



READING BETWEEN THE  
LINES: RACE, EQUITY,  
AND BOOK PUBLISHING



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
REPORT CONTENTS	6
SECTION I: THE COLOR OF PUBLISHING	7
A CHANGING INDUSTRY: PUBLISHER ACTION MEETS LITERARY ACTIVISM	8
PUBLISHER COMMITMENTS	11
HALTING PROGRESS: DIVERSITY IN FITS AND (FALSE) STARTS	14
A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE INDUSTRY AND THE PUBLICATION PROCESS	17
THE PUBLICATION PROCESS	18
SECTION II: STAFF DIVERSITY	21
THE NUMBERS TELL THE STORY	21
A RISING COHORT OF PUBLISHERS OF COLOR	24
NARROW PIPELINES FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR	27
EMPLOYEE RETENTION AND PROMOTION	29
WORKPLACE REALITIES FOR PROFESSIONALS OF COLOR	30
“AD HOC SENSITIVITY READERS”	32
SECTION III: CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES IN PUBLISHING	35
THE DEMAND FOR CROSSOVER SUCCESS	36
CASE STUDY - (1)NE DROP: SHIFTING THE LENS ON RACE	38
THE “ONE IS ENOUGH” RULE	41
THE “IDENTITY TRAP”	43

SECTION IV: PUBLISHING NORMS AND REPLICATED INEQUITIES	47
AGENTS AND EDITORS	47
COMPARATIVE TITLES AND SALES PROJECTIONS	48
AUTHORS OF COLOR AS A “TREND”	49
SECTION V: SELLING THE STORY: THE OVERLOOKED ROLE OF MARKETING, PUBLICITY, AND SALES	52
MARKETING AND SELLING DIVERSE BOOKS	53
CONSUMER RESEARCH AND BOOKSTORES	55
MARKETING BEYOND THE BOILERPLATE	57
MARKETING BEYOND PIGEONHOLES	60
CONCLUSION	62
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	63

# INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the publishing industry entered a moment of moral urgency about the persistent lack of racial and ethnic diversity among employees and authors. The industry is disproportionately white, and the canon of published books from trade publishers is overwhelmingly so. According to one analysis, 95 percent of American fiction books published between 1950 and 2018 were written by white people.<sup>1</sup> While that analysis looks at a broad sweep of time, more recent figures indicate that both the publishing industry, and the books it puts out, remain disproportionately white. The lack of diversity in the ranks of publishing professionals and in the works brought to market are linked: In a cultural industry like publishing, where subjective interpretations of what constitutes good or marketable literature are a major determinant of what gets published, the whiteness of the industry's staff has accompanied a largely white cadre of published authors.

Not only is the United States a demographically diverse nation—as of the last census, an estimated 42 percent of the country are people of color<sup>2</sup>—it also boasts a demographically diverse readership. The National Endowment for the Arts estimates that approximately a quarter of America's regular adult readers are people of color.<sup>3</sup> For decades, voices within and outside the publishing industry have called on publishing houses and bookstores to more fully

reflect this demographic diversity.<sup>4</sup> In response to calls for publishers to heed and support employees and authors of color, the publishing industry has gone through waves of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. But over time, many of these gains have turned out to be temporary or insufficient. Industry experts and longtime editors have occasionally aired their frustrations with these cyclical, transient attempts. As fifty-five year publishing veteran Marie Dutton Brown put it in a 2020 interview: “Black life and Black culture are rediscovered every 10 to 15 years. Publishing reflects that.”<sup>5</sup>

Over the past several years, major publishers have ramped up their efforts to diversify the racial and cultural composition of their workforces and author lists. They do so while facing—and in part spurred by—a groundswell of activism, including from authors and editors of color, calling on the industry to change. At the same time, activists have seen the rise of social media-enabled advocacy, from the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement (a hashtag-turned-organization that advocates for more diverse children's books) to the #PublishingPaidMe movement (a 2020 campaign that called on authors to disclose their advances to expose discrepancies in payment between white authors and those of color).

Beginning in the summer of 2020, the society-wide

---

1 Richard Jean So, Gus Wezerek, “Just How White Is the Book Industry,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2020, [nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html).

2 Mabinty Quarshie, Donovan Slack. “Census: US sees unprecedented multiracial growth, decline in the white population for first time in history,” *USA Today*, August 12, 2021, [usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/08/12/how-2020-census-change-how-we-look-america-what-expect/5493043001/](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/08/12/how-2020-census-change-how-we-look-america-what-expect/5493043001/)

3 James Murdoch, Mark Bauerlein, Marie Halverson, Natalie Morrissey, Esther Galadima, “How Do We Read? Let's Count the Ways,” National Endowment for the Arts, March 2020, [arts.gov/sites/default/files/How%20Do%20We%20Read%20report%202020.pdf](https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/How%20Do%20We%20Read%20report%202020.pdf), [arts.gov/sites/default/files/How%20Do%20](https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/How%20Do%20)

4 For the purposes of this report, by ‘diversity,’ PEN America refers to racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. This report's focus on racial and ethnic diversity should not be construed to imply any commentary regarding the importance of other indices of diversity—such as diversity of sexual orientation or gender identity, or diversity regarding differently-abled people.

5 Richard Jean So, Gus Wezerek, “Just How White is the Book Industry,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2020, [nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/)

confrontation of racial justice issues in the United States prompted a renewed reckoning. As the killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter instigated a sea change in the way Americans have approached race and racism, book publishers were among the corporate institutions that have pledged to be part of this change. A *New York Times* article in June 2022 noted that in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death, “the number of nonwhite employees in the publishing industry surged,” editors “scrambled to buy manuscripts from nonwhite authors,” and publishing houses “doubled down on their efforts to recruit and support their nonwhite employees and to examine their procedures through diversity, equity, and inclusion councils.”<sup>6</sup>

But diversity in the books sector isn’t just a question of who is on editorial staffs and which authors receive book contracts. Our research and interviews revealed a host of historically underexplored financial and institutional factors that feed into underrepresentation across the industry, and compound the marginalization of publishing professionals, authors, and booksellers of color. These factors include policies and strategies for entry-level pay, author advances, employee retention, professional mobility, mentorship, book sales, audience development, and marketing—all of which shape a book’s chance of publication and commercial success as well as an author, bookseller, or publishing professional’s capacity to remain and flourish in the industry.

**Systemic change requires more than goodwill. It necessitates specific, far-reaching, and sustained policy revisions and company-wide commitments that outlast any single political moment and persist despite inevitable hurdles and setbacks.**

Today we find ourselves in the midst of a promised shift, with publishing houses launching signature initiatives, hiring new personnel, and making high-level strategic decisions designed to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Big Five U.S. publishers—Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House (PRH), and Simon & Schuster—collectively control over 80 percent of the so-called trade publishing market, encompassing books sold to a general audience.<sup>7</sup> Their actions—including through their various imprints—will be determinative in shaping the diversity, equity, and inclusion of the trade book sector at large, but there are also hundreds of midsize and small independent publishers that play a role in determining the industry’s direction.

PEN America is convinced that the industry has embarked on current reforms with a genuine desire to make change. But systemic change requires more than goodwill. It necessitates specific, far-reaching, and sustained policy revisions and company-wide commitments that outlast any single political moment and persist despite inevitable hurdles and setbacks.

---

6 Marcela Valdes, “Inside the Push to Diversify the Book Business,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2022, [nytimes.com/2022/06/22/magazine/inside-the-push-to-diversify-the-book-business.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/22/magazine/inside-the-push-to-diversify-the-book-business.html).

7 “Hagens Berman: Booksellers Sue Amazon and Big Five Publishers for Alleged Monopoly Price-Fixing the U.S. Print Book Market,” *Business Wire*, March 25 2021, [businesswire.com/news/home/20210325005940/en/Hagens-Berman-Booksellers-Sue-Amazon-and-Big-Five-Publishers-for-Alleged-Monopoly-Price-Fixing-the-U.S.-Print-Book-Market](https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20210325005940/en/Hagens-Berman-Booksellers-Sue-Amazon-and-Big-Five-Publishers-for-Alleged-Monopoly-Price-Fixing-the-U.S.-Print-Book-Market); As of publication, there is an ongoing legal case between PRH and the Department of Justice to permit PRH to buy competitor Simon & Schuster, a move that would shrink the Big Five to the Big Four.

If publishers are the curators of our country's stories, they have an obligation to ensure that these stories reflect the breadth of our society. Current diversity statistics, alongside the testimony of many publishing and writing professionals of color, point to persistent obstacles and shortcomings in fulfilling this responsibility.

PEN America undertook this report to better understand why the debate over the lack of diversity in publishing has seemed to stagnate, or to progress only in fits and starts. Our hope is to shed light on the dynamics that both enable and inhibit the broadest range of voices in American literature. In researching this issue, PEN America focused on racial and ethnic diversity—acute and urgent, if not the sole, areas of under-representation. Our research and analysis incorporate interviews, conversations with major publishers, and open-source data and draw on PEN America's deep contacts with authors and editors and throughout the field of adult trade publishing.

This report is primarily informed by more than 60 interviews with authors and publishing professionals, including agents, editors, salespeople, marketing and publicity specialists, and publishers. The interviewees range from longtime veterans to recent hires and represent independent presses such as Graywolf and Akashic as well as the Big Five. While many agreed to speak on the record, a significant number chose to speak anonymously or off the record to avoid impairing their career prospects or personal relationships. PEN America has made every effort to select sources whose reliability could be established.

## REPORT CONTENTS

This report has five sections.

- Section I offers a snapshot of the transitions afoot in the industry.
- Section II addresses recruitment and retention, delineating how the lack of staff diversity impedes the autonomy and authority of editors and executives of color, and limits the books that are acquired and how they are marketed and sold.
- Section III explores long-standing attitudes and platitudes that have shaped the way the publishing industry has dealt with books by authors of color, including the shibboleth that “diverse books don't sell.”
- Section IV examines how certain timeworn conventions such as author advances and the use of comparative titles (“comps”) for sales projections may perpetuate existing inequities for authors of color.
- Section V focuses on the marketing, distribution, and sale of books and how standard practices can disadvantage books by authors of color.

**PEN American Experts:** James Tager, Clarisse Rosaz Shariyf

Published October 17, 2022

# SECTION I

## THE COLOR OF PUBLISHING

How disproportionately white is America’s corpus of stories? Although there is no regularized, industry-wide system that tracks the racial identities of published authors, there are several sets of numbers that help to paint a picture.

The most comprehensive evaluation of racial diversity among trade authors came in 2020, when McGill University professor Richard Jean So and *New York Times* graphics editor Gus Wezerek compiled a data set of approximately 8,000 fiction books by 4,100 authors published by major American publishing houses between 1950 and 2018. The research team identified the race or ethnicity of almost 3,500 of these authors. They concluded: “We guessed that most of the authors would be white, but we were shocked by the extent of the inequality once we analyzed the data. Of the 7,124 books for which we identified the author’s race, 95 percent were written by white people.”<sup>8</sup> While the results of this research emphasize trends across decades and may hide

recent historical gains, they paint a sobering picture of publishing as an institutionally white field.

Richard Jean So analyzed this data both in his 2020 book *Redlining Culture* and in a piece published in *The New York Times* in December of that year. Speaking to PEN America about the significance of this research, So said: “I wouldn’t say I was surprised by these results, but it was a learning process. We focus so much on the success of a few individual writers that we don’t realize that’s like all there is, that there’s not a much larger community” of books from writers of color. “But when you really get into the data of it—actually, no, there’s not.”<sup>9</sup>

Of the Big Five publishing houses, only two—Penguin Random House and Hachette—have publicly disclosed author diversity statistics.

Penguin Random House released its first-ever public, multiyear report on the subject in December 2021.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Richard Jean So, Gus Wezerek, “Just How White is the Book Industry,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2020, [nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html)

<sup>9</sup>PEN America interviews with Richard Jean So, April 2021 and October 2021.

<sup>10</sup>An audit of the diversity of Hachette Book Group’s publishing programs was completed and distributed to employees in June 2020, indicating that 22% of 2019 acquisitions by authors and illustrators new to the HBG lists were persons of color. No other numbers are publicly available. [hachettebookgroup.com/corporate-social-responsibility/an-update-on-hbgs-diversity-and-inclusion-efforts/](https://hachettebookgroup.com/corporate-social-responsibility/an-update-on-hbgs-diversity-and-inclusion-efforts/)

Their stats revealed that white U.S. contributors (authors, illustrators, and translators) accounted for 74.9 percent of the books released by the publishing giant between 2019 and 2021—a number significantly higher than the percentage of white people in the general population but one that tracks closely with the percentage of white employees in PRH’s U.S. workforce (74.2 percent).<sup>11</sup> Contributors of color constituted 23.5 percent, including 6.8 percent Asian, 6 percent Black, 5 percent Hispanic or Latinx, 2.1 percent Middle Eastern or North African, and 3.3 percent two or more races, with less than 1 percent each for American Indian and Pacific Islander.<sup>12</sup>

Hachette has disclosed its broad statistics for recent acquisitions of authors of color in comparison with white authors since 2020. In March 2022, Hachette released its third annual report on diversity equity and inclusion—including author diversity statistics. The publishing house disclosed that 34 percent of contracts with new contributors in 2021 were with self-identified BIPOC authors and illustrators, compared to 29 percent in 2020, and 22 percent in 2019.<sup>13</sup>

Elizabeth Méndez Berry is a vice president and executive editor of the PRH imprint One World as well as the founder of Critical Minded, an initiative to support cultural critics of color. She told PEN America that while the publishing industry doesn’t control what the consumer buys, “we do play a big role in defining what they can buy. And when you put that in historical context—the millions of stories in

New York and hundreds of millions of stories in the country—[when] we primarily publish books by white authors, the number of stories that we’re avoiding or suppressing is significant. It’s exciting that we’re starting to see a shift in acquisitions, but you have to remember that this shift is happening against a backdrop of decades upon decades that told a narrow story of what this country has been and could be. We have a lot to make up for.”<sup>14</sup>

## A CHANGING INDUSTRY: PUBLISHER ACTION MEETS LITERARY ACTIVISM

In recent years, publishers have pledged to renew their commitment to diversity. In 2017, Penguin Random House, which accounts for an estimated 25 percent of U.S. trade book market<sup>15</sup> and, as of this writing, was trying to fend off an antitrust challenge to its bid to acquire rival Simon & Schuster, began an employee-led diversity, equity, and inclusion initiative. In 2019, PRH contracted with an outside consultant, Paradigm, to conduct an in-depth company culture survey, followed by focus groups with company employees. U.S. CEO Madeline McIntosh found the results eye-opening. “On every measure,” she told PEN, “there was just such a significant gap in empowerment, to put it simply, where everybody—everybody—rated below straight, white men. In the focus groups, it became clear that that was affecting business decisions as simple as how a cover is designed.” Many employees reported that in the course of doing their jobs, they felt they didn’t have

---

11 “PRH U.S. Publishing Programs Audit Findings,” PRH, accessed June 16, 2022, [penguinrandomhouse.com/penguin-random-house-u-s-publishing-programs-audit-findings/](https://penguinrandomhouse.com/penguin-random-house-u-s-publishing-programs-audit-findings/)

12 PRH U.S. Publishing Programs Audit Findings,” PRH, accessed June 16, 2022, [penguinrandomhouse.com/penguin-random-house-u-s-publishing-programs-audit-findings/](https://penguinrandomhouse.com/penguin-random-house-u-s-publishing-programs-audit-findings/)

13 Hachette Book Group, An update on HBG’s diversity, equity and inclusion efforts (March 2022), [hachettebookgroup.com/an-update-on-hbgs-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-efforts-march-2022/](https://hachettebookgroup.com/an-update-on-hbgs-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-efforts-march-2022/)

14 PEN America interviews with Elizabeth Méndez Berry, May and October 2021

15 Benjamin Mullen and Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, “Penguin Random House Parent to Buy Simon & Schuster From ViacomCBS,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 25, 2020, [wsj.com/articles/penguin-random-house-parent-near-deal-to-buy-simon-schuster-from-viacomcbs-11606268232](https://www.wsj.com/articles/penguin-random-house-parent-near-deal-to-buy-simon-schuster-from-viacomcbs-11606268232)





**As a direct result of #PublishingPaidMe and the discrepancies it revealed, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, a recipient of the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award for his story collection Friday Black, was able to renegotiate his advance for his next book.**

for greater attention to diversity in the children and young-adult sectors, adopting the Twitter hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks. Soon after, a group of writers and publishing insiders founded We Need Diverse Books as an organization aiming “to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people.”<sup>18</sup> The Cooperative Children’s Book Center has found that We Need Diverse Books has had a major impact, prompting a meaningful rise in authors of color.<sup>19</sup> In 2016, a group of Hispanic publishing professionals created Latinx in Publishing to connect authors and publishers with readers and to boost the Hispanic presence in the industry.<sup>20</sup>

These efforts accelerated in mid-2020 as a society-wide reckoning with racial justice reverberating throughout the publishing industry. In June of that year, author L.L. McKinney started the Twitter hashtag #PublishingPaidMe, calling on writers to reveal the advances they received for selling their books to publishers.<sup>21</sup> That same month, employees at the Macmillan imprint Farrar, Straus, and Giroux organized a “Day of Solidarity” for publishing professionals to “speak out against racist murder, white supremacy, and racial capitalism.”<sup>22</sup> It asked publishing professionals to work on projects featuring Black authors, donate a day’s pay, or otherwise support Black writers. At least 1,300 workers across the industry ended up participating.<sup>23</sup>

---

16 PEN America meeting with Penguin Random House, March 7, 2022

17 PEN America meeting with Penguin Random House, March 7, 2022

18 “About Us,” We Need Diverse Books, accessed June 16, 2022, [diversebooks.org/about-wndb/](https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/); “FAQ” “Official Tumblr of We Need Diverse Books, accessed August 1, 2022, [weneeddivebooks.tumblr.com/FAQ](https://weneeddivebooks.tumblr.com/FAQ).

19 University of Wisconsin Madison, School of Education, Cooperative Children’s Book Center -Diversity Statistics FAQs- [ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/diversity-statistics-faqs/](https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/diversity-statistics-faqs/)

20 Carlos Rodríguez-Martorell, “Taking a Look at Latinx in Publishing,” Publishers Weekly, June 29, 2018, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/77406-taking-a-look-at-latinx-in-publishing.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/77406-taking-a-look-at-latinx-in-publishing.html)

21 Authors receive an advance, usually paid in three installments, upon selling a book. They only begin earning royalties on sales after revenue from sales exceeds the amount of the advance.

22 John Maher, “Workers Across Book Business Take Collective Action Against Racism,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/83536-workers-across-industry-take-collective-action-against-racism.html>

23 Concepción de León, Elizabeth A. Harris, “#PublishingPaidme and a Day of Action Reveal an Industry Reckoning,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/06/08/books/publishing](https://nytimes.com/2020/06/08/books/publishing)

The #PublishingPaidMe revelations were both predictable and alarming. Author Jesmyn Ward, who is Black, disclosed that even after *Salvage the Bones*, her second novel (for which she received an advance of about \$20,000), received a National Book Award, she had to fight furiously, and switch publishers, to receive \$100,000—“barely equal to some of my writer friends’ debut novel advances”—for her next novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. That book also went on to win a National Book Award. Science fiction writer N.K. Jemisin, who is also Black, reported that she received only \$25,000 advances for each book of her Broken Earth trilogy—all of which went on to receive the Hugo Award, making Jemisin the first author in the award’s 65-year history to win three times in a row.<sup>24</sup>

As part of the #PublishingPaidMe discussion, a Google spreadsheet of advances began to circulate with nearly 1,200 self-reported entries. Of these, 122 authors revealed that they received an advance of at least \$100,000. Of those 122 authors, 78 identified themselves as white, compared with just seven who identified as Black and two as Latino or Latina.<sup>25</sup> While the spreadsheet was not comprehensive, many commentators nonetheless pointed to the results as another indication that publishing favors white authors and audiences.

