as we shall show, affects not only their acquisition but how they are promoted and sold.

Conclusion

The fundamental challenge that publishers face in tackling diversity is the supposed dichotomy between the commercial and the cultural. All the publishers we spoke to recognise the strong cultural value of their work. Respondents gave us a very genuine sense that they care about the books that they publish, in terms of how they can enrich people's lives and what they can contribute to society. In this way, respondents spoke of publishing as almost providing a public service. But they recognise also that they are fundamentally a business and need to sell books. Indeed, sometimes they spoke of how commercial pressures prevent them from doing some of the work with writers of colour that they would love to do. But is this a given? As suggested, the main problem for publishers is that they are geared up to cater for one (admittedly lucrative) segment of a much bigger audience. We argue that it is only when publishers rethink 'diversity', which goes beyond the question of workforce composition and instead focuses on catering

“It is only when publishers rethink ‘diversity’, which goes beyond the question of workforce composition and instead focuses on catering for the full diversity of the nation that we will see more writers of colour published, and published well.”

for the full diversity of the nation, that we will see more writers of colour published, and published well.

Having said that, we want to stress that there is no right or wrong way to publish such a writer. We also recognise that, as academics, we are not qualified to tell the publisher how to publish writers of colour better. However, in each of the three main sections we list some recommendations that will provide the reader with some practical steps to better publish writers from minority backgrounds. Our hope is that the findings will encourage publishers to challenge their assumptions and reflect on their practices in order to help make the industry a space where writers from all backgrounds can flourish.

Coda

We worked through the final drafts of this report while in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. With publishers having to contend with monumentally complex financial situations, it may be tempting to put issues like diversity on the backburner. However, as publishing houses consider significant restructuring we believe that this provides a unique opportunity to rebuild the industry with diversity and inclusion at its core. It is hard, if not impossible, to make any predictions about what the publishing and bookselling industry will

look like after the pandemic. Hard times will inevitably follow for all. But this is also a chance to rethink what we do and how we do it. Quite possibly, recalibrations will be made. To reiterate, an opportunity has arisen to make tackling inequality a core part of how publishers are doing business. Both COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests have exposed the depth to which racism is entrenched in society. Publishers now have an opportunity to make tackling inequality a core part of how they do business.

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Finding and Acquiring Writers of Colour

Introduction

For writers who aspire to be published, the acquisition stage is generally seen as the most important. Agents and editors have a lot of power generally but when it comes to writers of colour their role as cultural gatekeepers becomes particularly apparent. When we asked our respondents in general about why there were proportionately fewer writers of colour being published, the common understanding was that they are either not being found, that racial and ethnic minorities are not attracted to writing careers, or, more contentiously, that the quality was not there (see RETHINK section on page 16). This was something that we wanted to interrogate and, as suspected, our interviews with respondents involved in acquisition produced rich data. Acquisition is the first gate that can block the entry of writers of colour – we argue disproportionately compared to their white, middle-class counterparts. Moreover, we found that for those writers who do make it through, it is often because they have been moulded (or have moulded themselves) to fit in a way that conforms with the worldview of the predominantly white, middle-class editorship (though there are exceptions). We also encountered publishers and agents who are adopting more creative means to find authors from marginalised groups, recognising that fulfilling the need to publish more diversely requires more proactive measures.

While the acquisition process refers specifically to the process of when a publisher acquires an author, we broaden the term to include the discovery of writers by agents. In what follows we demonstrate how both the practices that constitute scouting/agenting and acquisition can inadvertently disadvantage writers of colour, but also highlight how some of our respondents are trying to challenge this.

Finding Writers

While there are many ways of becoming a published author, the role of agents in the publication of writers

remains strong. Nearly all of the editors we interviewed stated that they rely on agents to find authors, with many saying that an author without an agent is unlikely to be acquired. While finding an agent is a difficult process for any writer, it becomes particularly challenging for writers from minority and working-class backgrounds. We argue that as long as agents rely on the traditional ways of discovering new authors, then writers of colour will remain marginalised in trade fiction.

The majority of the agents that we spoke to use the same routes to find authors. This includes scouting on creative writing courses, networking events, recommendations from other agents/writers, literary prizes/competitions, and via open submissions. When we asked agents specifically about writers of colour, they all agreed that they would like more 'diverse' writers, but most admitted that they struggle to find them. Indeed, discovering such writers was generally presented as a major challenge for agents.

Reasons Given for Not Finding Writers of Colour

The publishers and agents we spoke to gave a variety of explanations for why they struggle to discover writers of colour. The most common reason was that they do not receive submissions from writers from 'BAME' backgrounds (though editors and agents admitted that they cannot always identify – and certainly do not track – whether a writer comes from a racial or ethnic minority based on the cover letter or submission alone). Sometimes this is presented as a class issue, that is, only the middle-classes are attracted to the writing professions, as the following two quotes suggest:

If you're not from a family that's already going to support you somehow, you're probably not going to be motivated to sit down and write books.

– Editor, senior, white, female

For all under-represented voices the idea of writing a book and getting it published probably feels very remote from your day to day experience. If you're white middle

class and/or upper class whatever ... you know it's a possibility because you probably know someone who knows someone who did. Whereas if you're not in any connection with that world, at all, how do you get a book published?

– Sales, senior, white, male

It is interesting that each quote refers to financial and cultural obstacles. While the first quote suggests the issue is purely financial the second quote suggests that the very idea of writing for a career is the preserve, or indeed, the privilege of the (white) middle-classes. One 'BAME' respondent elaborated on this idea based on the notion that publishing lacks role models from racial and ethnic minority groups: 'If they are not seeing themselves, why would they want to do that?'

When the issue of race was specifically brought up the very common response we encountered was that

“As long as agents rely on the traditional ways of discovering new authors, then writers of colour will remain marginalised in trade fiction.”

black and Asian minority groups specifically are not attracted to a career in writing, because of the lack of rewards for labour and status. Instead, they are steered towards other (non-creative) careers. However, some of our respondents were quite hostile towards such reasoning. For instance, one 'BAME' interviewee reacted quite angrily at the suggestion that racial and ethnic minorities choose not to do creative work: 'this idea that we're not interested and that it's always about money is just so offensive. You're basically saying that everybody that is black and brown is only working for us in this country'. But overall the idea that writers of colour are not attracted to writing was challenged for the reason that agents are not doing enough to find racial and ethnic minorities who *do* aspire to be published writers. Indeed, the publishing industry over the past few years has seen a number of writing competitions and writing schemes that target writers of colour, and having spoken to the people behind them it was clear that there was no shortage of submissions, suggesting that there is a pool of writers from minority backgrounds that might be relatively small but is nonetheless going untapped.

How Writers of Colour Struggle to Find Representation

We contend that the traditional ways in which agents find writers creates an immediate obstacle for those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds in particular, compounded if they are non-middle-class. Creative writing courses in particular were seen as exclusionary spaces. As one 'BAME' respondent asserted, 'creative writing courses that cost loads don't make themselves accessible to everyone'.

Another counter to the idea that there are simply no writers of colour out there referred to the opacity of the process. As the 'BAME' respondent above continues, 'a lot of people from diverse backgrounds don't even know what agenting is as a process, they don't even know how to become a published author'. Indeed, a common narrative that we encountered from

publishers and agents, both 'BAME' and white, was that having an awareness of the agenting process is based on privilege. That is, it is only white, middle-class writers who understand the role of agents and how to approach them – or indeed, have personal connections to them via family links or broader social networks.

This raises the issue of class, and how it gets reproduced at the agenting stage of production. As an experienced white, female author told us:

I think the first hurdle's getting an agent, and I think agents are overwhelmingly white, middle-class, very Guardian-reading, liberal by and large and that's the first hurdle and that's the hard one. They are not people who spend their lives dealing with difference. When people encounter a black person, it's because it's their cleaner or it's some terribly nice Oxbridge-educated black person who has been in publishing for 25 years.

This becomes a recurring theme in the report.

However, as alluded to above, there are some agents and publishers attempting to be more proactive in discovering and encouraging writers of colour. Paths described to us included formal routes such as writing competitions for writers from disadvantaged groups,

and informal routes such as reading online journals and blogs and tapping into 'BAME' creative networks and encouraging people of colour to write.

Yet a major obstacle to finding authors in this way is the time and effort required. As one 'BAME' respondent explained to us, 'It's a long process, I've sown plenty of seeds and I'm hoping that eventually some of those will come to fruition, but it takes a long time, and that stuff doesn't just come into you organically all the time'. Another 'BAME' respondent admitted that while they used to be 'much more proactive', they 'can only afford to do a little of that now'. In this regard, many respondents highlighted the importance of programmes provided by writer development agencies as vital spaces for getting new writers, particularly from marginalised communities, into the industry.

