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Why Publishing Is So White

A deep dive into hiring practices across the industry shows that publishers care about diversity, but many haven't taken effective steps to bring about lasting change

By Rachel Deahl, with reporting from Anisse Gross, Claire Kirch, Diane Patrick, and Judith Rosen | Mar 11, 2016



A hostile work climate, low pay, a lack of interest in the field from minority candidates: these were some of the reasons publishing professionals gave for the industry's overwhelming whiteness in 1994, as reported in a story *Publishers Weekly* ran that year called "Houses with No Doors." At the time, the industry was grappling with data from the Census Bureau showing that the country's population was becoming increasingly nonwhite. During that year's AAP annual meeting, Harold Hodgkinson, from the Center for Demographic Policy of the Institute for Educational Leadership, asked how a business dominated by "old, white, rich people" could "develop new markets."

Flash forward more than 20 years and this business has unquestionably changed. It's not quite so rich, or old—but it remains very white. This fact was highlighted in the results from PW's most recent annual salary survey, published in October 2015, in which 89% of respondents identified themselves as white. (The survey was sent to 5,800 *PW* subscribers, and though it focused on earnings in the industry, it yielded demographic details about the more than 400 respondents.) In January, Jason Low at children's publisher Lee & Low Books released the "Diversity Baseline Survey," a more detailed report about the demographic makeup of publishing's workforce. Though Low's survey goes well beyond race—it breaks down the workforce in a variety of ways, including by gender, sexual orientation, and disability—it highlighted the lack of racial diversity in book publishing, indicating that the industry is 79% white. It also put the industry in the crosshairs of the media. Following the survey, a number of outlets cited the results in stories blasting the business for its lack of diversity.

Why has publishing made so little progress in its efforts to diversify, particularly racially? Looking for answers, PW talked with more than 40 publishing professionals (many of whom would only speak candidly off the record), including human resources executives at four of the Big Five houses. We discovered that

unconscious bias is an issue in publishing, as it is in most industries. Despite this, many in publishing still believe lasting change is possible. It can only happen, though, when the biggest publishers make diversity hiring a firm internal policy instead of a vague public commitment.

Almost everyone *PW* spoke with acknowledged that the industry is not as diverse as it should be, but some questioned the validity of the results of the Lee & Low survey. One Big Five HR exec said she felt her company was “comfortably ahead” of the numbers laid out there. Nonetheless, her house declined to offer details to back up this claim.

Another Big Five exec called coverage of the industry’s lack of diversity one-sided and unfair, claiming it has largely focused on what has not happened as opposed to what has. An HR exec at the same publisher said “this kind of press doesn’t help the industry,” adding that at recruitment events, she now receives questions about whether book publishers really want to hire diverse candidates.

So how does publishing compare to other industries on this front? Not too bad, actually. Which is to say, it’s doing just as poor a job of diversifying its workforce as most of corporate America. As one Big Five HR exec put it: “I have friends who work in HR in various industries, and we’ve all been sitting in the same diversity meetings for the last 20 years without seeing real progress.”

Some sources noted that when they look at the makeup of the publishing industry, they see some positive things—namely that it has a good track record on hiring and promoting women. Given some of the recent scandals that have rocked the technology industry and Hollywood—last year Ellen Pao mounted a discrimination lawsuit against former employer Reddit that put a spotlight on sexism in Silicon Valley, while the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission began an investigation into potentially sexist hiring practices in the movie business—sources we spoke with touted the fact that publishing is not only friendly to women, it’s dominated by them. (The “Diversity Baseline Survey” indicated that white cis women—i.e., women who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth—account for 82% of those working on the editorial side of book publishing. Although this stat points to another way in which the industry is homogenous, some have held up this figure as a positive.)

John Skrentny, a sociologist at UC San Diego and the author of *After Civil Rights: Racial Realism in the New American Workplace* (Princeton Univ., 2015), suggested that it is important to look at broader data when considering why book publishing has such a high concentration of white faces in its ranks. Most jobs in publishing houses require college degrees and, as he noted, recent census data shows 73% of Americans with college degrees are white. Looking at the situation through this lens, the roots of the problem can be seen to extend well beyond the publishing industry itself.

Nonetheless, big trade publishers have not always followed the lead of large companies in other industries when it comes to diversity. Recently, some major tech companies released statistics about the diversity of their employees. A January story in *Bloomberg Businessweek* titled, “Why Doesn’t Silicon Valley Hire Black Coders?,” mentions how the major technology firms were nudged into making this information public. Called out in the press for being too white, Google, Facebook, and other big tech companies released demographic information about their workforces, letting the world know that African-Americans made up no more than 1% of employees at their firms.