The #PublishingPaidMe discussion brought the long-secretive subject of advances at least partly out in the open. “The #PublishingPaidMe hashtag

really showed us the inequality that exists, where a Black writer with even a big following might be getting three, five, ten times less than a white author that isn’t equal at all in terms of audience,” Rebekah Borucki, founder and president of Row House Publishing,<sup>26</sup> told a writer for *Forbes*, noting that the online debate sparked widespread frustration among publishing professionals and writers of color.<sup>27</sup> Writer Leah Johnson, author of the acclaimed young-adult novel *You Should See Me in a Crown*, posted on Twitter that #PublishingPaidMe was “one of the most important things that could have ever happened in publishing,” adding: “We’re still witnessing a shift in culture that was kickstarted by a newfound transparency around wage disparity (and the expectation of overwork for minimal compensation) . . . It’s difficult to understand how underwater you are when you have no concept of where the surface is.”<sup>28</sup>

As a direct result of #PublishingPaidMe and the discrepancies it revealed, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, a recipient of the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award for his story collection *Friday Black*, was able to renegotiate his advance for his next book. But he told PEN America that as he scrolled through his feed at the time of the initiative, he couldn’t help noting the absence of “so, so many of these white male authors that I see all the time on Twitter . . . And I keep that in my head.” While Adjei-Brenyah expresses gratitude toward “the white writers who stepped up and made

---

24 Concepción de León, Elizabeth A. Harris, “#PublishingPaidme and a Day of Action Reveal an Industry Reckoning,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/06/08/books/publishingpaidme-publishing-day-of-action.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/books/publishingpaidme-publishing-day-of-action.html); Aja Romano, “The Hugo Awards just made history, and defied alt-right extremists in the process,” *Vox*, August 21, 2018, [vox.com/2018/8/21/17763260/n-k-jemisin-hugo-awards-broken-earth-sad-puppies](https://www.vox.com/2018/8/21/17763260/n-k-jemisin-hugo-awards-broken-earth-sad-puppies)

25 The #PublishingPaidMe spreadsheet can be found at [docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Xsx6rKJtfa8f\\_prYYD3zRxaXYVDaPXbasvt\\_iA2vA/edit#gid=1798364047](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Xsx6rKJtfa8f_prYYD3zRxaXYVDaPXbasvt_iA2vA/edit#gid=1798364047). As of August 2022, the number of entries is slightly more than 2,800. The remaining authors identified as Asian, Middle Eastern, Multiracial, Native American/First Nations, Nonwhite, or did not share. As of August, 346 authors self-reported receiving an advance of at least \$100,000. Of those authors, 232 identified as white, twenty-six as Black, and four as Latin American.

26 Rebekah Borucki. (n.d.) Experience, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rebekahborucki>

27 Michelle King, “How To Disrupt The Publishing Industry And Do Better,” *Forbes*, November 24, 2021, [forbes.com/sites/michelleking/2021/11/24/how-to-disrupt-the-publishing-industry-and-do-better/](https://forbes.com/sites/michelleking/2021/11/24/how-to-disrupt-the-publishing-industry-and-do-better/)

28 Leah Johnson, “I think one of the most important things that could have ever happened in publishing was #PublishingPaidMe,” Twitter, April 18, 2022, [twitter.com/byleahjohnson/status/1516125126](https://twitter.com/byleahjohnson/status/1516125126)



Yaba Blay, author



Regina Brooks, author



Ebony LaDelle, author

more clear and transparent that disparity,” he said that for the most part, on the subject of equity in book advances, “it’s really always the people of color talking about this, people of color on the diversity counts, people of color trying to fix things—and where are the white people trying to help us?”<sup>29</sup>

## PUBLISHER COMMITMENTS

That same month, in response to the broad national call for reckoning and to targeted activism among their authors, employees, and audiences, major publishers made a series of public commitments, in some cases pledging to implement major initiatives to address racial inequities in their institutions.<sup>30</sup> PRH vowed to disclose statistics on employee demographics, publish more books by people of

color, mandate antiracist training among its staff, and hold a company-wide reading assignment of Ibram X. Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist*. Michael Pietsch, the CEO of Hachette Book Group, announced that it would provide staff demographic information and create diversity targets for its staff and authors.<sup>31</sup>

Each of the Big Five publicly voiced support for Black Lives Matter and articulated new company principles about racial equity and justice. PRH promised to “stand against racism and violence toward the Black community” and to “commit to listening—to our readers, to our authors, and to our teams—as we work toward becoming part of the change.”<sup>32</sup> HarperCollins Publishers pledged to “stand with all of our colleagues, authors, readers, and partners who experience racism

<sup>29</sup> PEN America interviews with Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, April and September 2021

<sup>30</sup> Jim Milliot, “Publishers Promise More Action to Diversify Industry,” *Publishers Weekly*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/83542-publishers-promise-more-action-to-diversify-industry.html>

<sup>31</sup> Concepción de León, Elizabeth A. Harris, “#PublishingPaidme and a Day of Action Reveal an Industry Reckoning,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/06/08/books/publishing](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/books/publishing)

<sup>32</sup> “Black Lives Matter,” PRH, accessed June 16, 2022 [prhspeakers.com/black-lives-matter](https://prhspeakers.com/black-lives-matter)

and oppression.”<sup>33</sup> Hachette declared that it would “support Black writers, readers and people of color by sharing their stories and experiences in many of the books we publish.”<sup>34</sup> Macmillan released a statement against racism, canceled internal meetings for a day in June to allow for discussions, added Juneteenth as a company-wide holiday, and offered a double matching program for donations to racial justice causes that led to over \$400,000 being donated to groups including the Black Lives Matter Global Network.<sup>35</sup> Simon & Schuster announced that it was “committed to working with our employees, authors and the publishing community to make our company and our industry a safe and inclusive environment for all, and a publisher of works that represent the breadth and depth of our diverse population.”<sup>36</sup> This public statement followed a June 1 internal letter from CEO Jonathan Karp to employees—a copy of which the publisher provided to PEN America—that said, “We stand with our colleagues, authors, and the many citizens both within the world of publishing and the greater population who have mobilized in the cause of social justice and in proclaiming that yes, Black Lives Matter.”<sup>37</sup>

PEN America spoke with representatives of each of the major five publishing houses to better understand how they have worked to actualize these pledges. Some publishers stressed that much of the work they view as most influential in promoting diversity occurred prior to 2020; still, each of the Big Five acknowledged the importance of June 2020 as a catalyst for the industry.

Based on these conversations as well as research and interviews, PEN America developed the following metrics to assess whether, and to what extent, publisher diversity statements have translated to structural change.<sup>38</sup> (As these metrics intend to evaluate structural change, we have omitted instances of individual and ad hoc editorial and commercial decision-making, which, while important, are more difficult to evaluate and may not reflect long-term, company-wide policy. These metrics are not intended as a comprehensive description of all publisher commitments and efforts, but as an illustration of Big Five activity in several important areas.)

---

33 Bea Koch, Leah Koch, “Diversity in Romance Books Still Lags,” *Publishers Weekly*, March 2, 2021, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/85707-diversity-in-romance-books-still-lags.html#:~:text=On%20June%201%2C%202020%2C%20seven,who%20experience%20racism%20and%20oppression](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/85707-diversity-in-romance-books-still-lags.html#:~:text=On%20June%201%2C%202020%2C%20seven,who%20experience%20racism%20and%20oppression).

34 Richard Jean So, Gus Wezerek, “Just How White is the Book Industry,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html>

35 PEN America communication with Macmillan, March 2022; Pan Macmillan statement on Black Lives Matter and Diversity and Inclusion, June 8, 2020, <https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/general/diversity-and-inclusion>; Macmillan Publishers, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, <https://us.macmillan.com/diversity/>

36 Jim Milliot, “Publishers Promise More Action to Diversify Industry,” *Publishers Weekly*, June 9, 2020, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/83542-publishers-promise-more-action-to-diversify-industry.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/83542-publishers-promise-more-action-to-diversify-industry.html)

37 Letter provided to PEN America on March 3, 2022.

38 See interviews and research in report as well as resources and leaders for assessing DEI initiatives in media and beyond, including Academy to Innovate HR, Cindi Howson at ThoughtSpot, Holly Falk-Krzenski, and Letrell Crittenden.

	Simon & Schuster	Penguin Random House	Macmillan	Hachette Book Group	HarperCollins
Does the publisher collect employee DEI statistics?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are the DEI statistics publicly available?	No	Yes*	Yes*	Yes*	No
Does the publisher have explicit DEI hiring benchmarks and targets?	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Does the publisher have a professional DEI Officer and/or Team?	Yes <sup>39</sup>	Yes <sup>40</sup>	Yes <sup>41</sup>	Yes <sup>42</sup>	Yes <sup>43</sup>
Is there a DEI Officer that reports directly to the CEO or COO?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes <sup>*44</sup>
Does the publisher require DEI training for all staff?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Does the publisher track and/or collect author/contributor DEI statistics?	Yes	Yes	No <sup>*45</sup>	Yes	Yes
Are they publicly available?	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Does the publisher track and assess equity in author advances?	No	No	No	No	No
Does the publisher have an Officer or Team specifically dedicated to multicultural marketing?	Yes <sup>46</sup>	Yes <sup>47</sup>	No	Yes <sup>*48</sup>	Yes <sup>49</sup>

\* Penguin Random House: <https://publishingperspectives.com/2022/08/penguin-random-houses-diversity-report-2021/>

\* MacMillan: <https://us.macmillan.com/diversity/>

\* Hachette Book Group: <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/corporate-social-responsibility/an-update-on-diversity-may-2021/>

39 Amanda Armstrong-Frank was appointed Director of Workplace Culture and Diversity Initiatives in September 2020.

40 Kimberly Ayers Shariff was appointed Executive Vice President, Director of Strategy for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, in April 2021 and leads a team of 4. PRH staffing also includes additional divisional DEI strategic roles.

41 LaToya Rose was appointed Vice President of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in August 2020, and promoted to SVP, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in April 2022.

42 Carrie Bloxson was appointed VP Diversity and Inclusion in December 2020.

43 Gisselda Nuñez was appointed VP Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in September 2020. Harper Collins also has a dedicated DEI team.

44 Gisselda Nuñez was appointed VP Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in September 2020. Harper Collins also has a dedicated DEI team.

45 Macmillan is planning to launch a voluntary author demographic survey by 2023.

46 Sienna Farris was appointed Simon and Schuster's inaugural Vice President and Director of Multicultural Marketing in October 2020.

47 In 2020, a dedicated team leading multicultural marketing strategy was formed: Anthony Key was appointed Director of Multicultural Marketing in September 2020. Susette Brooks was appointed Director of Strategy, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Penguin Publishing Group, in February 2021. Carolina Meurkens, Manager, Multicultural Marketing, Penguin Publishing Group, was appointed in May 2022.

48 Former Director of Multicultural Publicity, Linda Duggins, started in 2006 and left in March 2021. The marketing strategy team regularly meets with the Chief Diversity Officer.

49 Former Director of Multicultural Publicity, Linda Duggins, started in 2006 and left in March 2021. The marketing strategy team regularly meets with the Chief Diversity Officer.

Since 2020, several diversity initiatives have been adopted by all of the Big Five publishing houses, becoming new baseline standards, particularly in the hiring and recruitment processes. These include the creation of new retention, hiring, and funding initiatives; the appointment of formal DEI officers, many of whom serve on and/or report to senior-level management; and a turn toward data to track and analyze employee diversity.

Other areas reflect a lack of uniformity in implementation. These include multicultural marketing officers and strategy; staff-wide diversity and inclusion training (acknowledging that the quality and value of such training can vary widely, making this metric difficult to assess); and the collection and publication of diversity statistics for a publishing house's authors and other contributors. As of August 2022, none of the Big Five had publicly disclosed information on author advances.

PEN America's research underscores that diversity in the book market is not simply a matter of getting employees and authors of color through the door. Each publishing house is operated and structured somewhat differently, obviating exact comparisons among their strategies to achieve greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. Nonetheless, we hope that by disclosing the information we did obtain on affirmative efforts to address these issues, we can prompt further discussion and progress. Intentional marketing, workplace culture transformation, and large-scale diversification in publishing houses are crucial for ensuring that diverse stories and storytellers can thrive.

According to the *Publishers Weekly* 2020 report on workplace diversity, 75 percent of industry respondents said that their employer had increased their diversity and equity efforts in the past year by broadening recruitment efforts (for instance, by expanding outreach at historically Black colleges and universities), hiring DEI experts and holding training sessions, adding a retail manager to work with bookstore owners of color, auditing author demographics, boosting marketing support for titles by authors of color, and raising entry-level salaries. Roughly half of the respondents whose workplaces added a DEI initiative said they believed the initiative would result in real change at their workplace.<sup>50</sup>

Overall, it is too early to evaluate how much long-term change this burst of post-George Floyd efforts will bring. Clearly publishing is investing in reform in unprecedented ways, impelled in large part by industry professionals, authors, and others proponents of change.

## HALTING PROGRESS: DIVERSITY IN FITS AND (FALSE) STARTS

Dating back to the 1960s, publishing companies have mounted initiatives and started imprints focused on authors of color, and industry publications have covered questions of diversity and inclusion within major houses.<sup>51</sup> Experts and longtime insiders have warned that these past efforts have waxed and waned, receiving substantial fanfare, then dying down as public and media attention diminished. Many of PEN America's interviewees referenced previous unfulfilled promises to transform, evincing leering about whether this time things will be any

---

<sup>50</sup> Jim Milliot, "Are Book Biz Diversity Efforts Starting to Kick In?," *Publishers Weekly*, December 31, 2020, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/85222-are-book-biz-diversity-efforts-starting-to-kick-in.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/85222-are-book-biz-diversity-efforts-starting-to-kick-in.html)

<sup>51</sup> Mel Watkins, "Hard Times For Black Writers," *The New York Times*, February 22, 1981, [nytimes.com/1981/02/22/books/hard-times-for-black-writers.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1981/02/22/books/hard-times-for-black-writers.html)

different. Despite this wariness, many interviewees voiced hope that current efforts would prove more serious and permanent.

“We are both at a demographic inflection point and an inflection point in terms of the future of our democracy,” said Tanya McKinnon, a literary agent for more than 20 years.<sup>52</sup> McKinnon argued that to surmount cyclical patterns of progress and regression, publishers need “to feel a real normalization toward acquiring and publishing books by people of color well. That is a first step, so that publishing voices of color doesn’t feel like an anomaly, that it doesn’t feel like it’s something that’s a response to the moment but that it’s an ongoing commitment—to publish consistently, and well, the work of people who reflect the face of America.”<sup>53</sup>

Some of those interviewed by PEN America express cautious optimism that a combination of attitudinal, societal, and commercial changes have combined to make progress irreversible. Ibrahim Ahmad, former editorial director of the Akashic Books, said that his decision to move from an indie publisher to Viking Books, a PRH imprint, in 2021,<sup>54</sup> was spurred in part by his belief that the industry was changing and that larger publishers increasingly recognized that authors of color can be both highly acclaimed and commercially successful. “What speaks loudest in this business and in any business are dollars,” he said. “When publishers see that writers of color

can sell huge quantities of books, they will invest in those books.”<sup>55</sup>

“I’ve been in the publishing industry for over 10 years,” said Milena Brown, marketing director at PRH imprint Doubleday,<sup>56</sup> “and literally, this year has been the most action I’ve seen on this issue. It’s slow-moving, and that’s not great, but . . . talks of diversity don’t matter until there’s people of color at decision-making positions. Why is there a lack of diversity at the top? . . . I think people are starting to see things changing in the industry or in corporate America, period.” Brown adds that the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests helped empower her personally. “I started to be more vocal” about problems in the industry like inequities in pay, budgets, and advances. Ultimately, she predicts, “this is no longer going to be a trend” that lasts for a few months or a year, then reverts to “the same things we’ve been doing. I don’t think we are going to allow it anymore. We can now hold companies accountable.”<sup>57</sup>

Carrie Bloxson, the Hachette Book Group’s chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer, said that new industry standards like collecting and disclosing employee and contributor statistics ensure publisher “accountability” to authors, readership, and industry professionals. Comparing Hachette’s 2020 and 2021 diversity reports, Bloxson notes, “What was interesting about 2021, too, is that the

---

52 Diane Patrick, “Meet the Agent: Tanya McKinnon,” *Publishers Weekly*, July 24, 2020, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/83962-meet-the-agent-tanya-mckinnon.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/83962-meet-the-agent-tanya-mckinnon.html)

53 PEN America interview with Tanya McKinnon, May 2021.

54 “Ibrahim Ahmad, Executive Director,” Penguin Books, accessed June 16, 2022, [penguin.com/ibrahim-ahmad-executive-editor/](https://penguin.com/ibrahim-ahmad-executive-editor/); Famously, Marlon James, who won the Man Booker prize in 2015 for his novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, saw the manuscript for his debut novel *John Crow’s Devil* rejected 78 separate times by publishers before Akashic published it in 2005. Mark Brown, Matthew Weaver, “Man Booker’s debut novel rejected nearly 80 times,” *The Guardian*, October 14, 2015, [theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/14/man-booker-prize-marlon-james-debut-novel-rejected-nearly-80-times](https://theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/14/man-booker-prize-marlon-james-debut-novel-rejected-nearly-80-times)

55 PEN America interviews with Ibrahim Ahmad, May and September 2021

56 Milena Brown. (n.d.) Experience, LinkedIn, accessed July 31, 2022, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/milena-brown-38>

57 PEN America interviews with Milena Brown, April and September 2021

largest percentage gain for staff diversity was at VP and above, which is really heartening to see.”<sup>58</sup>

Others are more skeptical. Speaking to PEN America in October 2021, Chris Jackson, publisher and editor-in-chief of PRH’s One World, said: “The last shred of naivete I have about publishing is that I think we have passed an inflection point. I don’t think we can go back to the way it was because there’s just too much evidence that books coming from writers of color work in the market.”<sup>59</sup> But when PEN America followed up in the summer of 2022, he was less certain: “I may have believed this when the interview first took place,” he said, “but I don’t believe it anymore. I’m pretty convinced at this point that things can definitely go back to the way they used to be.”



**“It’s very, very hard for somebody who is not independently wealthy to come into the industry and accrue the power that’s required to actually be the decision-maker later on.”**

**Elizabeth Méndez Berry, Vice President and Executive Editor, One World**

---

<sup>58</sup> PEN America interviews with Carrie Bloxson, June and September 2021

<sup>59</sup> PEN America interviews with Chris Jackson, April and October 2021



## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE INDUSTRY AND THE PUBLICATION PROCESS

The American trade publishing industry consists of a patchwork of presses—from PRH, the largest, which publishes over 15,000 print titles a year,<sup>60</sup> to micro-presses that publish only a couple a year. Trade publishers acquire, edit, produce, and distribute works of fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and journalism. Trade books, the largest publishing category, are intended for a general audience and are usually sold in bookstores and through other retail booksellers. Other publishing categories include academic, professional, and specialty. While children’s and young-adult books may have some different conventions, they are often considered part of the trade publishing industry.

The Big Five trade publishers were known as the Big Six until 2013, when Penguin and Random House merged. In 2020, PRH announced plans to buy Simon & Schuster for more than \$2 billion; the Justice Department has sued to stop the merger, citing antitrust concerns.<sup>61</sup> If the merger goes through, the moniker will become the Big Four. The industry’s center of gravity is in New York City, where all of the Big Five and many other publishers are based.

The Big Five account for an estimated 80 percent or more of the domestic trade book market, with PRH books alone comprising roughly 37 percent.<sup>62</sup> Within the Big Five, each conglomerate operates numerous “imprints”—literary brands that make relatively independent decisions in acquiring books. PRH, for example, owns about 275 imprints, including Riverhead, Vintage, Viking, One World, Doubleday, and Pantheon, each of which has its own editorial team and sensibility.<sup>63</sup> Hachette Book Group owns Basic Books, Grand Central Publishing, BoldType, Little Brown, and more.<sup>64</sup> Amistad, an imprint known for focusing on work by Black writers, is an imprint of HarperCollins, as is Ecco.<sup>65</sup> Simon & Schuster’s imprints include Atria, Scribner, and Avid Reader Press,<sup>66</sup> while Macmillan’s include Flatiron Books, Henry Holt, and Farrar Straus and Giroux.<sup>67</sup> In all, the Big Five have an

---

60 “The Book Lover’s Guide to Publishing,” PRH, accessed June 16, 2022, [penguinrandomhouse.com/articles/the-book-lovers-guide-to-publishing-part-1-publishing-ephemera/#:~:text=Read%20below%20for%20the%20answers,15%2C000%20print%20books%20each%20year](https://penguinrandomhouse.com/articles/the-book-lovers-guide-to-publishing-part-1-publishing-ephemera/#:~:text=Read%20below%20for%20the%20answers,15%2C000%20print%20books%20each%20year)

61 “Justice Department Sues to Block PRH’s Acquisition of Rival Publisher Simon & Schuster,” The United States Department of Justice, accessed June 16, 2022, [justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-sues-block-penguin-random-house-s-acquisition-rival-publisher-simon](https://justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-sues-block-penguin-random-house-s-acquisition-rival-publisher-simon)

62 Thad McIlroy, “What the Big 5’s Financial Reports Reveal About the State of Traditional Book Publishing,” *Book Business*, August 8, 2016, [bookbusinessmag.com/post/big-5-financial-reports-reveal-state-traditional-book-publishing/](https://bookbusinessmag.com/post/big-5-financial-reports-reveal-state-traditional-book-publishing/). For additional numbers on publishing market percentages, see Amy Watson, “Share of adult hardcover and paperback bestseller positions held by leading publishers in the United States from 2019 to 2021,” Statista, February 3, 2022, [statista.com/statistics/1234734/book-publishers-best-sellers-list-share/#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20the%20Big%20Five,from%20independent%20publishers%2C%20than%20majors](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1234734/book-publishers-best-sellers-list-share/#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20the%20Big%20Five,from%20independent%20publishers%2C%20than%20majors)

63 “Imprints,” PRH, accessed August 1, 2022, [penguinrandomhouse.com/imprints](https://penguinrandomhouse.com/imprints). “PRH Imprints,” PRH, accessed August 1, 2022, [penguinrandomhouse.com/imprints.php](https://penguinrandomhouse.com/imprints.php)

64 “Imprints,” Hachette Book Group, accessed August 1, 2022, [hachettebookgroup.com/imprints/](https://hachettebookgroup.com/imprints/)

65 “HarperCollins Imprint and Lines,” HarperCollins Publishers, accessed August 1, 2022, [harpercollins.com/pages/corporate-harpercollins-imprints](https://www.harpercollins.com/pages/corporate-harpercollins-imprints)

66 “Divisions and Imprints,” Simon & Schuster, accessed August 1, 2022, [aboutsimonschuster.com/divisions-and-imprints](https://www.aboutsimonschuster.com/divisions-and-imprints)

67 “Our Publishers,” Macmillan Publishers, accessed August 1, 2022, [us.macmillan.com/publishers/](https://www.us.macmillan.com/publishers/)

estimated 500-plus imprints,<sup>68</sup> many of which were once autonomous companies. Agents can submit a manuscript for consideration to multiple imprints within a publishing house, and imprints can bid against one another as long as a different publisher is also in the running.