Acquiring Writers of Colour

After focusing on the agenting/scouting process, we wanted to explore how and which type of writers of colour are signed by publishers. One of the findings from the *Writing the Future* (Spread the Word, 2015) report was that writers from minority backgrounds feel steered into reproducing racial and ethnic stereotypes. While publishers did not admit to this, what became clear from our interviews is the strategy of replicating past successes. Publishing is an inherently risky business, and as such publishers look to reproduce formats or formulas that they know worked in the past. As one 'BAME' writer put it to us, publishers 'don't want the next big thing. They want the next big thing to be just like the last big thing, only slightly tweaked'. This comment was deliberately facetious, but many other editors made a similar point, that publishers want the same, but different, especially in commercial fiction. It is in this way that familiar tropes around racial and ethnic difference are reproduced. But there was also a sense that 'breaking the mould', as one white editor put it, is 'where the big money potentially comes from down the line, and that's how publishing books changes subtly'.

Conforming to Whiteness

Many of the 'BAME' respondents we spoke to felt that in order to get a publishing deal they had to fulfil certain expectations of what white, middle-class editors want. Take the following quotes from both 'BAME' and white respondents:

And I think a lot of white editors were like 'We thought you were giving us this immigrant narrative, but you're

not, and so we're not going to pursue it.' ... I think there's a particular narrative that they're at ease with, and they know how to grapple with politically, and they know how they want to publish it in a particular way.

– 'BAME' respondent

What people don't seem to be as open to, is somebody [a 'BAME' author] writing a rom-com, or a crime novel. It seems it's almost like we've pigeon-holed [them] and so the more diverse authors are generally writing about war or terrible things.

– Editor, senior, white, female

So thinking about the crime market, if you had like a black Londoner writing about knife crime, I can imagine selling that and people nodding and going, ok, that makes sense. But if it was a black Londoner writing a cosy, village mystery with a vicarage, an Agatha Christie type thing, I think I would struggle to get people to pay attention to that book because it doesn't fit their perception of what [black] people should be doing.

– Sales, senior, white, female

Thus for a writer of colour to be published, their stories need to conform to the worldview of the white, middle-class editors who have particular expectations over what kind of stories are supposedly authentic to these writers.

'BAME' Authors as a Riskier Investment

One major theme that came out of our interviews was the implicit suggestion that writers of colour represented a riskier investment for publishers. While there is a strong narrative that this has been changing in recent times – such that being a writer of colour in certain genres is seen as *an advantage* – there was nonetheless a fear that the core (white) audience will not be able to relate to the stories by writers from racial and ethnic minorities. Take the following quote from a 'BAME' perspective of telling stories that do not conform to particular expectations:

That's not what they think will sell. There's a whole language that they use. 'It didn't resonate with me.' 'I don't know if I can place this book' or whatever. The fact is that they don't know what to do with it because they don't have the kind of mindset. They have certain kinds of barriers and stuff. And I don't think it's conscious. I think it's a cultural thing. I think it's upbringing. I think it's the way they have been conditioned to see the world.

What we found interesting about this quote is the different euphemisms that editors use to explain their

fears over the relatability – or more accurately, the marketability – of books by writers of colour: ‘It didn’t resonate with me,’ ‘I don’t know if I can place this book.’ While such comments can be perfectly innocent, what this respondent alludes to is that when it comes to writers of colour publishers struggle to imagine an

“ I can see that there will be an automatic perception that a commercial title that features a black character as a protagonist might be a smaller opportunity. ”
– Marketing, senior, white, female

audience for such books, or more precisely, audiences beyond the supposed ‘core’ audience. In this way, we find that writers of colour struggle with the perception that their books are seen as too niche, or ‘issue’:

I can see that there will be an automatic perception that a commercial title that features a black character as a protagonist might be a smaller opportunity.

– Marketing, senior, white, female

[speaking of a book with] highly racialised dialogue . . . there’s just a shut-off because they think it’s going to be in an unrelatable setting or this person’s back story is going to be too niche. That comes up a lot.

– Editor, senior, white, female

Books that are dealing with issues are just harder for us to publish.

– Editor, senior, white, female

Thus we find that writers of colour are stuck between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand there is an expectation of what stories such authors are able to write about (usually relating to the author’s racial or ethnic identity in some way), but also a fear that such stories might appear too niche.

Conclusion

From our interviews we find that there are multiple obstacles that writers of colour face in the scouting/agenting/acquisition stage of publishing. In order to effect change, agents and publishing staff need to be aware that a combination of mindset, assumptions,

and standardised publishing processes often pose obstacles to writers of colour. More racial and ethnic diversity in agenting and editing will no doubt have an impact. Agents serious about diversity need to take more proactive measures in finding writers of colour, including looking beyond the traditional routes; the agents who look more creatively are likely to be the most rewarded. Since such work is very labour-intensive, publishers should develop strategic partnerships with organisations that specialise in working with creative writers in under-represented communities, such as writer development agencies and community writing groups. Overall, publishers involved in scouting/agenting/acquisition need to reflect more critically on the assumptions that frame their approach and challenge them where necessary. But ultimately if publishers want to discover more writers of colour, they need to widen their perception of who their audiences are. This is the theme of the following sections.

References

Spread the Word. 2015. *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Marketplace*. www.spreadtheword.org.uk/writing-the-future/

Recommendations

- Leave the usual paths – discover different channels, don’t limit your search to London and other big cities.
- Develop strategic partnerships with writer development schemes in order to find prospective authors who will not come through the traditional paths.
- More diversity in hiring will have a positive impact, especially if new hires have connections to under-represented communities. But don’t burden your ‘BAME’ staff with finding/developing ‘BAME’ authors; let them develop their own niches.
- Reflect upon your practices and assumptions (audience, authors) and change your organisational culture (behaviour, yes, but mindset, too).

RETHINK: Meritocracy and the Question of 'Quality'

While all our respondents agreed that the publishing industry could do more in publishing writers of colour (particularly the case in commercial fiction) there was also a fear of tokenism. Tokenism refers to when writers of colour are published in order to tick a 'diversity' box. When we heard this narrative from our white respondents it was generally expressed in solidarity with writers of colour, who, it was felt, would not want to be published on the basis of the colour of their skin. However, while we did find that the fear of tick-boxing was shared by white and 'BAME' respondents alike, we found this narrative spoke also to wider anxieties publishers have when publishing writers of colour.

While all of our respondents agreed that they would like to publish more 'diversely' some expressed a concern that this would lead to a lower quality of books being published. Take the following quotes, for example:

I do believe that people still think that to publish tokenistically is to undermine quality.

– Marketing, senior, white, female

And I do think that a number of sub-par books are being published precisely because they're not written by white people. I don't think that's good for anyone.

– Editor, senior, white, male

[on the demand for more writers of colour] everybody is aiming towards making things more politically correct.

– Agent, senior, white, female

The respondents behind the first two quotes in particular made it clear that while publishing more diversely is important this should not be to the detriment of quality – as stated, a view shared by the majority of our respondents. But we also found a counter-narrative that suggested that the argument around quality is somewhat disingenuous, as the following quotes illustrate:

On the one hand you can say some people might say, 'Well we're getting these inferior books published because of this tick boxing', but on the other you can say, 'Well isn't it great that we're having inferior books published by BAME people because we've had inferior books published by white people for long enough!'

– Agent, senior, white, male

And sometimes they spend an awful lot of money on books that are shit.

– Author, senior, white, female

Indeed, when pressed, many of the publishers we spoke to – across both literary and commercial fiction – conceded that not everything they published was necessarily of the highest 'quality'. Instead, they might see a book/writer as being 'commercial', but this very rarely applies to writers of colour for reasons that shall be explored throughout this report. In general, though, we found that it is the fear of compromising quality that is essentially holding back writers of colour.

In this regard we want to challenge what publishers mean by 'quality'. 'If it's good we will publish it' is a comment we heard throughout the research. But to what extent is this notion of 'good' really that universal? In an industry that is dominated by the white middle-classes, many of whom attended Russell Group universities, notions of 'quality' are shaped by a very particular experience and education, based on a canon that in recent times has been questioned for its Eurocentric view of the world. While some publishers may contest this, what we add, instead, is that the real challenge to diversity is less about the fear of diminished quality but more about publishing's sense of its own audience. As stated, the publishers we spoke to admitted to publishing books that they do not always love. But the reason for publishing such books was because they knew that there was an audience for them.

We believe that comments about a lack of 'quality', while certainly the case with certain writers of colour (there is no universal right to be a published writer after all), also stems from publishers' lack of confidence on how to reach wider audiences. One of our key findings is that publishers do not know how to engage the communities that those authors belong to. To put it more provocatively, publishers do not see value in the types of books that they imagine they would need to publish in order to engage those audiences. Thus, the discourse around how a particular writer of colour may lack 'quality' can also be read as not believing that the core, white, middle-class audience will see value in this book, other than if they were to buy it for tokenistic reasons. In other words, the struggles that writers of colour face in getting their books published are not always about their perceived lack of quality, but can be more of a case of publishers not knowing how to reach

the audiences who would be interested in such books.