While the publishing industry does have Low's survey, it is not known how the biggest publishers are performing individually when it comes to diversity hiring. The Big Five have never released information about their workforce demographics, and all declined to do so for this story. Furthermore, only three of the Big Five—Hachette, Macmillan, and Penguin Random House—participated in the "Diversity Baseline Survey."

One Big Five exec went so far as to insinuate that there could be legal repercussions if his house released demographic data on its employees. But the numbers only pose a threat on the public relations front. And that, of course, is the point: making this kind of information public can generate negative press and, in so doing, force change. This is not how some see it, though. An HR exec at the same publishing house said a company only opens itself up to "ridicule" by making these numbers public, because the results will "never be good enough."

Skrentny, who has studied bias and diversity in fields such as journalism and film, said that there is some precedent for industries pushing for measurable improvements in diversity hiring. The newspaper business, which he discusses in his book, was widely criticized for its lack of diversity in the 1970s, when it came to light that newsrooms were overwhelmingly staffed by white journalists. The numbers raised concerns about the media's ability to portray minorities fairly and accurately in coverage. In response, he explained, the American Society of News Editors created a minority committee in 1978. The committee pledged that, by 2000, the staff of newsrooms would reflect the racial makeup of the country as a whole. In 1998, ASNE publicly stated that it had fallen short of its goal and would aim, instead, to hit its target by 2025.

Of course, ASNE is not a company; as a trade organization, it's not directly involved in the hiring decisions of its members. Although individual companies face a different set of challenges in implementing diversity hiring commitments, several of the people we talked with pointed to strategies that could overcome those obstacles.

Today, it can be tricky for corporations to implement affirmative action programs. Hiring quotas, for example, are legally risky. Skrentny explained that quotas can be used in "damaging ways" in litigation. A company can come under fire for failing to reach a quota, or for allowing one to inform its hiring decisions. In the latter situation, Skrentny noted, the worry is that a rejected candidate could claim in a suit that "you didn't hire me, a white guy, because of these minority targets."

One alternative, according to a Big Five HR exec, is for companies to create internal targets around diversity hiring. Acknowledging that people "get very nervous talking about quotas," she said a company can instead "set internal targets it aspires to hit." To implement these targets, she thinks big publishers should rely on their key executives to see to it that the hiring plan is "enforceable." Employees can even be incentivized to hit certain goals with things like bonuses.

"Human resources can't do this in a vacuum," the HR exec said, adding that it can be particularly difficult to bring up the issue of diversity to executives who are successfully overseeing their corners of the business. "They'll say, 'Everything is running smoothly, so why are you telling me diversity is a problem?'" Others, she said, who claim to care about the issue, can be easily distracted. "You can have someone say all day long that he's really committed to [making his company more diverse], and maybe he is, but when the real

world creeps in, it's another story.... That person doesn't want to fight with a publisher who wants to hire his godson." Ultimately, she said, without being held to a plan, people find it too easy to ask why they are being "bothered" about the issue.

To be fair, the industry has established myriad programs that aim to address diversity. The Association of American Publishers (AAP) has long championed the issue, spearheading a number of efforts over the years. Marisa Bluestone, AAP's director of communications, said the group has been working to make diversity "a priority" for publishers, helping them take measures such as establishing diversity councils and revising their "corporate vision statements" to include diversity. On the recruitment front, AAP has been facilitating programs with a wide range of multicultural organizations, including 1vyG (which represents more than 400 college students who are first in their families to attend Ivy League or top-tier schools), the United Negro College Fund, the campus group Latinos in Publishing, and the Asian American Writers' Workshop.

Another very visible force lobbying for diversity in the industry is the relatively new organization We Need Diverse Books. The group takes its name from a rallying cry (and hashtag) created by a handful of authors on Twitter in 2014; last year, WNDB was established as a nonprofit. Although WNDB focuses more on the books houses publish than the people they hire, it did recently create an internship program that caters to candidates from "diverse backgrounds." (In 2015, the internship's inaugural year, it placed five interns, at Hachette, HarperCollins, Lee & Low, Macmillan, and Simon & Schuster.)

In addition to these industrywide initiatives, each of the Big Five has its own diversity programs. Hachette has, among other efforts, a diversity committee (founded in 2013) to improve its hiring and retention of diverse candidates; the publisher also said 50% of its intern pool, at a minimum, is made up of candidates who identify themselves as "diverse." Simon & Schuster, which also has a number of programs on this front, noted that its 2015 internship class "ranged from 66% to 80% diverse." HarperCollins lists its commitment to literacy among its efforts on the diversity front, citing ties to groups ranging from First Book to the Parent-Child Home Program (a home-based literacy program that targets low-income families). Penguin Random House, among other things, supports a writing contest for students at "economically and ethnically diverse" New York City high schools.

At Macmillan a diversity and inclusion council was established last year, the company said, to promote a "broader representation of differences" that seeks to address workplace issues surrounding "gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, age, gender identity and expression, family status, economic background and status, and geographical background."

