



Seeing White

Black Faces Still Scarce in Publishing Industry

By [Christian Red](#)

Betty Prashker, during her more than 40 years as an esteemed book editor, has seen publishing in New York City transformed from a "glamour industry" into just another business worried about the bottom line. She has seen the creation of rich literature evolve into the proliferation of in-your-face biographies by people like The Rock, the wrestling star. And she has seen authors' salaries shrink from seven figures to a more modest five. But one facet of the publishing industry has barely changed - the overwhelming dominance of white people like herself.

"There have always been few minorities in publishing," Prashker said. "I believe that there was no aggressive recruitment and then there was always the problem of the salary level."

Many publishing insiders - editors, literary agents, marketing executives and others - agree with Prashker's observations. Some also say deeper, more subtle factors - such as the "club-like" atmosphere of publishing and episodes of white insensitivity - help explain why so few minorities, particularly African-Americans, are involved in the decisions to publish the books Americans read.

Statistics on minority employment in the industry are hard to find. Organizations like the American Association of Publishers, or AAP, and trade magazines like Publishers Weekly and Library Journal document the latest news in the publishing industry. None of those resources releases figures on the percentage of African-Americans working in the various New York publishing houses, but one need look no further than the offices themselves to get a sense of the racial make-up.

"Just look around here, it's pretty much white," said Kristin Kiser, 33, a white senior editor at the Crown Publishing Group, which is a division of the largest English-speaking publisher in the world, Random House, Inc. "But it has gotten better in the last few years. I've seen changes here." She was referring to Crown's hiring of more minorities since her arrival in 1997.

Maybe so, but in the cubicles and offices of the marketing, publicity, editorial, production and subsidiary rights departments of Crown and other publishing companies, there is an overwhelming majority of white faces. Out of approximately 115 employees at Crown, four are African Americans - three of them hired only in the last year.

One of the three, Chris Jackson, a 30-year-old editor, disagreed with Kiser, saying that more minorities were needed in the industry. Moreover, he pointed out that the day-to-day realities of being black in publishing

change very slowly.

"I get a lot of black authors who have given me manuscripts to read because they don't trust white editors," Jackson said. "And black authors don't feel like having to explain the point of their book to someone white who doesn't get it." However, he said, that pay levels impede recruitment of black editors. Many young black professionals, new to the middle class, feel obliged to seek high salaries, he said. "And publishing salaries do not promise a lot of money."

Crown Publishing has four different imprints, a publishing term for a specialized division, and their books cater to everything from New Age to lifestyle books to general fiction and non-fiction. Before Jackson's arrival, the company had been trying to branch out to the African-American market with books by Spike Lee, Michael Jordan, Jake Lamar and the editors of Essence magazine. No minorities worked in the editorial department of Crown when any of those titles were released. Most of the books had marginal success rates once they hit the shelves.

Only the Jordan title spent time on the New York Times bestseller list, and a brief stint at that. Whether those books would have fared better with minorities behind them - editing, coming up with marketing plans, doing the publicity - may be debatable, but Jackson's job interview at Crown pointed to an ingredient that critics say is missing from the daily process.

The interviewer, who was white, asked Jackson, "Do you think black editors should edit blacks books?" Jackson said he remembered thinking that the question was a good one, and that Crown, or at least the editorial department, was looking for some direction. Shortly after he accepted the job, his theory was proven true. A book by the New York Times sports columnist, William Rhoden, who is black, had been acquired in 1996. The book, which focuses on anger in black athletes, was passed from one white editor to the next, languishing in editorial doldrums until Jackson inherited the project four years later.

"For the first time since Crown had bought the book, the author finally felt like someone understood what he was trying to say," Jackson said. "It's been rewarding to bring that understanding to the table." Rhoden did not return phone calls about this article. Crown plans to publish the title for the fall season, typically the busiest for the publishing industry.

Other publishing insiders are even more vocal about who should be working on books by African-American authors. Anita Diggs, who is African-American, is a senior editor at Random House and the director of One World Books, a division that publishes African-American literature only. Some white editors, she said, are capable of editing books by black authors, but others know "little or nothing about black folks beyond what they read in white newspapers, magazines and see on television." Diggs added that white editors who don't understand the material - and worse, believe they do - can cause an African-American author "to become extremely frustrated, unhappy and fatigued."

Diggs, who started her publishing career in 1989 as an executive secretary at publishing giant Penguin-Putnam, also said she wanted more black professionals working in publishing. "Today, almost every major house has at least one black editor," she said. "It is not enough. I'd like to see more of us in the field, particularly in departments like marketing, publicity and sales."

She and other publishing executives can look at some of the developments over the last five years as an encouraging step. In 1992 there were only two publishing divisions that catered to African-Americans. Now there are at least seven, including three at Random House alone: Striver's Row, Harlem Moon and the

mentioned One World. Another, Amistad Press, is part of Rupert Murdoch's HarperCollins Publishers and has grown from a trade magazine begun in 1986, to a full division that will publish 13 titles this year.