Underpinning the narrative on quality is a broader issue relating to meritocracy. Frequently encountered comments such as 'we don't care who the author is, if it's good we will publish it' are basically premised on publishing as a meritocracy – that everyone has the chance to be published if their work is of a high enough quality. It follows that 'diversity', when it is understood as giving special affordances to writers of colour, is seen as potentially undermining publishing's meritocratic foundations. Thus publishers want to publish more 'diversely' but are held back from taking proactive, *affirmative* measures to address this as it might be seen as giving writers of colour an unfair

“To what extent is this notion of 'good' really that universal?”

advantage over white writers (expressed in terms of publishers not wanting to compromise quality). We argue that in order for publishers to publish more diversely, they need to challenge their own assumptions about whether publishing truly is a meritocracy. The monocultural nature of the industry, the books published and the audiences catered for suggest that, despite its best intentions, publishing is not the level playing field that it might like to think it is.

RETHINK: The Art of Comping

Comping – the process of finding comparative titles in order to predict sales – is at the core of commercial publishing. While, as we shall show, some of our respondents were critical of comping practices, many accepted this as a key process in publishing. What became apparent in our research was that, far from an exact science, comping is a very creative act. We also learnt that there is no right or wrong way to 'comp' a writer of colour. But there are also inevitably particular challenges that such writers face, which are distinct from those of their white peers.

One issue that was raised was on whether to compare writers of colour to other writers of colour or to white writers. In some ways it feels the obvious solution is to comp with the nearest similar title, whether written by someone who shares the same racial/ethnic identity of the author or not. Nonetheless, such a topic provoked some strong responses. For instance, some respondents were critical of 'forcing a white comparison'. One senior editor we spoke to criticised the practice of making books by writers of colour as the 'black' or 'Asian' version of successful books by white authors, asking her colleagues, 'Why do you need to find a cultural example within your own context that makes you feel comfortable?' On the other side of the coin a 'BAME' respondent spoke out against how writers of colour are comped with other writers of colour even though they may share nothing in common other than the same racial background:

It could be a book about sunflowers, and someone will make the comparison to Reni Eddo-Lodge and it's like, you're only doing that because it's a book by a black woman and that it's non-fiction.

These examples point to how particular comparisons were made in order to amplify the commercial value of the book. Indeed, while these respondents were critical of the practices described, it should be acknowledged that some writers of colour would appreciate being compared in this way, rather than have their book marginalised for being too niche.

This raises another issue, regarding the lack of data that exists for writers of colour, which affects how they are comped. As one senior, white, female editor said to us, the lack of such data 'could disadvantage [writers of colour] if there's not good comparisons in the marketplace'. A 'BAME' respondent agreed that a lack of data can 'hold authors of colour back':

finding a comparison can prove incredibly difficult, or the comparisons might not necessarily have the numbers the editor or sales might want, so it might mean that a book isn't published, cos there isn't a comparison to go with it.

A senior, white agent we spoke to made the point that despite the success of some writers of colour, 'we haven't published things that are both commercial and sensitively representative yet and so there's been no real successes in order to prove that point'. This particular respondent refers to a *chicken-and-egg* situation, that the reason that we do not see more writers of colour published is because we have not seen enough commercially successful writers of colour.

Interestingly, one 'BAME' respondent explains this excuse – that a lack of comparative titles is what is holding back writers of colour – as a form of unconscious bias in itself: 'they're probably looking for excuses to not publish it'. Indeed, a quote by one senior, white publisher alludes to how data, while regarded as objective and neutral, is used creatively to back up editors' own agendas: 'they tend to take the bits of it that they like and discount the rest'. In this way, one gets a sense of how data used during the comping process can be used to confirm a particular bias.

We would want to add that there is also an issue about the lack of data around particular audiences, which can affect the comping of writers of colour. One senior, white

marketing manager had this to say about the use of data, when dealing with 'niche' audiences:

when you're trying to publish something into an area, it could be a non-fiction book that has just got a really niche community, you're just like, I don't know anything about this, how do I get to them? It's a big challenge and again, most big companies wouldn't even dream of doing that unless they had a whole load of research at their fingertips.

While this is not about comping per se, what we take from this quote is how a lack of data can hold a book back. And when it comes to writers of colour, a lack of data about the communities that they belong to means that the major publishers would not take a risk on them. The question of audience is unpacked further in the sections on promotion and sales.

“Comping is a creative practice, but a constraining one when it comes to writers of colour.”

Essentially writers of colour are being comped in relation to data that comes from a single readership: the white, middle-class audience. And we argue that a lack of data around untapped audiences – especially 'BAME' ones – is holding back writers of colour. But to reiterate, we do not believe that there is a right or wrong way to comp a writer of colour. Rather we want to draw attention to how the question of whether to compare a writer of colour to a white or non-white author is even a question in the first place. As one 'BAME' respondent said to us, when it comes to 'non-diverse' books (that is, books by white authors), 'there just seems to be more freedom in what you can do'. Comping is a creative practice, but a constraining one when it comes to writers of colour.

Promoting Writers of Colour

Introduction

In the section on finding and acquiring authors we suggested that writers of colour are held back by a view that they lack commercial value. This is based on how publishers perceive their audience. When we interviewed people that work in the promotion of a book – including jacket design, marketing, and publicity – it became apparent that they all shared a common understanding of their 'core' audience: explicitly middle-class, implicitly white. While they would target particular niches, these would be subsets within this one demographic, for instance, distinguishing between *Guardian* or *Daily Telegraph* readers. In other words, publishers have a very narrow sense of who their audience is, and if a writer of colour is not seen as having value to this very specific group then they are less likely to get published. It follows, then, that writers of colour who do get acquired are packaged and promoted in a way that is made to appeal to a white, middle-class audience.

That is not to say that it is necessarily *bad* to publish books by minority authors in this way. Indeed, targeting white, affluent audiences can become a lucrative opportunity for some writers of colour as well as publishers. But in what follows we want to explore how the promotion stage of publishing can disadvantage writers of colour. We consider publishers' perceptions of their own audience, before exploring how these assumptions shape how writers of colour are marketed and publicised. We then examine the struggles publishers face in attempting to reach wider audiences.

Who is the Audience?

When we began our interviews with people involved in marketing and publicity, we anticipated hearing comments such as *for a black author we targeted a black audience*. In fact, respondents were quite critical of this type of marketing. As one white woman in marketing said about targeting specific audiences based on the ethnic/racial identity of an author, 'I just think that's not how readers approach books'. A 'BAME' respondent

agreed: 'if you're publishing a book on ethnicity, it doesn't mean that people of colour are the only people going to be reading it'.

However, as our research continued we found that the reason for not targeting specific minority audiences for writers of colour was a fear about how this would limit the overall audience. When we asked one white respondent who works in publicity about whether they would approach 'ethnic press' for a particular book, she replied 'yes, but you would do that in addition to a core literary readership that you've got with Radio 4'. According to this respondent, engagement with minority audiences is seen as an additional extra, rather than the core marketing activity. Hence our main finding that – with particular reference to the major publishing houses – ethnic and racial authors are marketed in a way that appeals specifically to the core publishing audience; as a respondent in sales put it to us, 'a sort of 50-something middle class to upper middle-class white woman who reads a lot because she has time, and she has resources to spend on books'. She was often referred to in our interviews as *Susan* or *Suzie*. The understanding of the core book-buying audience as middle-class became very clear in our interviews. When we asked a senior marketing manager if he had ever used a social grade category other than 'AB' when defining the potential market for a particular book, he replied: 'never, you would never start there, even if that might be your ultimate audience'.

However, we did encounter some respondents who were rethinking who publishers consider their main audience. For instance, one senior, white, female editor wanted to challenge 'the assumption that the majority of the British reading public is white'. As she continued 'technically it is I suppose, but I think we base too much on that'. One comment from a (white) respondent who worked in marketing alluded to how there was something actually quite disingenuous about the idea that focusing on a minority audience would limit an author's readership, when the numbers that publishers deal with are so low

in the first place (especially in literary fiction where writers of colour feature the most); as he said, 'there was a sort of joke, are we talking to the same two thousand people in London every single time?'

But as stated, our concern here is the implications for writers of colour when the target audience is white and middle-class. One 'BAME' respondent told us how they once observed editors asking for changes to a manuscript by a writer of colour that basically amounted to it being 'translated for a white reader'. As they put it, 'not every book is being written for a white reader', and that sometimes the writer in question is 'writing to their own community'. The question then is to what extent are publishers able to reach – or are *invested in reaching* – these communities? This is something we explore in more detail in the final part of this section. But first we consider how writers of colour are promoted to white, middle-class audiences.

Promoting and Publicising Writers of Colour

The following quote from a 'BAME' respondent provides an interesting overview of how writers of colour are marketed, in terms of the types of narratives that are used to promote their work.

