

## **What needs to happen to create 'mainstreaming' and greater choice of books?**

Margaret Busby

Last year's publication of *New Daughters of Africa* (Myriad Editions, 2019) was an extraordinary opportunity for me to reflect on my more than half a century engagement with the British publishing industry. I had edited its predecessor, *Daughters of Africa*, in 1992, motivated by the need to remedy the exclusion of women of African descent from the literary canon. Yet here I was, embarking on that journey again. Not that everything had remained the same for 30 years. Indeed, a number of initiatives aimed at black writers and writers of colour have recently appeared and continue to gain traction. These include competitions such as the Jhalak Prize and the SI Leeds Literary Prize, as well as the pledge by Jacaranda – a publishing house headed by a black woman – to publish 20 writers of colour in 2020. Such important and significant developments are much welcomed. But how do they impact on the traditional profile of the publishing industry? What difference or differences will they make in the long run?

On a personal level, I can't escape (without retrospectively changing facts) the label often attached to me: at the time, Britain's youngest publisher and first black African woman book publisher. Yet, while growing used to being called a trailblazer, I never willingly accept being 'the only' in any situation and have no wish to stand out in that way, despite this still being the case at many a publishing function. Rewind two decades: imagine my relief and joy at a

Penguin Books party to spot another black woman, who wasn't serving canapés and turned out to be Allah Wakatama Allfrey, then an assistant editor, with whom I would bond and develop a lasting work and real-life friendship, offering a sympathetic ear when needed as she navigated her way upwards through prestigious positions in the industry. In a recent discussion she commented: 'It's been hugely encouraging to see the various attempts, over the last three years especially, at sustainability in diversity initiatives. It's crucial that young people who come from outside the usual (white, upper/middle-class, urban) pool of publishing recruits are provided with constant support. There's a lot to be learned from established organisations such as National Centre for Writing and Spread the Word that have decades of experience in this regard. At the same time, I'm very keen that we avoid ghettoising these diversity initiatives - we do need action that affirms diversity, but the goal has to be injecting the excellence afforded by that diversity into the mainstream, rather than isolating it in *specialist* initiatives.'

While changes in the make-up of companies may affect the industry's long-term profile, we are still at the stage where individuals grapple with being 'the first' or 'only' representing particular demographics. So how does it feel to *be* that diversity injected into the mainstream? In 2018, Sharmaine Lovegrove of Hachette's Dialogue Books recalled: 'During my first six months as a publisher I cried every day, as it was so hard to be the only black woman in my division and for my race to be so defining of my work. I felt ashamed at the continual requests to be on diversity panels and hated the feeling that my presence made people think we had made progress. [...] The publishing industry has utterly failed to tell the stories of people across society, having told talented, diverse writers for decades that there was no space for them, and expecting a largely white, predominantly middle-class staff to be pardoned for not "being woke enough" because of their "privilege", which only now seems to embarrass them.'

Specific initiatives meant to benefit minority groups can also be fraught with unintended hazard. For example, rife use of the terms BAME and 'diversity' (sometimes the giveaway that there is no BAME presence in the meeting room) can shroud the mechanical way in which (some) people allude to inclusiveness yet actually do little, if anything, about it. I've even heard of an event where a publisher in a presentation referred to 'normal' books and 'diverse' books.

The truth is, the best laid plans can go awry, and there are historical lessons to be learned. In 1988, Fiona Pitt-Kethley took legal action against the Arts Council of Great Britain on the grounds that it had discriminated against her as a white applicant for a literature bursary in 1986/87 since, on that occasion, the bursaries were specifically for writers of Afro-Caribbean or Asian origin. Similarly, the Decibel Penguin Prize, launched in 2005 to promote culturally diverse literatures and showcase the work of talented writers from culturally diverse backgrounds, was criticised (by some) as a patronising and condescending form of positive discrimination, and also ran into difficulties with the Commission for Racial Equality, which judged it to be in breach of Section 29 of the Race Relations Act. As a result, the ethnic entry requirements were abandoned in favour of a focus on 'personal stories of immigrants to the UK.'

