

Embracing Our Diverse Reality

Publishers and editors discuss their efforts to broaden their lists to reach those in underrepresented communities

BY DIANE PATRICK AND CALVIN REID

Driven by a national wave of public social protest and a renewed professional commitment, U.S. publishers say they are focused on acquiring adult, young adult, and children's books that better reflect the diversity of American society. And while acknowledging a lack of multicultural representation on their lists in the past, they now point to an increasing number of authors from underrepresented BIPOC and LGBTQ communities—with even more such titles on the way.

PW asked a variety of adult and children's publishers to weigh in on the ways that diversity—and the vast range of topics that define it—is reflected in their publishing programs. Publishers and editors who responded include Abby Bussel, editorial director of Princeton Architectural Press; Nick Ciani, senior editor at Atria and Black Privilege Publishing; M.J. Fievre, director of DragonFruit; Carol Hinz, associate publisher at Millbrook Press; Arthur Levine, president and editor-in-chief of Levine Querido; Karen Lotz, president and publisher of Candlewick Press; Ginee Seo, executive publishing director, children, at Chronicle Books; Esi Sogah, executive editor of Kensington Publishing; George Thompson, publisher of George F. Thompson Publishing; and Phoebe Yeh, v-p, publisher of Crown Books for Young Readers.

How does the subject of diversity and related topics fit within your acquisitions strategy?

Ciani: Our industry has paid too little attention to those outside the traditional halls of power and influence. "Diversity" in this case could more accurately be called "reality." At One Signal, Atria, and Black Privilege, I aim to publish books that genuinely push the conversation forward, and it only makes sense that much of that ground is being trod by women, BIPOC, AAPI, and LGBTQ+ authors. Only now are we recognizing the full scope of what we've historically left to languish outside the spotlight.

Lotz: Looking for book creators who speak from diverse perspectives is at the forefront of our day-to-day acquisition strategy. Children's publishing should always feel a moral and social imperative to provide a broad body of literature that is representative and reflective of all young readers' experiences—



Nick Ciani

particularly in our increasingly diverse society. But frankly, history reveals a different story. At Candlewick, we all are committed to stepping up to meet that need and making sure that we are a significant part of correcting historical imbalances in full literary representation. Currently we ensure that 50% of all artists we consider identify as being from Black, Latinx, AAPI, Indigenous, or other nonwhite communities. We're also making sure that highlighting the work of authors who identify as being from communities of color is an equally significant part of our backlist focus and paperback reprinting program, to keep these books fresh and in the hands of kids as long as possible.

Thompson: Ever since I began my book publishing career as an acquisitions editor at the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1984, diversity has been an important factor in the kind of books that attract me and that I wish to develop and bring to publication. But in my world, *diversity* has many meanings, as reflected in the place-based books we publish under the George F. Thompson Publishing imprint. These include recent books about Native American history, land, and life: John Willis's award-winning books *Views from the Reservation* and *Mni Iconi/Water Is Life; Visual/Language*, a collection of ledger drawings



Karen Lotz

by Dwayne Wilcox, who is a member of the Oglala Lakota Tribe; and Stephen Strom's *Bears Ears: Views from a Sacred Land*. Recent books about Latinx culture include Ann Murdy's *On the Path of Marigolds: Living Traditions of Mexico's Day of the Dead* and Erika Diettes's powerful *Memento Mori: Testament to Life*, about the 250,000 "missing" people in Colombia. Both books were issued in bilingual English and Spanish editions.

Other new GFT books include Daniel Levin's *Violins and Hope: From the Holocaust to Symphony Hall*; David Wharton's *Roadside South*, the third book in his trilogy on the American South; and Sandra Matthews's *Occupying Massachusetts: Layers of History on Indigenous Land*, her photographic meditation on the human occupation of land from the early 1600s to the present day.

Seo: Publishing a list that comprises a diversity of voices and stories is a priority for Chronicle Books. We're aiming to improve representation every year, have set measurable goals around that, and the changes we're already seeing in upcoming lists are exciting and inspiring.