Either you've been redeemed by the establishment so, you've gone to Oxbridge, so, they say 'amazing intellect, went to Oxbridge'. Or you came from the streets: 'look how good he's done'. Those are the two main marketing channels for publishing in England, if you think about it.

This respondent describes how writers of colour effectively become squeezed into either of two marketing routes, both of which fulfils a particular white, liberal expectation of who and what writers of colour are allowed to be. Moreover, this limits the opportunities for writers of colour who want to talk beyond their experience, and not talk about their racial or ethnic identity. As a white publicity manager said to us:

I think a lot of writers of colour often get typecast in the media like, you can talk about your experience of writing from a marginalised perspective but if you want to talk about popular culture or you want to talk about TV or films ... sometimes people can be a bit sniffy about that.

While a writer of colour might choose to talk about

their marginalised experience, such a burden prevents writers of colour from speaking about broader issues or interests. The 'BAME' respondent from the previous quote states that such an attitude can end up 'exoticising people', as writers of colour find themselves having to *perform* their racial and ethnic identities in ways that conform to mainstream white, liberal views in order to get media exposure. They add, 'the industry says it wants to diversify, but it's on its own terms'.

This introduces another issue related to publicity that can disadvantage writers of colour: the sole focus

“To what extent are publishers able to reach – or are invested in reaching – ['BAME'] communities?”

on what one publicity manager described as 'traditional media'. This is based on the understanding that getting big book sales relies upon obtaining national press coverage. A 'BAME' respondent similarly describes how 'mainstream media' is targeted for books by writers of colour:

because that's what Waterstones, and that's what the independents, and that's what Amazon understands. They only understand mainstream [media] that has quite a white, middle-class audience. Because that's their customer base.

What we find particularly interesting about this quote is its reference to booksellers. Publicity here is less about reaching audiences and more about winning over booksellers. Moreover, publicity managers need to focus on media that the booksellers recognise and see as valuable. This serves to reinforce publishing's middle-class foundations, in terms of the people it hires, the media it focuses on, and the audience it is selling to. To be a published writer of colour means being able to be connected into this circuit. This raises the issue, why are 'BAME' audiences undervalued? If they are seen to have value, why do publishers struggle to reach them?

Struggles to Find Diverse Audiences

When we spoke to 'BAME' respondents in particular, there was a strong sense that publishers do not do enough to engage more diverse audiences. As one 'BAME' respondent put it, 'I think just the lack of relationship and the lack of willingness to build a sense

of community with people who aren't white is really present'. We identified several ways in which this was expressed, which in turn point to how publishers can do better to reach wider communities of readers.

Firstly, one reason given for why publishers are failing to engage more 'diverse' audiences was based on assumptions about minority reading behaviours. When we pressed one 'BAME' respondent about why publishers do not engage minority audiences, they proffered, 'maybe they think they don't read'. This was a contentious topic with the majority of the publishers we spoke to denying that they felt this. But nonetheless we felt that such a belief did underline assumptions about minority audiences. One 'BAME' respondent we spoke to however was quite firm in their opinion that the minorities do not read, but only because publishers do not cater for them:

Ethnic minorities don't read, and we don't know how to make them read ... Publishers don't have a clue about how to increase their market.

This relates to a second issue regarding the struggles that writers of colour have in promoting their books: the way that publishers undervalue 'non-mainstream' media. Specifically, we are referring to new online platforms created by minorities directly for audiences that have been traditionally neglected. Interestingly, these new media are gaining much cultural (and commercial) significance beyond their core audience. *gal-dem* was one such platform that was mentioned first and foremost by younger publishers. But it was felt that the big publishers in particular are failing to engage with this new generation of digital media even though they present unique opportunities in engaging

of recruitment and the value of making promotional teams more diverse. For instance, one white, female editor referred to a colleague in marketing who shared an upbringing with the author in question which helped to promote a book she was working on:

[He] grew up on an estate in the north and there was such freshness to his ideas for the book. He really connected, it was really, really helpful but wouldn't it be wonderful if that wasn't an exceptional experience?

Indeed, one major issue regarded the expectation placed on 'BAME' publishers to do the labour of reaching more diverse audiences. We found a variety of responses in this regard. Some 'BAME' respondents were happy to perform this role:

I feel like I have a responsibility to do so, because if I don't, I just know that these groups will not be approached. And I just know that in acquisitions or in board rooms or in meetings when I'm not there, I know that certain things would be said that are false and untrue. So, this community doesn't really read, and they don't really like books like that.

While others find it demeaning and tokenistic:

I feel like being asked to fix diversity as the one diverse person infuriating, but then when I do try and fix it and you don't listen to me, then that's just tokenism.

The responses above demonstrate the complex feelings that 'BAME' respondents have about being expected to do the work regarding minority audiences. We do not believe there is a 'right' or 'wrong' way to approach this. But we do want to refer back to the first quote in this series that alludes to what happens when racial and ethnic minorities are not present, including the assertion of problematic assumptions about minority audiences, let alone the lack of interest in these minority audiences in the first place.

“ This raises the issue, why are 'BAME' audiences undervalued? ”

particular audiences. As one 'BAME' respondent put it, these platforms are 'perfect opportunities where you can put books by people of colour ... but they're not being targeted'.

Indeed, in our interviews with white people who work in press and publicity we got a sense that they do not know what media channels to target for writers of colour. As one respondent conceded: 'I don't know if we know as much about black media'. This raises the issue

To conclude this section, however, we want to draw attention to one comment from a 'BAME' respondent who describes how, despite their aspiration to do so, they are unable to reach under-represented audiences through a lack of resources:

Let's just say there is an ambition to be able to do that, and then there is the reality of resources that they have within a publishing house. And I would say that is my biggest challenge. I can have every ambition to find new

audiences and diversify their reading, etc. But at the end of the day, who is actually going to do that and how is that going to happen and who is going to help you make that happen?

What this respondent refers to is how they feel they do not have the resources – in terms of money or people power – to reach the communities that writers of colour belong to. With the best will in the world, this person feels that finding ‘new audiences’ is beyond the means of publishers, that this is the ‘reality’. But regardless of the question of funding (and the £1.67 billion turnover in 2019 suggests that there is some money somewhere), the more pressing question is do publishers, as a whole, have the inclination to reach new audiences? Do they find *value* in such audiences? From

We believe that if publishers are serious about diversity they need to focus on how to reach audiences that they do not usually target. This requires significant resources but we believe there are some immediate steps that publishers can take. Publishers would benefit from investing in promotional talent who know these communities and relevant media inside-out. (But ‘BAME’ employees should not be *expected* to do or be restricted to this labour.) As publishers are effectively creating new audiences this role needs to be properly resourced and supported. We also recommend that publishers develop strategic partnerships with audience development agencies that specialise in reaching neglected communities. Again, these partnerships need to be properly invested in.

“ I feel like being asked to fix diversity as the one diverse person infuriating, but then when I do try and fix it and you don’t listen to me, then that’s just tokenism.”
– ‘BAME’ respondent

our research respondents persuaded us that they do care about engaging new communities for readers. But to achieve this, publishers need to understand that they need to go beyond the traditional channels.

Conclusion

To reiterate, one of our key findings is that the publishing industry is set up to cater for just one white, middle-class audience. Writers of colour are essentially promoted to appeal to this core audience, which can lead to their exoticisation and marginalisation.

Fundamentally, publishers need to challenge their assumptions about minority audiences, that they are not interested in books. While we should be careful not to define particular racial and ethnic groups as homogenous, publishers need to recognise that such audiences have been profoundly neglected. There is huge commercial potential in these audiences, but reaching them entails publishers realising their cultural value as well as economic potential.

Recommendations

- Recognise that there is more than one kind of reader.
- Hiring more people who belong to communities not traditionally targeted by publishing can bring new, fresh perspectives to the promotion of books.
- Recognise the value of the growing number of ‘BAME’-led online platforms. These might not have the clout of traditional media, but they can help publishers target new audiences.
- Collaborate with audience engagement organisations/consultants. They can help reach new audiences in the promotion of *all* books – not just those by writers of colour.
- Understand that reaching new audiences demands strong investment and resources, otherwise such initiatives will only ever be tokenistic.

RETHINK: Designing the Covers of Writers of Colour

Publishers have a very specific idea of their audience. While this does not necessarily shut off opportunities for writers of colour (after all, the core book buyer is a voracious reader 'open to new perspectives', as one editor put it to us), it can constrain their craft. We find this to be particularly the case in the design of their book jackets.

In our interviews with people involved in book cover design we found that there remains a fear that featuring a racial or ethnic minority person on the cover could lead to diminished sales. In recent times we have seen plenty of examples of book covers featuring black and brown figures that have gone on to become bestsellers, so we were surprised that such attitudes still exist. Take the following quotes:

I think it's still quite unusual [and] seen as a bold move to have a black character ... a photograph of a black character ... I think things have changed quite a lot recently, but historically, it would have been seen as you were then relegating that book to sort black interest and therefore, you would be decreasing your sales.