In contrast to the Big Five, independent publishers are not part of a large conglomerate. They tend to be much smaller and include the likes of Grove Atlantic, Graywolf, Beacon, New Press, Akashic, Feminist Press, and Catapult. With fewer resources, independent and small presses offer lower advances and slimmer marketing and publicity budgets. They are seen within the industry as taking greater creative risks and being less profit-focused, with some of them embracing a nonprofit model. While independent and Big Five publishers often act as competitors, they also have collaborative relationships, as major publishers frequently operate as distributors for one another and for books published by their indie counterparts.

Though every publisher has its own processes, most houses have editorial, marketing, publicity, sales, and production departments. Other departments include art and design, contracts and legal, digital production, finance, and subsidiary rights.

## THE PUBLICATION PROCESS

The first step of the process happens outside the publishing houses: when a writer with a manuscript or a book proposal queries an agent, or an agent queries a writer whom they hope to represent. Once they sign a representation agreement, the agent, who has developed relationships with editors at various houses, pitches the book project to editors.

If an editor is interested in acquiring a book, they—often with the sales director—create a profit-and-loss projection that can include information such as production and manufacturing costs, royalty rate, formats, expected price, and, perhaps most important, expected sales. This sales projection is typically based on comparative titles (“comps”), previously published books that are similar to the proposed project and likely to appeal to the same book-buying audience. The final decision on whether to acquire is typically made through a committee that includes editorial, publicity, marketing, sales, and sometimes other departments, depending on the house.

The advance is the amount the author is paid to write the book (with the agent taking a cut, usually 15 percent). It is based in part on sales projections, which in turn are based on the comp titles. As the word suggests, an advance is not simply a lump-sum payment. It is a preliminary payment of the author’s predicted future earnings—that is to say, the royalties from sales, share of any licensing

---

<sup>68</sup><https://aspiringauthor.com/publishers/publishing-houses-in-new-york/>

agreements, and any other profit the author is expected to make on the book. Advances are typically paid out in three or four installments: the first payment upon signing the contract, the second payment when the full manuscript is delivered, and subsequent payments when the book is published (including publication in different formats, i.e. hardcover and paperback). A writer starts receiving royalties on copies sold only once they “earn out,” meaning they have sold enough copies that their total royalties (and other earnings) exceed their advance.

Marketing and publicity departments work together to ensure that the book finds an audience. Generally, marketing works on positioning a book: What genre is it? What social media campaigns should they run? What kind of advertising will the publisher run and on which platforms? How should the book be described and tagged for search engines? Publicists are responsible for soliciting “earned” media coverage (as opposed to advertising) of a book. They ensure that the book is reviewed and that the author is interviewed or featured in print or on radio, podcasts, or television. Publicists also plan and execute book tours, readings, and other events.

With the marketing department, the salespeople are often responsible for managing direct relationships with bookstores and booksellers. Sales reps are a direct link to buyers—bookstores, other businesses, libraries, schools—and are responsible for selling the book to these purchasers.

For each publishing “season”—often spring, summer, and fall—a house has an internal “launch” of its new books, during which editors present them to marketing and publicity teams and to national sales reps, aiming to get them excited about promoting the latest titles. Internal launches of a book take place about a year before it is set to be published.<sup>69</sup> After the launch, publishing houses host sales conferences, where marketing and publicity present a selection of the biggest upcoming titles—and associated highlights and tactics—to all the sales field reps.

The marketing and publicity budgets are set during meetings that take place shortly after the launch presentations. Staff from editorial, marketing, and publicity are likely to be present. Also present for these deliberations might be sales managers who work with booksellers (representing, for example, Barnes & Noble, Amazon, Costco, and independent distributors). They consider how many copies were purchased from distributors in the past for similar books and discuss sales projections, leading to decisions on how much to spend to push a particular book to the market.

The number of copies the publisher plans to publish—the so-called announced first print run (AFP), or announced market distribution (AMD)—is a key indicator of how big the house expects the book to be,

---

<sup>69</sup>See e.g. Kelly Notaras, A Publishing Timeline for First Time Authors, KN Literary Arts, June 27, 2017, last updated July 9, 2019, [knliterary.com/a-publishing-timeline-for-first-time-authors/](http://knliterary.com/a-publishing-timeline-for-first-time-authors/)

and therefore how much of an investment it makes in marketing. If a book receives good early buzz, the AFP may increase and the associated marketing and publicity budgets may rise. The budget size also ties into the size of the author's advance—a higher advance generally demands a higher budget to earn back that money.

Distribution is broadly divided into print and e-book arms. Typically, big publishers possess in-house distribution services with their own sales representatives and warehouses. Most small and medium-sized publishers contract with a book distributor, which agrees to get their books to market (bookstores, book chains, online booksellers, and book wholesalers) in exchange for a percentage of sales.

One of the distributor's main roles is to handle advanced sales of a book to bookstores and libraries before it's published. Distributors also commonly provide services including marketing, sales, logistics, shipping, order fulfillment, warehousing, and returns. Traditionally, when a book comes off the printer, it is sent to an established book distributor that provides warehousing for the book before it is sold to various stores in the book trade or to a wholesaler (such as Ingram, Baker & Taylor, or Greenleaf), which can also fulfill book orders from bookstores and libraries. There are several companies that operate purely as book distributors. Three of them—the Independent Publishers Group, Ingram Publishers Service, and National Book Network—collectively represent 900 small publishers.<sup>70</sup> But small publishers frequently work with one of the Big Five publishers to distribute and sometimes market their titles to bookstores and other sellers.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Jim Milliot, "Where Have All the Midsize Book Publishers Gone?" *Publishers Weekly*, October 1, 2021, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/87526-where-have-all-the-midsize-book-publishers-gone.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/87526-where-have-all-the-midsize-book-publishers-gone.html)

<sup>71</sup> "Distribution: Inside Publishing," *Writers Services*, accessed August 1, 2022, [writersservices.com/resources/distribution-inside-publishing/](https://writersservices.com/resources/distribution-inside-publishing/); "Demystifying Book Distribution for Small to Mid-Sized Publishers," *Ingram Content Group*, June 26, 2018, [ingramcontent.com/publishers-blog/demystifying-book-distribution-for-small-to-mid-sized-publishers](https://ingramcontent.com/publishers-blog/demystifying-book-distribution-for-small-to-mid-sized-publishers)

## SECTION II

### STAFF DIVERSITY

The disproportionate whiteness of the publishing industry is a product of racial disparities that have dominated every professional field in America. But as other industries have made progress in diversifying, one reason that book publishing has lagged is that it “attracts people who don’t need to make money,” said consultant Richard Nash, who formerly headed Soft Skull Press, an independent publisher known for experimental fiction.<sup>72</sup>

Publishing is notorious for low pay and long hours and is centered in New York City, all of which pose barriers for those who do not have external sources of financial support from their families or savings. These limitations do not hinder people of color alone, but they do tilt the playing field toward people with wealthy families or powerful connections. Because people of color are more likely to lack these advantages, ostensibly race-neutral conditions like low entry-level salaries enshrine systemic inequities. “It’s very, very hard for somebody who is not independently wealthy to come into the industry and accrue the power that’s

required to actually be the decision-maker later on,” said Elizabeth Méndez Berry of One World.<sup>73</sup>

#### THE NUMBERS TELL THE STORY

Although there are few publicly available numbers that break down the ethnic and demographic makeup of publishing employees, the numbers we do have affirm what numerous interviewees told PEN America: that the publishing industry remains whiter than American society overall.

In 2015, Lee & Low Books, a children’s publisher, and researchers at St. Catherine University took the first publicly available baseline survey measuring diversity in the publishing industry as a whole.<sup>74</sup>

Among the findings:

- The publishing industry was 79 percent white
- Executives in the publishing industry were 86 percent white
- Editorial departments were 82 percent white

---

<sup>72</sup> “About/Contact.” Richard Nash, accessed July 31, 2022, [rmash.com/about/](http://rmash.com/about/); “About,” Soft Skull Press, accessed July 31, 2022, [softskull.com/about-us/](http://softskull.com/about-us/).

<sup>73</sup> PEN America interviews with Elizabeth Méndez Berry, May and October 2021

<sup>74</sup> Sarah Park Dahlen, Nicole Catlin, “Where is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey Results,” Lee & Low Books, January 26, 2016, [blog.leeandlow.com/2016/01/26/where-is-the-diversity-in-publishing-the-2015-diversity-baseline-survey-results/](http://blog.leeandlow.com/2016/01/26/where-is-the-diversity-in-publishing-the-2015-diversity-baseline-survey-results/)

- Sales departments were 83 percent white, and marketing and publicity departments were 77 percent white
- Book reviewers were 89 percent white

Lee & Low completed a follow-up survey in 2019, the most recent year for which data is available.<sup>75</sup> Among the findings:

- The publishing industry was 76 percent white—but the 3 percent difference from the 2015 results “did not meet the bar for statistically significant change”
- Executives in the publishing industry were 78 percent white;
- Editorial departments were 85 percent white, a statistically insignificant increase from 2015
- Sales departments were 81 percent white, and marketing and publicity departments were 74 percent white
- Book reviewers were 80 percent white, and literary agents were also 80 percent white

While the 2019 survey appeared to show a slight improvement in diversity at the top levels, editorial departments were, the survey’s authors noted, “even more White than before.” The authors concluded that, overall, **“the field is just as White today as it was four years ago.”**<sup>76</sup>

In the past couple of years, three of the Big Five houses—PRH, Macmillan, and Hachette Book Group—have published their own internal diversity statistics. PEN America has analyzed these reports and compared their findings. The percentage of white employees differs somewhat, although not massively, among the three houses: PRH’s employees are 74 percent white,<sup>77</sup> Macmillan’s 70.5 percent white,<sup>78</sup> and Hachette’s 64.6 percent white.<sup>79</sup> PRH, Macmillan, and Hachette also disclosed the makeup of their senior management teams. The data indicates that senior managers are disproportionately white, surpassing the percentage of white employees in lower positions.<sup>80</sup>

---

75 “Where is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2019 Diversity Baseline Survey Results,” Lee & Low Books, January 28, 2020, <https://blog.leeandlow.com/2020/01/28/2019diversitybaselinesurvey/>

76 “Where is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2019 Diversity Baseline Survey Results,” Lee & Low Books, January 28, 2020, <https://blog.leeandlow.com/2020/01/28/2019diversitybaselinesurvey/>

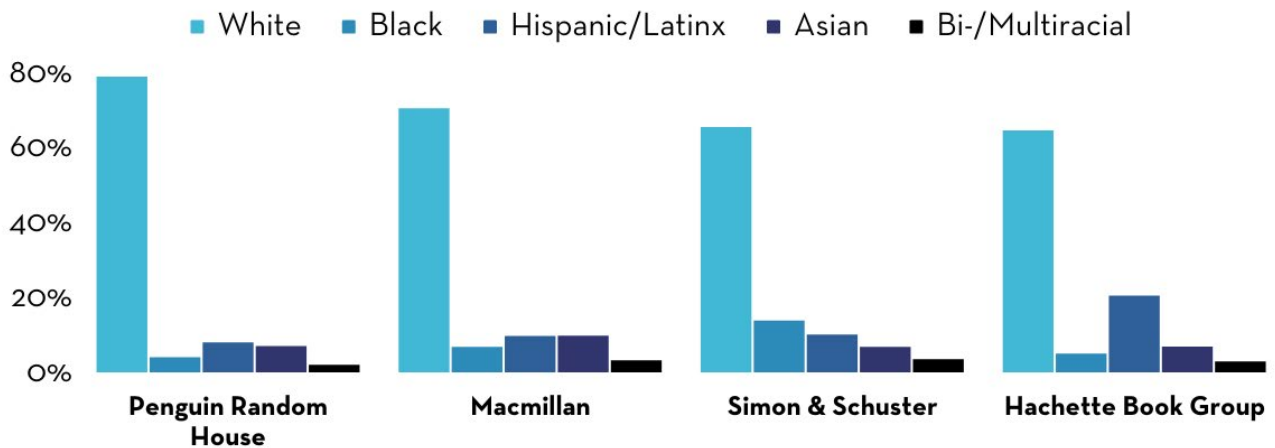
77 As of 2021. 2021-2022 Penguin Random House Social Impact Report, available at <https://tinyurl.com/y69b8skp>

78 As of 2021. Macmillan Publishers, Diversity Equity and Inclusion, <https://us.macmillan.com/diversity>

79 As of 2021. Hachette Book Group, An update on HBG’s diversity, equity and inclusion efforts (March 2022), <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/an-update-on-hbgs-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-efforts-march-2022/>

80 2021-2022 Penguin Random House Social Impact Report, available at <https://tinyurl.com/y69b8skp>; Macmillan Publishers, Diversity Equity and Inclusion, <https://us.macmillan.com/diversity>; Hachette Book Group, An update on HBG’s diversity, equity and inclusion efforts (March 2022), <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/an-update-on-hbgs-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-efforts-march-2022/>

# Employees by Race/Ethnicity

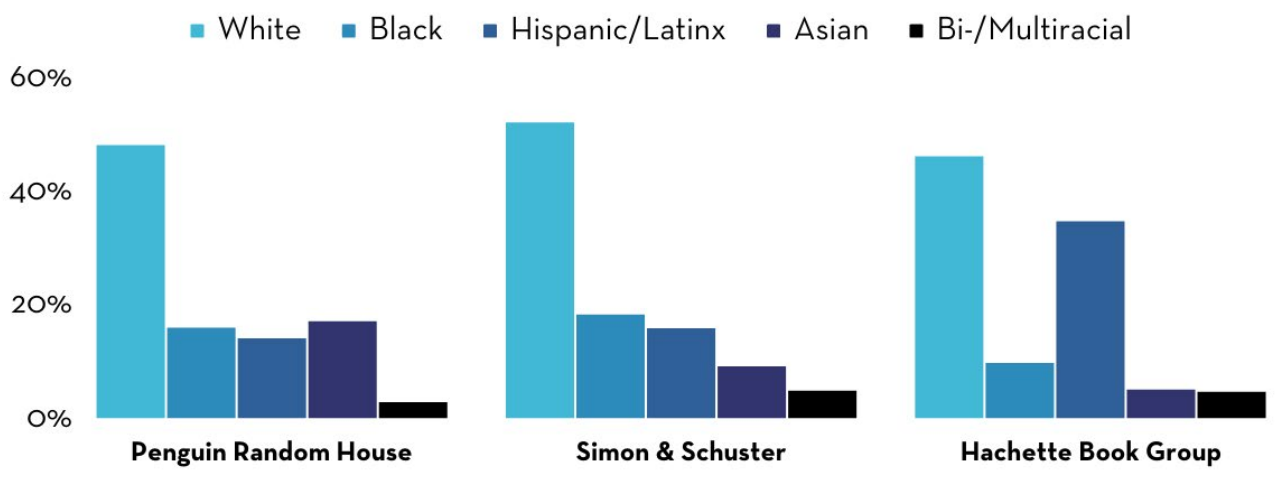


**Notes:**  
 The information is drawn from publicly available statistics with the exception of Simon & Schuster who shared internal data with PEN America for this report. Chart represents data from 2021, except for PRH, which included data from 2020 and 2021. Simon & Schuster's data set also reported 0.02% American Indian/Alaskan Native. Harper Collins has not disclosed this data.

**Sources:**  
 "Our People: Penguin Random House," Penguin Random House, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/about-us/our-people/>  
 "Diversity, Equity & Inclusion," Macmillan, 11 March 2022, <https://us.macmillan.com/diversity/>.  
 Simon & Schuster 2021 Internal Diversity Statistics shared directly with PEN America  
 "An Update on HBG's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Efforts (March 2022)," Hachette Book Group, 23 March 2022, <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/an-update-on-hbgs-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-efforts-march-2022/>.

Of the five publishing houses, only PRH and Hachette Book Group have publicly disclosed the race and ethnicity of their new hires from the past two years; Simon & Schuster provided PEN America with internal reports from 2020 and 2021 that give this information. The numbers demonstrate that the efforts to increase diversity within the companies has resulted in more hires from underrepresented groups.

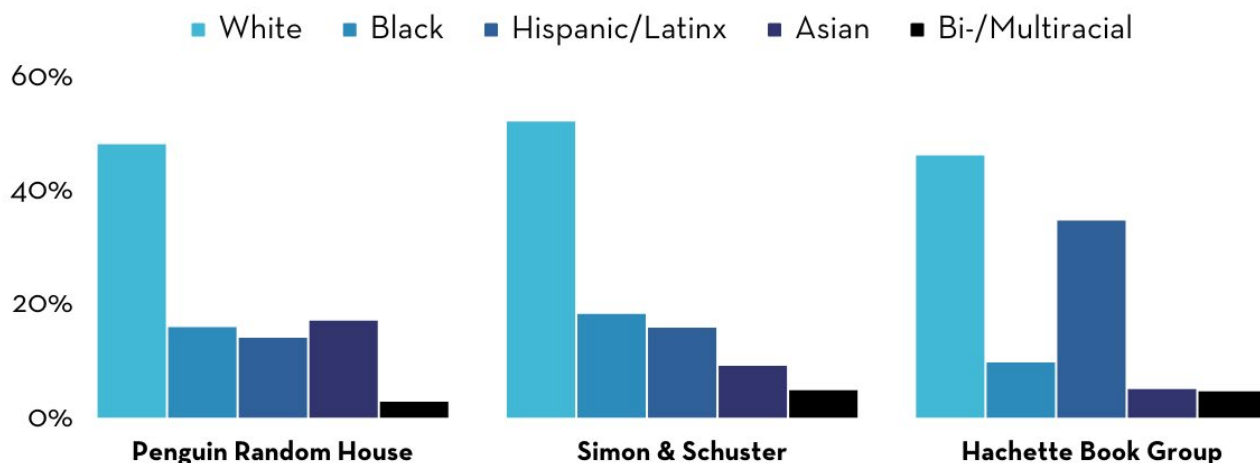
# 2021 New Hires by Race/Ethnicity



**Notes:**  
 The information is drawn from publicly available statistics with the exception of Simon & Schuster who shared internal data with PEN America for this report. (\*) PRH's data only represents regular employees, excluding warehouse workers; PRH also reported 0.04% Native American/Pacific Islander. Macmillan and Harper Collins have not disclosed this data.

**Sources:**  
 "Our People: Penguin Random House," Penguin Random House, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/about-us/our-people/>  
 Simon & Schuster Internal Diversity Statistics shared directly with PEN America  
 "An Update on HBG's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Efforts (March 2022)," Hachette Book Group, 23 March 2022, <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/an-update-on-hbgs-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-efforts-march-2022/>.

## 2021 New Hires by Race/Ethnicity



**Notes:**  
The information is drawn from publicly available statistics with the exception of Simon & Schuster who shared internal data with PEN America for this report.  
(\*) PRH's data only represents regular employees, excluding warehouse workers; PRH also reported 0.04% Native American/Pacific Islander  
Macmillan and Harper Collins have not disclosed this data.

**Sources:**  
"Our People: Penguin Random House," Penguin Random House, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/about-us/our-people/>  
Simon & Schuster Internal Diversity Statistics shared directly with PEN America  
"An Update on HBG's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Efforts (March 2022)," Hachette Book Group, 23 March 2022, <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/an-update-on-hbgs-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-efforts-march-2022/>.

All of this data helps to confirm the widespread assumption that the industry remains overwhelmingly white, particularly at the higher echelons. Still, publishers' decisions to release this information publicly is itself encouraging, as it provides a benchmark against which further progress can be measured.

