

PUBLISHING NOW

Kathleen Whyman asks the publishers how the increase in diversity is changing the industry

Last issue I looked at how publishers are changing to ensure BAME authors are better represented. I also asked the experts what this means for both authors and the publishing industry itself.

Leila Rasheed, director of Megaphone, a project that offers support for writers of colour in England as they work on their first novel for children or young adults, says: 'We need more publishers, agencies, literacy organisations, booksellers and others to be led by black, Asian and other British people of colour. That will create real, systemic change.'

Keshini Naidoo, co-founder and publishing director at Hera Books, agrees. 'It does feel that we need more people of colour in other departments as well as commissioning – art designers, marketers – so that we have people who understand the audience for a book from the ground up and know how to sell the books being commissioned.'

Leodora Darlington, commissioning editor at Canelo, also encourages publishers to think about how to retain that new talent.

'Publishers need to consider how to make people feel comfortable and safe in an environment where they're by far in the minority,' she says. 'As *Spread the Word's Writing the Future* report shows, we continue to see writers or publishing hopefuls from under-represented backgrounds entering the industry then leaving as it doesn't feel like a welcoming place. If publishers consider how to make their environments feel more

inclusive as well as diverse, this should help.'

Ellen Gleeson, commissioning editor at Bookouture, says publishing has been 'woeful' at diversity in recruitment.

'Low or no-wage internships and rampant nepotism are thankfully becoming things of the past, at least at bigger publishers, but publishing needs to do more to attract and retain staff outside of the white middle-class bubble. In 2019 a Publishers Association survey found that 13 per cent of the publishing workforce identified as BAME. Considering it's such a London-centric industry, and the BAME population of London is around 40 per cent, there's definitely a way to go.'

Author spotlight

Hera's Naidoo says there also needs to be a focus on under-represented authors.

'The work that's being undertaken to increase representation in the industry, for staff and the publishing output, is fantastic and sorely needed,' she says. 'However, we also need to look at the sales of comparable authors writing in those same genres and ensure that we don't marginalise our authors of colour, or treat their work as a box-ticking exercise in increasing "diverse" output.'

Bookouture's Gleeson says: 'Carefully studying and following the recommendations of the 2020 *Re:thinking "Diversity" in Publishing* report (also from *Spread the Word*) is a great place to start: rethinking who publishers perceive to be their key audiences; believing



Leodora Darlington
at publisher Canelo

in the economic value of diversity; and stopping viewing authors of colour as "risky" investments. This will mean different things for different publishers, but it's so important to consider how the steps can be integrated into publishers' existing processes, and to ask if processes need to be changed completely to dismantle the structural racism we know is at play within publishing.'

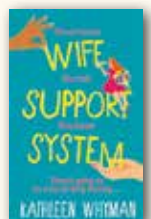
Darlington is the founder of Owned Voices, an organisation focused on nurturing the talent of writers from typically under-represented backgrounds (eg BAME, LGBTQ+, working class or with disabilities). 'We run workshops to develop participants professionally and creatively as writers,' she says. 'And we've just held the Owned Voices Novel Award, which offers winners editorial feedback on their manuscripts, advice from industry experts on how to find representation, some one-to-one mentoring, and a small cash prize. It's great to see things like this happening.'

Rasheed notes that when Megaphone started in 2015 very little was being done.

'Since then, publishers have paid attention and diversity schemes have popped up everywhere,' she says. 'The ones I think will be most effective and meaningful are those led by people of colour – Knights Of and Round Table Books, for example – or those that give us information to understand the problems and craft solutions, such as BookTrust Represents, CLPE's Reflecting Realities research projects and *Spread the Word's* reports.'

'There are so many organisations working to increase representation in publishing,' says Gleeson. 'Publishers need to link up with them and funnel manuscripts to their submissions piles and acquisitions meetings.'

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



Leila Rasheed of the
Megaphone project



Ellen Gleeson
at Bookouture