Just as questions still arise about the continued necessity for a Women's Prize for Fiction, so too justification may be sought for a twenty-first-century compilation devoted to the literary creativity of women of African descent, given that so many more of them are in print since the original *Daughters of Africa* in 1992. In the course of promoting this 2019 anthology, on panels at festivals across the UK, I have learned a few sad truths (making more poignant the generosity of sisterhood that, through waived fees, has enabled a SOAS scholarship for an African woman). One contributor told me that this was the

first opportunity she'd had to work with a black editor. Another reported that an expected feature on her had been postponed by a national newspaper because, according to them, they had too recently featured another black Muslim woman. There are many such stories. What we learn from them is that a myriad of obstacles and gatekeepers still exist, waiting to be navigated and overcome.

Of course, access to publishing (whether or not through targeted programmes) and access to audience (i.e. writers being nurtured and effectively promoted to a broad audience) are different things. It is entirely possible to be published (including self-publishing) yet still be marginalised. A mainstream publisher may even publish the work of a writer of colour simply to fulfil a 'quota' (formal or not) or to ease their reputation. Such things are conceivable.

There is also the issue of who and what is published in the 'mainstream': which writers (e.g. Oxbridge graduates are often viewed favourably), and which stories (e.g. those that follow trends or reinforce existing stereotypes).

Then we have the question of who chooses what is to be published. Who are the agents, editors and taste-makers? There are conflicts and contradictions in how writers are edited and nurtured. Who decides on whether, where and by whom books will be reviewed or promoted – including literary editors and booksellers. How do perceptions of 'readership/audience' impact on what is taken on? That includes the insidious idea that black authors write for a black audience who don't buy books, or the myth that white readers do not read black writers – something definitively contradicted by Andrea Levy's sales figures. From my own experience, I note that colour-coded reviewing is a thing. Being black seems to be considered my expertise; the couple of times I've been asked to review a white writer is when their subject-matter is 'black'.

Well, what are we up against? First of all, the facts, which are so glaringly obvious that it is a complete mystery why anyone is surprised by the findings of surveys like those by Danuta Kean, author of *In Full Colour: Cultural Diversity in Book Publishing Today* (published by the Bookseller and Arts Council England in 2004), and editor of *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Authors and Publishers in the UK Market Place* (published by Spread the Word in 2015), or the Arts Council England report *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case – A data report 2012-2015*. Eleven years passed between the publication of *In Full Colour* and *Writing the Future* and yet when Danuta Kean revisited the position of black and Asian writers and publishers in the UK in 2015, she found that little had changed for the better. In fact, the publishing world was reported as less diverse than ever.

Secondly, the experience, where content is driven by background and cultural knowledge, as the late and much lamented Binyavanga Wainaina cleverly satirised in his 2005 essay 'How To Write About Africa'. Ghanaian-Scottish Lesley Lokko's piece in *New Daughters of Africa*, entitled 'No more than three, please!', discusses her journey towards writing blockbusters (and bonkbusters). She says:

In Spring 2004, my first novel, *Sundowners*, was published and went on to sell 100,000 copies in thirteen languages. Of the many conversations between author, agent, editor and marketing director, one in particular stands out. It went something like this:

"Er, the thing is...we don't want to be *too* prominent about it."

"About what?"

"Well, who *you* are."

"How so?"

"Well, what we *don't* want is to wind up putting you in the Black Interest section."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Three hundred copies sold if you're lucky."

"So, what do you propose?"

"Let's play it down. The whole 'race' thing."

Lokko references Wainaina's frustration with the 'narrow bandwidth of tropes defining the African literary landscape' that led him to turn each cliché on its head. Later in the piece, Lokko writes of an uncomfortable conversation with her publisher:

"It's not personal, of course... / wouldn't mind... but you're going to have to limit the number. The characters... We've had a little chat and... well, we think the best thing is to put a limit on it."

"Limit on what?"

"Africans. The African characters. There's just too many. It's hard for your readers to... connect. So, what we thought is, we'd keep to three. No more than three, please."

This chimes well with the title of an end-of-year article in the online African literature site *Brittle Paper*: 'Is There a Quota of 5 Books by African Authors for Every 'Best 100 Books of 2019' List?'