### A RISING COHORT OF PUBLISHERS OF COLOR

In the past few years, major publishing houses have begun aggressively courting professionals of color.<sup>81</sup> Veteran publisher Erroll McDonald<sup>82</sup> noted in 2021 that "more people of color have been appointed to

senior positions in publishing in the last year than have been appointed in decades."<sup>83</sup> Notably, many of these professionals have come from outside the publishing industry.<sup>84</sup> Several of these hires or appointments have been to roles specifically focusing on organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion, including:

- In January 2021, Hachette hired Carrie Bloxson, former VP of marketing at HarperCollins but more recently the interim CEO of DoSomething.org, as head of diversity and inclusion<sup>85</sup>
- In September 2020, HarperCollins hired Gisselda Nuñez, former executive director and

<sup>81</sup>Alexandra Alter, Elizabeth A. Harris, "In Publishing, 'Everything Is Up for Change,'" *The New York Times*, July 15, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/07/15/books/book-publishing-leadership.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/books/book-publishing-leadership.html)

<sup>82</sup>"Erroll McDonald," PEN America, accessed July 31, 2022, [pen.org/user/erroll-mcdonald/](https://pen.org/user/erroll-mcdonald/)

<sup>83</sup>"[Virtual] PEN Presents: Beyond Representational Politics in Publishing," PEN America, October 4, 2020, [pen.org/event/pen-presents-beyond-representational-politics-in-publishing/](https://pen.org/event/pen-presents-beyond-representational-politics-in-publishing/)

<sup>84</sup>Ibid, "[Lisa] Lucas and [Dana] Canedy, both newcomers to publishing, are now poised to become two of the most powerful Black women in the literary world, with the ability to alter the culture of the divisions they lead and shape the landscape...[Chris] Jackson said that the scarcity of Black executives in publishing makes it hard for companies to recruit from within their own ranks and imperative that they look to other industries when hiring."

<sup>85</sup>"Carrie Bloxson joins Hachette Book Group as Vice President, Diversity and Inclusion," Hachette Book Group, January 7, 2021, [hachettebookgroup.com/hachette-book-group-news/carrie-bloxson-joins-hachette-book-group-as-vice-president-diversity-and-inclusion/](https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/hachette-book-group-news/carrie-bloxson-joins-hachette-book-group-as-vice-president-diversity-and-inclusion/)



head of diversity strategy at Morgan Stanley, as its newly created VP of DEI<sup>86</sup>

- In September 2020, Simon & Schuster appointed Amanda Armstrong-Frank as its director of workplace culture and diversity initiatives<sup>87</sup>



**Chris Jackson of One World described himself as part of a previous wave of entry-level diversity hires in the early 2000s, “a whole generation of people that were hired at the same time that were close-knit, young people in publishing.” Many of those hires have since left the industry, he said, “because it was a hostile environment for them.”**

Throughout 2020 and after, major publishing houses and other literary institutions also announced a series high-profile senior Black and Latinx editorial hires, among them:

- In April 2020, Nadxieli Nieto, a board member of Latinx in Publishing who formerly served as program director of the PEN America Literary Awards, joined Flatiron as executive editor<sup>88</sup>
- In July 2020, Lisa Lucas, formerly executive director of the National Book Foundation, was hired as publisher of Pantheon and Schocken Books, two PRH imprints<sup>89</sup>
- Also in July 2020, Krishan Trotman, formerly an executive editor at Hachette, started a new Hachette imprint focused on underrepresented voices called Legacy Lit<sup>90</sup>
- In September 2020, Jamia Wilson, previously the director and publisher of CUNY’s Feminist Press, was named an executive editor at Random House<sup>91</sup>
- In 2020 and 2021, Dana Canedy, LaSharah Bunting, and Aminda Marqués González—all female journalists of color—joined Simon & Schuster. Canedy, a former administrator of the Pulitzer prizes and *New York Times* journalist, joined as senior vice president and publisher

---

86 John Maher, “HC, S&S Name Company-Wide Diversity Executives,” *Publishers Weekly*, September 16, 2020, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/84348-hc-s-s-name-company-wide-diversity-executives.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/84348-hc-s-s-name-company-wide-diversity-executives.html)

87 Ibid

88 “Nieto Joins Flatiron,” *Publishers Weekly*, April 8, 2020, [publishersweekly.com/pw/newsbrief/index.html?record=2663](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/newsbrief/index.html?record=2663)

89 Calvin Reid, “Lisa Lucas to Head Pantheon and Schocken Books,” *Publishers Weekly*, July 15, 2020, [www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/83857-lisa-lucas-to-head-pantheon-and-schocken-books.html](https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/83857-lisa-lucas-to-head-pantheon-and-schocken-books.html)

90 “Meet Legacy Lit,” Grand Central Publishing, accessed July 31, 2022, [grandcentralpublishing.com/landing-page/meet-legacy-lit](https://grandcentralpublishing.com/landing-page/meet-legacy-lit)

91 Calvin Reid, “Jamia Wilson Named Executive Editor at Random House,” *Publishers Weekly*, September 30, 2020, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/84486-jamia-wilson-named-executive-editor-at-random-house.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/84486-jamia-wilson-named-executive-editor-at-random-house.html)

- of the Simon & Schuster imprint.<sup>92</sup> Bunting, a former *New York Times* editor and director of journalism at the Knight Foundation, joined as vice president and executive editor.<sup>93</sup> Marqués González, the first Hispanic person and second woman to serve as editor of the *Miami Herald*, also joined as a vice president and executive editor.<sup>94</sup> In July 2022, exactly two years from the date of her hiring, Canedy announced that she was leaving Simon & Schuster, reportedly to focus on writing.<sup>95</sup>
- In February 2021, author, editor, and host of the Minorities in Publishing podcast Jennifer Baker joined Amistad Books, the HarperCollins imprint, as senior editor. In September 2022, Baker revealed on Twitter that her position had been dissolved.<sup>96</sup>
  - In March 2021, Yahdon Israel, former editor-in-chief of Brooklyn magazine and founder of the book club Literary Swag, joined Simon & Schuster as a senior editor.<sup>97</sup>
  - In August 2021, Denne Michele Norris was named editor-in-chief at Electric Literature, reportedly making her the “first Black and openly trans editor-in-chief of a major U.S. literary publication.”<sup>98</sup>
  - In December 2021, former *New York Times* reporter Adenike Olanrewaju joined HarperCollins as executive director.<sup>99</sup>
  - In February 2022, Milena Brown, formerly the associate director of marketing at Simon & Schuster, joined Doubleday, part of PRH, as marketing director.<sup>100</sup>
  - In February 2022, Retha Powers, former assistant director at the CCNY Publishing Certificate Program at City College, joined Henry Holt & Co. as vice president and executive editor.<sup>101</sup>
  - In July 2022, Carmen Giménez, a queer Latinx poet and editor, was named director of the independent Graywolf Press.<sup>102</sup>

92 Jonathan Landrum Jr., “Dana Canedy named as publisher at Simon & Schuster,” *The Washington Post*, July 6, 2020, [washingtonpost.com/business/dana-canedy-named-as-publisher-at-simon-and-schuster/2020/07/06/74b77eec-bfd5-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/dana-canedy-named-as-publisher-at-simon-and-schuster/2020/07/06/74b77eec-bfd5-11ea-8908-68a2b9eae9e0_story.html)

93 “LaSharah Bunting, Vice President and Executive Editor,” Simon & Schuster, accessed July 31, 2022, [simonandschusterpublishing.com/simonandschuster/lasharah-s-bunting.html](https://www.simonandschusterpublishing.com/simonandschuster/lasharah-s-bunting.html)

94 “Mindy Marqués Joins Simon & Schuster Editorial,” Simon & Schuster, October 29, 2020, [about.simonandschuster.biz/news/mindy-marques/](https://www.about.simonandschuster.biz/news/mindy-marques/).

95 John Maher, “Dana Canedy to Step Down at Simon & Schuster,” *Publishers Weekly*, July 19, 2022, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/89892-dana-canedy-to-step-down-at-simon-schuster.html](https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/89892-dana-canedy-to-step-down-at-simon-schuster.html).

96 @jbakernyc, Sep. 12, 2022, <https://twitter.com/jbakernyc/status/1569332>

97 “About.” Literary Swag Book Club, accessed July 31, 2022, [literaryswagbookclub.com/about](https://www.literaryswagbookclub.com/about); “Yahdon Israel Joins Simon & Schuster Editorial,” Simon & Schuster, March 22, 2021, [about.simonandschuster.biz/news/yahdon-israel/](https://www.about.simonandschuster.biz/news/yahdon-israel/); see also [nytimes.com/2017/10/27/nyregion/how-yahdon-israel-of-literaryswag-spends-his-sundays.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/nyregion/how-yahdon-israel-of-literaryswag-spends-his-sundays.html)

98 Sophia Stewart, “Denne Michele Norris Takes the Helm at Electric Literature,” *Publishers Weekly*, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/87087-denne-michele-norris-takes-the-helm-at-electric-literature.html](https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/87087-denne-michele-norris-takes-the-helm-at-electric-literature.html).

99 “Adenike Olanrewaju Joins Harper as Executive Editor,” *Publishers Weekly*, December 2, 2021, [publishersweekly.com/pw/newsbrief/index.html?record=3524](https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/newsbrief/index.html?record=3524)

100 Milena Brown. (n.d.) Experience, LinkedIn, accessed July 31, 2022, [linkedin.com/in/milena-brown-3862416/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/milena-brown-3862416/)

101 Retha Powers. (n.d.) Experience, LinkedIn, accessed July 31, 2022, [linkedin.com/in/rethapowers/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/rethapowers/).

102 Claire Kirch, “Carmen Giménez named Graywolf Press Publisher,” *Publishers Weekly*, July 7, 2022 [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/89792-carmen-gimenez-named-graywolf-press-publisher.html](https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/89792-carmen-gimenez-named-graywolf-press-publisher.html)

While laudable, this recent wave and the many appointees from other fields highlight the long-standing lack of a hiring pipeline for professionals of color. Speaking to PEN America, One World Editor-In-Chief Chris Jackson asks: “Why is it that these publishing houses have had to look outside to be able to hire diversely at the highest levels? They have not cultivated anyone within the industry to take on these roles.” Compounding his frustration, Jackson said, is “the self-congratulation that they hire people from outside the industry, when in fact that’s a damning fact about their failure.”

Jackson, a leading light of the industry who has edited and published such luminaries as Ta-Nehisi Coates, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Ibram X. Kendi, Heather McGhee, Eddie Huang, and Bryan Stevenson, described himself as part of a previous wave of entry-level diversity hires in the early 2000s, “a whole generation of people that were hired at the same time that were close-knit, young people in publishing.” Many of those hires have since left the industry, he said, “because it was a hostile environment for them.”<sup>103</sup> Their pain ripples far beyond their own dismal on-the-job experiences, to the future authors never published, colleagues never mentored, and stories never read.

Today, editors of color may worry that this cycle threatens to repeat itself, with editors of color who are brought in but then not supported. Jennifer Baker, the former senior editor at Amistad, critiqued her former employer on Twitter when sharing the news of her firing in late 2022: “I’m mostly dismayed

at how the authors I worked with have been disregarded . . . And I remain upset at this treatment of creators of color when they were assured Amistad was a safe home for them/their work.”<sup>104</sup>

## NARROW PIPELINES FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR

When Retha Powers was a Howard University undergraduate, she rode a train from New York City to Washington, D.C., and observed a Black woman reading *The New York Times Book Review*. She asked the woman if she could borrow it, struck up a conversation, and “by the time I got to D.C., she had offered me an internship.” The woman was Marie Dutton Brown, an editor and book agent with more than 40 years’ experience in publishing.<sup>105</sup> Today Powers is a vice president and executive editor at Henry Holt & Company.<sup>106</sup>

Powers’s story is a testament to the importance of person-to-person connections and mentors in publishing. Yet the lack of such relationships is among the major obstacles cited by interviewees that narrow and obstruct the paths to publishing success. Historically, the field has drawn heavily from elite schools that themselves disproportionately recruit young people from privileged backgrounds, replicating broad inequities of both class and race. “Publishing is a very cliquish, network-y, elitist sort of group,” said literary agent Ayesha Pande, who worked as an editor from 1990 to 2005 and today runs her own literary agency with an explicitly anti-racist mission. “They all know and talk to each other, and when people are hiring, they ask each other: ‘Do

---

<sup>103</sup>PEN America interviews with Chris Jackson, April and October 2021.

<sup>104</sup>@jbakernyc, Sep. 12, 2022, <https://twitter.com/jbakernyc/status/1569332752889028608>

<sup>105</sup>For more on Marie Dutton Brown’s impact and career, see e.g. Morgan Jerkins, “How Marie Dutton Brown Changed The Literary World,” *Shondaland*, December 18, 2017 [shondaland.com/inspire/books/a14428057/marie-dutton-brown-profile/](https://shondaland.com/inspire/books/a14428057/marie-dutton-brown-profile/)

<sup>106</sup>“Publishing Certificate Program,” the City College of New York, January 16, 2019, [ccny.cuny.edu/english/pcp](https://ccny.cuny.edu/english/pcp/); Retha Powers. (n.d.) Experience, LinkedIn, accessed July 31, 2022, [linkedin.com/in/rethapowers/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/rethapowers/).

you know someone?’ ‘Oh yes, my lovely Dartmouth assistant . . .’ So that absolutely ensures that they stay within the group, within those elite circles.”<sup>107</sup>

Like the clubby who-you-know phenomenon, other circumstances that may not code as race-based can hinder the progress of would-be publishers of color. In addition to her position at Holt, Powers was until recently the assistant director of City College of New York’s publishing program, started in 1988 by the biracial novelist Walter Mosley to develop a pipeline of publishing employees of color. Powers said that many of the students of color who graduate from the program are a few years older than typical entry-level publishing hires and sometimes have to contend with comments about “being old”—which, Powers said, “on its own might not sound like a microaggression in the sense that it’s not a direct comment about race, but it ultimately ends up being one.” Rather than sauntering from Ivy to Big Five, such students often have to spend years transitioning to publishing or, given the low salaries, take a second job to make ends meet.<sup>108</sup>

A master’s degree in publishing and experience in bookselling were initially not enough for Ebony LaDelle to land a full-time job. “I worked at Howard, at the bookstore, and then I worked there even after I graduated,” said LaDelle, who until this spring held the post of marketing director at PRH.<sup>109</sup> “So I had those few years of publishing-related experience, no different from anyone who is a part-time bookseller in a New York bookstore and got a job as an editorial

assistant, which I saw happen all the time.” She remembers going on several interviews that did not lead to job offers: “They felt like I was great, but there were always these reasons why they went with another candidate.”<sup>110</sup> After several such dead ends, LaDelle reluctantly enrolled in a masters program at Pace University, but still struggled with finding a job after she graduated. One conversation there stuck with her and helped her process her earlier struggles. “Someone said to me something I’ll never forget: that at the end of the day, the people are just thinking about who they could see themselves getting drinks with. And it’s a slight to yourself, but I do think that they’re looking for who they unconsciously feel most comfortable with, and it seems like more often than not, that’s a white candidate.”<sup>111</sup>

Zakiya Dalila Harris is the author of the satirical novel *The Other Black Girl*, a 2021 *New York Times* bestseller about a young Black woman who contends with racism in the publishing industry.<sup>112</sup> While the

**Several insiders reported that employees who feel personally connected to a book help generate excitement for it that builds into greater support within the publishing house and in the marketplace. In this way, the composition of the workforce directly translates into whose stories get told and whose don't.**

<sup>107</sup> PEN America interviews with Ayesha Pande, March and September 2021

<sup>108</sup> PEN America interview with Retha Powers, May and October 2021

<sup>109</sup> Ebony LaDelle. (n.d.) Experience, LinkedIn, accessed July 31, 2022, [linkedin.com/in/ebonyladelle/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/ebonyladelle/)

<sup>110</sup> See also Linda Duggins, Tracy Sherrod, Erroll McDonald, Cherise Fisher, Janifer Wilson, Kori Wilson, Kerri K. Greenidge, Ebony LaDelle interviewed by Alexandra Alter, Elizabeth A. Harris, Joumana Khatib, Concepción de León, “‘A Conflicted Cultural Force’: What It’s Like to Be Black in Publishing,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/07/01/books/book-publishing-black.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/books/book-publishing-black.html)

<sup>111</sup> PEN America interviews with Ebony LaDelle, May and September 2021

<sup>112</sup> “The Other Black Girl,” Simon & Schuster, accessed July 31, 2022, [simonandschuster.com/books/The-Other-Black-Girl/Zakiya-Dalila-Harris/9781982160142](https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Other-Black-Girl/Zakiya-Dalila-Harris/9781982160142)

book is wider ranging, Harris said that she did draw from her own experience feeling like “the only one” during her nearly three years at Knopf/Doubleday as an editorial assistant and assistant editor.<sup>113</sup> She saw that most hires had personal connections to the hiring editor, had gone through Columbia’s publishing program—with its high cost as a barrier to entry—or had passed through circles that Harris saw as closed and essentially white. Always in the back of her mind was the idea that she was the sole Black editorial assistant. “I definitely had the thought that this wasn’t the path for me,” she recalled, but remembered thinking, “If I can’t make this work, and I’ve had all these opportunities afforded to me—an MFA, resources, availability of financial help—how hard must it be for someone else to get hired here?”<sup>114</sup>

These hiring disparities translate into author disparities. Several insiders reported that employees who feel personally connected to a book help generate excitement for it that builds into greater support within the publishing house and in the marketplace. In this way, the composition of the workforce directly translates into whose stories get told and whose don’t.

In PEN America’s conversations with representatives of the Big Five houses, executives emphatically touted their initiatives and policies aimed at disrupting this cliquishness, such as internship, associate, and mentorship programs. But even if these efforts succeed, they will take time, and sustained commitment, to bear fruit. Decades of exclusionary hiring and retention failures mean that there are comparatively few mid-career or late-career

professionals of color to mentor this rising generation or wield authority in pushing for greater inclusion. If so many of Chris Jackson’s peers hadn’t felt the need to defect, they could now be filling these voids.

## EMPLOYEE RETENTION AND PROMOTION

**Decades of exclusionary hiring and retention failures mean that there are comparatively few mid-career or late-career professionals of color to mentor this rising generation or wield authority in pushing for greater inclusion.**

Beyond hiring, several publishing conventions limit the pathways for upward mobility, making it difficult for younger people to graduate into positions of power. “Some places have faced retention issues on the junior level because advancing is so difficult,” said Yuka Igarashi, executive editor at Graywolf. “There’s this convention that people stay editorial assistants for three years, and I’ve heard people repeat that so many times to me. There are other weird publishing conventions, like that you need to do the job for a year before you’re acknowledged for the title, which leads to back promotion.”<sup>115</sup> These conventions do not uniquely affect publishing professionals of color. Yet combined with the scarcity of people of color already at the top, they function to inhibit the advancement of employees of color and keep the decision-makers in the industry disproportionately white.

