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'PW' Panel Warns Industry, Lack of Diversity Threatens Publishing

By Calvin Reid | Oct 21, 2014

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To the surprise of no one in the room, a series of charts tracking the lack of diversity in children's book publishing over the last 18 years showed virtually no change in the problem. The dismal series of charts was supplied by Lee & Low publisher Jason Low during a PW panel on diversity held last week at Penguin Random House's midtown offices.



Photo: Calvin Reid

PW Salaries and Diversity panel at Random House with (l to r) Jim Milliot, Alvina Ling, Stacy Barney and Jason Low.

Over the course of a two-hour discussion focused on diversity in book publishing—or, rather, lack thereof—the panel, moderated by PW editorial director Jim Milliot, examined the depth of the industry's lack of diversity, while also touching on some possible ways to address the problem.

The panel drew a small but lively audience that, while more diverse than most industry gatherings, inadvertently highlighted one concern among many attendees: the people with the power to address the issue of diversity in the industry are not making it a priority. Only one senior publishing executive from a Big Five house attended the panel with the majority of the audience consisting of editorial staffers. There was only one person from marketing, cited during the program as a key department for providing support to a diverse list.

Panelists Alvina Ling, executive editorial director of Little Brown Books for Young Readers, and Stacy Barney, senior editor at Penguin/Putnam, acknowledged the industry's long running lack of minorities. The panel was, in part, held as a way to address the recent PW Salary Survey that showed nearly 90% of respondents were white.

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"There's a supreme lack of diversity in book publishing at every level, from editors, to publishers to librarians and book reviewers," said Low. While Low also showed charts detailing a profound lack of diversity in the

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American TV and film industries, book publishing's lack of minorities seems intractable, he said, and is a problem that haunts the industry. The panel cautioned that this issue threatens the book publishing's long-term viability.

"The needle is not moving," Low said, noting that about 36% of the U.S. population identifies itself as a person of color, while his data showed that about 10% of U.S. children's books have content targeting minority readers. Low said his house, L&L, is an exception to the rule; it has 15 employees, nine of which are people of color. "We walk the walk," he added.

Ling detailed many of the classic reasons offered for the industry's inability to attract minorities—low salaries, the obsession with hiring Ivy League grads—"we're an old school industry that looks to hire people of similar backgrounds," she's said. "It's crazy. We need to examine our biases." Ling said when she joined Little Brown Books for Young Readers, she found a commitment to diversity from the publisher and said the kids imprints where about 35% are minorities—though once again the tally is "skewed" to mostly Asian staff. While she acknowledged that diversity among "higher ups" remains an issue at Little Brown, she said that "HR has made diversity a priority. Now we have to retain the minority staff that we have."

However, panelists did point out there are some diverse books getting published, like Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*, from Penguin, which was nominated for the National Book Award for Young People's Literature. But overall there are simply not enough being released. "Does the lack of diversity impact what books are published," Ling asked rhetorically, "yes it does. I respond to Asian American content and authors. I want to publish books for underrepresented communities."

Barney said that while she feels welcome at Penguin, she is, nevertheless, often "the only person of color" in editorial and sales meetings. An English major and a teacher before she began working in publishing, Barney was an intern at Lee & Low before moving to Penguin. Barney, and others on the panel, said part of the problem with getting more diverse books published is the myth that they don't sell. Often parents and teachers believe books with minority characters are somehow, "not for them. These in-grown beliefs perpetuate the myth that books with minority characters don't sell," said Low.

Panelist said books targeting minorities should not be "segregated" in special sections in bookstores. "Don't over emphasize the issue of diversity," Low said. "We acquire books because they're great books and that is how they should be talked about. Don't put them in a diversity box."

While there was not much focus on programs like the Publishing Certificate Program at CUNY or the long running New Press internship program, programs designed to attract and train minorities for the book publishing industry, the audience and the panel emphasized the need to talk and investigate and highlight possible solutions and not just repeatedly invoke the problem. The possible influence and collaboration with the AAP's Young To Publishing group was discussed as well as college outreach, job fairs and internships designed to bring minorities into the industry. And Low emphasized that editors and book professionals need to "diversify your bookshelves. People need to read cross-culturally. Books represent who you are and what you stand for."

"It can't just be one segment of the industry working on this. We all have to get involved in changing this situation," Milliot said.