– 'BAME' respondent

I've been in meetings where a book [by a writer of colour] might be perceived as niche. ... I have heard my managing director, my then MD, who is still in a senior role in publishing say, 'We can't put a black girl on the cover of a book because it won't sell.' And that is in my lifetime. And that was shocking to me then. And is still shocking now.

– Editor, senior, white, female

The following quote came from the editor of a book that featured a person of colour on the cover:

There was one supermarket who told our sales director that their demographic was white working class and therefore they saw no reason to support the book.

– Editor, senior, white, male

It is interesting that one of the quotes above comes from a 'BAME' respondent, which shows how ethnic and racial minorities who work in publishing can internalise dominant understandings around blackness seen as potentially niche.

The response to the fear of a depiction of race as potentially limiting the audience is to try and downplay the race angle. Some respondents referred to characters from racial/ethnic backgrounds literally being whitened on covers, as one 'BAME' respondent puts it, 'so when the character is black or ... mixed ... you've just had like a white woman on the front!'. Another 'BAME' respondent describes an instance where a psychological thriller, written by a writer of colour, was packaged 'with white people on the front' for the reason, so they were told, that 'we saw it as an opportunity to package commercially'. Respondents also referred to how writers of colour are packaged to fit in certain genres, in a way that can undermine the story, as the following quote illustrates:

So, I know one writer who published a novel which was a very serious novel, and the cover made it look like some kind of airport romantic fiction, with very ... and the

characters in the novel were black people and quite dark, but the cover made them look lighter. Because they obviously thought they wanted to reach a certain market.

– ‘BAME’ respondent

Needless to say, ‘BAME’ respondents in particular were very critical of the process of whitewashing, described by one as ‘incredibly disrespectful and reductive’.

This quote is interesting for the way that they describe how ‘black writing’ in this instance becomes a genre in itself.

We want to stress that there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to design the jacket for a book by a writer of colour. But our finding is that publishers’ focus on a very particular white, middle-class audience leads to the presentation of books by writers of colour in very particular ways. Publishers either downplay or

“There was one supermarket who told our sales director that their demographic was white working class and therefore they saw no reason to support the book.”
– Editor, senior, white, male

The examples here refer to commercial fiction, but it is interesting that in literary fiction we found examples where ethnicity or race became a way of making the book attractive; as one designer put it to us, ‘you would use African, Indian, whatever sort of colours and textures and patterns to denote this is ... you know ...’. A ‘BAME’ respondent refers to a book cover that signifies the racial identity of the author and the characters of the book: ‘So the cover is quite gorgeous. It’s really colourful and they used traditional fabric designs ... they were very much trying to use that to appeal to people to make them interested’. As another ‘BAME’ respondent put it:

I think in literary fiction there is still a little bit of signifying that goes on in terms of, ‘Oh, this is a writer of colour, so, therefore, let’s make it look like this.’ Not ghettoising but kind of making black writing a genre. There is still a bit of that, I think.

reject strong racial signifiers through fear of making the book too niche, or represent their difference in a softly, *exoticised* way (such as the use of ethnic fabrics) that would appeal to a liberal, white, middle-class sensibility. While this may lead to bigger sales for the benefit of both the author and the publisher, ‘BAME’ respondents were much more ambivalent about this trend, especially for the way that it can undermine the narrative of the book. As one ‘BAME’ respondent puts it, it places ‘expectations for [writers of colour] to write a certain type of book’ in order to fit into these kind of marketing categorisations. So writers of colour face either whitewashing or exoticisation. It is only once publishers start broadening their sense of the audience that we will see more diverse visual representations of race in publishing.

RETHINK: Literary Festivals

Across all interviews, literary festivals and public author events were mentioned as important publicity opportunities to establish direct contact with readers and raise author profiles. While these events bear the potential to also craft direct connections with audiences who might not frequent bookshops, our interviews revealed that festivals are shaped by the same assumptions around 'BAME' and working-class readers.

Two recurring assumptions are that festival audiences (in particular in crime fiction) are white and middle-class and thus attracted to a specific kind of book. The other, that literature festivals outside of London in regions with a strong 'BAME' population have encountered, is that 'BAME' audiences would not be interested as much in literature. As one 'BAME' respondent recalled, they were advised to 'call it a book festival, make it more *festival*', as stakeholders believed that 'people are not going to engage with the literature festival, it's too high-brow'. The success in terms of attendance and high-quality line-ups of those literature festivals has refuted such assumptions partly, but they have not gone away.

Even if publishers recognise the value of such festivals 'as a really great opportunity to take someone outside of London and take someone to a major city and to a different audience' (festival curator, junior, white, female), one junior, white festival programmer expressed her irritation at some publishers who seemed to assume that 'BAME' audiences will automatically attend if there is a large 'BAME' population in the area: 'That's a very diverse city. "Surely this particular writer from this particular ethnicity will work because you have that community" ... I have found that we do get pitched particular kinds of writers because of where we are.' As stated in the section on promotion, these audiences also need to be attracted and relationships established.

On the other side of the spectrum, some festivals have become such highly regarded institutions that observations about their programme and audience were referred to as 'proof' about what works in a specific genre and what its audience looks like. The audience of crime fiction festivals was often mentioned to describe the mainstream crime fiction audience as white, middle-class, and rather conservative:

the audience for most crime and thriller has been white, often women, often of a certain age, and so I think probably most publishers without really thinking about it just felt that's who's buying it and they're buying into largely a very specific kind of [crime fiction] ... often quite backward looking in terms of England of yesteryear ... it's quite traditional.

– MD, senior, white, male

However, this notion was also challenged by some respondents who emphasised that the whiteness of the audience does not mean they are only interested in stories from their own experience. A senior author (white, female) warned that publishers often ‘under-estimate their audience quite profoundly’, an audience that is ‘a lot more open than people think. They look like a white Tory audience, but they’re not, not by any manner or means’.

And while the racial or ethnic diversity of the audiences and authors are addressed more frequently, one ‘BAME’ respondent drew attention to socio-economic issues. Indeed, we encountered concern in a number of sales and publicity interviews of how to attract working-class audiences or rather comments that they are hardly ever approached (see also section on promotion).

The issue is the working class. It just so happens a disproportionate amount of the BAME community, most of it, sits within that socio-economic class. White working-class people have exactly the same issues with reading that BAME communities do, and that's a factor that is forgotten. It's lovely for children to see themselves reflected, of course it is. And it's nice to have that mixture, but that isn't the underlying thing here. That's where the festival comes in, because that's what we try to engage.

– ‘BAME’ respondent

Literary festivals have the opportunity to approach potential readers who might not venture into a

traditional bookstore and be more appealing to those who do not feel welcome or represented in those spaces. As one junior, white, female festival curator reported, their aim was partly to ‘demonstrate that literature is not just picking up a book and reading it. It's actually in everything around us’ and thus be more welcoming to a wider audience. She continued:

it shows that actually by putting on these events, that there is an audience there who want to come and hear that ... there's quite a diverse audience coming to that event which is fantastic, because they're seeing us as a place where those audiences can come and be part of those conversations.

“Literary festivals have the opportunity to approach potential readers who might not venture into a traditional bookstore.”

And one ‘BAME’ respondent emphasised how creating entertaining events with ‘the books at the heart’, but also other artists surrounding it, ‘brings in different audiences’.

The challenge seems to be to get publishers on board. And with publishing being quite London-centric, many public readings and festivals happen in the South. One senior salesperson (white, female) reported how those ‘booksellers that are a long way away from London feel a bit left behind sometimes’ (with sales through events playing a big role). In addition, the cultural capital associated with some of the more established/traditional/white literary festivals make publicity staff try for them first. This makes one wonder if the value associated with ‘BAME’ and working-class audiences is as high as the value associated with the audiences at the ‘Cheltenham’, ‘Hays’, and ‘Harrogate’.

Selling Books by Writers of Colour

Introduction

With 202,078 print books published in 2019 (Nielsen), publishers are competing for the attention of readers as well as for shelf space and bookshop support. Our interviews revealed a set of challenges and opportunities for books by 'BAME' authors in the UK. Centralised book buying and dominance of a few players are seen as major challenges and have an effect on publishers. Furthermore, interviewees revealed once more that the core audience they know how to reach is a white, middle-class readership. The accessibility of bookshops was reflected upon, with many respondents expressing concerns that bookshops might make 'BAME' and working-class readers feel excluded or not welcome. And while independent bookshops as well as digital communication and sales channels can provide a number of opportunities for books by 'BAME' authors, one concern remained that the whiteness of bookselling and retail created obstacles for 'BAME' authors and their books. As one 'BAME' respondent said: 'we can do everything we want to in this building on getting in more authors of colour, but if retailers aren't engaged with that conversation then there's no point'.