Yeh: I have been acquiring books with BIPOC content by BIPOC authors and illustrators since I began my children's publishing career in the mid-1980s; in fact, my first acquisition, *The Seven Chinese Brothers*, featured the Chinese American illustrators Jean and Mou-sien Tseng. Throughout my publishing career I have been committed to publishing diverse books. In my eight years at Crown Books for Young Readers, I have noticed the shift in my list. Currently, almost all my acquisitions reflect books with BIPOC content by BIPOC authors and illustrators. This is a reflection of the submissions I receive from agents and of my commitment—and that of Crown—to finding and publishing new BIPOC voices and building the BIPOC voices already on our list. The authors we publish—such as Schuyler Bailar, Kelly J. Baptist, Mahogany L. Browne, Cheryl Willis Hudson and Wade Hudson, Elle McNicoll, Olugbemiola Rhuday-Perkovich—and our partnerships with We Need Diverse Books show the range of diverse voices in fiction and nonfiction that we offer to all readers.

Levine: It's not a part of our acquisitions strategy: it is our complete acquisitions strategy and Levine Querido's founding principle. Our dream, and our passion, is to nurture a diverse group of exceptionally talented authors and artists, and contribute to the world a literature for young people that reflects the complexity of the multifaceted world around us, and gives children from all backgrounds a chance to see themselves on the page. It is not something that we've "fit" within a larger "strategy," but rather is our defining ethos at LQ, the mission that drives everything that we do.



Arthur Levin

Sogah: Diversity is a part of all of our acquisitions conversations. We have a diverse team at Kensington, so even if it's not highlighted specifically in a pitch, our conversation is going to include a wide range of



Ginee Seo

views. In addition, it's important to us that we look to improve in all areas of diversity—not just racial, but also diversity in sexuality, gender, disability, religion, etc.

Fievre: At Mango, we are a very diverse staff—we are of many different cultures and nationalities, we have disabilities, we are LGBTQ, our first language isn't always English. Therefore, diversity has been at the heart of everything we've done since the very beginning. With our new children's imprint DragonFruit, books like *One Bee Too Many* by Andrés Pi Andreu and Kim Amate, and *Young Trailblazers* by myself and Balacuit, deal with issues like immigration, bullying, and the lack of representation of Black people in the STEM world. Even our ABC books celebrate diversity; *Haiti A to Z* by illustrator Anastasia Khmelevska, for example, teaches children letter recognition but also emphasizes a multilingual vocabulary as readers learn about Haitian culture and heritage.

This is important, because our demographic data has taught us recently that 59% of our readers speak English as a first language, while 41% do not, and 53% speak at least two languages. I'm also an in-house writer for Mango, which gives me a unique perspective as a commissioning editor. Thanks to our advanced analytics, I know what readers are hungry for. I'm also



Phoebe Yeh

constantly aware of what kinds of books need to be published to create a fully diverse catalog of books. Our strategy in acquisitions is based on our research and our data paired with our intentional seeking of diverse voices and viewpoints.

Hinz: *Diversity* is a very broad term, and my colleagues at Lerner Publishing Group and I are taking a broad approach. We're looking for fiction and nonfiction by creators from historically marginalized

groups, while also looking closely at representation any time there is a cast of characters being depicted. In terms of acquisitions strategy, we aim to work with a mix of established and new authors and illustrators, in an effort to continue publishing an ever-expanding variety of voices.

Busse: We've long published titles that explore and celebrate visual culture through the design disciplines—fields that have been dominated by white men and Bauhaus influences. In an ongoing effort to set the record straight, we recently published books such as *Black, Brown + Latinx: Conversations on Design and Race* by Kelly Walters; *Extra Bold: A Feminist, Inclusive, Anti-Racist, Nonbinary Field Guide for Graphic Designers* by Ellen Lupton et al.; and *Baseline Shift: Untold Stories of Women in Graphic Design History* by Briar Levit and Martha Scotford—each one indicts the status quo as it recasts past and present to level the playing field. Similarly, in *Dressing the Resistance: The Visual Language of Protest Through History* and *Love and Justice: A Journey of Empowerment, Activism, and Embracing Black Beauty*,

the authors—Camille Benda and Letitia Ky, respectively—make unequivocal calls for acts of self-expression that can energize social justice movements and help forge an inclusive future.