But when pressed about programs focused specifically on diversity hiring, some Big Five members could only cite a paid internship program established in January, in partnership with the AAP and the United Negro College Fund. So while there's little question that many of the programs the Big Five have established aim to address the lack of diversity in the industry, it remains difficult to gauge how effective they are.

The power of strong internal mandates to improve diversity hiring is exemplified by the progress on the issue at some independent publishers. New York City-based New Press, which is behind one of the longest-running diversity-driven internship programs in the industry, has seen significant results from its outreach efforts. In addition to its internship program, which got off the ground in the mid-1990s and has graduated 249 people to date, the publisher has also stuck to a hard commitment to ensure its own staff is diverse. Marc Favreau, editorial director at the publisher, said New Press employs 24 people, and anywhere from one-third to half of the employees are people of color.

At Boston-based Beacon Press, director Helene Atwan said recently ramped-up efforts focused on diversity hiring have resulted in the publisher retaining a staff of which 30% are people of color. (Beacon employs 33 people.) And Lee & Low said, in reporting the “Diversity Baseline Survey” results, that 69% of its staff identify as people of color.

Of course, for small houses such as Beacon, Lee & Low, and the New Press, single hires can have a significant impact on workforce diversity. That’s not the case for the Big Five.

The same Big Five HR exec who championed establishing internal targets to improve workforce diversity said that large publishers are unable to replicate the hiring practices of industries that are known for being more diverse, such as consulting, finance, and insurance. “Companies [in those industries] can go into a graduating class at an HBCU [historically black colleges and universities] and hire 50 new associates,” she explained. “In publishing, we hire one person at a time.”

The fact that hiring decisions at both big and small publishers are put in the hands of individual managers seems to have left the industry at large in its current state: very white.

Philip Nel, who teaches at Kansas State University and is the author of the forthcoming book *Was the Cat in the Hat Black? The Hidden Racism in Children’s Literature, and Why We Need Diverse Books* (Oxford Univ., late 2016), said we sometimes forget that racism is “systemic, resilient, and often goes unnoticed by whites—who, of course, hold nearly all the positions of power in publishing.” It’s therefore wishful thinking to believe that systemic racism doesn’t come into play in book publishers’ hiring decisions.

Nel said there are studies showing that hiring managers, when presented with two identical résumés featuring different names, regularly chose the candidate with the more “Anglo” name. Nel believes that in order to diversify the publishing industry, it’s essential to change the mind-set of those who work in publishing. “Internal education in the industry would probably be helpful,” he said, so people learn that “being nice and being racist are not mutually exclusive.” He then added, “You don’t have to be Donald Trump to act in ways that uphold racist structures of power.”

All the HR execs and most of the white industry members who spoke to us for this story firmly dismissed the idea that structural racism is to blame for the fact that publishing employs so few people of color. Many of the white industry members instead cited low starting salaries as a significant reason for the lack of diversity. As one white editor at a midsize press explained, because publishing jobs are “not well paid,” the industry is unfortunately “self-selecting for people who don’t necessarily need to live on a salary alone.”

Other sources questioned this idea. Favreau, at the New Press, said no one at his house, which is more diverse than most, “comes from wealth.” Chris Jackson, who works at Penguin Random House imprint Spiegel & Grau and is one of the most distinguished black editors in the industry, also took issue with this premise. “I grew up in Harlem,” Jackson said. “When I got into publishing, I had no money.... But I believed in the power of books to shape the culture. This is what I’ve discovered when I’ve met with people to hire. They don’t mind the salary. They want to do the work.”

David Unger, director of the City College of New York’s Publishing Certificate Program, said his students have no problem with the salaries in publishing. The 17-year-old program caters to a diverse population of undergraduates, often from lower-income backgrounds, and a starting salary of \$32,000 can be, Unger noted, quite attractive to these young people. For him, the problems lie in finding hiring managers who will take a chance on his students.

The program, Unger estimated, has graduated 300 students to date, about half of whom have gone on to work in publishing. Of those 150, Unger said 49 are still working in the industry.

The Columbia Publishing Course, a popular postgrad feeder program for publishing companies and other businesses in the industry, has a much better placement rate. It is notably bigger, graduating 110 students annually, but is also more of a go-to option for hiring managers. According to program director Shaye Areheart, 92% of the class of 2014 landed full-time jobs in publishing. Columbia also caters to a wealthier student population than CUNY. The six-week program has a tuition of \$5,300, which doesn't include housing in New York City, or meals. Areheart estimated that roughly 15% of the class is made up of people of color.

