



Diversity Matters: growing markets in children's publishing - How Committed Are Publishers to Publishing Black Writers?

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Malorie Blackman describes her experiences of being published.

How Committed Are Publishers to Publishing Black Writers?

Malorie Blackman's novel **Pig Heart Boy** was short-listed for the Carnegie Medal and is one of several of her titles to have been adapted for children's television. She has won numerous literary awards, among them the Young Telegraph/Fully Booked Award and the W H Smith Mind Boggling Book Award. But as one of relatively few black British writers for children and as the only one whose name now appears in the bestseller lists alongside Jacqueline Wilson, J K Rowling and Philip Pullman, she has had to hold firm to her convictions about what sort of books she should be writing against the expectations and assumptions of other people. Here **Malorie Blackman** talks about her experience of being published. <!--break-->

My experience of publishing is mainly from one perspective, that of a writer. However, I want to say that my comments don't refer to Random House who have been nothing but supportive of the stories I want to write and sympathetic as to why I want to write them. But I have been 'lucky' enough to work for over fourteen different publishers in my time, so I do feel I have more than a little experience of a number of editors and publishing house philosophies.

There's a certain shorthand that comes from having shared life and cultural experiences. A shorthand which means certain idioms, ideologies and cultural references don't have to be explained or justified. On the whole, most white writers have this with white editors, while black writers have had to adapt and adopt. I certainly remember when I first started working as a writer sixteen years ago, any and all attempts to have my characters speak even the merest hint of patois were dismissed as 'not proper English' and 'children won't understand that'. Editors in the children's publishing world tend to be overwhelmingly white and middle-class. That's not to point my finger or denigrate any of the editors I've worked with, that's just a fact.

Another facet of publishing: a few years ago, I discovered that the route a number of younger editors followed to enter publishing was to volunteer their services free of charge from anywhere between a few weeks to several months. They were in the lucky position of not having to make any money whilst getting experience and the requisite publishing knowledge under their belts. But how many can afford to do that? In my early twenties, I wouldn't have been able to. I didn't have family resources behind me. The way forward might be for larger publishers to set up some kind of sponsorship scheme or bursary for those who really need it to ensure that all members of society have a fair chance of entering the publishing world.

Quality is the criterion

Books are first and foremost a means of sharing ideas, characters, lives. Books are all about communication – that’s what makes them so special. And as such they should be accessible to all readers – so that our children can understand our differences and appreciate our similarities. Diverse characters with wide-ranging philosophies, varied world views and even different ways of expressing themselves, add texture and depth to British literature, they don’t detract from it.

Publishers need to have more faith in the work of British BME (black and minority ethnic) writers. If they don’t have faith in their product, how can they hope to convince booksellers and readers about the quality of the books they produce? Friends have told me stories of sales reps only breaking out their books which feature black protagonists, in areas with a higher density of ethnic minorities. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, such books are for everyone, everywhere. Surely the quality of the story should be the first criterion for selling a book, not the colour of the protagonist? And the simple truism is you have to spend money to make money. If a book is given a tiny print run and no marketing or publicity spend, it makes it that much harder for the book, any book, to find its audience. Now of course publishing is first and foremost a business. Every publisher is looking to make a profit or they wouldn’t be in business very long. We all live in the real world and we all understand that. But surely marketing and publicising the book to the widest possible audience is the way to do that. Bringing a book out and hoping it will find its audience is no longer enough.

Commitment to publishing BME writers?

A particular editor once told me that she was only publishing my book because she needed something on her multi-cultural list – a list which consisted of my book and nothing else as I saw when her publisher’s catalogue came out later that year. Now there were one or two moments before I ever had anything published when I came *that* close to giving up. My conversation with that particular editor was the only moment after I’d been published and had a few books out, when I felt the same way. I phoned my current editor at Random House, Annie Eaton, and asked her straight out: why was she publishing me? Did she have the same agenda? Because as far as I was concerned, if that was the only reason I was getting published then I’d go back to computing. Annie made it very clear that Transworld was a business and they wouldn’t be publishing me if they didn’t believe in my stories and feel passionately about them, if they didn’t feel my books could reach a wide audience and if they didn’t think they could make money out of it. That was *exactly* what I needed to hear. The thought of only getting my books published because I was black – a case of never mind the quality, look at the writer’s colour – I found nauseating. So thank you Annie for giving me the reassurance I so desperately needed at the time. Needless to say, I never wrote another book for the other editor. Mind you, she never asked me to!