If you publish for children, what do you look for in prospective titles and authors?

Bussel: Our children's books are highly visual and deeply rooted in story. Be it an imaginary tale or an activity book, we are looking for titles that sensitively convey race, gender, and a sense of belonging—on topics that are joyful and full of adventure and sometimes involve serious story lines. In fall 2022 we will publish Nina West's *The You Kind of Kind*, a book that boldly embraces authenticity—and captures the way we want to represent and reflect myriad experiences for readers of all ages.

Hinz: We look for books that are a good fit for our overall publishing program—for me, that means picture books and nonfiction that appeal to both the trade and the school and library markets. I'm looking for authenticity as well as excellent writing, and I'm interested in both fresh approaches to familiar themes and themes that haven't been covered in picture books or photo books in the past, whether that's something like *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre* by Carole Boston Weatherford and Floyd Cooper, or



Esi Sogah

Who Is a Scientist? by Laura Gehl. While I connect with many authors via agented submissions, to diversify our list, I think we also need to expand the ways in which we find authors. For instance, a colleague in our marketing department suggested that I reach out to Hmong American author Kao Kalia Yang after hearing her speak at an event hosted by the St. Paul Public Library, and that proved to be an amazing connection, which led to us publishing *A Map into the World*, *The Most Beautiful Thing*, and *From the Tops of the Trees*.

Fievre: We actively seek out marginalized voices and publish them. There are many writers and illustrators who come from a variety of backgrounds, so it's not hard to find them if you are intentional about looking for them. Many times, writers contact us directly with proposals for new, exciting books that are diverse in nature and deal with topics very relevant to children today. DragonFruit books do more than just educate children on the basics of academic learning. We love the kind of stories that are memorable, either written from personal experience or because the author knows how to tell a story that is relatable and fun, fluid in its language, and relevant to a range of readers.

Yeh: I'm always looking for stories which will engage readers and broaden their perspective on family, friendship, school, and social issues. There has to be something memorable about the voice and the characters, which should either reflect the readers'

experience or offer a new perspective, the window to someone else's experience. I want the books and the authors to help readers to connect to the character or the story line in a new way.

Levine: We look for voices that speak with emotional clarity, and bracing originality—voices as varied in tone and harmonics as the music of the world. We want to feel we're in the hands of a master storyteller, visually or textually. And in our attention to the list, we want our representation to be both broad and deep. It's not enough for us to find one Indigenous author to publish, for instance; no one author or one story can stand for the multitude of experiences that any group has.

Seo: We look for talent that offers something different, exciting, and fresh, that says something new or thought-provoking. As we're a very visual publisher, we pay special attention to a book's potential for making a beautiful or unusual statement.

Lotz: We look for excellence in content, whether that might take the form of a fresh narrative approach in a fiction title or a highly accurate, insightful perspective in an informational offering. We also scan the illustration world to find artists who offer new and valuable perspectives in their work. We accept only the highest quality of writing and artwork, and we want our creators to share stories authentic to their own experiences and identities through narrative voices that speak directly and meaningfully to young audiences. We enjoy humor, as do young readers, and we value genuine emotional understanding expressed on the page.

Are new topics emerging under the broad subject of diversity? If so, why do you think this is happening?

Clani: What I've seen and hope to continue to see is progress toward celebrating all communities in full. With our next step, book publishing needs to cultivate, acquire, and promote diverse authors in all genres and sectors with the same vigor and confidence we've given similar titles in the past.