So, what needs to happen to create 'mainstreaming' and greater choice of books, which is actually better for everyone?

Vimbai Shire is a publishing professional and editor of African descent whose views I recently canvassed. She has more than 20 years' industry experience, and acknowledges: 'It's certainly frustrating that the industry is still overwhelmingly white and middle class - but publishers have acknowledged this imbalance and there are encouraging signs of change.'

She took the time to tell me of a new project she is currently part of: a government-approved publishing apprenticeship – the first of its kind in the UK – created in partnership with the Publishers’ Association and a consortium of industry professionals to provide an alternative route into the industry. This 13-month-long programme is run by South London-based education provider LDN Apprenticeships, and aims to equip the young apprentices with the broad range of knowledge and skills required to meet the standard of a Publishing Assistant. Vimbai will deliver the programme and teach and mentor the apprentices as they begin their publishing careers. She says:

Publishing is a highly competitive industry and it’s notoriously difficult just getting a foot in the door.... Apprenticeships are a great entry into a publishing career as they enable young learners to receive on-the-job experience as paid employees alongside off-the-job training through real-world project work, workshops and masterclasses, at the end of which they’ll gain a recognised qualification, and in many cases, a permanent job offer. The apprenticeships are also a great way to encourage diversity from the ground up.

Vimbai explains:

My own publishing career did not follow a linear path and along the way I encountered my fair share of closed doors as I sought to forge a path for myself in an industry I still feel so passionate about but which at times could feel remote and out of reach. However, I was also extremely fortunate to work with some incredible people early in my career, and I’ve been looking for a way to pass on my knowledge and experience to others ever since. As the industry seeks to make good on its pledges towards inclusivity and diversity there could not be a better time for young people of colour to pursue careers in a variety of roles – from editorial to sales and marketing, artworking and production.

This is an immensely encouraging initiative, and I wish it well in gradually changing the profile of those working in publishing. Katherine Cowdrey raised the issue of 'unconscious bias' in the hiring process in publishing, in an article for *the Bookseller* in 2016. It will be fascinating to see what useful fruit is born from this. A model of success is demonstrated by the fact that new star Candice Carty-Williams (author of bestselling novel *Queenie*, 2019) found employment at the HarperCollins imprint 4<sup>th</sup> Estate in 2014 thanks to an internship, and while there created the *Guardian* and 4th Estate BAME Short Story Prize that aims to offer help towards publishing or literary agent representation. Kudos to her for starting in January 2020 a weekly column in *The Guardian*.

Progress towards positive change is, however, a two-way street and the deficiencies of the mainstream can be the making of autonomous Black publishers. Verna Wilkins, who founded Tamarind Books (now part of Random House) in 1987, was driven by the dearth of books featuring children of colour to set up a company to write and publish a range of books with children of colour as the main protagonists. As she told me in 2016, after yet another approach for comment about the industry's lack of diversity, her route to achieve her goal was to bypass the usual gatekeepers:

We ignored the false belief that books with black characters traditionally did not sell; we sold successfully, not in bookshops or other orthodox venues, but in Black Hair and Beauty shows, at churches, large city schools and places frequented by people of colour. Parents were keen indeed to purchase books that gave a high, positive profile to children of colour.

Black-led UK publishers have long forged their own effective paths of influence. They include New Beacon Books, Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, Hansib Books, Karnak House, Karia Press, Black Ink, and Black Woman Talk.



Among other ventures dedicated to impacting on literary output are *Wasafiri* magazine, championing international literatures for more than 30 years, and now the Jhalak Prize and the SI Leeds Literary Prize for unpublished fiction by Black and Asian women, uncovering what is being written before it even reaches the gatekeepers.

Susheila Nasta, founding editor of *Wasafiri* and editor of the anthology *Brave New Words* (Myriad Editions, 2019) celebrating 35 years of the magazine, recalls in her Introduction the cultural politics of the 1980s, when 'writers who were not immediately identifiable to reviewers through the comforting lens of a Euro-American aesthetic were often perceived to be off-centre by the arbiters of literary taste. This gatekeeping reverberated across all aspects of the industry from publishers to the writers themselves.' She identifies with Caryl Phillips recalling his schooldays experience of never being offered a text penned by a black person, about which he says: 'If the teaching of English literature can feed a sense of identity, then I, like many of my...contemporaries...was starving.'