“It's the Catch-22 that authors, if they're not stocked in supermarkets, aren't going to sell shitloads, which is so infuriating.”
– Sales, senior, white, female

Market Concentration and Centralised Book Buying Affect 'BAME' Authors Negatively

Independent booksellers aside, most book buying on the retail side is centralised in the UK. While not all outlets stock the exact same books, the buying power is in the hands of very few people. And while the particular bookshops can decide what they want to stock from the central warehouse, outlets like supermarkets don't have any room for regional differentiation; as a senior, white book buyer stated, 'that level of complexity would just kill the whole system, it's just a big machine for moving books through fast and efficiently'.

The comparatively tiny number of book buyers is particularly worrying because of their potentially biased perspective. As the following 'BAME' respondent put it, the monoculturalism of the decision makers poses an obstacle to the backing of books by 'BAME' authors: 'there's such a profitable opportunity for us, for retailers, for the media, but they're just not getting it. And I think that because at the top level, it's quite a homogenous group of people who kind of are the decision makers, who sanction it, that they'll have a little bit of it'. Thus, even though there is a commercial argument, retailers don't see the opportunity and/or are content with having a token number of 'BAME' authors stocked.

In addition to the impact on what is stocked, the decision makers in retail also have an impact on book cover design (see RETHINK section on page 24). Again, the decision-making power lies in a few hands:

we're aiming to get into Waterstones or the supermarkets and a lot of a book's success, as in sales success, will depend on whether they get those slots or not. We have had instances where we've shown a cover to Waterstones and the Waterstones buyer didn't like it, so, we then have to change it basically, otherwise it's not going to get into the shops.

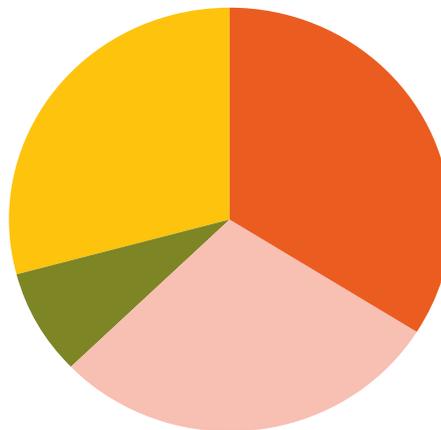
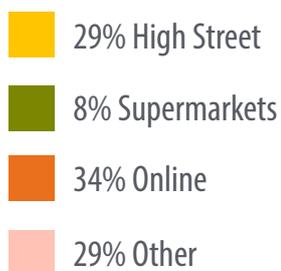
– Designer, senior, white, female

The centralised nature of book buying, combined with the commercial pressure booksellers reported, can lead to a concentration on a very limited range of books, i.e. books by authors who already have a positive track record or books that publishers and booksellers feel confident they know the audience for – thus perpetuating the status quo of representation. As a senior, white, female bookseller conceded: 'I know that you would tend to fall back on examples that can give you a grounding ... We're a business, so people aren't supposed to go off-piste too often'. Similarly, a 'BAME' respondent observed: 'they're working in a precarious sort of high street business and they'll always go for the sure-fire thing'.

Reactive Retailers Disadvantage 'BAME' Authors

In a number of conversations, hope was expressed to have more (commercial) books by 'BAME' authors receive more attention from booksellers after a successful precedent. However, if books by 'BAME' authors are considered 'too niche' for supermarkets and/or get packaged as literary fiction where sales figures are generally lower, conclusions might be drawn that 'BAME' books have less commercial appeal. One 'BAME' respondent called for 'more championing of authors of

Sales channels



Source: Nielsen Books & Consumers tracker for 2019.

(Other = festivals, book clubs, retailers like gift shops or garden centres, toy shops, bargain bookshops etc.)

colour in commercial spaces' and emphasised that as 'more authors of colour get funnelled more into literary spaces' one side effect was that 'you don't get to see huge numbers'. It becomes a perpetuating system, in particular if 'BAME' books are comped with other 'BAME' books with lower sales numbers which again makes supermarkets less likely to stock them.

The supermarkets are the most traditional of all the retailers out there in terms of being – not resistant to change but the commercial side of it is really the only thing that they're interested in. And so, taking risks is just not in their vocab ... it's the Catch-22 that authors, if they're not stocked in supermarkets, aren't going to sell shitloads, which is so infuriating.

– Sales, senior, white, female

Respondents across positions described the main book retailers as 'reactive', brand authors and expected bestsellers with large marketing budgets aside. Booksellers were described to be waiting for the reactions around the publication date to adapt their order numbers, watching out for 'that kind of organic

“If publishers do not invest in publicity and marketing, any 'buzz' is rather unlikely unless the author brings their own audience.”

buzz that comes from a book, from booksellers reading it', as a senior, white, female bookseller put it.

We would like to challenge the idea that this 'buzz' is as 'organic' as is claimed. Indeed, if publishers do not invest in publicity and marketing, any 'buzz' is rather unlikely

unless the author brings their own audience. So again, 'BAME' authors risk being disadvantaged if they are not backed substantially by their publishers and/or if there are no appropriate comparisons that make booksellers stock the titles.

In YA, there seems to be a particular disadvantage for 'BAME' authors from the UK compared to their US counterparts when it comes to being stocked and supported by mainstream booksellers. A 'BAME' respondent observed that booksellers 'go for the big US authors with big profiles, big press coverage, as opposed to somebody who's a homegrown London author'. So if 'BAME' authors are disadvantaged in PR and marketing, this can produce a ripple effect in bookselling:

we can put whatever we like on our shelves ... but really the most sales we will get are people being driven to things because they've read a review, they've heard it on the radio, they've seen a poster ... that is the publishers' responsibility to be putting the books out there into people's minds ... I'm sure the percentage that we hand sell, or put in a catalogue or display, is going to sell a fraction compared to the big books that they get behind and they push. So if we're provided with good books, we will sell them; and if they promote good books, we'll sell even more.

– 'BAME' respondent

Bookshops: Exclusive White, Middle-Class Spaces?

One challenge that brick-and-mortar bookshops seem to face is that they can feel exclusive to non-white, non-middle-class people. Our respondents suspected the following reasons for this: what booksellers stock (i.e. highbrow books or books with predominantly white, middle-class protagonists), how the shop is designed, the location and the staff of the bookshops (i.e. white, middle-class).

One bookseller (senior, white, female) suspected that the location of the bookshops already had an impact on the customers: 'Bookshops, by necessity, are often

in affluent parts of the country. So you got a skewed demographic, immediately'. But even in areas in which the population has a demographic with >50% 'BAME', bookshops' staff and audiences tend to be white. This senior, white, female bookseller described how she tries to attract more 'BAME' readers into her store: 'signalling, showing, signifying that there is, there's something, that the community is reflected in the shop. Window, stock choice. I would just focus on making sure I'm choosing diverse stock and event programming'.

But while the selection of stocked books might lead to the effect of a wider audience, independent booksellers face particular challenges when it comes to pricing. Independent booksellers reported that stocking e.g. commercial crime fiction does not make any sense for them because of the high discounts that bigger retailers can pass on to their customers. So, in turn, the stock of the affected independent booksellers might make the shop feel less accessible: 'the highbrow-ness is another barrier for people to coming in. It's not class or money', said a 'BAME' respondent, referring in particular to how some commercial fiction will be priced so low at the bigger retailers, that a small independent bookseller selling at Recommended Retail Price (RRP) cannot compete. And another white, female bookseller added: 'We don't bother stocking 90 percent of what a supermarket does. Because they have silly prices'.

However, some booksellers seem to be aware that they might be perceived as exclusive or not welcoming to some groups and the Booksellers Association has reacted, too, by introducing 'Diversity and Inclusiveness Grants' to 'help bookshops deliver practical initiatives to increase inclusivity in their shop or in their community' (Booksellers Association, 2018) and ultimately make bookselling more accessible and inclusive.

Supermarkets, on the other hand, have the potential to reach customers in every location and social category, but they stock only a limited selection of books, i.e. bestselling titles with a great track record which are dominated by white authors. Adding to this problem

is that publishers need supermarkets because of the large volume they can sell once they choose a title. So it becomes self-perpetuating: supermarkets want to see high sales numbers before they stock a book and if they don't stock a book it is really hard to reach such a wide audience.

Monocultural Staff Struggles to Find New Audiences and Promote 'BAME' Authors

Concerns were raised that sales reps, the link between publishers and bookshops, might not be as much on board the diversity schemes as one would hope. One senior, white woman in sales that we spoke to described sales reps as 'predominantly older white people' and added 'I think perhaps it's more difficult for them to adjust to some of the initiatives that are coming through than it might be for some of my other colleagues'. And a senior, white, male bookseller called sales reps a 'slightly slow changing breed' and expressed concern that they, as the 'gatekeepers of a lot of bookstores ... are not being fed the reason why this is all important'.