Lotz: Readers want to see themselves, their relatives, and friends on the page as they are, not simply as symbols or tokenized elements. It's gratifying to see more families portrayed with two queer parents with otherwise relatively conventional situations and plotlines, for example. A new mindfulness about gender, broadly, is wonderful to see—for example, not pigeonholing characters

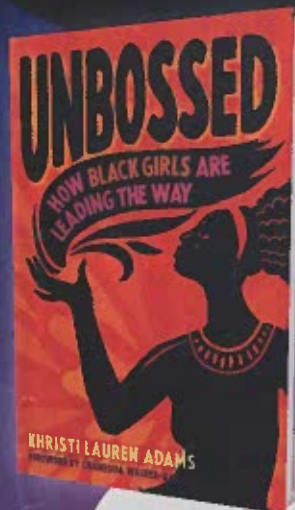


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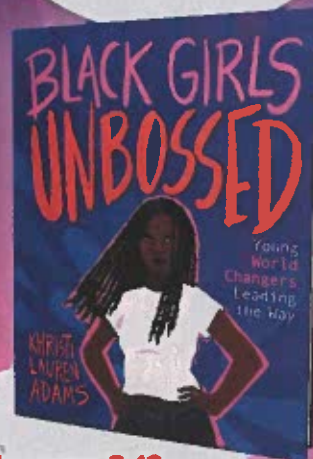


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in picture books into any binary or stereotypical division of girl character or boy character, but allowing them just to be children. While books about parts of our history that have been erased or misrepresented due to historical racism are hugely important—and still too few—we also are glad to see more books coming that center on the joyful, everyday experience of life in Black and brown families and communities, something that is long overdue for our audiences.

Thompson: The impact of the murders in 2020 of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, and the thousands of other African Americans and people of color who historically have been lynched, terrorized, and killed brought back home the all-too-familiar reality of America's and Americans' constant struggle with race, unequal opportunities, and social and environmental injustice. And so publishers, curators of museums, the media, businesses, schools, government agencies at every level, nonprofits, and nearly every enterprise I can think of are looking to diversify in ways that are meaningful and significant to their respective mission. One can call this initiative a much-needed course correction, an important educational imperative, a morally just endeavor, or support it with other commendable motives, but for some there will always be a profit drive. One hopes that the integrity, quality, depth, and layering of new work will be manifest in the book publications to follow and that new stories, art, and scholarship by new voices—notably those who have been previously ignored, underrepresented, or underappreciated—will be heard.

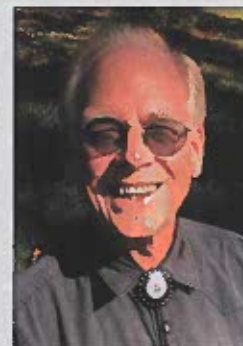
Levine: Most of publishing is done via large corporations. Those corporations will be driven—by boards who demand profit and financial growth—to publish what is reported to be “working” in the marketplace. I think that at long last activists were able to push the reading public, via social media and other tools, to demand greater equity and inclusion in the books they were offered. Demand led to disproving many stubborn myths about which main characters readers would embrace, and what settings and cultures could be central to a broadly popular book. Once the floodgates were open, a powerful wave emerged. As an example, Native American creators have always had great stories to tell; with demand from a diverse readership of consumers we are starting to see everything from thrillers like Angeline Boulley's to fantastical murder mysteries like Darcie Little Badger's to sweeping memoirs in verse like Eric Gansworth's.

Seo: One very welcome change I've noticed is that creators are telling more everyday family stories or stories without a serious message. Don't get me wrong: serious historical nonfiction titles are important, too, and we are publishing some beautiful ones on upcoming lists, but I love the idea of just telling a good story and letting the intent be there in the background. And I think this is happening because, societally, there's a greater recognition that these stories are important, too, and just as necessary and needed as the stories about heroism and adversity and tradition.

Yeh: I think we are in a DEI moment—and it's about time. The young people are telling us that they want to read books that reflect diversity of race, identity, and experience. The U.S. population demographic is changing, and our books for young people need to reflect their interests and needs. That is, books of Black joy alongside books that address social issues as well as genre titles featuring BIPOC protagonists, whether sci-fi, fantasy, mystery, or romance. This applies to graphic novels, as well. I