NYU also offers popular postgrad publishing programs for hiring managers in the industry. It houses a masters in publishing and its Summer Publishing Institute. The masters program, which graduates 40–50 students annually, is a 42-credit course in which 10-12 credits per semester cost just under \$19,000 (excluding housing). The summer publishing program is six weeks and costs \$5,500 (excluding housing). NYU also boasts notably higher placement rates than CUNY. Andrea L. Chambers, the programs' director, said a survey of recent alumni of the masters program showed that 81% who had indicated an interest in book publishing are now working in the industry. She said 65% of the 2015 Summer Publishing Institute graduates are now working, or interning, in book publishing. NYU does not track the ethnicity of students in its summer program, but Chambers said that 38% of recent graduates from the masters program identified as nonwhite.

Unger believes that unconscious bias and structural racism aren't the biggest problems his students face; he feels CUNY's graduates are at a disadvantage in an industry in which class can be a factor in hiring decisions. "We have a lot of very talented students who graduate every year with five courses under their belt, and it's hard to get them in the door," he said.

Unger's colleague Retha Powers, who serves as assistant director of the CUNY program, was more blunt in her assessment of the situation: "I've heard the word *pedigree* used many times. There's this assumption that a student who comes from NYU—who is more likely white—is going to be better suited for the publishing industry than our students, who have incredibly diverse backgrounds, racially, culturally, and also in terms of class." She went on: "I think it's odd that a student who is the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, interned at ABC and MTV, and is Phi Beta Kappa doesn't even get a call back for an interview. On paper that's a student who stands out, but what's missing is that the student has a very [racially] identifiable last name and goes to City College as opposed to NYU."

Powers acknowledged that the CUNY program receives support from a number of publishers, some of which offer stipends to students taking on unpaid internships. Nonetheless, she feels the industry doesn't practice what it preaches when it comes to hiring. While she does not expect publishers to "blindly place someone in a position because they're a person of color," she believes houses remain fixated on qualities that put CUNY students at a disadvantage.

"[We have] students... who are amazing on paper, and they aren't even talking to them," Powers said. "There has to be a change in the business as usual. I don't want to hear again, 'Sorry, they really want someone from NYU or the Ivys.'"

A few sources said that some in the industry, especially at the New York City publishers, lean too heavily on Columbia and NYU for job candidates. Amy Hundley, a senior editor at Grove Atlantic, said looking to these programs for entry-level employees is often “the path of least resistance in terms of needing to fill a position.” She readily acknowledges, though, the downsides of this approach. “I don’t think it’s an intentional thing to disqualify other candidates, and I personally try to cast a wider net when hiring, because it has unintended consequences to do otherwise.”

Many of the Big Five HR execs blanched at the notion that CUNY students are not given a fair shake, and all vehemently dismissed the notion that class or race is ever a factor in hiring decisions. As one Big Five HR exec complained: “It’s not about socioeconomic. It’s as if it doesn’t count if we hire someone black who went to Skidmore.”

So how does the industry move forward and do better? Right now, publishing seems to be struggling with the difference between words and actions. Take, for example, a situation a publisher at a reputable Midwestern press recounted. Claiming he is “always trying to diversify our staff,” he brought up a recent editorial assistant search that initially yielded 250 applicants. The press narrowed its options down to eight finalists, five of whom were white and three of whom were people of color. Although all the finalists were “excellent” in his estimation, the position went to a white woman. The reason? “There’s no room for tokenism at [our press].”

Correction: An earlier version of this story referred to Lee & Low Publisher Jason Low as Jason Lee. Additionally, the story has been updated to reflect the cost of the NYU masters in publishing and the correct spelling of author Philip Nel's last name.

This article appeared in the 03/14/2016 issue of *Publishers Weekly* under the headline: Why Publishing Is So White

5 Comments

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Justina Ireland · Hamline University

So, you wrote an article on systemic racism within publishing and got your single quote on systemic racism not from We Need Diverse Books or Jason Low, people doing the work to improve representation within publishing, but from a white dude who has his own checkered past with racial insensitivity ([http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/...](http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/)).

Yet we wonder why people of color don't really see jobs within publishing as a real option?

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Jerry Craft · Syndicated cartoonist / Children's book author & illustrator at Mama's Boyz by Jerry Craft

As someone who has been publishing children's books for nearly 20 years, many African American creators still face the same obstacles that we've always faced. No

African-American creators still face the same obstacles that we've always faced. No one ever asks those of us who have had to, (or choose to) publish our own books "why?" They just assume we don't exist. If they really want to get books from authors and artists of color that aren't about slavery or the struggle of the civil rights movement, they would! I touched on a few of these issues in a blog I did last year for the CBC Diversity site. <http://www.cbcdiversity.com/.../it-will-take-a-village-to...>

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Lesa Ellanson · West Virginia State University

The last paragraph of your article bespeaks a ridiculous "loophole" for myopic majority white publishing professionals: No people of color on your staff, so you don't hire a person of color on your staff to prevent "tokenism". Problem solved.

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Mike Green · Executive at Bookseller

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