

Trade publishing is a **white middle class ghetto**. And if its workforce does not start to bear a closer resemblance to the population as a whole it risks becoming culturally **irrelevant**.

That was the stark conclusion of In Full Colour, the first investigation into diversity in publishing, which I edited earlier this year on behalf of the Arts Council decibel project.

Among the statistics revealed in the survey were:

* While only **8%** of the industry believe publishing is culturally diverse, **47%** are **adamant** that it is not.

* **87%** of respondents were white, while Asian, Black Chinese and other minority ethnic groups accounted for only **13%** of respondents

The figures painted a depressing picture, but not as depressing as some of the comments made by respondents, the worst of which had to be this from an editorial director in a large house: 'THERE ARE SOME INATE BARRIERS TO FULL CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN PUBLISHING, AS WE RELY HEAVILY ON GOOD LANGUAGE AND LITERARY SKILLS WITHIN OUR CHOSEN FIELDS. NOT ALL ETHNIC AND CULTURAL GROUPS CAN OFFER THOSE SKILLS.'

Hey I am from Manchester, I am not sure that I can supply those skills either.

Seriously though, I can't help wondering what that man knows about the history of publishing in the UK and the impact that **German born Jews made** on the industry.

Does cultural diversity matter?

Well, yes. Publishing **needs** to be more diverse for a whole bunch of reasons:

- * It needs **fresh eyes and blood** if it is to remain innovative and competitive.
- * it needs to reach the **widest possible pool of talent** if it is going to attract the best people and not just the connected and affluent
- * it needs to be publishing books that **reflect the make up of the population** if it is to grow. A disturbing trend of recent years is that **fewer** people are buying **more** books, and those few people are ageing. **We are a dying market.** We need to do something about that.

So what is stopping diversity in publishing – and I am including STM and professional as well as trade here? Well three things:

Chief of these is the way people get jobs in publishing: **40% OF RESPONDENTS SAID THEY GOT THEIR FIRST JOB IN THE TRADE THROUGH A CONTACT. IF YOU ARE CONNECTED YOU ARE IN.**

We all know publishers' budgets are cut to the bone, and recruitment is a low priority when it comes to spending. But **as long as publishers rely on a narrow range of universities and social groups for new recruits they will miss out** If they fail to reach out into the state educated, non-Oxbridge sector, they will not be reaching **all** the best talent.

Which brings me to the second issue: the disturbing reliance of publishers on **“work experience”** students. When you have major London publishing houses employing **“work experience”** graduates for free for as long as **six months** you should be

worried. That is not education and experience: it is **exploitation**. Working for free is **slavery**. It also undermines the value of fully paid workers, many of whose work overlaps with the work experience girl or boy. No wonder employers like it: it sends a message to staff that there are plenty of others to take their place if they demand a living wage: hey and they will work for free.

But as any fool kno, if you **don't** do work experience, then your chances of getting a job in this business are almost **negligible**.

That means that only those without student debt to worry about and parents affluent enough to support them for the months they are working unwaged can get into this industry.

The third point I would make is about the **closed networks** that operate in recruiting publishers to senior positions. I can recall more than one ceo md and editorial director who first heard about the vacancy for their job at a **dinner party**. It makes a **joke** of equal opportunity if only those with friends and influence get to hear about jobs in the first place. It also automatically discriminates in favour of a select group, dominated by **white, middle class people**.

When researching In Full Colour I spoke to many Black and Asian publishers who felt excluded from these networks and were frustrated in their attempts to break into them.

Many spoke of being marginalised and, worse, patronised, their faces only registering on the publishers landscape when they were called into acquisition meetings with Black or Asian authors: a token presence to make the publisher look better.

Some might say that none of this matters, Black and Asian authors are acquired and published well – look at Zadie Smith, Monica Ali or Hari Kunzru. But look at the backgrounds of these authors: **all** Oxbridge. Hari Kunzru told me that he had **no doubt** that his education played a major part in his getting an agent and then a book deal. He said it meant he was part of the **club**, he was, and I am sorry to use this expression, “**acceptable Asian**”. I heard the same from quite a few of the Black authors and publishers.

In contrast, Malorie Blackman, who went to a London Poly and was the only Black author featured in the Big Read, had three books published before an agent would represent her. She said she felt completely excluded by the process and had publishers advising her to “**tone down** the race content” in her books. Luckily she didn’t listen to those publishers, because readers certainly were not put off by it.

More Black and Asian publishers will bring a greater **diversity** to lists that reflects national life. They will make lists more relevant to the average young person living in inner cities – and that is where most people live!

Let’s face it 20 years ago when the white men of the Garrick Club ruled the roost, women had a tough time breaking into senior roles. But once they did they **revolutionalised** – and **professionalized** – publishing. No one would want to go back to the bad old days. Those women brought the publishing industry into the late 20th century. Isn’t it about time that we brought it into the **21st** century and made it an industry every one can relate to? There is a good reason to do this: the minority ethnic community has disposable income of **£32bn** a year. For a **£1.6bn** industry that is a lot of potential.