



# Diversity Matters: growing markets in children's publishing - Conference Report

Article Author:

[Shereen Pandit](#) [1]

160 [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

**Shereen Pandit** reports on her impressions.

## Diversity Matters: Conference Report

Funded by Arts Council England and organised by CLPE\* , the Diversity Matters conference, the first of what is to be a number of initiatives aimed at promoting diversity in publishing for children, was held on 24-25 June in London.

Conference delegate **Shereen Pandit** reports on her impressions. <!--break-->

?Nothing much has changed since the seventies.?

This seemed to be the rather disappointing verdict on the ?Diversity Matters: growing markets in children's publishing? conference, though the conference determinedly aimed at ensuring progress in providing diversity in children's literature in the future.

The conference kicked off with a lively speech delivered by Shami Chakrabarti, the Director of Liberty, who situated the issue of children's literature squarely within the context of human rights. Children's literature, she argued, should not only give children aspirations, but demonstrate shared values, ie commonality as well as variety. Only in this way, would it reflect the truth of their lives. She took us, knowledgeably and amusingly, through several children's books which she saw as metaphors for human rights issues and for challenging the infringement of human rights.

## Panel discussion

During the panel discussion which followed, it emerged that children's literature is far from sufficiently diverse, either in content or availability, to meet the needs of the children of the very diverse society which makes up 21st-century Britain.

Issues raised included the fact that the book industry itself fails to reflect that diversity: publishing and bookselling remain largely white and middle-class; publishing fails to reach out to other groups and fails to provide the kinds of books which all our children need in order to allow them to see the diversity, both historically and currently, of the world they inhabit.

Black British author Catherine Johnson provided some insights into what stimulated her to write, *inter alia*, wanting to see people like herself in main roles in books. In other words, the very absence of diversity had acted as an incentive to provide for children like herself, the kind of books which they wanted and needed.

Loxford school librarian, Louise Kanolik, whose school is largely black in terms of student composition, then spoke about efforts at her school to stimulate reading amongst young people. Young people, she said, want to read books about

things which are of interest to them as young people, regardless of the colour of the author or the culture or the characters.

This was followed by a *mea culpa* from Francesca Dow of Puffin Books. She confessed that there were not enough books catering for a 'multi-ethnic' community, that publishers aren't meeting the needs of such a community, that Puffin isn't active enough in the community and needs to invite writers to come to it. Puffin also needs to make their workforce more diverse and to recruit the talent out there. However, she was very clear that publishers were operating a business and therefore there had to be a business imperative to change. Part of Puffin's addressing of this 'exciting challenge' was to sponsor a graduate traineeship in publishing and bookselling. They are also considering whether they should commission a book by a black writer as the best way forward.

Freelance journalist Suresh Ariaratnam argued that booksellers need to reflect the community around them, especially if they are based in black areas, making available books that are published but not readily available in mainstream bookshops.

Constraints of time and a very full first day agenda prevented full discussion from the floor around the issues raised, but this was remedied in the workshops which followed. The eight workshops on various topics included an account by Beverley Naidoo of her writing about South African children, both pre and post apartheid, and Rosemary Stones's knowledgeable outline of the struggle for diversity in children's literature in the UK in the last couple of decades.

### **Productive workshops**

These workshops proved productive in providing some key themes and practical solutions for ensuring diversity in children's literature, arising both from those who addressed the workshops and discussion from the delegates present. Such key themes emphasized the nature of diversity in children's literature as being more than just putting out books by black authors or involving black children. They stressed the importance of diversity 'including diversity in family patterns' as a way of enabling children to share and understand different cultures and languages. Once again, as with the discussion earlier, it was stressed that whilst people have noted changes since the 1970s, there remains a lot to do. Amongst the solutions which emerged from the workshops, was a suggestion that publishers provide mentoring to encourage writers and publishers from 'non-traditional' backgrounds and that positive publishing initiatives be examined to determine why they have been successful. It was also stressed that work in schools and bookselling in the community should be more closely looked at in terms of promoting diversity.

Lunch provided the opportunity to purchase books and informally continue the morning's discussions and was followed by a lively and thought-provoking speech by Malorie Blackman, one of the UK's most successful and popular children's authors. This was followed by a repeat of the morning's workshops and then a panel discussion on the importance of authors and illustrators in changing images and attitudes.