---

<sup>113</sup> PEN America interviews with Zakiya Dalila Harris, July and September 2021; see also Elizabeth A. Harris, “Her Book Doesn’t Go Easy on Publishing. Publishers Ate It Up.” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2021, [nytimes.com/2021/05/23/books/zakiya-dalila](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/23/books/zakiya-dalila)

<sup>114</sup> PEN America interviews with Zakiya Dalila Harris, July and September 2021

<sup>115</sup> PEN America interviews with Yuka Igarashi, May and October 2021

Interviewees stress that low turnover at the higher, whiter levels can mean less room for high-level, non-white executives to make changes, execute new ideas, and help promote longer career trajectories for staff of color. Lisa Huang, a sales strategy associate at Macmillan, said: “I feel like because a lot of people in the industry have retained their jobs for 10-plus years, and back then the publishing industry was like 90 percent white . . . , everyone knows each other, so of course everyone is going to vouch for each other for promotion. And because a lot of the younger positions are more diverse than the older positions, we don’t get as many connections and networking to aim for those promotions.”<sup>116</sup>

Carrie Bloxson of Hachette believes that the need for greater opportunity is “urgent” and that given the slow rate of turnover, “we may need to consider some additional options if we want to see change faster.” Bloxson asks: “Is there room to consider additional roles within the industry? I realize that’s challenging in terms of budget, but that could be a serious gamechanger in terms of opening the pipeline.”<sup>117</sup>

The lack of upward mobility for younger employees leads some of them to leave the industry. “At one of the publishing houses that I worked at that was very highly respected and highly regarded, most of the senior members of that house died out of their job,” said Lesleigh Irish-Underwood, who worked in publishing for 25 years before leaving in 2013.<sup>118</sup> It’s hard, she said, for a young go-getter to be placed in a

situation where they’re expected to work for decades without a clear path to seniority.<sup>119</sup>

An editor who has worked at both major and independent publishers spoke anonymously to offer a blunt appraisal: “I see too many white people stay in their job way too long, like decades too long. . . You see some people dying at their job, and at a certain point we have to get that out of the way.” Too often, when a senior-level staff member does leave, said Amanda Armstrong-Frank of Simon & Schuster, a person of color will be hired as a replacement—but at a lower level because they lack the seniority and years of experience of the person they replace.<sup>120</sup>

## WORKPLACE REALITIES FOR PROFESSIONALS OF COLOR

There are other insidious impediments to advancement. Virtually all of the interviewees reported or affirmed that they found working in the industry isolating and emotionally taxing. While stress and strain are common to all work environments, non-white publishing employees told PEN America that they had experienced incidents and patterns involving exclusion, disrespect, and the expectation that they should do more work than white colleagues. “I’ve seen across my career the struggles of my Black colleagues to stay in a business that always felt hostile, not built for us, in the rare events that we were hired at all,” Chris Jackson said in a 2020 speech at the Center for Fiction.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> PEN America interview with Lisa Huang, May 2021

<sup>117</sup> PEN America interviews with Carrie Bloxson, June and September 2021

<sup>118</sup> “Lesleigh Irish-Underwood,” Brooklyn Community Foundation, accessed July 31, 2022, [brooklyncommunityfoundation.org/about/bo](https://brooklyncommunityfoundation.org/about/bo)

<sup>119</sup> PEN America interviews with Lesleigh Irish-Underwood, June and September 2021

<sup>120</sup> PEN America interviews with Amanda Armstrong-Frank, May and September 2021

<sup>121</sup> “Chris Jackson on the Privilege of Being an Editor, and Publishing’s Systemic Problems,” Literary Hub, December 10, 2020, [lithub.com/chris-jackson-on-the-privilege-of-being-an-editor-and-publishings-systemic-problems/](https://lithub.com/chris-jackson-on-the-privilege-of-being-an-editor-and-publishings-systemic-problems/)

Research backs up these observations. One substantial study, the Workplace Racism Survey, conducted in 2018 by the nonprofits People of Color in Publishing and Latinx in Publishing,<sup>122</sup> surveyed 200 professionals who had worked in various departments at publishing houses, both independent presses and the Big Five. The majority of respondents were entry-level professionals, with fewer than five years' experience and more than half having worked at a large publisher. Among the survey's findings:

- 92 percent cited occasions on which they were the only person of color in a meeting
- 72.9 percent said they had experienced microaggressions at work
- 61 percent said they felt they needed to modify their actions, appearance, or other aspects of themselves to fit in with the culture. Examples of such accommodations included how they wore their natural hair, the food they brought for lunch, the gestures they used, and how they conducted themselves socially
- 88.6 percent said they felt it was their job to educate coworkers about diversity
- A third said they felt the need to mask their opinions so as not to be seen as too aggressive and—as the report authors described it—“to avoid being negatively marked as the ‘diversity police’”

Though the survey was conducted about three years before its June 2021 release, Nancy Mercado, a board member of Latinx in Publishing, said that “based

on the reactions we received online to the survey results and in personal conversations, it's clear that while some changes may have been made, the overall, underlying problems persist.” She lists among them “low salaries, toxic culture, lack of timely promotions, employees being generally overworked, and an industry steeped in whiteness.”<sup>123</sup>

Many interviewees recount stories or experiences that underscore these systemic problems. Retha Powers recalled hearing from her City College students and alumni of color that they are told they don't have the right attitude “if they're not chipper all the time”—an idea echoed by survey respondents—and that “when they see their white counterparts slacking off, they feel they don't have that option and will, at every step, need to work harder than white colleagues.”<sup>124</sup>

Malaika Adero, an author, book developer, and literary agent who is Black, relates a story about a microaggression that she experienced in 2012 from a senior-level colleague at Scribner. Outside the office, a white colleague she'd never had a conversation with grabbed her hair. “She said, ‘Oh, I hope you don't mind, I've been dying to do this,’” Adero remembers. Then, in early 2021, this same, now-former colleague invited Adero to work on a project with her. Adero said that she was open to working with this woman, but “I felt like no matter what I did with her moving forward, I needed to clear the air on this, and so we talked about it, and I told her, . . . ‘The most significant encounter we ever had was when you grabbed my hair in the street.’ And she interrupted me and said, ‘Oh, you didn't mind did you?’ Well, I absolutely minded.”<sup>125</sup>

---

122 “About,” Latinx in Publishing,” accessed July 31, 2022, [latinxinpublishing.com/about](https://latinxinpublishing.com/about).

123 PEN America interview with Nancy Mercado, September 2021

124 PEN America interviews with Retha Powers, May and October 2021

125 PEN America interviews with Malaika Adero, April and October 2021

## “AD HOC SENSITIVITY READERS”

Some interviewees shared their frustration at what they saw as a widespread expectation that they should only or automatically be expected to champion writers of the same racial or ethnic background. Such pigeonholing has come from agents pitching book proposals, colleagues, and higher-ups. “You become a sort of de facto ambassador to a group of people,” the “sole representative of the Black Man Society,” said Todd Hunter, who spent a decade at Atria and is now the founder and CEO of Avenue Literary Services agency. Hunter said that at times he chafed at this role, yet he believed that if he didn’t play it, there was no one else who could. “The publisher doesn’t necessarily have to invest or engage in that audience,” he said. “They just use you to do it.”<sup>126</sup>

One Black editor who works at an independent press, who requested anonymity to speak more freely, reports similar experiences and similar mixed feelings. “I am a Black publicist who works on many race titles,” the editor said. “And sometimes that’s great, and other times I would be interested in not shouldering so many race-related publicity campaigns. Sometimes it kind of lands as ‘Black hire, Blackness, Black books.’ And sometimes that is a really gratifying and satisfying experience, and other times it becomes a typecasting and pigeonholing experience.”<sup>127</sup>

Cherise Fisher, a literary agent at Wendy Sherman Associates and former senior editor at Simon & Schuster, believes that typecasting professionals of color reduces broad arrays of experience to simple black and white. “It’s important to have a lot of different types of people of color,” Fisher



**“You become a sort of de facto ambassador to a group of people, the sole representative of the Black Man Society.”**

**Todd Hunter, CEO of Avenue Literary Services Agency**

said. She cites industry leaders like Chris Jackson of One World, Rakia Clark of Mariner, and Dawn Davis, formerly of Simon & Schuster, as more than just representatives of their race: “Those three individuals have their interests. Our experiences as Black people are so multiple. You would never say to a white editor, ‘Here’s a book by a white author. I’m sure you’re going to love it.’ Is she white from New York, white from Wisconsin, white from California? I mean, the fact that [people] recognize the diverse experiences and interests of the white editor but think a Black editor wants it because it’s by a Black person is just problematic.”<sup>128</sup>

<sup>126</sup> PEN America interviews with Todd Hunter, May and September 2021

<sup>127</sup> PEN America interviews with anonymous editor, May and September 2021

<sup>128</sup> PEN America interviews with Cherise Fisher, April and September 2021.



Such typecasting is not only presumptuous but also creatively limiting. What if, say, a Black editor wants to work on books about cats, or cars, or science, or electoral politics? Or a Hispanic publicist wants to promote a book about classical music? “The verve and excitement that I could bring to a race-related title I could also bring to something not related to race,” said one Black editor.<sup>129</sup> Aminda Marques Gonzalez, who in 2020 left a leadership role at Miami Herald Media to join Simon & Schuster as a VP and executive editor, said that she has received many Cuban book proposals due to her heritage. “That’s fine because I have an interest and expertise,” she said, “but I don’t want to just be ‘the Cuba book editor.’”<sup>130</sup> Another editor of color, speaking anonymously, said, “Sometimes people feel that because a person is Black, they will always like all of the Black books, as if they didn’t have their own taste, their own expertise.”<sup>131</sup>

Many interviewees say that, while they are often treated as “authorities” when it comes to diversity initiatives or books written by authors of color, they enjoy less respect and acknowledgment of their expertise when it comes to their core publishing, editorial, and marketing acumen. “No matter what specific point of view or range of interests we articulate,” said Chris Jackson, “both in terms of the work and our careers, we’re often meant to serve a racial function within the company.” Jackson said that this dismissal can extend to entire publishing brands. “One World publishes award-winning books and bestsellers,” he said. “We are a publisher of exceptional literary excellence. But

I find in conversations with people in the industry that when they describe our work, they describe it as encompassing ‘writers of color’ in this very meaningless way, that fails to speak to the particular point of view or quality or even range of subjects and genres we publish—i.e., the way any other publisher would be described.”<sup>132</sup> As a result, “any success we experience is discounted or even erased.”

In recounting these experiences, publishing professionals who spoke to PEN America noted that assumptions of racial expertise and expectations of greater diligence do not come with real organizational power, higher pay, or more opportunities for promotion. Nor do professionals of color receive rewards for educating their white coworkers on race—an unpaid task that is not unique to the publishing sector but is prevalent there. The Workplace Racism Survey found that 86 percent of respondents “cited unfair or extra workloads placed on them in order to educate their colleagues about racism, while 47.4 percent said they had been asked to act as ad hoc sensitivity readers without compensation.”<sup>133</sup>

PEN’s interviewees also described pressure to “overprove” or “overexplain” to others in the industry why a book by an author of color could be commercially successful—denying them the deference and respect granted to white employees of comparable stature. Several editors say that they commonly find themselves doing extra research for books by authors of color both to validate their own judgment and to rebut presumptions that they are championing those books only out of an

---

129 PEN America interview with editor, May and September 2021

130 PEN America interviews with Aminda Marques Gonzalez, June and September 2021

131 PEN America interview with editor, June and September 2021

132 PEN America interviews with Chris Jackson, April and October 2021

133 Calvin Reid, “Survey Reveals a Need for Greater Workplace Inclusivity,” *Publishers Weekly*, June 25, 2021, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/86773-survey-reveals-a-need-for-greater-workplace-inclusivity.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/86773-survey-reveals-a-need-for-greater-workplace-inclusivity.html)

assumed racial affinity. “There was a literary agent in particular, a Black female, where my boss made the assumption that I was supporting this project because I was her friend,” said Malaika Adero, formerly of Simon & Schuster. “When, you know, I’m a little embarrassed to say that I didn’t even like the woman and we weren’t friends.” She adds that an editor at Viking once said something about Adero’s boss at Amistad, a Black man, that “suggested that she assumed we were lovers.”<sup>134</sup>

The need to constantly justify and defend their recommendations and decisions contributes to “burnout” for employees of color, said Rockelle Henderson, who runs Rock Inked, a publishing consulting company. Henderson worked at HarperCollins from 2000-2006 and served as the associate publisher at Amistad—an imprint of HarperCollins focused on publishing Black authors—from 2003 to 2006. Henderson said that she left her job at Amistad and founded her own company in part because this dynamic took a toll on her. “One of the things in the industry that I didn’t have was someone in marketing who came before me who taught the industry what it was to market to Black readers but also to publish books by Black people that white people would want to read,” she said. Besides the onus of “having to explain why these books should be published, why certain authors should be published,” she became exhausted by the “the education of helping other people understand what it is we’re doing with our publishing program. And it wasn’t even just the in-house people. It was the industry as a whole. When somebody at Barnes & Noble can say, ‘If you don’t put a Black person



**One of the things in the industry that I didn’t have was someone in marketing who came before me who taught the industry what it was to market to Black readers but also to publish books by Black people that white people would want to read.**

***Rockelle Henderson, President of Rock Inked***

on the cover, how will anybody know this is a Black book?’—why does this have to be a Black book? Those arguments went on, that was every title argument. That gets exhausting. It was distribution, it was sales, it was retail book buyers, it was across the board, an industry-wide problem.”<sup>135</sup> Henderson’s observations dovetail with the findings of the Workplace Racism Survey, whose authors conclude that “the burden on BIPOC to educate white colleagues” about race and racism “is an onerous task that contributes to burnout.”<sup>136</sup>

---

<sup>134</sup> PEN America interviews with Malaika Adero, April and October 2021

<sup>135</sup> PEN America interviews with Rockelle Henderson, May and October 2021

<sup>136</sup> Calvin Reid, “Survey Reveals a Need for Greater Workplace Inclusivity,” *Publishers Weekly*, June 25, 2021, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/86773-survey-reveals-a-need-for-greater-workplace-inclusivity.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/86773-survey-reveals-a-need-for-greater-workplace-inclusivity.html)

## SECTION III

### CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES IN PUBLISHING

Many interviewees referenced or affirmed the same bromide when describing the rationale for underinvesting in books by authors of color: “Diverse books don’t sell.” This phrase represents a stock belief within the publishing industry, one that interviewees described as increasingly unfounded yet still axiomatic, setting the tone for attitudes toward authors of color. The belief that books by and about people of color don’t sell breaks down into more specific conceptions about the commercial viability of particular books.<sup>137</sup>

Publishing veterans can cite examples of this axiom echoing through decades. Malaika Adero recalled

**“Diverse books don’t sell.” This phrase represents a stock belief within the publishing industry, one that interviewees described as increasingly unfounded yet still axiomatic, setting the tone for attitudes toward authors of color.**



**There is a general notion in American society that you become an honorary white when you reach [the stature of] Oprah, or Miles Davis, and become famous and acceptable.**

**Malaika Adero, Publishing Consultant**

that in the 1980s, when a marketing director told her that books by Black authors didn’t sell, she pointed out that she had acquired and successfully sold books by Miles Davis and Spike Lee. The director then clarified that “those aren’t Black books”—meaning, as Adero understood it, that authors who find commercial success with white audiences are in some sense no longer Black. “There is a general notion in American society,” she said, “that you become an honorary white when you reach [the stature of] Oprah, or Miles Davis, and become famous and acceptable.”<sup>138</sup>

Regina Brooks, an agent and the founder of the Serendipity Literary Agency, that champions authors of color, remembers approaching editors just over a decade ago with a pitch for a children’s picture book on civil rights leader Shirley Chisholm, and

<sup>137</sup>“True or False? Multicultural Books Don’t Sell,” Lee & Low Books, October 8, 2013, [blog.leeandlow.com/2013/10/08/true-or-false](http://blog.leeandlow.com/2013/10/08/true-or-false)

<sup>138</sup>PEN America interviews with Malaika Adero, April and October 2021

being asked who Chisholm – the first Black woman elected to Congress – was. It wasn't until 2018, when it was announced that Viola Davis would be working on a movie about Chisholm, that editors became interested. Brooks recounts that “there were numerous figures and stories I sought to advocate for and bring to publishers' attention” but finding that her opinion was less valued than her white colleagues'.<sup>139</sup>

Ayesha Pande, whose clients include Ibram X. Kendi, author of the 2020 bestseller *How to Be an Antiracist*, recalled a meeting over a decade ago at a publishing house where editors were considering whether to buy a book by an earlier best-selling Black author, bell hooks. Pande was asked to invite the one Black person who worked in the publishing house—in sales, at a different imprint—to “sit at the table for representation.” She notes that editors' comments included, “Nobody wants to read about people who have been incarcerated” and “Black people don't read.” The publisher passed on hooks's book.<sup>140</sup>

Veteran editor Marie Dutton Brown started at Doubleday in 1967 and is well-known for mentoring a generation of Black editors. She described her frustration that she could never get a publishing house to commit to a long-cherished idea: a book on Black dance history featuring legendary dancers Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus. Told that there wasn't an audience for such a book, and she immediately thought, “But you can have 10,000 books on ballet and folk dancing?” Brown concluded that “there was no enthusiasm because of the lack of awareness” of the subject.<sup>141</sup>

These long-ago slights still loom large in the minds of longtime publishing professionals of color and continue to frame their outlook. Though such snubs are more overt than most contemporary instances of discrimination and tokenism, editors express doubt that the underlying attitudes that drove them have been eradicated. Many interviewees struggle with the still-prevalent notion that authors of color inherently have a more limited audience, and thus more limited commercial potential, than white authors. The predominant belief, drawn from interview after interview, is that editors continue to systematically underestimate the potential to market and sell books to buyers of color.

Regina Brooks of Serendipity Lit said that she frequently asks editors whether they would champion a book that's well written and has a defined audience but doesn't resonate with them personally. She said that 99 percent of editors say no. In an industry that remains overwhelmingly white, the books that personally resonate with editors will remain overwhelmingly white.<sup>142</sup>

## THE DEMAND FOR CROSSOVER SUCCESS

Alongside the assumption that authors of color are writing for a smaller, racially defined audience is the belief that the ideal reader—the one the author is addressing—is always white, even for an author of color. Authors of color are thus evaluated according to the extent that editors predict their books can achieve crossover success. In other words, they are hemmed in by both editors' assumption that their audience is

---

<sup>139</sup>PEN America interviews with Regina Brooks, April and September 2021

<sup>140</sup>PEN America interview with Ayesha Pande, March and September 2021

<sup>141</sup>PEN America interviews with Marie Dutton Brown, May and September 2021

<sup>142</sup>PEN America interviews with Regina Brooks, April and September 2021

**Alongside the assumption that authors of color are writing for a smaller, racially defined audience is the belief that the ideal reader—the one the author is addressing—is always white, even for an author of color.**

limited and non-white and editors' demand that their audience be mainstream and white.

Todd Hunter, who founded Avenue “as a response to the frustrations felt by promising writers—particularly writers of color,”<sup>143</sup> told PEN America

that publishers tend to “proceed with caution” when it comes to authors of color” and “will try to find an author within these groups who has a high appeal to the ‘mainstream,’” even though, he argued, the publishing industry no longer treats this approach as axiomatic.<sup>144</sup> Fiona McCrae, the retired director and publisher of Graywolf Press, said that booksellers would often use the phrase “I don’t have that shopper” when turning down her pitch to stock a new book from a writer of color. She came to interpret the phrase as a euphemism for the (self-fulfilling) belief that few of their customers would buy any book by an author of color.<sup>145</sup>

---

<sup>143</sup>“About the Avenue,” Avenue Literary Services, <https://avenueliteraryservices.com/about-the-avenue/>

<sup>144</sup>PEN America interviews with Todd Hunter, May and September 2021

<sup>145</sup>PEN America interviews with Yaba Blay, June and September 2021

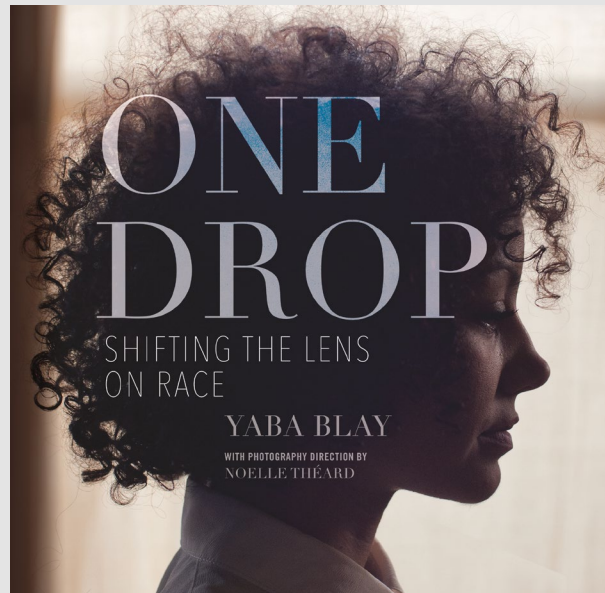
## CASE STUDY – (1)NE DROP: SHIFTING THE LENS ON RACE

Yaba Blay, a Ghanaian-American academic, published her book *(1)ne Drop* twice: She self-published it in 2013, then republished it through an established publisher in 2020. Befitting the book's subtitle—*Shifting the Lens on Race*—her experience with this book illustrates both blind spots and progress as publishers continue to evaluate books through the prism of white readership.

In 2013, Blay created an online community around a collection of portraits and essays exploring Black identity. The project was featured on CNN, involved high-profile journalist Soledad O'Brien, and attracted an enthusiastic audience, so she decided to turn it into a book. An agent reached out to Blay, promising interest from publishing houses, and she agreed to draft a proposal. "We got feedback, probably from a dozen or so publishers, and the vibe was definitely of hesitation and uncertainty," Blay said. Ultimately, she feels that publishers "weren't willing to take a risk"—and that even with proven appeal, to them "the book represented a risk."<sup>146</sup>

So Blay self-published the book through Kickstarter. Over the years, as the print run ran out, people regularly reached out to her asking how they could get a copy, which sometimes sold for upwards of \$900 from independent booksellers. The book went on to inspire a CNN series, *Who is Black in America?* In 2020, facing a new wave of interest, Blay worked with agent Tanya McKinnon to republish it with the independent house Beacon Publishing, where it sold (under the similar title "*One Drop*") out of its first print run in two days. Asked why she believed publishers were so leery despite demonstrated success, Blay said:

"My audience, when I wrote that book, was Black people. This is a conversation for and about Black people for us to be discussing our racial identity and issues of skin color politics . . . This is very much a reiteration of gatekeeping, that there are people in a position to tell us what we are allowed to speak about, what is a necessary conversation for us to be having. And much of that is motivated by capitalism. It's not about the value of the conversation as much as it is about the literal monetary value that comes with it. And honestly, they're thinking about white people. If you walk in with the



---

<sup>146</sup>PEN America interviews with Yaba Blay, June and September 2021

idea that Black people don't buy books— i.e., Black people don't read, which is highly problematic in and of itself—then how is this book going to appeal to a larger white audience? Because that's how we're going to make our money . . . The folks who do the gatekeeping, and who get to decide what a necessary conversation is, it's very much guided by a white supremacist lens—one that idealizes white perspectives and white value systems. And if white people don't want to talk about it, then it must not be important.”