Arguably, things have improved. Yet the need to 'decolonise the curriculum' is still acutely felt. Publishing may no longer be synonymous with being 'an occupation for gentlemen' (as famously characterised by the publisher Fredric Warburg), but lack of diversity within the industry has not gone away. I testify from the freakish position of having been a 'black girl' on the British publishing scene since the late 1960s. And since co-founding an initiative called GAP (Greater Access to Publishing) in the 1980s, I have seen the pursuit of diversity become almost a career path for some; organisations emerge, or morph, yet the status quo remains. The UK book trade still has a long way to go in terms of being inclusive of gender, class, ethnicity and all the diverse shapes and orientations in which talent is packaged. But everyone stands to benefit from the necessary change. As Toni Morrison said in the course of my 1988

interview with her, a time before she was universally lauded (hard to conceive now but that interview, filmed by Sindamani Bridglal, came about as the result of Toni being considered not well enough known by the mainstream): 'It's not patronage, not affirmative action we're talking about here, we're talking about the life of a country's literature.'

It is a matter of urgency that the entire industry understands what is at stake. Tokenism is not enough, nor adding a few more flavour-of-the-month writers of colour onto mainstream lists. Bernardine Evaristo's essay in *Brave New Words* welcomes changes in the industry that have seen the successful publication in recent years particularly of non-fiction works, including by David Olusoga (*Black and British*, 2016), Reni Eddo-Lodge (*Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, 2017), Afua Hirsch (*Brit-ish*, 2018), Akala (*Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Europe*, 2018), Yomi Adegoke and Elizabeth Uviebinené (*Slay In Your Lane: The Black Girls' Bible*, 2016), Emma Dabiri (*Don't Touch My Hair*, 2019) and Derek Owusu (*Safe: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space*). Having for decades been at the forefront of campaigns to challenge the status quo and improve access to the publishing and arts industry for people of colour, Evaristo appreciates what there is to celebrate, while realising 'that the future won't look after itself. We cannot take any developments for granted and believe that society will become more progressively inclusive without our ongoing intervention.'

It is about whose perspectives play out in every meeting, who is in the room at all. Personally, I am wearied by having to talk about diversity year in, year out, a feeling perhaps shared by others perennially called upon for an opinion because of our rarity value, our usefulness in representing the industry's almost missing demographic. Allah Wakatama Allfrey, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Sharmaine Lovegrove, Verna Wilkins, Elise Dillsworth, Natalie Jerome, Valerie Brandes... The usual suspects should not always be expected to provide the

solutions; in a *Guardian* feature five years ago, I quoted black Oscar nominee Marianne Jean-Baptiste, on being asked why she hadn't been getting parts in Britain: 'I can't tell you why I've not been invited to a party. You need to go to the host and say, Why didn't you invite her?'

These conversations about diversity and inclusivity are unlikely to be comfortable ones, whether concerning ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, or physical ability. We cannot say 'something must be done' and then leave it to others to fix. Every person in the industry has a duty to make it work better and more fairly. If we do not, who will?

### **Margaret Busby**

Margaret Busby, OBE, Hon. FRSL, was born in Ghana. On graduating from London University, she became Britain's (at the time) youngest and first black woman publisher when she co-founded Allison and Busby. As editorial director, she presided over an international list that included Buchi Emecheta, Nuruddin Farah, Rosa Guy, C. L. R. James, Michael Moorcock and Jill Murphy. Margaret has written drama for BBC radio and the stage, her abridgements and dramatizations including work by Henry Louis Gates, Timothy Mo, Walter Mosley, Jean Rhys, Sam Selvon and Wole Soyinka. Her high-profile interviewees include Toni Morrison, Nawal El Saadawi and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Margaret Busby edited the pioneering anthology *Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent* (1992) and its 2019 sequel *New Daughters of Africa*. She has judged many literary prizes and was the Chair of judges for the 2020 Booker Prize.

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](https://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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