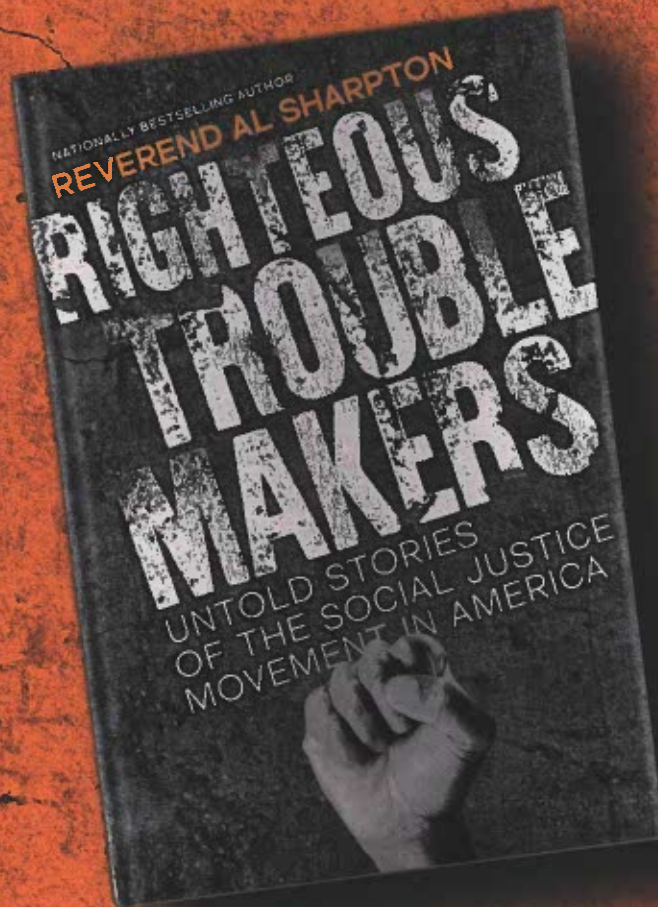
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think this is an enormously exciting time for children's book creators and publishers.

Sogah: I think people are realizing that even within broad categories like race or gender, there are infinite different experiences. I'm seeing people be more open to the fact that not every story can encompass every experience of someone in that group, and that our goal as publishers is to tell as many stories as we can.

Flevre: We're seeing more books written by Black authors about issues beyond race. They are writing about their futures and roles in a world where climate change, for instance, is of great concern. These days, with conversations spinning around disinformation, with an apparent lack of understanding and critical thinking around science, readers are looking to read books about those topics; thus, we're seeing more writers venturing into those fields. Science books are selling well because, amid the confusion, people want to understand the world and its mechanics more than ever. For many years, science was a "whites only" career path, and even then, only white men; women and people of color were largely left out of the equation. Our new release, *Young Trailblazers*, will highlight Black scientists who have been overlooked or ignored in the course of history. We're seeing influencers of color delve into their passion in growing their own foods, garnering followers in foraging, or teaching about farming and eco-consciousness. We're interested in those voices and how they translate in writing to appeal to audiences looking for that very same kind of fresh, edgy material.

Hinz: As we continue publishing a wider range of voices, I think it's inevitable that new topics will emerge. Within any community, there is a multiplicity of perspectives, and children benefit when books show diversity within a given community. I also think we're going to see an increasing focus on intersectionality, where we're looking at aspects such as race, gender, ability, religion, and body size in a picture book rather than putting the emphasis on just one of those elements. People are multifaceted, and our books must likewise be multifaceted.

Bussel: The topics that are emerging are not new; they simply have not been widely seen or centered until now. Publishers like to develop long relationships with authors; historically, this has narrowed the path to publication. It's been a loss for authors and readers alike. We are consciously and actively working to right this wrong, and to amplify previously unheard voices and stories.

What are your plans for acquiring more diverse titles in the future?

Bussel: We will continue to increase the number of under-represented voices and topics on our list through extensive outreach efforts to writers and agents, to thinkers and creators. It's a long-term commitment.

Hinz: My goal is to continue expanding the scope of the voices we publish. One forthcoming title I'm particularly excited about is the picture book *Where We Come From*, by Diane Wilson,

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Sun Yung Shin, Shannon Gibney, and John Coy, with illustrations by Dion MBD. Sometimes a story can't be told by a single person, and I'm looking forward to continuing to explore new types of collaboration as one way of continuing to diversify our publishing program.