Blay has responded to *(1)ne Drop's* recent success with mixed emotions. She is grateful to her publisher but feels that the book's sudden popularity after its second publication in 2021—years after it was first published—shows that the publishing industry appears to be willing to confront race and racism only when white audiences are ready to do so. “I'm not going to sit here and praise the publishing industry, as if they somehow finally came to the light,” she said. “Coming to the light means you clearly understand the need for the conversation irrespective of the money that it might bring. I know it's still a numbers game, I know it's still about money. It's not about the content, it's about the moment. In this moment, white folks are willing to talk about racism. I'm glad so many white folks love it and are getting something from it. Great, but I didn't write it for them. I wrote it for us.” Ultimately, Blay is concerned that the publishing industry's investment in Black voices in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement is not the narrative of racial progress that others wish it to be: “You're still communicating that our lives actually don't matter, because when we write about our lives, you only want us to write about them insofar as white people are interested in them.”<sup>147</sup>

---

147 PEN America interviews with Yaba Blay, June and September 2021

Ingrid Rojas Contreras reports that she had to confront the issue of crossover appeal “all the time” as she drafted and developed her acclaimed 2018 book, *Fruit of the Drunken Tree*. “All the characters are very new immigrants to the country,” she said. “And most of the story happens in Colombia. A concern that I heard from peers or teachers or mentors was always whether an American audience would be interested in that story if most of it didn’t happen in this country.” Traditionally, Rojas Contreras said, “migrant stories tend to start when the person arrives” in the United States. “And then the story is from that moment on, so it becomes a story of how you make a home, or about what happens when you assimilate or become habituated to the new landscape that you find yourself in. I wanted to tell the opposite story,” the story of what sent the migrants here. “I got asked a lot whether I should just write the book in Spanish and publish it in Colombia,” she said. “And I think that the implication was, why would a white American audience care about Colombians?”<sup>148</sup>

Author Nicole Chung said that she, too, had to contend with the question of crossover appeal when trying to sell her 2018 memoir, *All You Can Ever Know*, which recounts her experience as a Korean American adopted into a white family. One editor asked her if she thought anyone would read the book if they weren’t either Korean or adopted. “I remember thinking, even if that were the case, that is actually a very large demographic,” she said. “I hadn’t expected to be asked that point-blank.” She replied that she hoped that people read outside their experience all the time. “People of color,” she said, “are routinely expected to do so.”<sup>149</sup>



**“I got asked a lot whether I should just write the book in Spanish and publish it in Colombia. And I think that the implication was, why would a white American audience care about Colombians?”**

### **Ingrid Rojas Contreras, Author**

Author Deesha Philyaw, whose debut short story collection *The Secret Life of Church Ladies* won the PEN Faulkner Award and the Story Prize, and was a finalist for a 2020 National Book Award,<sup>150</sup> shared with PEN America that she was concerned the publishing industry’s emphasis on crossover appeal would

---

<sup>148</sup>PEN America interviews with Ingrid Rojas Contreras, April and September 2021

<sup>149</sup>PEN America interviews with Nicole Chung, April and September 2021

<sup>150</sup>“Announcing the Winner of the 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction,” *PEN/Faulkner*, April 6, 2021, [penfaulkner.org/2021/04/06/announcing-the-winner-of-the-2021-pen-faulkner-award-for-fiction/](https://penfaulkner.org/2021/04/06/announcing-the-winner-of-the-2021-pen-faulkner-award-for-fiction/).



affect publishers' reception of her book. Philyaw, who had previously co-authored a non-fiction book on co-parenting, said she worried about "what I'd heard from other Black writers and other writers of color—about this pressure to translate our culture and our language, to imagine a white audience as our primary audience." These concerns deepened, she said, after several major publishers her agent submitted the book to said that it was not a good fit. Thankfully, the book eventually landed at West Virginia University Press, where it went on to receive substantial acclaim. Philyaw told PEN America she felt fortunate for both the substantial online support the book received, and her publisher's significant investment in marketing it.<sup>151</sup>

A related scenario—white authors telling stories about people of color—brings its own set of complexities. Take, as an example, the 2020 novel *American Dirt*, written from the perspective of an undocumented Mexican migrant by Jeanine Cummins, an author of mostly Irish heritage with a Puerto Rican grandmother. The book, which carried a reported seven-figure advance for Cummins, was keenly anticipated and aggressively marketed.<sup>152</sup> It initially attracted wide acclaim from luminaries including Oprah, Mexican-American author Sandra Cisneros, Stephen King, and John Grisham. But it encountered a storm of controversy after Chicana writer Myriam Gurba argued that it was a form of cultural appropriation—"trauma porn that wears a social justice leaf," with a "coat of mayonesa" for white American audiences.<sup>153</sup>

Some critics suggested that the problem was simply that Cummins had done a poor job depicting the plight of Mexican migrants, while others countered that given the pent-up frustrations over lack of representation in publishing, any book on that subject by an author with her lineage would have been regarded as fatally flawed in the eyes of a certain readership. The ongoing discussion over whether or to what extent white authors should tell stories about communities of color is not one this report explores, but clashes over "literary appropriation" feeds into broader public arguments about the white lens through which writers, editors, and publishers curate America's literature.

One editor who spoke to PEN America anonymously recalled a discussion of whether Black author Kiley Reid's debut novel, *Such a Fun Age*, would appeal to white people if it made fun of them. Despite these doubts, in 2019 Reid's book went on to rank number three on *The New York Times*' hardcover fiction list within two weeks of its release.<sup>154</sup>

People in publishing "are accustomed to a monocultural sensibility," concluded Chris Jackson. "And being someone who's outside of that [monoculture], it's all so vivid. But within it, it's unspoken."<sup>155</sup>

## THE "ONE IS ENOUGH" RULE

Many interviewees observed that, as publishers increasingly commit to publishing authors of color

---

<sup>151</sup> PEN America interviews with Deesha Philyaw, May and October 2021

<sup>152</sup> Constance Grady, "The controversy over the new immigration novel, *American Dirt*, explained," *Vox*, Jan. 30, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/1/22/21075>

<sup>153</sup> Sevanny Camposs, "Where Things Stand on the 'American Dirt' Book Controversy," *NBC New York*, February 5, 2020, [nbcnewyork.com/news/national-international/where-things-stand-on-the-american-dirt-book-controversy/2279530/](http://nbcnewyork.com/news/national-international/where-things-stand-on-the-american-dirt-book-controversy/2279530/); Constance Grady, "The controversy over the new immigration novel *American Dirt*, explained." *Vox*, January 30, 2020, [vox.com/culture/2020/1/22/21075629/american-dirt-controversy-explained-jeanine-cummins-oprah-flatiron](http://vox.com/culture/2020/1/22/21075629/american-dirt-controversy-explained-jeanine-cummins-oprah-flatiron)

<sup>154</sup> Elisabeth Egan, "Kiley Reid Has Done Her Share of Soul-Searching in Coffee Shop," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/01/09/books/review/inside-the-list-kiley-reid.html](http://nytimes.com/2020/01/09/books/review/inside-the-list-kiley-reid.html).

<sup>155</sup> PEN America interviews with Chris Jackson, April and October 2021

while holding on to the notion that such books are commercially risky, another pattern emerges. Jenny Xu, an editor at HarperCollins imprint Ecco and Mariner, calls it the “one is enough” rule: the belief that books by authors of similar background that follow a similar theme or format are simply different versions of the same story—and that audiences are hungry for only one such story at a time.

As an illustration, Xu remembers wanting to acquire Jaquira Diaz’s memoir, *Ordinary Girls*, and being told that the editor had “heard the story before.” She wondered if this person had heard that specific story before, or if they had simply read another memoir by a Latinx author before. When it was published—by another house—in 2019, the book went on to win awards and acclaim, both mainstream and community-wide, and it did not seem to strike readers as a story they’d heard before. “I had an event at The Lit. Bar in the South Bronx,” Diaz said, “where a lot of the people who were in the audience had already read the book . . . A lot of them were just there to express how it was the first time... that they’d seen people like them in a book. People who grew up in poverty, too, who were Latino, who were Black and brown, who had struggled with mental illness or had a mother with schizophrenia or had suffered sexual violence. A lot of them were there just to say, thank you for writing this book.”<sup>156</sup>

Speaking to *The New York Times* in December 2020, former Simon & Schuster editor Michael Strother recalled a 2016 meeting at which he tried to

authorize a large bid for Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*, which went on to achieve massive commercial success and a Hollywood adaptation. He said he was asked, “Do we need Angie Thomas if we have Jason Reynolds?”<sup>157</sup> Tomas and Reynolds are both Black authors of young-adult fiction with black characters—and the similarity ends there.<sup>158</sup>

Ayesha Pande affirmed that all too often, trying to sell or acquire a book by a person of color means having to “educate white people that this is actually an important story, and no, this story is not the same as that story. Just because they were both written by Black people doesn’t mean they’re telling the same story. Even if they’re two stories that in some way delve into the traumatic experiences of racism, it’s still not the same story. But that level of nuance is something that they don’t understand.”<sup>159</sup>

One obstacle may be that diverse books appear to be more common than they actually are. In the above-mentioned 2020 *Times* article, Marie Dutton Brown explained that the small number of highly visible books by people of color who are public figures “gives the appearance that there are a lot of Black books published,” while the rest of publishers’ catalogs remain overwhelmingly white.<sup>160</sup> Richard Jean So said that the most common genre for writers of color—literary fiction—is also the most high profile. This would seem to be a boon, but, So said, “there’s this problem that if you put all the writers of color into this one category and they’re highly visible, then everyone thinks there are a lot more writers of color

---

<sup>156</sup> Eva Recinos, “In Jaquira Díaz’s Memoir ‘Ordinary Girls,’ Sisterhood is Shaped by Shared Struggles of Violence & Poverty,” *Remezcla*, November 25, 2019, <http://remezcla.com/features/culture/jaquira-diaz-debut-memoir-ordinary-girls-queer-impoverished-latinas-never-feel-seen/>

<sup>157</sup> Richard Jean So, Gus Wezerek, “Just How White is the Book Industry,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2020, [nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html)

<sup>158</sup> “The Hate U Give,” Angie Thomas, accessed July 31, 2022, [angiothomas.com/the-hate-u-give/](https://angiothomas.com/the-hate-u-give/)

<sup>159</sup> PEN America interviews with Ayesha Pande, March and September 2021

<sup>160</sup> Richard Jean So, Gus Wezerek, “Just How White is the Book Industry,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2020, [nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/11/opinion/culture/diversity-publishing-industry.html)

**Editor Todd Hunter recalled what happened when a book about interracial relationships didn't do well. "That book just sold a few thousand copies, and it was clear: We're not doing any more interracial relationships books."**

than there actually are, because the other, less visible parts of publishing—like mystery, thrillers, adventure, young adult, all those genres, which is really the majority of publishing—are not being diversified." Meanwhile, So reports that Black authors tell him that they've struggled to find agents or sell books due to a perception that the market is "saturated."<sup>161</sup>

"Dominant groups will select one representative in order to say, 'Look, we had Toni Morrison, we have Amy Tan,'" said writer Myriam Gurba. "That one person is essentially an alibi for white supremacy. And so now, instead of one, I see accommodation being made for two or three or four or five, but that still isn't enough. It's still tokenized."<sup>162</sup>

When there aren't enough books by authors of color, a single underperforming book can take on outsize importance—as if books by authors of color are a monolith, and if one fails, they will all fail. Editor Todd Hunter recalled what happened when a book about interracial relationships didn't do well. "That book just sold a few thousand copies, and it was clear: We're not doing any more interracial relationships books."<sup>163</sup>

## THE "IDENTITY TRAP"

The confounding flip side of the "one is enough" is what some interviewees call the "identity trap." Authors of color are not only damned if they tell stories that white gatekeepers wrongly believe they've already read—they're also damned if they don't tell stereotypical stories that white publishers actually have already read and expect. Various interviewees described an authorial straitjacket whereby publishers seek to capitalize on the proven successes of writers of color, but only in a circumscribed way: If a story worked once, tell it again.

Bookseller Marva Allen of Huelman Books, an independent store in Harlem, said that Black authors who want contracts "have to write about slavery or Black Lives Matter or racism." Deviating from the template can be tricky. "If you come with a love story or you come with something else that has a different cultural sway," Allen said, white publishers "have no space or experience to understand that work. So, it's very likely that you're going to get a rejection letter that said, we love the book, but we just don't know how to support it."<sup>164</sup>

**Authors of color are not only damned if they tell stories that white gatekeepers wrongly believe they've already read—they're also damned if they don't tell stereotypical stories that white publishers actually have already read and expect.**

<sup>161</sup>PEN America interviews with Richard Jean So, April and October 2021

<sup>162</sup>PEN America interviews with Myriam Gurba, April and October 2021

<sup>163</sup>PEN America interviews with Todd Hunter, May and September 2021

<sup>164</sup>PEN America interviews with Marva Allen, April and September 2021

Richard Jean So observes that while most authors of color publish literary fiction, white authors “can write about anything: They can write YA, they can write thriller, they can write mystery.”<sup>165</sup> For So, this complicates the assumption that more authors of color will automatically lead to more diverse stories. “A publisher may say, ‘Well I just signed three new Black authors,’” he said, “but if those three Black authors are all being constrained to a single type of story, then that’s a problem to me. If you’re a Black or Asian writer, and you are writing in a genre or style that isn’t recognized as fitting within that one type of story, you’re not going to get that book deal.” Part of the answer to this problem, So said, goes back to hiring: “Publishers need to think more deeply about hiring not just editors of color for their literary fiction line, but editors of color for, say, the mystery genre or young adult genre . . . This is a subtle problem that is hard to fix structurally because it’s so complicated.”<sup>166</sup>

Certainly, not all authors of color are confined by these expectations. Some of the most prominent authors of today, such as Colson Whitehead, Celeste Ng, and Brit Bennett, have grown their stellar literary reputation with books that cross such genre and subject conventions. But these successes do not necessarily indicate that the industry as a whole has changed its expectations.

Another ramification of the identity trap is the pain associated with mining personal and collective trauma for the consumption of white audiences. “So many of the writers of color that I know have had white people treat their work as though it were a kind of medicine,” author Yaa Gyasi wrote in a March 2021



**Myriam Gurba recalled that one of the proposed covers for her first story collection featured adobe houses, “to signify that there were Mexicans lurking”—even though all the stories in the collection take place in cities.”**

essay. “Something they have to swallow in order to improve their condition, but they don’t really want it, they don’t really enjoy it, and if they’re being totally honest, they don’t actually even take the medicine half the time.”<sup>167</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> PEN America interviews with Richard Jean So, April and October 2021

<sup>166</sup> PEN America interviews with Richard Jean So, April and October 2021

<sup>167</sup> Yaa Gyasi, “White people, black authors are not your medicine,” *The Guardian*, March 20, 2021, [theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/20/white-people-black-authors-are-not-your-medicine](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/20/white-people-black-authors-are-not-your-medicine)

Ingrid Rojas Contreras said that while writing *Fruit of the Drunken Tree*, she was at one point told that she was “sitting on a gold mine” of collective trauma over migration and other painful aspects of the Colombian experience. She said: “Writers of color often have to struggle with that idea—that something traumatic can then be monetized and that it’s a good thing that something bad happened because it gives you material. There’s a hunger for those stories from writers of color, and that hunger comes from a complicated, politicized place. It gets very difficult for a writer to approach that story and to be able to tell it from a place of your own desire to tell it.”<sup>168</sup>

Poet Kaveh Akbar agrees that for writers of color, “the closer we are to danger, the more value our art has.”<sup>169</sup> Books about Black pain, like the 1996 novel *Push*, by Sapphire, which was made into the award-winning film *Precious*, can more easily find a place in the market than, say, a Black romance. “If you’re writing in a genre or you’re writing characters that white book editors aren’t familiar with in real life,” Tia Williams, author of *Seven Days in June*, told Literary Hub, “it’s hard for them to believe that it’s real or believe that it’s valid or believe that anyone will read about it. Which, you can imagine, makes it really hard to try to sell a fun, fizzy, rom-com about glamorous Black people, because if you don’t know any, and you don’t see any on TV, and what you do know about Black people is really that they’re symbols of oppression, what kind of books are you going to publish? You’re going to publish really academic tomes about racial inequities in America

. . . Or you’re going to publish fiction about enslaved people or Civil Rights-era maids. I mean, this is what you learned at school. This is what you know. But anything in between—a Black fantasy novel, Black westerns, Black romances—it’s kind of a stretch.”<sup>170</sup>

Williams’ editor at Grand Central, Seema Mahanian, told PEN America that she struggled to find accurate comps for *Seven Days in June*, a “joyful, romantic book” with Black characters published in 2021. She eventually pitched it as a “modern-day Terry McMillan novel,” name-checking the author of 1990s novels-turned-hit movies *Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. She remembers thinking, “It’s frustrating that I had to go back as far as the ’90s to find one point of comparison that felt close to accurate.”<sup>171</sup>

Reducing authors to their identity doesn’t end when they sign the contract. Marketing teams, too, often allow the author’s identity to overshadow the story, blocking non-white authors from being seen as part of a larger genre. Ciera Burch, an assistant editor at HarperCollins and a former bookseller, laments that books from authors of color are “always, always marketed as ‘diverse books’ instead of ‘This is a badass book about dragons that also happens to have a main character of color.’” She argued that even well-intentioned efforts to promote voices of color can fizzle when publishers ignore the story: “Marketing gets so caught up in the ‘diverse books’ idea or #ownvoices, . . . and then they forget about the actual content of the books because they think #ownvoices

---

168 PEN America interview with Ingrid Rojas Contreras, April and September 2021

169 PEN America interviews with Sabir Sultan, May and September 2021; See Astrid M Trouillot, “The Muslim Community at NYU Gathers for a Night of Poetry and Discussion,” Medium.com, March 31, 2017, [medium.com/@amt653/the-muslim-community-at-nyu-gathers-for-a-night-of-poetry-and-discussion-236d8e7de03f](https://medium.com/@amt653/the-muslim-community-at-nyu-gathers-for-a-night-of-poetry-and-discussion-236d8e7de03f)

170 Reading Women, “Tia Williams on the Meta Experience of Writing about Black Authors in a White Publishing Industry,” Literary Hub, July 13, 2021, [lithub.com/tia-williams-on-the-meta-experience-of-writing-about-black-authors-in-a-white-publishing-industry/](https://lithub.com/tia-williams-on-the-meta-experience-of-writing-about-black-authors-in-a-white-publishing-industry/)

171 PEN America interviews with Seema Mahanian, June and September 2021

is going to sell it or people are so interested in #ownvoices that that's what's going to grab them."<sup>172</sup>

Sabir Sultan, of the Strand Bookstore, put it most bluntly in his conversation with PEN America, saying that publishers all-too-often “assume [an author’s] identity is a topic.” Sultan said that many books are marketed as being about, for example, “the queer, Black experience, and I always think, ‘well what else is it about?’ That can’t be the entirety of it. And that sort of block of text is on the back of every memoir by a Black queer person, or an Asian queer person . . . it’s just always the same.”<sup>173</sup>

Reducing authors to their race or ethnicity can influence creative decisions throughout the marketing process, including a book’s cover and imagery. Myriam Gurba recalled that one of the

proposed covers for her first story collection featured adobe houses, “to signify that there were Mexicans lurking”—even though all the stories in the collection take place in cities.<sup>174</sup>

Between the “one is enough rule” and the “identity trap,” authors of color are caught in a double bind: Write a book that is too broadly and thematically similar to those by other authors of color, and you risk being dismissed as an also-ran for one of the few token slots. Write one too far afield from the well-trammeled tropes of identity and culture, and you risk missing the window of publishers’ interests. Behind it all is the assumption of the white monoculture, the idealized white reader who still exerts controls over the imaginations of the publishing professionals who choose which authors get published.

---

<sup>172</sup>PEN America interviews with Ciera Burch, March and September 2021

<sup>173</sup>PEN America interviews with Sabir Sultan, May and September 2021

<sup>174</sup>PEN America interviews with Myriam Gurba, April and October 2021

## SECTION IV

# PUBLISHING NORMS AND REPLICATED INEQUITIES

Many interviewees pointed out that certain long-standing norms serve to entrench a system that benefits authors with privilege, connections, or a proven track record far more than those without. Leveling the playing field for authors of color will require a reexamination of these core practices.