Across the different sections of our interviews, respondents observed that companies with exclusively white staff experience more difficulties in approaching a wider audience that also includes 'BAME' and working-class readers. While one challenge on the retail side is that booksellers claim not to track the ethnicity of their customers, in some cases there seems to be an attitude issue: as a 'BAME' respondent said, 'I was the only person of colour in the bookshop. A colleague also referred to me once as the token and would send every person of colour my way for recommendations because they didn't know how to recommend to people of colour'.

Smaller, more agile publishers shared stories of their strategies to approach audiences directly; audiences who would not shop at what they perceive as posh bookstores. The publishers approached them through events that related to the author, topic, or style of the book, and appealed to a broader audience.

Opportunities through Independent Bookshops and Digital Channels

The impact that independent booksellers can have was hailed a number of times, in particular for debuts and/or books that might appear too small for the bigger retailers. A person in sales (senior, white, female) described indies as 'intrepid and they're very keen to search out new things' – and it seems as if indies absolutely need to do something different in terms of selection as they can't compete on price. Several respondents attributed the impact indies can have to their clout and potential to start a certain 'buzz' around a book, not least putting it on the map for literary prizes; as one senior respondent in sales put it: 'it's not just the size of the market, it's the influential nature of it'. Thus, indies also have an indirect impact on the bookselling landscape as bigger retailers tend to order more copies once a book's profile has grown, as several respondents stated.

While some respondents spoke about opportunities in digital sales channels and formats, they also emphasised that a certain level of visibility must be attained first. The main obstacle here seems to be rooted in the assumption that 'BAME' books are a riskier investment and thus often receive a smaller publicity and marketing budget (see also section on promotion). And Amazon is perceived as an opportunity as well as a challenge due

to ever-changing parameters, opaque processes, and the fact that it only shares a fraction of its data. As one sales person (white, female) said: 'it is a never-ending beast: Amazon will change their parameters around stuff at a drop's notice, that will completely change our metadata and how we organise stuff'.

Direct communication with (and sales to) audiences via digital channels can avoid some of the challenges in sales/retail, as this 'BAME' respondent explains:

We'll have these commercial books that go out into bricks and mortar, and that's where you're going to get the most commercial success ... but I think the digital space now gives us a great opportunity to really experiment and try new things, because we can now target more audiences. We've got the tools to do that and start through data these social media companies supply now. We can identify who is the target market, what's their behaviour and how we connect with them ... we can start talking to them, start engaging with them, without worrying about a buyer at Tesco or a buyer at Asda.

In terms of formats that can be sold directly online, audio books and eBooks were repeatedly mentioned as a way to appeal to different target groups, who might not shop in the brick-and-mortar stores. Exemplary for a number of other comments is the following quote from a white, senior sales woman: 'we tend to see a big BAME audience

“ I think the digital space now gives us a great opportunity to really experiment and try new things, because we can now target more audiences. [...] we can start talking to them, start engaging with them, without worrying about a buyer at Tesco or a buyer at Asda. ”
– 'BAME' respondent

coming towards our audio. So, that has been a real sort of focus for us, and e-books as well because digital reading tends to be a younger demographic and also a BAME audience'.

Conclusion

The dominance of a few retailers and the decision making by very few people combined with reliance on data that is not as objective as often portrayed, is seen as a major obstacle for writers of colour. In particular, when so much power lies in so few hands, a more diverse team can be game-changing. The whiteness of sales, book-buying, and retail spaces and personnel, or rather their unconscious bias, raised concerns as well. And while digital channels can be a way to bypass exclusive spaces and gatekeepers, more investment in publicity is needed to make 'BAME' authors and their books visible at the same time.

References

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Recommendations

- Hire more diversely, but do not expect 'BAME' staff to be responsible for all 'BAME' books or readers. Booksellers need to educate themselves on more diverse books.
- Reconsider the way publicity resources are spent in order to make published books more visible across channels.
- Make room for 'BAME' writers in commercial spaces and do not solely publish them into literary spaces.
- On the retail side, more data about your audiences' socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds might be a first step to approach a wider audience.
- Booksellers in particular will benefit from reflecting on how their spaces might feel exclusionary to certain demographics. Those respondents who had the closest ties with the communities they serve beyond the selling of books managed to attract the most diverse audience.

Conclusion

and Recommendations

One of the clearest findings from our research, based on our interviews at least, is that publishers do care about diversity. Everyone we spoke to showed an openness around how they can make the industry more diverse, especially in terms of the books it publishes. We encountered no denial or defensiveness about the inequalities that exist in publishing. There was a strong sense that publishers need to do better. This is very encouraging for the future. On a personal note, one of the benefits of the research was seeing for ourselves the amazing books that were published in the past year (and those in the pipeline) by writers of colour. While independent presses have generally been behind such books and continue to be the main driving force for diversity, there was a sense that the big publishers are getting on board too. As stated in the introduction, we cannot claim for certain that there are more writers of colour being published than before. But it does at least seem like there is a genuine attempt to seek out and publish 'new voices'.

Yet, issues remain. One of the many topics that we did not have the space to address in this report, was how publishers' desire for more writers from disadvantaged backgrounds can stem out of fear or embarrassment of not being seen as inclusive. Social media has enabled audiences to publicly talk back to publishers in a way that was never the case before, to the extent they can make or break books. Fear and shame in this instance are generating new opportunities for minority and working-class writers. But it seems far from ideal when the push for diversity is more about preventing reputational damage than solving structural inequalities.

Ultimately, though, we find that the biggest challenge for publishers in producing more diverse books stems from a tension that is at the heart of publishing: publishing as a business versus publishing as a public service. While the understanding that publishing is a commercial

enterprise was clear amongst our respondents, they also demonstrated a strong sense of the cultural value of publishing. By cultural value we are referring to publishers' sense that books can be a positive force in society, in educating and enlightening as well as entertaining readers. While publishers like to think that cultural and economic value go hand-in-hand, we discovered that these two poles are more likely to exist in tension. As a senior, white editor said to us, 'we're being asked on the one hand to behave as if we're a library at the same time as having to make enough money to stay in business'. Approaches to diversity in publishing are shaped by this tension. As stated, there was a strong sense from our respondents that the economic and cultural value of diversity are mutually inclusive, but our biggest finding is that publishers are still not convinced by the economic benefits of publishing more diversely, as this would mean reaching new audiences which they do not know how to actually engage. To put it bluntly, minority and working-class audiences feel alien to the core publishing industry.

The big publishers essentially cater for a white and middle-class audience. While publishers always hope that their books can reach beyond this particular audience, it is this core readership who are the focus of all acquisition, promotional, sales, and retail activities. As stated, this still provides some opportunities for writers of colour, as 'Susan', the typical (white, middle-class) reader is open to new experiences and perspectives (to an extent). Indeed, many of these books have crossed over into the communities that those authors belong to. Yet as we have found, publishers' interest in one core audience produces two effects for writers of colour: 1) marginalisation/exclusion ('there is no market for this'); or 2) their exoticisation/whitewashing in order to appeal to middle-class whites. Of course, there are

exceptions, though we argue that these most often emerge from publishers who are not burdened with strong commercial pressures. It is the reason why writers of colour feature so little in commercial fiction, such as crime/thriller.

“Ultimately, we believe that making publishing more diverse entails diversifying the audience.”

One immediate step in addressing the lack of diversity in books is through agents and editors being more proactive in seeking out new voices. In this regard we want to acknowledge the new generation of publishers we encountered who are looking beyond the traditional spaces in order to discover new talent from under-represented backgrounds, and moreover, are giving them the time and space to develop. But ultimately, we believe that making publishing more diverse entails diversifying the audience. That does not mean that black authors should only be sold to black audiences. But as things currently stand publishers are not even trying to sell black authors to black audiences. If publishers are serious about the economic value of diversity, they need to find the *cultural value* in reaching these new audiences. To pose it as a question, which publishers out there are willing to go to Bradford to better understand the desires and needs of the working-class Asian community?

As we showed there remains some contestation over whether those belonging to 'BAME' and working-class communities are interested in careers in writing. Or whether they can even afford to be. This cannot be verified without further research (though we would challenge any assumptions that publishers have that are themselves not evidenced). But we strongly believe that

if those new audiences felt that the publishing industry actually catered to/cared for them, then more people belonging to those communities might be inspired to write.

How to reach new audiences? We offer four broad recommendations. Firstly, hiring more people who belong to disadvantaged communities is one important step. But even this comes without guarantees. People of colour who work in publishing should not be expected to do this labour. But if the premise that this is the role of the job is clear then it should be properly resourced and supported so as not to appear tokenistic. Either way, publishers need to ensure that 'BAME' employees are allowed to flourish and develop like their white peers. But they should be given the same privilege to fail as their white peers too. After all, publishing is a risky business which leads to more failures than successes. Just because a book by a writer of colour acquired by a person of colour does not sell, does not mean that there is no appetite for these kinds of books. Maybe it simply was not the right time, was not properly resourced, or it did not reach the right audience.

