

PUBLISHING NOW

How can authors help increase representation? Kathleen Whyman asks the industry

People of all kinds should be represented in literature, both as characters and authors, regardless of gender, colour, race, sexuality, background and ability. It's appalling that, even into the 21st century, it should have to be highlighted as an issue. At long last, though, it's an issue that's being addressed.

Laura Macdougall, literary agent at United Agents, hopes that representation, inclusion and diversity are factors all agents and publishers are conscious of and working to improve.

'I strive to offer a welcoming and inclusive space and to make clear to prospective writers that anyone can contact me and talk about their work,' she says.

'I've also worked hard to cultivate a list of exceptional writing by members of the LGBTQ+ community, and the majority of writers I currently represent are from this section of society.'

Macdougall recently won the Inclusion Award at the Romantic Novelists' Association's Industry Awards. The RNA champions the quality and diversity of romantic fiction, and has two diversity and inclusion officers. Liam Livings

and Caroline Bell Foster work to ensure that a broad range of authors and the stories they write are welcomed into the RNA, and that all aspects of inclusion are sensitively discussed and acted upon.

All RNA events are accessible and facilities include alternatives for delegates who prefer not to choose between male and female spaces. The association also supports financial plans and sponsors bursaries for those who are financially challenged.

Keshini Naidoo, co-founder of Hera Books, is trying to bring under-represented voices into commercial fiction.

'Literary fiction from writers of BAME origin over-indexes in literary awards, but we don't see that same representation in mass market fiction,' she says. 'We need own voices in this industry. Your work and your story are important.'

Several years ago, Bell Foster created the Diverse Romance Facebook group, a safe place for writers of a BAME background, and the #DiverseRomance hashtag, making it easier to find less traditional novels.

'Speaking from the perspective of a black British author of contemporary romance with diverse characters, I have an open-door policy for anyone who'd like to talk to me about their journey and any trepidation they may have,' she says. 'The hill in publishing is steep, but thankfully the ground is levelling with the increased visibility of a number of BAME authors within the RNA.'

How to help

We can all help by representing different voices in our writing.

'Life includes a wide variety of people, from all sorts of

backgrounds. Fiction should aim to do so as well,' says Livings. 'But it's important that this is done in a way that doesn't make it feel tokenistic. Including traditionally under-represented characters should be done in a rounded way, just as with all characters.'

Naidoo adds: 'It's important that writers have good intentions in increasing representation in their writing. Ask yourself if a character is being used purely as a soapbox to highlight a particular issue or whether they are as fully realised as the other, mainstream characters.'

Macdougall agrees. 'Don't write something you don't believe in. Don't try and shoehorn in characters, themes or ideas just for the sake of it – it will show.'

'Books should showcase the true reflection of communities around us,' says Bell Foster. 'Being Black British of Caribbean grandparents, I didn't see myself reflected anywhere in the books I read growing up. That's why I will always write at least one main character with a background similar to my own.'

'My daughter and her friends should be able to walk into a bookshop with the privilege of



Liam Livings

choice. Growing up, I had none.

'As the late, great Toni Morrison said, if there's a book you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.'

Macdougall cites Kit de Waal, Kerry Hudson, Nikesh Shukla, Bernadine Evaristo, CN Lester and Juno Dawson as 'just a few writers who are helping create an impact, a conversation and positive change'.

Naidoo also has a list of books that Hera has published, which feature currently under-represented characters, including *A Convenient Marriage* by Jeevani Charika and *Bollywood Wives* by Alex Khan, both with Sri Lankan characters, and LGBTQ+ romance *When You Were Mine* by Lisa Swift.

'Caroline and I write books with BAME and gay characters respectively,' says Livings. 'There are many other RNA members who write characters from traditionally under-represented groups.'

'The RNA has seen a steady growth of authors from all walks of life,' adds Bell Foster.

'Publishing can be a daunting place. You have to be thick-skinned and, let's not forget, most writers are introverts by nature. It takes a lot to put yourself out there – and even more so when you're from a minority group.'

With people like Naidoo, Macdougall, Livings and Bell Foster championing the cause, a true reflection of the diverse nature of all communities is surely not far off.



Laura Macdougall



Caroline Bell Foster