A number of publishers say they want to publish more ethnically diverse books to which my response is ‘Prove it!’ My scepticism stems from the fact that a friend of mine, a black woman writer, sent a manuscript off to a publisher only to have it bounced back at her with a letter stating ‘we already publish Malorie Blackman, so thanks but no thanks’. Now I’ve had a number of publishers over the years and my friend wouldn’t say which publishing house she sent her manuscript to, but to the editor who made that comment – shame on you. Since when does a publisher turn down a book from an aspiring author saying, ‘We already publish the work of one white writer, we don’t want or need another?’

We need a balance. We need to get away from the idea that books about ethnic minorities can only be about one thing. Books written by black and minority ethnic writers are not minority interest books. They can and do sell, whether they are about race and racism or something else entirely. But let’s look at the books available to all our children. My own experience and that of some of my friends provide a salutary lesson. When my daughter was born I wanted to provide her with books which were culturally diverse and which would also reflect her own image back to her. Picture books featuring ethnically diverse children are few and far between in this country. I had to seek out the wonderful Tamarind Press and Letterbox Library or Amazon on the Internet to buy books from America. With a lot of digging I could find the books I wanted and more importantly the books I thought my daughter needed. I wanted books for my daughter which showed that first day at school, making new friends, discovering new things in nursery, things relevant to my daughter’s life. Books about puppies, kittens, baby rabbits and the rest of the baby animal kingdom are fine, but where were the picture books which reflected my daughter’s cultural heritage i.e. the British experience as opposed to an

American one? I've bought a number of books only available in America over the years, not because they are better than British BME books but because they were available and a critical mass of books by black British authors just weren't. Which leads me on to my next point.

A poor relation to African American literature?

It seems to me, the prevailing attitude in this country, particularly when it comes to children's literature written by BME writers, is that it's a poor relation to African American literature. A friend told me that a librarian said of my book **Noughts and Crosses**, 'if children want to know about racism, they should read Maya Angelou, certainly not **Noughts and Crosses**'. One comment that was made to me about **Noughts and Crosses** was: 'I'd be more impressed by your insight on racism if you were white.' Why? The story is the story. Why is it worth less because a black British writer wrote it? The African American experience is not the same as the Afro-Caribbean British experience. The two are not interchangeable.

The attitude of some adults when it comes to books about racism or dealing with race issues is they'd rather not have them available to children. 'Time enough for children to learn about these things when they're older,' as I once had someone say to me. How much older? When children are in their thirties? Forties? Fifties? A number of adults seem to feel that books which tackle serious issues are preachy and didactic. If the subject matter makes *them* uncomfortable, they feel their reaction will be the reaction of all children. But as with all subjects in children's books, doesn't it depend on how it's done? Children and young adults are hungry to learn about the world around them. They want to find out more.

When I was a child, although my dad encouraged the reading of non-fiction books like encyclopaedias, books on nature, space and the universe, animals etc and newspapers, he actively discouraged me from reading fiction books. As far as Dad was concerned, fiction was a total waste of time. My dad got it wrong. I learnt far more about people and our shared lives and emotions from fiction than I ever did from non-fiction. But I was in my mid-twenties before I read my first book which featured black characters, **The Color Purple** by Alice Walker. That's one hell of an age to be before you see yourself even remotely reflected in a book. Thinking about it now, maybe that's why my dad thought fiction was a total waste of time, because he knew I'd never see myself reflected anywhere in it. I'm determined that won't happen to my daughter.

So to conclude, the fact that we're having this Diversity conference is such a positive step. The fact that now I can go into a book shop and find a few books written by British BME writers is another positive step. But it is only a very few books. We have many, many more steps to take. We live in a society, in a world where we all need to be more culturally, religiously and racially aware. This is the beginning of the twenty-first century for heaven's sake! And what better place to start than with the books, a form of communication and sharing which works from babies to the very old and every stage in between.

This article is an abridged version of Malorie Blackman's keynote address at the Diversity Matters conference held on 24-25 June 2006 in London.

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