### **The perspective of the writer and illustrator**

Blackman supported the view expressed by Johnson in the morning's panel discussion 'she wanted to see people like herself in all genres of children's books. She also raised the issue of publishers' lack of faith in the writing of 'black and ethnic minority' writers, their failure to provide adequate publicity for the books which they published by such writers and the limitations they impose on how many books they are willing to publish featuring black children and their families.

Mary Hoffman led the next panel with some interesting insights into her experiences of writing books featuring black children and children with parents of different racial groups, including being subjected to having a book banned for being racist, though it had very real roots within her own mixed race family.

Bali Rai argued forcefully (if someone that laid back and 'cool' can be described as forceful) for writing about the UK's young people as just young people the way they occur and behave and interact in UK society. Books, he said, should reflect children and their lives the way it is, without regard to this or that cultural or racial emphasis. This is what

Rai strives to do ? using as his setting the very mixed Leicester background with which he is familiar. What makes him sad and angry, he said, is that kids from such backgrounds are still amazed to find themselves in books, which shows that things have not moved on since he was the same age. Having himself been inspired to write by an author of a similar background (ie from a Leicester housing estate, rather than similar gender, colour or religion) he argued that this is what inspires young people to read and write ? seeing that people like them can produce books successfully.

In the lively question and discussion session which followed, Mary Hoffman suggested that there has been some progress towards providing more diversity in children?s literature, while Bali Rai insisted that he saw none, or very little. Publishers and booksellers, he said, should look at themselves when it comes to the issue of providing access to the kind of books needed, instead of bemoaning the fact that the writing isn?t out there for publication.

Between these two authors, both of whom have contributed much towards the progress of diversity in children?s literature, illustrator Ken Wilson-Max spoke about being pigeon-holed to do black illustrations because he is black.

I missed the evening?s ?Wicked Words? poetry performance, but this was more than made up the following day, when the morning was kick-started with a tour-de-force poetry reading by John Agard. Though I am part of a family which has been familiar with Agard?s work for many years, and have heard him perform on numerous occasions, it was still a treat which reminded me that poetry was never meant just for the page. Poetry as written and read by John Agard is a powerful lens indeed for young people to view the world through. Of course I rushed out and bought the latest of the man?s work. My daughter, let alone my husband, would never have forgiven me for missing the opportunity to get signed copies of our bard?s books.

### **Market difficulties**

We were brought back down to earth by the panel discussion in which the dearth of ethnic minority writers and illustrators was once again emphasized. Janetta Otter-Barry, the editorial director of Frances Lincoln, a medium-sized publisher with a good track record of publishing multi-cultural books for children, including **Lines in the Sand** , the recent anthology edited by Hoffman and Lassiter in aid of the children of Iraq, pointed to some of the difficulties faced by publishers like Frances Lincoln. Not only have their exports to the USA fallen dramatically from 80% to under 20%, but major bookshop chains are not very keen to stock multi-cultural books. Dual-language picture books are selling badly which makes it hard for publishers, from a business point of view, to support such books.

Unfortunately, the panel discussion which followed on issues raised by the previous day?s workshops was succeeded by a desultory and wandering speech by Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. The bits which I could make sense of made me wonder if he knew anything at all about the issues under discussion, ie acceptance and celebration of diversity, not conformity to a dominant culture, language and way of using that language. One did wish that he?d either attended the previous day?s discussion, or someone had told him about it, or at the very least, that he?d listened to and understood Agard. Certainly, if one were to take seriously Phillips? views on how we should use the English language, then people like Agard would never be published, let alone read, for fear that he would influence our children into thinking that they can get jobs if they don?t speak BBC English.

What is important is the outcome of this conference. The question is, will it bring real change, real progress, in providing true diversity in children?s literature with regard to content as well as availability? Will the face of publishing and bookselling change to meet this challenge, or will we be talking about and bewailing the same lack of progress in another twenty or thirty years? time?

Bated breath time, then.

**Shereen Pandit** is a writer and teacher.

\* Centre for Literacy in Primary Education



[Shereen Pandit.JPG](#)

[3]



[Shereen Pandit.JPG](#) [4]

Page Number:

8

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Aug '19):** <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/160/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/diversity-matters-growing-markets-in-children%E2%80%99s-0>

**Links:**

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/shereen-pandit>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/160>

[3] [http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Shereen Pandit.JPG](http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Shereen_Pandit.JPG)

[4] [http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Shereen Pandit\\_0.JPG](http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Shereen_Pandit_0.JPG)