Levine: Our plans are to continue to let the reading tastes of our diverse staff bring joy and enthusiasm to the process of cultivating a beautiful polyethnic literature for young people.

Sogah: One thing I think is important is to not just say we want diverse books. We need to be specific about what we're looking for, both in terms of genre and subject matter. It's not fair to aspiring authors out there to simply say "send us your books" without giving guidance on what precisely we're looking for. So we try to give our calls for submission parameters, and editors also generate story ideas and look for writers who might be a good match at bringing them to life. This isn't a passive exercise.

Yeh: There is room at the table for more BIPOC creators and more BIPOC stories, and Crown wants to find opportunities for these new voices in addition to uplifting the voices already on our list. If anything, I anticipate that our diverse list will continue to grow.

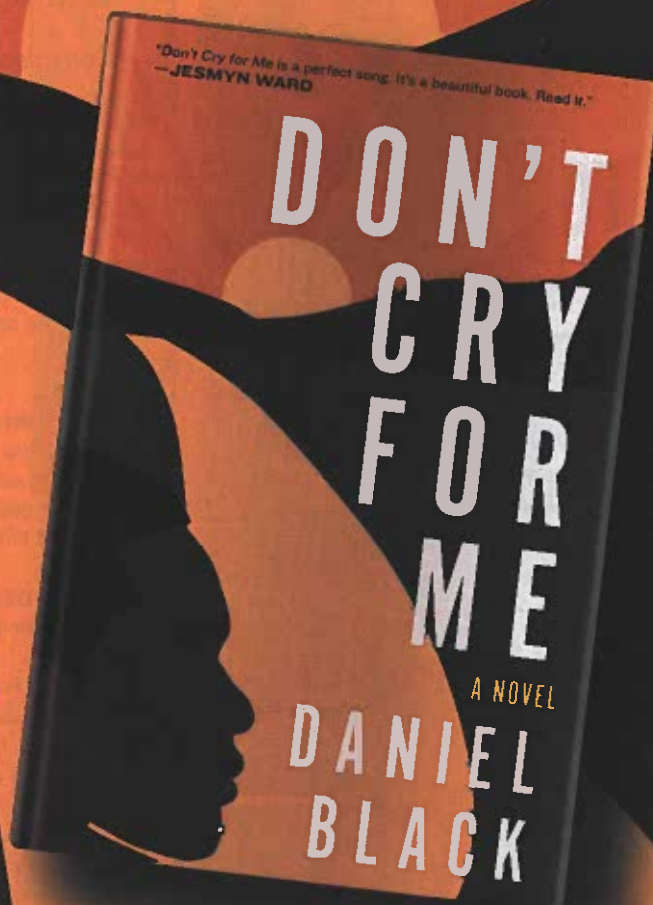
Seo: I hope we can do away with a term like *diversity-related* and just appreciate books from as many perspectives as possible, and publish the best of them. The overall goal for all of us is to end up with wonderful stories that come from everywhere, and that will make more kids happy—and feel more seen—than ever. To that end, two titles of note coming out in spring 2022 are *Black Girl Rising* by Brynne Barnes and Tatyana Fazlalizadeh, a powerful antidote to negative voices that can surround a person, and *Shine On, Luz Veliz!* by Rebecca Balcarcel, a treasure of a book about second chances. The ideal is to fill every category on our list—from board book to picture book, middle grade fiction and nonfiction to YA graphic novels—with stories and creators that represent as many backgrounds and experiences as possible.

Clani: We do everyone a disservice when we assume diverse authors can only write books that check a specific set of boxes; there are thin lines between representation, commodification, and ghettoization. I'm interested in science, history, economics, society, and culture. I want titles that spark joy and lend confidence. My goal is to help make space for writers of all backgrounds to write those books as well.

Fleuve: Acquisitions involves staying in the know. Our plan is to remain connected to our readers, so we can continue to deliver books that satisfy those needs for progress and stimulate their intellect. We will continue to keep abreast of the conversations that are happening and pay attention to voices that have been traditionally marginalized. We want children to have a broad-based education about the world around them and learn lessons that are important for building a more inclusive future. All is done in a spirit of love and progress. I'm very optimistic about where we are headed. ■

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