## AGENTS AND EDITORS

Like many industries, publishing has its own, often opaque rules, codes, and bureaucracies. Interviewees noted that such conventions can be most mysterious to writers of color who do not have networks of friends and mentors who can help lift the veil. “Many people think if you are a person of color, you will get fast tracked for success—and I think that’s hilarious because if anything it’s significantly harder to get broader attention for your work,” said *Pachinko* author Min Jin Lee.<sup>175</sup> Keeonna

Harris, a former PEN America Writing for Justice fellow who recently sold her debut memoir, *Mainline Mama*, to the Black-focused press Amistad, said that initially, she “hadn’t had any clue” about the process. “You just cannot walk up to these companies and say ‘Hey, there’s my idea for a book.’”<sup>176</sup>

The typical first step, finding an agent, is critical for both editors scouting new writing talent and authors submitting their work to editors. Approximately 85 percent of the members of the Association of American Literary Agents (AALA) are white. Fewer agents of color can mean fewer authors of color finding representation for their books.<sup>177</sup> Often agents rely on an “echo chamber of referrals,” drawing from their existing networks, which are not likely to be adequately diverse or inclusive, said Katy Nishimoto, a senior editor at Dial Press who worked as an agent at William Morris Endeavor for a decade.<sup>178</sup>

---

<sup>175</sup> PEN America interviews with Min Jin Lee, April and September 2021

<sup>176</sup> PEN America interviews with Keeonna Harris, March and September 2021

<sup>177</sup> Ed Nawotka, “U.S. Book Show: Making Publishing More Inclusive Demands Leadership,” *Publishers Weekly*, May 26, 2021, [publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bea/article/86491-u-s-book-show-making-publishing-more-inclusive-demands-leadership.html](https://publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bea/article/86491-u-s-book-show-making-publishing-more-inclusive-demands-leadership.html)

<sup>178</sup> PEN America interviews with Katy Nishimoto, April and October 2021

Nishimoto points to the #DVpit (“diverse pitches”) initiative, started in 2016 by Boston literary agent Beth Phelan, as an example of an important innovation for agents who want to diversify their client list. #DVPit is a once-a-year event that allows writers to query agents on Twitter instead of going the traditional route of query letters.<sup>179</sup> #DVpit has led to a number of success stories, including Swati Teerdhala, who eventually sold her novel to HarperCollins; Joy Smith, who found an agent for her novel about a Black ballerina; and Karen Strong, who found an agent for her middle-grade novel about the racist history of the South, which was published in 2019 by Simon & Schuster.<sup>180</sup>

Since the intense calls for racial justice that emerged in the wake of George Floyd’s 2020 murder, however, some editors are starting to do more direct outreach to demystify the rules of publishing. Aminda Marqués Gonzalez of Simon & Schuster argued that it’s important to “crack the door open a little bit more to people who don’t know how to navigate this world.”<sup>181</sup> Like all publishing executives, she works with agents, but she also calls on her background in journalism to unearth her own authors. She’ll read news stories and features and reach out directly to the talented writers and try to help connect them with agents.

Yahdon Israel, who like Marqués Gonzalez started working at Simon & Schuster in March 2021, held an Instagram Live event shortly after his hiring to explain how the editorial process works and the types of

manuscripts he wants to acquire. “That’s me talking directly to a broad audience,” he said. “Not just a broad audience of creators and people in the industry but also people who just don’t know what they don’t know.” Without such help, Israel said, “how do you even begin to understand this sort of byzantine, large, overwhelming industry that you call publishing?”<sup>182</sup>

## COMPARATIVE TITLES AND SALES PROJECTIONS

When editors are interested in buying a book, they bring it to an acquisitions meeting to clear the potential sale with colleagues and members of the sales and marketing teams. In preparation for this meeting, they fill out a profit-and-loss estimate. The P&L sheet includes sales projections based on comparative titles (“comps”), which help determine the size of the author advance, the planned print run,<sup>183</sup> and the budget for marketing and promotion. In short, comps help publishers project how well they expect a book to sell and the general level of resources to put behind it.

But comps can be insidious. Almost by definition, said publishing consultant Jane Friedman, author of *The Business of Being a Writer*, the projected revenue for an author of color will be relatively low, because the comps are often titles by other writers of color, who were often not deeply supported and therefore do not sell as well as they might have.<sup>184</sup> In effect, the system of using comps and sales projections is a way of justifying lower advances

---

179 “What is #DVpit?” DVpit, accessed August 1, 2022, [dvpit.com/about](https://dvpit.com/about)

180 “#Dvpit Success Story,” DVpit, February 20, 2018, April 16, 2018, August 10, 2017, [dvpit.com/blog/category/%23DVpit+Success+Story](https://dvpit.com/blog/category/%23DVpit+Success+Story)

181 PEN America interviews with Aminda Marques Gonzalez, June and September 2021

182 PEN America interviews with Yahdon Israel, April and September 2021

183 Jane Friedman, “The Book P&L: How Publishers Make Decisions About What to Publish,” Jane Friedman, updated September 30, 2021, <https://www.janefriedman.com/book-pl/>

184 PEN America interviews with Jane Friedman, May and September 2021



and smaller print runs based on numbers and past sales. “For a lot of books that are by writers of color, the comps are not going to be there,” said Retha Powers. “You have to be creative about writers of color because they are underrepresented in the books that are published, and there’s really a big challenge.”<sup>185</sup>

As a result of this long-standing practice, long-standing inequities become entrenched in seemingly “objective” data, which plays a major role in publishers’ financial investment in new books. Reliance on comps locks publishers into a conservative, backward-looking posture—making them less likely to take chances on authors of color.

There are signs that publishers may be more open to reducing their reliance on comps and rethinking how they are deployed. In fall 2020, Ruby Rose Lee, an editor at Holt, acquired a book by a Korean-American professor that was a blend of memoir and cultural criticism. “When we were looking at the comps, it limited the numbers I could pay for the book,” she said. But the company was receptive to the idea of offering more. “Is that because it was only a few months after last summer,” she asks, with Black Lives Matter protests erupting around the country? “Absolutely . . . I don’t think, two years ago, I would have gotten to pay for that book what I did.”<sup>186</sup>

Authors may also have some agency to influence their comps if they come prepared to challenge that part of the process. Ingrid Rojas Contreras said that when she was pitching *Fruit of the Drunken Tree* to agents and publishers, she came to the table with

her own set of comps: “I was thinking about, this is a novel told from a young point of view about war, and so those were my comp titles when I was pitching.” Rojas Contreras encourages other writers of color to think about—and pitch—the themes of their work, not just the identity of the author, to influence which comps publishers attach to the book. “I think that this is something that’s useful for writers of color to know about, and maybe for everybody in the process to know about, whether it’s comps or even when talking about the copy or talking about how to sell or what to compare it to. The easy thing is to match the country to the country. But I feel that there’s a missed opportunity—the richer connection is going to be what the book is about.” She adds, authors pitching their work should not be “afraid to make connections to other books that are from other cultures.”<sup>187</sup>

## AUTHORS OF COLOR AS A “TREND”

Several interviewees conveyed their frustration that the publishing industry often treats authors of color as simply another market trend. In the 1990s, Dutton Brown said, publishers sought basic surveys of Black history and biographies of already recognized figures, like Martin Luther King and Harriet Tubman. Then “we went through this period of ‘urban lit,’ and you just couldn’t get anything published unless it was street lit or urban lit.” Authors of color, she said, “were not taken seriously” unless their books dealt with “what was being considered the most successful Black genre.”<sup>188</sup> In the aftermath of George Floyd’s death, as titles on race and racism began to sell well,

---

<sup>185</sup> PEN America interviews with Retha Powers, May and October 2021

<sup>186</sup> PEN America interviews with Ruby Rose Lee, March and September 2021

<sup>187</sup> PEN America interviews with Ingrid Rojas Contreras, April and September 2021

<sup>188</sup> PEN America interviews with Marie Dutton Brown, May and September 2021

publishers rushed to market with a glut of books to capitalize on spikes in public attention, prompting what one bookseller termed a “tsunami” of such titles throughout 2021 and to date.<sup>189</sup>

“Auctions for BIPOC authors are just astronomical,” said one DEI lead, a person of color at a large publishing house, who requested anonymity to speak more freely. “And now we run into this issue of, well, are these authors going to earn out on these advances?” While publishing more books by authors of color on racism should be applauded, there are potential hazards. “I’m very troubled by this trend because the stakes are high,” they said. “And not only does that set up the author for failure, but [also] the

editor who put themselves out there.”<sup>190</sup> When such efforts do backfire, they perpetuate the age-old myth that diverse books don’t sell.

“I am seeing a lot of these well-meaning white editors . . . flooding the market with so many POC books that aren’t saying anything new,” said Jenny Xu of HarperCollins. Then “you see them burn out because they have already bought their POC books.”<sup>191</sup>

Publishers will say that there is no market for a book, “and the reason for it is because they over-published books that were not worthy of publication when it became a thing or a movement,” said Dutton Brown.<sup>192</sup> Such miscalculation and overcorrection



Katy Nishimoto, editor



Yahdon Israel, editor



Tanya McKinnon, agent

189 Elizabeth A. Harris, “Books on race filled best-seller lists last year. Publishers took notice,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 15, 2021, [nytimes.com/2021/09/15/books/new-books-race-racism-antiracism.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/15/books/new-books-race-racism-antiracism.html); see also Elizabeth A. Harris, “People are marching against racism. They’re also reading about it,” *The New York Times*, June 5, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/06/05/books/antiracism-books-race-racism.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/books/antiracism-books-race-racism.html)

190 PEN America interviews with DEI lead, May and October 2021

191 PEN America interviews with Jenny Xu, May and September 2021

192 PEN America interviews with Marie Dutton Brown, May and September 2021

can ricochet beyond a single book or author, shaping future decisions and attitudes industry-wide. While the overzealous embrace of proven formulas is not limited to works by authors of color, those authors often pay a higher price when their books don't meet inflated expectations. When books by non-white authors crash, their failure can implicate entire demographic groups. Seema Mahanian, senior editor at Grand Central said: "There is that fear that if an author of color doesn't earn out, there is something in the back of executives' minds where the next book is a risk, but it feels like white authors get more chances. That's not the case all the time, but I think the consideration of taking a huge advance for a debut and worrying if that is going to bite them later is unfortunately something that probably authors of color have to worry about more—because they are given fewer chances and have to "prove themselves" more at every stage than white authors—and that in itself is pretty systemic."<sup>193</sup>

Yet, as #PublishingPaidMe has helped demonstrate, for most non-white authors, the problem with author advances is emphatically not that they're too big. Houses looking to publish writers of color may find themselves walking a tightrope: wanting to undo systemic inequities that cause writers of color to be paid less than their white counterparts but not wanting to set those writers up for failure by paying advances their books may not earn out. The DEI lead from a large publishing house who spoke to PEN America anonymously argued that a more durable approach to reaching authors of color "at scale" is to focus on a larger number of midlist authors of color, "offering a reasonable advance and investing in the opportunity and hopefully seeing those breakouts."<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>193</sup> PEN America interviews with Seema Mahanian, June and September 2021

<sup>194</sup> PEN America interviews with DEI lead, May and October 2021

## SECTION V

### SELLING THE STORY: THE OVERLOOKED ROLE OF MARKETING, PUBLICITY, AND SALES

While much of the external discussion of diversity has focused on editorial gatekeeping, marketing, publicity, and sales are also integral to a book's success. It is during the marketing phase that the axiom "Diverse books don't sell" is particularly likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without enough money and expertise in reaching diverse audiences, books by authors of color will probably go nowhere.

While there are formulas tying the size of an advance to the marketing budget, there is also some fluidity in the process. When it comes to book marketing, "there's a difference between the machine operating with gas and the machine operating when premium gas has been put in," said agent Cherise Fisher. "The machine is going to basically work for everybody at a certain level, but the machine is turned up to 10 on certain titles, and those decisions are made in small rooms."<sup>195</sup>



"There's a difference between the machine operating with gas and the machine operating when premium gas has been put in. The machine is going to basically work for everybody at a certain level, but the machine is turned up to 10 on certain titles, and those decisions are made in small rooms."  
*Cherise Fisher, Agent*

Few published books receive the dialed-up marketing campaigns that their authors may feel they may deserve, a phenomenon that is not limited to authors of color. Peter Hildick-Smith, a marketing vice president at a division of what is now Penguin Random House in the mid-'90s and who is now CEO of Codex Group, a book-audience research firm, recalled that out of the several hundred books that his division would put out per year, "We were only able to fully support thirty titles because of budget and manpower limits . . . Book marketing is problematic because the marketing spending is lower than other consumer businesses—because both the product scale and overall profit margins are lower."<sup>196</sup>

<sup>195</sup> PEN America interviews with Cherise Fisher, April and September 2021

<sup>196</sup> PEN America interview with Peter Hildick-Smith, June 2022

Some critics allege that the publishing industry is overall not particularly market-savvy.<sup>197</sup> Given this situation, it is difficult to conclude categorically that publishers' marketing investment in authors of color lags behind that of white authors, at least in the absence of publicly available data.

Still, interviewee after interviewee stressed their belief both that authors of color are as a rule more poorly served during the marketing-and-distribution phase and that this inequity is especially under-examined. "It is generally assumed that editorial comprises the gatekeepers and it is they who are largely responsible for the dire state of diversity of voices in books," said Erroll McDonald, vice president and executive editor at Doubleday, who began his publishing career as Toni Morrison's intern and has published authors from James Baldwin to Fran Lebowitz. "But the real issue is the relationship between readers and bookstores, and those bookstores and sales departments. Because editors can publish so-called diverse voices as much as they want. If there's no demand for those voices, the dire situation remains as is, the status quo remains."<sup>198</sup>

"It's just black and white, it's dollars and cents," said Yona Deshommes, CEO of Riverchild Media and a former Associate Director of Publicity at Simon & Schuster's Atria imprint. "I would see that some of these other authors, some of whom were debut, no track record, starting out with a pretty significant

budget. You haven't even proven yourself and you get this budget that authors of color were not afforded."<sup>199</sup>

Publicist Carla Bruce, the director of publicity at One World, said that she has seen many books from authors of color fail because they appeared to lack sufficient institutional support. "It's such a commonplace thing that sadly I've stopped counting it," she said. "Because it's almost like it's too many to lament each one."<sup>200</sup>

The truth is that very few books—about 25 percent—earn back their advance.<sup>201</sup> Yet when books by non-white authors fail, interviewees emphasize, they are all too often perceived not as just one-off disappointments or as illustrations of the need to better cultivate readers of color but as a confirmation of prior beliefs. "Parallel to the film industry," said Malaika Adero, "what you hear is that when a so-called Black story or a so-called Asian story fails, it's the story's fault. But when it does do gangbusters, it is dismissed as a fluke."<sup>202</sup>

## MARKETING AND SELLING DIVERSE BOOKS

While in the past few years many non-white executives have been hired for high-profile editorial roles, comparatively few have been hired in marketing. There are several key exceptions: In September 2020, for example, PRH hired Anthony

---

197 E.g. Matthew Yglesias, "Amazon is doing the world a favor by crushing book publishers," Vox, November 13, 2014, [vox.com/2014/10/22/7016827/amazon-hachette-monopoly](https://www.vox.com/2014/10/22/7016827/amazon-hachette-monopoly) ("When I was a kid, my father was a novelist as were both of my grandparents. So I heard a lot of stories about how useless publishers are at marketing books. Then I got to know other people who wrote books and they had the same complaints. Then I wrote a book, and their complaints became my complaints.")

198 PEN America interviews with Erroll McDonald, April and October 2021

199 PEN America interviews with Yona Deshommes, May and October 2021

200 PEN America interviews with Carla Bruce, May and October 2021

201 Chip MacGregor, "Ask The Agent: What If My Book Doesn't Earn Out?," *MacGregor & Luedeke*, July 20, 2016, [macgregorandluedeke.com/blog/ask-agent-book-doesnt-earn/#:~:text=But%20second%2C%20keep%20in%20mind,them%20are%20in%20the%20red](https://macgregorandluedeke.com/blog/ask-agent-book-doesnt-earn/#:~:text=But%20second%2C%20keep%20in%20mind,them%20are%20in%20the%20red)

202 PEN America interviews with Malaika Adero, April and October 2021

Key as its first director of multicultural marketing. A month later, Simon & Schuster hired Sienna Farris for the same newly created role.<sup>203</sup> Book marketer Rockelle Henderson has concluded that, “If the publishers want to really get serious about publishing these books and not just acquiring these



**Editor Yuka Igarashi recalled presenting books to distributors and being struck by the homogeneity of their sales teams. This shortcoming, she said, “is much more hidden than something like what author’s name is put on the book, and it makes a huge difference.”**

books, we need higher-level people of color in marketing and publicity across the board.”<sup>204</sup>



**“A budget is a moral document... When we talk about diversity, we need to understand what that means financially.”**  
*Elizabeth Méndez Berry, One World*

Marketing and publicity teams help position books and appeal to media consumers, while the sales team is responsible for championing and selling books to various distributors and to schools, libraries, bookstores, and other retail partners like Costco and Target. “Sales definitely has a lot of power in terms of championing the book toward bookstores and librarians and a lot of people in the industry,” said Lisa Huang, who joined the sales team at Macmillan in 2019. “We know a lot of people in the industry and are able to tell them: ‘Hey, this book is really good. We believe that you should buy out more quantities of this title and promote it in your bookstore.’”<sup>205</sup>

Since sales teams are crucial to finding—and creating—an audience for a book, their inattention to diversity issues can sink its prospects. Alia Almeida, who works as a sales rep for Chesapeake & Hudson Inc and previously worked in sales at Mariner Books, a division of HarperCollins, said that some salespeople present books to retailers by relying on marketing materials alone, without understanding the themes of a book. Such pitches often fail to land.<sup>206</sup>

<sup>203</sup>PT Editors, “People Round-Up, Early October 2020,” October 8, 2020, [publishingtrends.com/2020/10/people-round-up-early-october-2020/](https://publishingtrends.com/2020/10/people-round-up-early-october-2020/); “Personnel changes at PRH,” Shelf Awareness, accessed July 31, 2020, [shelf-awareness.com/issue.html?issue=3827#m49899](https://shelf-awareness.com/issue.html?issue=3827#m49899)

<sup>204</sup>PEN America interviews with Rockelle Henderson, May and October 2021

<sup>205</sup>PEN America interview with Lisa Huang, May 2021

<sup>206</sup>PEN America Interviews with Alia Almeida, March and October 2021

Editor Yuka Igarashi recalled presenting books to distributors and being struck by the homogeneity of their sales teams. This shortcoming, she said, “is much more hidden than something like what author’s name is put on the book, and it makes a huge difference.”<sup>207</sup>

Allison Hill, CEO of the American Booksellers Association, agrees that publishers should diversify their sales teams. “Booksellers,” she said, “want diverse sales reps pitching them diverse titles.” Hill said that publishers should build relationships with both bookstore owners of color and nontraditional booksellers, like mobile bookstores and pop-ups. “Because historically institutional racism has created obstacles for people of color trying to raise capital to finance small brick-and-mortar businesses, booksellers of color have found non-traditional models to be a way to remove these barriers to entry in the industry,” she says. “Publishers’ support of these models is really important even if it doesn’t seem directly related to diversity.”<sup>208</sup>

Méndez Berry of One World believes that to achieve real equity, publishers need to look beyond author advances and consider budgets more holistically. “A budget,” she said, “is a moral document . . . When we talk about diversity, we need to understand what that means financially and in terms of decision-making power.” In practice, it means making monetary investments—including in marketing and distribution allocations—that help authors of color reach and win over readers.<sup>209</sup>

“If the industry really wants to make the change that we all want to see in this space,” said the DEI lead from a large publishing house who spoke to PEN America, “they have to take a harder look at their own budget allocations, budget methodologies, how they allocate or project sales and budgets for titles, and figure out if there’s a different way to allocate those funds for BIPOC authors. The authors who are traditionally white cis-heteronormative authors get these huge marketing budgets, and that’s because they are sort of a tried-and-true sales opportunity.” The DEI lead said that editorial teams sometimes ask them why they can’t take a fraction of that money and apply it to others to break the self-perpetuating cycle. The lead pointed to the bottom line, profit and loss. “I can do microaggression training until the end of the day,” they said. “That’s not really going to change the actual representation.” What will bring change, they argued, is “making serious concessions within the traditional budgets.”<sup>210</sup>

## CONSUMER RESEARCH AND BOOKSTORES

Without figuring out how to reach and cultivate audiences for books by authors of color, warned agent Regina Brooks, many good books “are going to die on the vine.” She said that “publishers are working on it, but they still haven’t really quite figured [it] out . . . The thing is, you must be thoughtful in your acquisitions. Before they acquire, editors must invest in the audience, learn what the audience is interested in, and be committed to knowing what resonates with them. It’s not about this rush to publish.”<sup>211</sup>

---

207 PEN America interviews with Yuka Igarashi, May and October 2021

208 PEN America interview with Allison Hill, June and October 2021; see also Rohit Arora, “Small Business Owners of Color Continue to Face Challenges,” *Forbes*, January 29, 2021, [forbes.com/sites/rohitarora/2021/01/29/small-business-owners-of-color-continue-to-face-challenges/?sh=7719b66f58aa](https://www.forbes.com/sites/rohitarora/2021/01/29/small-business-owners-of-color-continue-to-face-challenges/?sh=7719b66f58aa).

