

# PUBLISHING NOW

Kathleen Whyman asks publishers how the recent calls for diversity are changing the industry

**G**eorge Floyd's tragic death last year ignited conversations about the lack of representation of people of colour in key positions, including those in publishing – whether as authors, agents, publishers or characters.

Tom Tivnan, managing editor of *The Bookseller*, says: 'I've never seen more titles from authors of a black, Asian or minority ethnic background on British publishers' lists. Partially this is publishers chasing the next *Girl, Woman, Other* or the next *Queenie*, but it also reflects the diversity discussions the industry, and wider world, have had.'

Keshini Naidoo, publishing director at Hera Books, agrees. 'There's definitely been a necessary seismic shift in publishing since the Black Lives Matter movement gained prominence. We see many more books by authors of colour in all genres, not just literary fiction – and own narratives, rather than books intended to encapsulate the experience of people of colour for a white audience.'

Leila Rasheed is director of Megaphone, a project that offers support for writers of colour in England as they work on their first novel for children or teenagers.

'There seems to be an increase in very high profile children's and YA books by black authors,' she says. 'We won't have statistics on whether this is a real increase or just an apparent one for some time. We've been here before – individuals and organisations have been arguing for diversity for decades

with very little attention being paid. It's so important for diversity not to be just a trend and for meaningful change to be sustained.'

This feeling is echoed by Ellen Gleeson, commissioning editor at Bookouture. 'It's crucial for books by BAME authors not to be seen as an "extra", something that publishers take on to tick a box and be trendy,' she says. 'We can't let diversity and representation of BAME authors become something that gets left behind when trends change.'

## Be confident

What advice do publishers have for authors?

'I don't think the burden is on authors to diversify publishing – that's the publishers' job,' says Leodora Darlington, commissioning editor at Canelo and founder of Owned Voices, an organisation that aims to bring more under-represented voices to mainstream publishing. 'I give authors of colour the same advice I give all authors, which is to write; keep writing and keep reading. When you're looking for representation, do your research and make sure it's the right home for you.'

Amy Durant, editorial director and co-founder of Sapere Books, urges authors to be confident to submit. 'BLM made us realise we can't be complacent about increasing diversity on our list,' she says. 'Although our submissions have always been open to all writers, writers of colour weren't submitting their novels. We've reached out to various writing societies, as well as putting out



Leila Rasheed of the Megaphone project

social media calls, and we're planning to shift our focus to signing up writers of colour as a priority in 2021.'

Bookouture's Gleeson says: 'We run specific call-outs for manuscripts by authors from underrepresented backgrounds, guaranteeing detailed feedback on every submission. It's a way of supporting writers on their journey to publication even if the manuscripts aren't quite right for us. We have the chance to give advice to authors and help shape the pitch and first chapters, which will hopefully stand them in good stead in their writing career.'

Bookouture is currently running a call-out in partnership with The Word, an organisation that promotes voices from underserved communities and diverse backgrounds, and has previously done the same with Dahlia Books/The Asian Writer, specifically for writers from BAME backgrounds.

'The plan is for these to be the first of many,' adds Gleeson.

Rasheed's advice is: 'Just keep writing! Find a group of supportive writing friends who are positive influences on your writing, and to whom you don't have to constantly explain or excuse your lived experience. Consider applying to the Developing Your Creative Practice fund, which gives emerging writers paid time to write, or to Megaphone, if you write for children or teenagers.

'Follow organisations that interest you on Twitter, or authors of colour whose books you enjoy. Opportunities tend to pop up there and I advise taking all the opportunities you can.'

'Agents and commissioning editors are crying out for your narratives,' adds Hera's Naidoo. 'This is your time – exploit it!'

• Kathleen's novel *Wife Support System* (Hera Books) is available in paperback, ebook and audiobook



Keshini Naidoo at Hera Books



Leodora Darlington at publisher Canelo