Secondly, publishers need to be more creative in their promotional strategies. They need to develop a stronger awareness of the new media channels beyond the mainstream that are reaching previously neglected audiences. Genuine relationships need to be built with these new media so that such an engagement does not feel opportunistic. Once again, a more diverse promotional team will help in this regard. Publishers – and perhaps more crucially, retailers – need to challenge

the assumption that traditional media is the only media that matters. Publishers also need to challenge their assumption that minority audiences are too small to bother addressing. When so many print-runs are in the mere hundreds and thousands we find this somewhat disingenuous. Most literary fiction, as one respondent suggested, basically sells to the same few thousand people in London, yet it constitutes a significant part of the trade fiction industry.

Thirdly, booksellers need to focus on how they can reach a more diverse audience of book buyers. It is encouraging that new independent bookstores are opening again

As a starting point, diversity needs to be stopped being seen as an additional extra. If publishers are serious about diversity, they need to invest more resources in reaching new audiences.

but they all essentially look the same and are catering for the same audience. To what extent do these spaces feel exclusionary to would-be readers, in terms of the booksellers, or the way that books are presented? How can small bookstores make themselves more appealing to the diverse audiences in their locale (and if there is not a particularly significant 'BAME' community, there is almost certainly a white, working-class community that is being neglected)? The major booksellers and supermarkets have a clear sense of their audience, which like the industry as a whole caters for the white, middle-class audiences. But clearly more books can be sold if they dared to reach out beyond this one group. Decentralising book buying might have an important

impact in this respect, allowing branch managers to put together a selection of books that cater for the diversity of their particular communities.

For audience development, publishers (sales and marketing) need to be investing more in audience development and working in partnership with audience engagement organisations or consultancies to reach and engage diverse audiences. This may require additional funding, but equally may be paid for by publishers. To discover new writers of colour, publishers should be working in partnership and supporting writer development initiatives with financial and in kind investment, as these schemes develop the 'pipeline' of writers. And publishers should be working strategically across the sector to build on existing best practice in audience and writer development initiatives (which may be funded). If publishers were genuinely serious about diversifying their lists – especially in commercial fiction – then investing in these types of initiatives can have a big impact. As stated, publishers feel a tension between the economic and cultural value of publishing. It is only when they take the cultural value more seriously, that the economic case for diversity will be really felt. Being able to emphasise the cultural value of publishing – specifically in relation to making it more diverse – we argue necessitates additional funding.

While there have been some big inroads made in recent times – publishing houses and the books they are publishing do feel more diverse – as all of our respondents mentioned, so much more work needs to be done. Unfortunately, this is not a quick fix and will take significant transformation. But, as a starting point, diversity needs to stop being seen as an *additional extra*. If publishers are serious about diversity, they need to invest more resources in reaching new audiences. If they are unwilling to do this, they need to be honest about how they value minority audiences as a consequence. To reiterate: a lack of faith in new audiences is the biggest reason why the publishing industry still struggles to publish more diversely. Indeed, it raises the question, if publishing is a profit-based industry, then why the lack of interest in reaching new audiences?

Rethinking 'Diversity': Calls to Action

Rethink How You Measure Diversity

The common way to approach diversity is to think that it is a simple matter of increasing the numbers of minorities in publishing, whether in terms of the workforce or the authors published. While we strongly recommend that all publishing houses 'audit' the ethnic/racial make-up of the authors that they publish (this may need further research from an independent agency to provide an overview of the entire industry), it is important that publishers stop thinking about diversity as purely a numbers game. Instead, diversity entails recognising structural inequalities and that people of colour are not afforded the same opportunities or freedoms as their white peers. The publishers who are most committed to fixing inequalities in the industry will be the ones bold enough to address this in an assertive, *affirmative* manner. The sooner publishers realise that the industry is not currently a meritocracy the sooner they will fix the problem of 'diversity'.

Rethink Your Audience

Do not cater only for 'Susan'. Rethink the idea of there being a 'core' audience and understand that modern Britain consists of multiple audiences. Catering for these new audiences necessitates more imaginative promotional campaigns, new types of partnerships, and booksellers doing much more to attract new audiences. People involved in the making and selling of books need to ask themselves whether their bookshop/writing course/festival are truly open to all, as minorities can find certain spaces exclusionary. But in rethinking their readership, publishers need to be careful not to think of 'BAME' audiences as homogenous. They contain as much diversity as white audiences, intersected by class, gender, sexuality, age, and so on. While particular communities have their own particular needs, their interests overlap with other communities. The sooner publishers start realising the value of these audiences, the range of books published will become richer and more reflective of the nation. Needless to say, there is a clear financial benefit in creating new audiences.

Rethink What Is Considered 'Quality'

Publishers sometimes believe that publishing more diversely means compromising on 'quality'. While editors need to maintain faith in their own judgements, they also need to understand that

notions of 'quality' are not as universal as they may think. In fact, supposedly universal notions of quality correlate strongly with a particular education and class position. The monocultural nature of publishing leads to the reproduction of this narrow version of 'quality'. There is no universal right to be a published writer. But sometimes a writer of colour is rejected for the reason that their book is not of a high enough quality, when in fact it is more about the failure of the publisher to find the right audience, or a reluctance to sell to a particular audience that is perceived as having less value. Publishers need to reflect on their perspective and the position they are making decisions from. We all have our own cultural biases, which we need to gain an awareness of in order to challenge them.

Rethink Your Hiring Practices

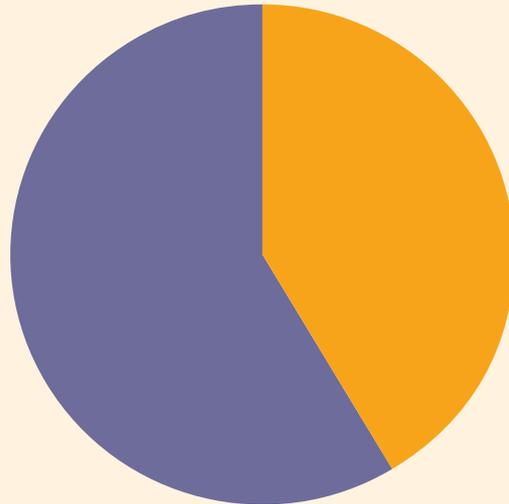
Hiring more people who belong to marginalised communities will benefit publishers strongly in terms of helping them tap into new audiences – but *only* if they are given the resources and freedom to do this work. Racial and ethnic minorities must not be expected to do all the labour related to attracting 'BAME' authors and audiences. If they are hired for this purpose, then this should be made explicit in the job description, so it is then up to the candidates to decide whether they want to work under those circumstances. To reiterate, these roles must be supported properly otherwise it represents nothing more than tokenism. Advertise widely and imaginatively in order to get the widest pool of candidates. While it is tempting to hire the person who fits in with the 'culture' of a publishing house, hiring people who do not fit the typical mould might in fact reap the biggest rewards if they are given the freedom and space to express themselves.

Rethink Who You Could Join Forces With

Many respondents in our research talked about the scarcity of time and people power, particularly in communications and finding writers. But publishers and agents do not have to do everything on their own. There are many not-for-profit and grassroots organisations working across the UK to engage communities with reading and writing. One example of this is the literature development organisations. While they are all unique in their size, programme, and funding, they are all rooted in their regions. Moreover, they have created long-term relationships with their communities and have their trust and attention. Both sides could benefit from partnerships at eye level, whether it is carried out as a collaboration between a literature development agency and an individual publisher or a coalition of publishers. Such relationships need to be long-term and built on trust, genuine commitment, and an understanding of (in)equalities.

Appendix

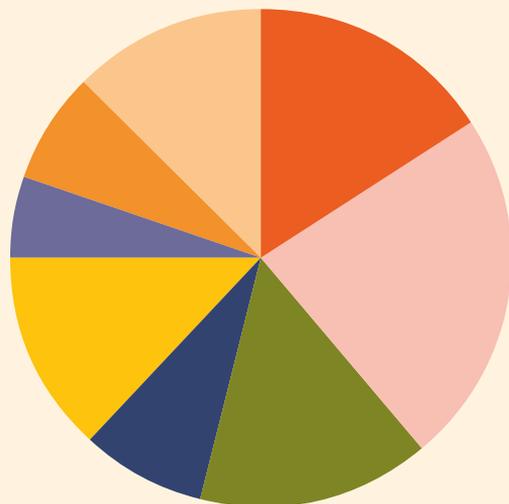
These were our respondents:



Respondents

-  'BAME'
-  White

Total: 113



Professions

-  Agents
-  CEOs/MDs/Publishers
-  Editors
-  Sales
-  Communications (Marketing and PR)
-  Designers
-  Booksellers
-  Other (authors, festival curators, etc.)

Total: 113

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About us



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