

PUBLISHING NOW

Last issue we looked at why inclusion is important. Here Kathleen Whyman asks how authors can implement this

Ensuring our characters accurately represent a diverse population is important. The word *accurately* is key here. If stereotypes creep into your work, it smacks of laziness at the very least, and could potentially be seen as offensive and prejudiced.

So if you're white, middle-aged, middle class, straight and able-bodied, how can you portray under-represented characters respectfully and honestly without causing offence?

'Do your research,' says Laura Macdougall, agent at United Agents. 'Read. Talk to people. Don't try to tick a box or satisfy a quota. Write with empathy.'

'Sensitivity readers are a useful tool to see whether your fiction is respectful and thoughtful of the issues facing marginalised people,' advises Keshini Naidoo, co-founder of Hera Books. 'But on a base level, talk to people within those communities, and be mindful of why you've chosen to include those characters and what they can bring to your narrative.'

'Research, first and foremost,' says Caroline Bell Foster, the Romantic Novelists' Association's diversity and inclusion officer. 'Don't rely on a simple search engine search. Join Facebook groups and forums, introduce yourself and ask questions. You'll find most people willing to share their culture and experiences.'

Liam Livings, also a RNA diversity and inclusion officer, agrees. 'There are many ways to "know" about a subject or identity that differs from your own. You can talk to people from that group. You can research online. You can ask for a sensitivity reader from that group to give views about your

portrayal of that character in your story.

'There's no guarantee you won't offend someone with what you write,' he warns. 'And there's no United Federation of Gay Men (or BAME women etc); if you ask a dozen gay men for an opinion about a portrayal of a gay man in fiction, you'll probably get a dozen different views. However, by ensuring your characters from backgrounds differing from your own are rounded, flawed, conflicted – just like those from a similar background to your own – you'll avoid stereotypes.'

'It's always better to ask questions and get it right than remain in ignorance and get it wrong,' Bell Foster adds. 'However, please be mindful – it's up to you, not anyone else, to educate yourself.'

Be the change

As well as having diverse characters in our novels, it's just as important that the people writing the books are not limited by race, colour, age, gender, sexuality, physical or mental ability or background.

'Be the change you want to see,' says Macdougall. 'Don't give up. And support those who are writing the books that make you feel represented.'

Livings suggests connecting with your nearest writing group.

'Submit your stories for awards,' he says. 'Talk about your writing with confidence. Your writing and you are just as valid as everyone else.'

'Nora Roberts blogged about the Romance Writers of America and pointed out that "writers" doesn't specify gender, sexuality, race, religion etc. The RNA applies it in a similar way: novelists come in all types.'

Naidoo agrees. 'We need our own voices in this industry,' she says. 'Your work and your story are important. If you feel that your book sits in the commercial fiction genre – whether crime fiction, romance or sagas – we at Hera would love to read it!'

Bell Foster was once asked to change the main character of a book from a mature black Rastafarian woman to a young white woman. She refused, published the book independently, and it became her first Amazon bestseller.

'Stay true to yourself and your characters,' she urges. 'It can be daunting but put yourself out there. The RNA has chapters [local groups] all around the country and is very supportive.'

She encourages the use of social media and hashtags,



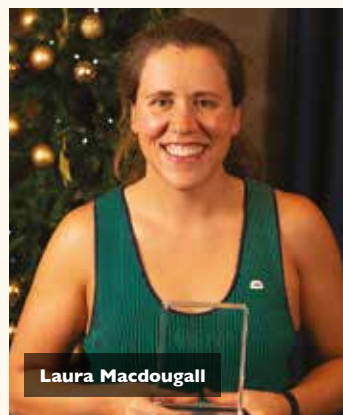
Keshini Naidoo

especially if your genre is niche.

'There are several websites that primarily showcase under-represented authors and novels with under-represented main characters,' she explains. 'We're living in exciting times, and the representation of all groups is finally being reflected within all aspects of fiction, TV and film. Information is at our fingertips.'

'It won't change overnight. This is a journey,' adds Livings. 'Most people are keen to understand more about people and characters from backgrounds different from their own. To educate and inform others, it's good to focus on the intent behind someone's questions to support their better understanding than any unintentionally clumsy language they may have used.'

'The process has been slow,' says Bell Foster. 'I've found publishing to be the last bastion, as it were, in the creative industry. The world is changing, and with it voices are finally being heard and their message noted. I'm hoping there will be a greater reflection of all communities for everyone to read.'



Laura Macdougall



Liam Livings



Caroline Bell Foster