209 PEN America interviews with Elizabeth Méndez Berry, May and October 2021

210 PEN America interviews with DEI lead, May and October 2021

211 PEN America interviews with Regina Brooks, April and September 2021

There is little available market research on book buyers and readers of color. This absence is seldom discussed but critical to understanding the lasting biases in the industry. Readers of color may have different preferences or buying habits, different media that they follow or topics that they read about, different ways that they learn about and consume books.<sup>212</sup> Not knowing how to reach or appeal to readers of color perpetuates the fiction that they “don’t read” and never will, or that they’re not worth targeting.<sup>213</sup>



**And what left me so surprised was that large publishers aren’t doing more testing to better understand and develop this market.**

***Peter Hildick-Smith, CEO of Codex Group***

There is some broad data on the reading habits of the American public and how readership breaks down along ethnic lines. According to the most recent National Endowment for the Arts Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, slightly more than half of adults (53 percent) said they had read at least one book in the past year (2017). When broken down by race, 60 percent of white adults, 47 percent of Black adults, 32 percent of Hispanic adults, and 45 percent of Asian adults said they had read at least one book in the past year.

A more recent study, conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2021, found that 80 percent of white adults, 75 percent of Black adults, and 62 percent of Hispanic adults said they had read a book in any format, in its entirety or in part, in the past 12 months. (The survey included Asian Americans but did not have sufficient sample size to do a statistical analysis of this group.)

One of the first-ever studies of the book buying habits of people of color was completed in March 2021 by Codex Group, underwritten by Hachette, Beacon, Simon & Schuster, Authors Guild, and Readerlink Distribution Services. Because the research is proprietary, PEN America cannot replicate the findings here, but our staff received a briefing on them from Codex. The research showed that there are key differences in the reading and buying habits of consumers of color versus white consumers. Among the findings: People of color buy far less from Amazon. Their tastes tend to be more “purposeful”—they’re interested in achieving goals and improving themselves and being better informed, while white book buyers are more in search of entertainment. Codex also found that white readers were more likely to say that they read books “to read and enjoy my favorite authors” and that readers of color placed less importance on the author for their buying decisions than white readers.

“Does that mean that readers of color don’t have authors they want to enjoy and have relationships with?” asks CEO Peter Hildick-Smith. “No. It means that not enough authors of color exist for readers of color to have these relationships with . . . I think one of the key takeaways from the study is that the range of

---

212 “An Introduction to Multicultural Marketing,” PRH, October 2021, [authornews.penguinrandomhouse.com/an-introduction-to-multicultural-marketing/](https://authornews.penguinrandomhouse.com/an-introduction-to-multicultural-marketing/)

213 Janks Morton, Ivory Toldson, *Black People Don’t Read: The Definitive Guide to Dismantling Stereotypes and Negative Statistical Claims about Black Americans*, On-Demand Publishing LLC, July 25, 2012



authors of color is not as rich and varied as it could be, particularly in fiction.”<sup>214</sup>

Hildick-Smith adds that there is much more analysis that could be done with just the data his firm collected and that overall the publishing industry could go much further in conducting foundational research to understand their consumers of color. “My background is in consumer packaged goods and consumer testing. In consumer-facing businesses, testing significantly improves and speeds the identification of what people need in specific categories,” he said. “And what left me so surprised was that large publishers aren’t doing more testing to better understand and develop this market.”<sup>215</sup>



**We’re all expected to read *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *NPR*. But we also read BIPOC publications like *TheGrio*, *The Root*, *Essence*. We have to keep up with that. That’s where burnout comes in, because you’re living in two worlds.**

***Rockelle Henderson, President of Rock Inked***

## MARKETING BEYOND THE BOILERPLATE

In general, PEN’s interviewees say, marketing plans tend to be too uniform, following a playbook that may work well for white mainstream audiences

but not necessarily for the communities of readers sought by diverse authors: Pitch *The New York Times*, *NPR*, other one-size-fits-all outlets—and leave it at that. As author Esmeralda Santiago puts it, many publishing teams reflexively and exclusively target the “white ladies book club” crowd.<sup>216</sup> Consultant Jane Friedman calls such default marketing plans the “boilerplate” plan. They neither reflect creative thinking nor bode success for non-white authors.<sup>217</sup>

“I’m not trying to diss [*The New York Times*] *Book Review*—I think it’s fantastic,” said publisher Johnny Temple of Akashic Books. “But who reads the *Book Review* and *The New York Review of Books*, and what are their promotional orientations?” Rather than rely on the same coveted reviewing spots, Temple elaborated, Akashic—which, according to its website, publishes “urban literary fiction and political nonfiction by authors who are either ignored by the mainstream, or who have no interest in working within the ever-consolidating ranks of the major corporate publishers”—develops marketing plans targeting audiences that most publishers forget or avoid. In the past, Temple said, his company has hosted events in places like Haitian galleries, Black churches, and book festivals for readers of color.<sup>218</sup>

Even avowedly neutral marketing practices—such as putting more resources behind the newest book of an author with a proven track record—can serve to replicate enduring inequities and entrench a status quo that systemically prioritizes white authors. Yona Deshommes described stark disparities in efforts to boost white versus Black authors whose books were struggling. “If you had a white author [whose] sales

<sup>214</sup> PEN America interview with Peter Hildick-Smith, CEO of Codex Group, June 2022

<sup>215</sup> PEN America interview with Peter Hildick-Smith, CEO of Codex Group, June 2022

<sup>216</sup> PEN America interviews with Esmeralda Santiago, April and September 2021

<sup>217</sup> PEN America interviews with Jane Friedman, May and September 2021

<sup>218</sup> PEN America interviews with Johnny Temple, May and September 2021

were slipping from book to book,” she said, “they literally would have these think-tank-type meetings where they would try to figure out why this person’s sales were slipping and how we could either grow that person’s audience or up their sales—month in and month out of planning. For Black authors, there was rarely a postmortem. It didn’t exist.”<sup>219</sup>

Méndez Berry, who entered publishing after a career in arts philanthropy and criticism,<sup>220</sup> said that shortly after arriving at One World, in February 2020, one of the first meetings she attended was for an English-language book by a Latina author. She asked if the marketing and publicity team had reached out to any Latino press outlets, English-speaking or Spanish-speaking, and said: “I remember that they had not, and I gave them a big list. I really believed in the book . . . and I will never know this, but I’m pretty sure that they did not reach out to them . . . They had other priorities, and I understand that.” But, she adds, “if you don’t have or build these relationships with other publications or other communities of readers,” then “when you need them, you don’t have them.”<sup>221</sup>

Rockelle Henderson agrees that marketing and selling to a non-white audience takes specific expertise and connections built over time—and that editors and marketers of color are expected to develop and utilize these channels alongside staying on top of more standard forms of publicity and outreach. “We’re all expected to read *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *NPR*,” she said. “But we also read BIPOC publications like *TheGrio*, *The Root*, *Essence*.

We have to keep up with that. That’s where burnout comes in, because you’re living in two worlds.”<sup>222</sup>

That specialized expertise helps ensure that the marketing budget goes toward outreach that works. Historically, though, publishers have not generally rewarded such expertise with financial or moral or support. When Farrar Strous & Giroux hired Ayesha Pande as a senior editor, in 2001, she said she was specifically brought in with the mandate to “de-Europeanize the list—to basically bring in some writers of color.” But once on board, she said, “I was just left to my own devices. There was not at any point during the time that I was there sort of a strategy session with marketing and publicity and sales to say, ‘Okay, we’re going to really focus on diversifying the list and so these are the kinds of things that we need to put in place in order to ensure the success of that.’” Instead, she was told by her boss that she shouldn’t need any guidance, “even though, when I think about it in retrospect, he asked me to do something to the list that nobody had successfully done. They never had any brown editors there.”<sup>223</sup>

Sabir Sultan contends that Black and other non-white audiences can be discovered and cultivated—and “it’s not hard.” He recalled hosting an event at the Strand Bookstore for a Black activist writer that should have attracted a crowd, but a week before, ticket sales were slow. Sultan and his team reached out beyond the usual literary groups to local Black activists and others to offer complimentary tickets. The event filled up, and most of the audience

---

219 PEN America interviews with Yona Deshommes, May and October 2021

220 Elizabeth Berry, Experience, LinkedIn, accessed July 31, 2022, [linkedin.com/in/elizabethmendezberry/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/elizabethmendezberry/); “About.” One World, accessed July 31, 2022, [oneworldlit.com/about-ow](https://oneworldlit.com/about-ow)

221 PEN America interviews with Elizabeth Méndez Berry, May and October 2021

222 PEN America interviews with Rockelle Henderson, May and October 2021

223 PEN America interviews with Ayesha Pande, March and September 2021

bought a book, reinforcing for Sultan the lesson that simply hosting a book event is not enough and that basic research and outreach pay off. Failure to understand beyond-the-usual literary audiences means foregoing important publicity opportunities. “You just have to extend the barest amount of effort,” said Sultan, “like Googling organizations. And you have to promote diversity all the time and work at forming relationships with organizations which will help grow a diverse audience for you.” He points to events with Staceyann Chin that attracted many queer Jamaicans and with Nicole Chung and Min Jin Lee that predominantly drew Korean Americans. “It’s important to be specific and targeted,” he said, “because places where people will see themselves, they will come out. I think people over-rely on the idea of a white interlocutor, and I think marketing to the widest audience possible can be a mistake.”<sup>224</sup>

Lesleigh Irish-Underwood said that as manager of promotion and advertising for Random House from 1990 to '99, she rarely witnessed targeted outreach. She remembers working on a nonfiction book about Southern migration to Chicago and attending a publicity meeting where people discussed sending the book to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* for review. Irish-Underwood suggested sending it to Susan Taylor, then editor-in-chief of *Essence*. The director of publicity asked who that was. “This was when *Essence* was in its absolute heyday,” she said. “They had the festival, they had *Essence* TV, they had started to broadcast, they had a partnership with BET. She is one of the most powerful Black women in media.” Irish-Underwood adds: “I didn’t think we did a good enough job really leveraging all of the

burgeoning Black media. I didn’t think we did a great job of putting together a list of leaders at HBCUs,” historically Black colleges and universities. “I never thought that we really got that book into the hands of people who might actually be interested.”<sup>225</sup>

Others also invoke *Essence* as an example of an obvious yet overlooked outlet for promoting books by Black authors. Regina Brooks, the agent and owner of Serendipity Literary Agency, also described what she viewed as surprisingly limited awareness among publishing colleagues of the reach and audience demographic of this prominent Black magazine and festival. “There was a blockbuster film [*Girls Trip* (2017)] that featured the *Essence* Festival, and the fact that colleagues weren’t familiar with the outlet as a book selling opportunity, to me, is unacceptable if you work with Black books,” said Brooks.<sup>226</sup>

Several interviewees cite 2020 as the year that publishers appeared to finally recognize the potential of Black fraternities and sororities as a literary audience, in part due to Vice President Kamala Harris’s campaign-trail stories about the historically Black sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha. Audra Boltion-Ortiz, who worked at Penguin, Simon & Schuster, and HarperCollins before founding her own PR firm, described her knowledge of Black Greek organizations as a “secret weapon” in her arsenal as a publicist.<sup>227</sup> Marie Dutton Brown recalled frequent neutering of this potent weapon. “I would sit in those meetings and talk about the phenomenal network and that aspect of Black women’s history, and I’d say, ‘Well, Black sororities and fraternities will support this.’ And people would say, ‘This is not a college book.’”<sup>228</sup>

---

224 PEN America interviews with Sabir Sultan, May and September 2021

225 PEN America interviews with Lesleigh Irish-Underwood, June and September 2021

226 PEN America interviews with Regina Brooks, April and September 2021

227 PEN America interview with Audra Boltion-Ortiz, May 2021

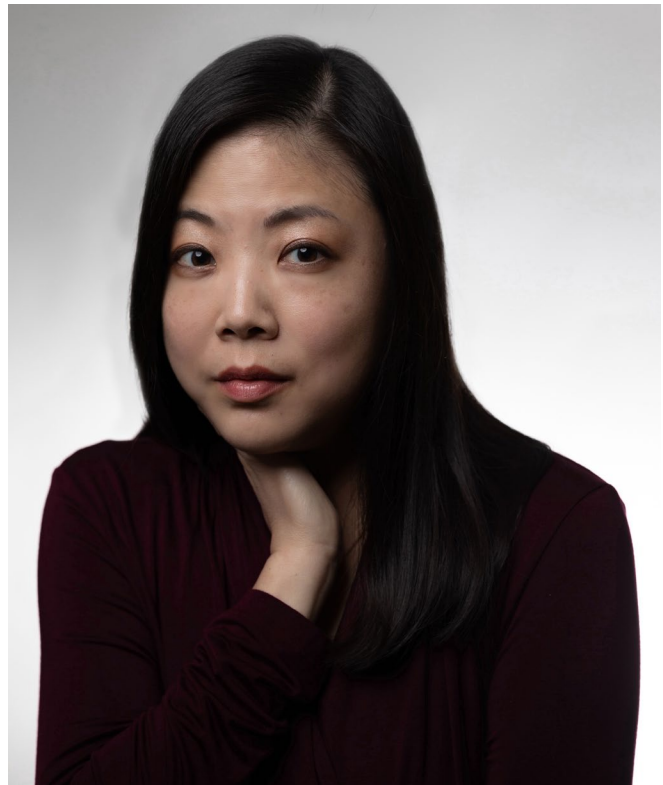
228 PEN America interviews with Marie Dutton Brown, May and September 2021

## MARKETING BEYOND PIGEONHOLES

Several interviewees observe that even when publishers do engage marketing channels oriented toward audiences of color, they often do it in a blinkered way. Ebony LaDelle, former marketing director at PRH, said that she watched many varied books by Black authors receive essentially the same marketing treatment, while those by white authors were seen as “multifaceted,” meriting vastly different approaches. “What publishing really has to learn is that Black people or people of color are not monolithic,” she said, “and so the same thing that might work for one author might not work for the next author, and you really have to look at the story in itself and the author to determine what’s the strongest hook to sale.”<sup>229</sup>

When Yona Deshommes was a publicist, she said, she saw undifferentiated, misbegotten campaigns where “the only reason they thought a certain outlet was the proper placement for this book was because the outlet was Black.” Publishers would pitch “an outlet that would never cover that book—and then they wonder why their approach didn’t work.”<sup>230</sup> And without awareness of why their approach didn’t work, the next author of color to come along could be stuck with a residual presumption of failure.

Authors of color also face questions about how to label their work that white authors do not. A book about teenage white girls coming of age and dealing with high school drama, for example, would be considered commercial literary fiction, LaDelle said. But if the main character is a person of color, “then all of a sudden there is ‘What kind of book is this? Is this an issue book?’” The assumption behind



**“I’ve been told, and I know plenty of other writers of color who are still told, ‘The books you really want to write . . . [are] sort of niche projects.’”**

### Nicole Chung, Author

such questions, she explained, is that a non-white character automatically transforms the book into being about race. Tagging a coming-of-age story as a Black coming-of-age story undermines attempts to “normalize these experiences,” LaDelle said, making the story appear less universal and potentially hindering its ability to reach a wide audience. At the same time, to maximize readership, many such books need to be marketed within a niche, which risks marginalizing them. As in the acquisition phase, this dual set of marketing imperatives builds on the double bind that authors of color experience: the

<sup>229</sup>PEN America interviews with Ebony LaDelle, May and September 2021

<sup>230</sup>PEN America interviews with Yona Deshommes, May and October 2021

pressure to appeal to their own communities while simultaneously achieving crossover success.

In 2021, Nicole Chung said at a Brooklyn Book Festival event: “I’ve been told, and I know plenty of other writers of color who are still told, ‘The books you really want to write . . . [are] sort of niche projects.’” Authors of books like her best-selling memoir, *All You Can Ever Know*, are informed that their work is “more accessible or more exciting to people if they share your background.” For those who don’t share their background, publishers pose the dreaded question: How marketable is it? This skepticism, voiced even about great books that go on to achieve acclaim and success, looms over writers of color in a way that few of their white counterparts experience.<sup>231</sup>

As VP of Multicultural Marketing for Simon & Schuster, Sienna Farris stressed that the way to more thoughtfully market books from authors of color is to push beyond the formulaic and think creatively. Sure, she said, “I have to put something on Goodreads, let’s do something on Facebook and Instagram, let’s get something on NPR.” But rather than stop there, each season Farris picks eight titles with the express aim of reaching diverse audiences. For example, after she noticed that the McBride Sisters Wine Company, in Oakland, California, offered a line of wines called Black Girl Magic, she partnered with it to create the Black Girl Magic Book Club, with books, wine, and a virtual event.<sup>232</sup> “Readers are everywhere,” Farris said. To find them she asks: “What are *other* opportunities?”<sup>233</sup>

---

<sup>231</sup>Nicole Chung in Beyond representational politics in publishing, Brooklyn Book Festival 2021. Moderated by Suzanne Nossel [youtube.com/watch?v=EtPxGHDFw7I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtPxGHDFw7I)

<sup>232</sup>“Black Girl Magic Book Club,” McBride Sisters Wine Company, accessed August 2, 2022, [mcbridesisters.com/Wine-Club/McBride-Sisters-Black-Girl-Magic-Wine-Book-Club](https://mcbridesisters.com/Wine-Club/McBride-Sisters-Black-Girl-Magic-Wine-Book-Club)

<sup>233</sup>PEN America interview with Sienna Farris, September 2021

## CONCLUSION

When asked what would lead to real change in the publishing community, employees across the industry provide the same answers: Publishing houses need to recruit broadly, especially into mid- and upper-level positions and on non-editorial teams; raise salaries and allow remote work; reevaluate diversity initiatives and ensure that they are led by people of color and have meaningful support from senior management; make sure that white colleagues are working on diversity efforts, too, and that the burden does not fall solely on employees of color; track and assess advances for authors of color and compare them with those of white authors; reconsider the ways that sales projections and comparative titles are used for books by authors of color; assess equity in marketing plans and budgets; and, to support these goals, regularly reevaluate budgets and set benchmarks across the board for improvement.

As the interviews in this report show, progress only begins with placing more people of color in more roles throughout the industry. Hiring is the first step, but just as important is ensuring that the people who are hired or promoted have true power, support, and trust. For retention, it's essential to ensure that the expertise of the new hires is respected and that they have the freedom to acquire, edit, market, and sell without being compelled to appeal to a white-centric view of readership.

In researching this report, several core themes stood out. While over the past few decades the industry has worked to bury tropes like “one is enough,” publishing professionals of color are still placed in the position of serving as de facto cultural representatives and diversity advocates while contending with the message that the ideal reader is white. Authors of color still must pull off the trick of writing books with characters that represent their culture while at

the same time avoiding their dismissal as a “niche” books that appeal solely to people from that culture. Dismantling these expectations will require not just new policies and programs but efforts to shift company culture.

Relatedly, publishers should adopt a greater willingness to reexamine some of the core conventions of the industry—from author advances to comps and the book acquisition process. Such conventions inevitably privilege those who already have the connections and credentials while disadvantaging writers of color.

Many interviewees stressed the crucial role of the marketing and sales side of the house. Publishers must work more intentionally to cultivate and connect to readers of color, develop more tailored marketing and sales plans that avoid boilerplate strategies, and learn more about literary spaces that cater to different communities. As approximately one out of four American readers is a person of color, this is an area where profit will follow principle—that is to say, developing stronger relationships with literary communities of color serves publishers' social as well as economic imperatives.

The issue of telling diverse stories has national ramifications. Méndez Berry of One World said that publishing is about “defining the American imagination, and deciding which voices get amplified in the moment.” Ultimately, Méndez Berry explained, publishing helps “create the American archive . . . Those who work in publishing, by making decisions about which American stories are told and not told, act as stewards of the stories this country tells about itself. Without a diversity of storytellers, characters, and experiences, this American archive is far from complete. That's why American publishing needs to look like the American people.”<sup>234</sup>

---

<sup>234</sup>PEN America interviews with Elizabeth Mendez Berry, May and October 2021.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written by James Tager, Director of Research; and Clarisse Rosaz Shariyf, Chief Program Officer, Literary Programming, with substantial research and drafting contributions from Angela Chen, reporting assistant. Additional research and editing contributions from Ryan Howzell, research consultant. PEN America gratefully acknowledges Jennifer Egan and Michael Pietsch for their generous support of this report. PEN America is thankful to all those who spoke with us for this report, including those not named.

## *Photo Credits:*

*Chris Jackson: @cjaxone*

*Ebony LaDelle: Taylor Baldwin*

*Elizabeth Méndez Berry: elizabethmendezberry.com*

*Ingrid Rojas Contreras: www.ingridrojascontreras.com*

*Katy Nishimoto: katynishimoto.com*

*Myriam Gurba: Geoff Cordner*

*Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah: Limitless Imprint Entertainment*

*Nicole Chung: Emma M. Pollock*

*Tanya McKinnon: mckinnonliterary.com*

*Todd Hunter: @t\_double*

*Yaba Blay: yabablai.com*

*Yahdon Israel: Rog and Bee*

*One Drop (Book Cover): Beacon Press*



[pen.org](https://pen.org)