Manie Barron, an African American who once was a marketing executive and editor at Random House, is now Amistad's publishing manager. In addition to acquiring new titles, Barron is responsible for the marketing and sales plans for all of Amistad's properties. Affable and garrulous when talking about any aspect of publishing, Barron was quick to point out some of the obstacles he faced entering the publishing business 14 years earlier. And he thinks that some of these barriers are still very much a part of why minorities shy away from publishing careers.

"I first came in on the bookstore side," Barron said. The time was the mid 1980s, and few black authors were getting published. As a result, Barron said, bookstores were inept at displaying and advertising sections in the bookstore devoted to African-American literature. When Terry McMillan was published in 1992, everything changed. Her novel, "Waiting to Exhale," was a huge commercial success and paved the way for more mainstream black fiction.

"Simon and Schuster never published anything by black authors until Terry McMillan. Today, they do a lot of black authors," Barron said. "But even so, I still think ghettoization, publishing books by blacks and then putting nothing behind them, is a problem. Hopefully with these new imprints popping up, people are dedicated to making the books a success."

Barron's frustration with "ghettoization" had its roots with his experience at Crown. Though he was an editor in an entirely different part of Random House during the mid- and late-1990s, he was often called to the Crown "launch" meetings when a new list of titles was announced. Specifically, his input was asked on all of the books written by African-American authors.

Barron refers to the meetings sarcastically as the "token black guy" being called in to help clueless white people. "I remember one time they were publishing a book called 'Spirit Dive,' by Michael Cottman, an African-American diver who searched the sunken slave ship, Henrietta Marie," he said. "I came down, looked at the jacket proof." What had happened, to Barron's frustration, was a complete change in the title and jacket art that in no way reflected the book's spiritual and emotional focus. "When I told them the book wouldn't sell with that design, no one listened."

The book, in its first life as a hardcover, was entitled, "The Wreck of the Henrietta Marie" and featured art that did not accurately convey the emotional journey of the author. And indeed, as Barron had predicted, the book did not sell. "I got the last laugh, though," Barron continued, "because when the paperback version was released, they put the original title ("Spirit Dive") back on the cover, and the original artwork. And the book's a success now.

"White people hate the fact that the black world is something they don't know, and until they're willing to admit that, this cycle will continue," Barron said.

Barron pointed to other frustrations that compound the problem of getting more minorities involved in publishing. He recalled the time a newly hired black publicist at one of Random House's divisions was given responsibility for all the books written by African-American authors. The publicist, in addition to performing assistant duties to another senior publicist, was not able to devote enough time to her books, and subsequently these titles got lost in the shuffle.

"And just when that publicist got comfortable with the African-American list, and the contacts and how these books worked, they promoted her and brought in a new publicist who was completely green," Barron said. "That's the cycle."

Whites are not as pessimistic about the publishing industry's work environment repelling minority candidates as they are about the dismal entry-level salaries. Jo Fagan, 53, worked in publishing for 28 years licensing rights before becoming a literary agent in 1998. She has represented African-American and white authors while an agent at the Jane Dystel Literary Agency in Union Square. "You have to remember that in the 1970s and '80s people in publishing came from money," Fagan said. "It was mostly a lot of young, white women whose parents could afford to have them live and work in New York on \$16,000 salaries."

Random House is one publishing company that has taken a step toward improving entry-level salaries. Starting last year, anyone hired as an assistant is guaranteed a \$30,000 income.

Still, colleagues are skeptical that such changes will break the pattern of mainly white people applying for publishing jobs. Kerrie Loyd, 30, is a sales director at Simon and Schuster and came to New York in 1994 to break into the industry. Loyd, who is white, is all too familiar with the poor salaries that publishing offers entry-level candidates. She started at less than \$20,000 for her first job as a marketing assistant.

"I see more minorities at Simon and Schuster now than when I first started at HarperCollins seven years ago," Loyd said. "But if you are a minority earning a degree, you are probably not going to look at these kinds of salaries coming out of college. It's ridiculous."

Calvin Reid, an African-American news editor for Publishers Weekly echoed Loyd's opinions. "There aren't a lot of recruiting efforts for minorities in publishing," Reid, 49, said. "So a lot of African-Americans don't know what a publishing career entails. But the industry has also traditionally pulled whites out of the Ivy League schools - people who come from money and are willing to work for smaller salaries."

Reid did express optimism for the future, however, indicating that the rise in imprints devoted to African-American literature meant that not only were more minorities reading, but also that these new publishing imprints were more likely to attract minority employees. "I do believe that the best business decision is a workforce that can address its mission well," Reid said. "And these imprints are more likely to succeed with people working there who understand the culture."

And for Betty Prashker, who has edited the likes of Stephen King, Dominick Dunne and Jean Auel in her distinguished career, there is no time like today to try to change the hue of the publishing industry. Even when she could easily sit back and rest on her accomplishments, Prashker is part of a new diversity committee within the AAP. The group is responsible for raising the awareness of publishing to minorities through a web site, brochures, videos and other materials that will be distributed to colleges and universities across the nation.

"Now that there is an important customer base for books of interest to minorities," Prashker said, "more of an effort is being made to bring them in."

Christian Red, who now works for the New York Daily News, wrote [this piece](#) in 2001 as part of a Columbia University seminar led by Professor Sig Gissler.