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Debbie Reese · 204 followers

I firmly believe that the industry must also be more thoughtful about POV that inadvertently contributes to stagnate views about all the people in "we the people." The much praised THOMAS JEFFERSON: LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF EVERYTHING is a good example. As a Native person, "the pursuit of everything" means the pursuit of land that once belonged to Native Nations. The title, in other words, is off-putting and it is evidence that the author did not imagine me (or a Native person) as part of the audience for her book.

Reply · Like · 4 · October 21 at 12:07pm



Jeff Rivera · ★ Top Commenter · 196 followers

OK. We know there's a problem and has been for decades. Solutions. That's what I want to hear, solutions. I want to hear what the individuals that are personally attending the panel discussion are doing to combat the problem besides waiting for the Big 5 to turn around. I want to hear the solutions those moderating and participating in the panel are doing to turn this problem on its head. I can think of a handful of solutions right off the top of my head and I know what I am personally doing about it. One of the things I'm not doing is complaining about

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know what I am personally doing about it. One of the things I'm not doing is complaining about the problem or waiting for "them" to change.

Reply · Like ·  3 · Edited · October 21 at 1:57pm



Steven Zacharius ·  Top Commenter

As the CEO of Kensington which was one of the first larger publishers that published extensively in the Af-Am field, we found that sales were dramatically higher at stores that put these books in the Af-Am section rather than co-mingled with all of the other books. Our books, which were primarily Af-Am romance, have always performed better in sections dedicated for these readers.

Reply · Like ·  2 · October 21 at 6:22pm



Andrea Shettle

I agree absolutely that diverse books should be mainstreamed into the rest of the bookstore. An awesome sci fi adventure story with an admirable and easily loveable hero should be shelved in the sci fi section of the store--regardless of the race, socio-economic status, gender (and gender identity), ability/disability status, or sexual orientation of the hero.

BUT, some of us readers are proactively seeking out diversity. And people who specifically WANT a hero who is a black Latina woman, or a hero who is a deaf teen girl of Chinese heritage, need an easy way to find them. It can be frustrating to ignore a book or TV show etc because we're assuming it's just "more of the same" only to realize years later that it actually has some of the diverse representation we had been desperately seeking.

I propose that marketing diverse... [See More](#)

Reply · Like ·  1 · October 22 at 9:35am



Erin Sinclair ·  Top Commenter

As a white female author just beginning her journey in the writing world I write the characters that come to my creative mind for the particular story I am crafting. I love writing about what's not expected. I wonder how many publishers would give a white author the cold shoulder to writing a story about an ethnic character simply because of a bias that a Caucasian writer could not possibly develop a strong say, Latin or Asian character because of a happenstance of birth?

Reply · Like · October 24 at 2:41pm



Bryce Milligan

As the publisher of Wings Press, which has been publishing multicultural literature since 1975 - over 60% of our authors are Latina/o, Native American, Black, Asian, or Middle Eastern -- I can say that the problem we see is that publications like Publishers Weekly, Library Journal, Booklist, Kirkus, Choice, et al. -- simply don't review many multicultural books or smaller independent presses. It doesn't matter if the books win awards or if the authors are downright revered by their readers. And when one complains, they stop reviewing ANY of your authors. We publish over 20 books a year and it has been a long time since even one of them was reviewed in the major trade journals. Every time we send out galleys or review copies to the trade journals, it makes recycling seem like an opportunity with an equal chance. I realize that the editors of these journals see themselves as heroic, but numbers are numbers.

Reply · Like · October 21 at 4:33pm



Jeff Rivera ·  Top Commenter · 196 followers

You certainly have a lot more experience than me, Bryce. But from where I'm sitting, I've noticed that trade reviews don't move the needle whatsoever in terms of sales. I've found going directly to readers or even bloggers is a lot more effective than chasing after industry publications and in my case, directly to schools, educators, principals, libraries, school librarians, churches, youth organizations. What has been your experience?

Reply · Like ·  1 · Edited · October 22 at 5:05am



Maria Simon

Indeed, we all have to get involved. I love this helpful cheat sheet to sell some awesome books: <http://www.gracelin.com/media/press/diversity.jpg> "Instead of...try..." I love telling readers to "check out Where The Mountain Meets The Moon and maybe you'll make its world in Minecraft like another reader from our library did sharing it with us at a book discussion."

Reply · Like · October 21 at 6:05pm



Devorah Devitt

I always knew that reading open minds and hearts. To be diversified means to open it up even wider where it missed the mark in publishing so far . Understand what happened and correct it.

Reply · Like · October 22 at 12:11am



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