

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.