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**A conversation about diversity, equity and inclusivity in publishing.**

with **Anonymous**

**Reading time: approx. 13 minutes**

**A dyslexia and ADHD friendly bionic version of this piece is available to read online or [download here](#).**

***Disclaimer: this is a paid, anonymous interview and as such some answers have been omitted or amended to protect the interviewee's privacy. If there is any risk of a breach in anonymity, this interview will be taken down in compliance with my terms of service.***

**Tell me about yourself.**

**I'm in my thirties, from a working-class background, I am Black mixed-race and I was born and raised in London. I like playing video games and I love reading, obviously, which is why I work in publishing.**

**What was the first book that you can remember reading that made you think you wanted to write or be involved in making books?**

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**Funny story, I didn't actually realise I wanted to work in publishing until I was 25. It hadn't really occurred to me that publishing was an industry I could work in, so it was only when I graduated from university and was looking for jobs that I thought**

**"I like books, what can I do with books?" and I went online and searched and realised,**

**"Oh, I could be an editor!" It was like a whole new world had opened up for me. When I was growing up I was really into reading and liked to write my own stories, and I was really good at English in school, so my mum thought I was going to be a journalist. I don't know why, but that never really appealed to me.**

***What kind of stories did you write?***

When I was a lot younger

– well, it was always fantasy, I have always been into fantasy

– so I would write very Enid Blyton-

style stories, because that's what I read. It was always children going on adventures similar to *The Magic Far Away Tree* series or *The Wishing Chair*. The

n when I got a bit older I wrote fan-fiction, first about *Dragon Ball-*

*Z*, then *Twilight* fan-fiction.

Terrible, terrible *Twilight* fan-fiction. It's going to the grave with me.

***It's interesting what you said about not thinking about publishing as a career path, I did that search-engine thing, too. I think before that I only knew about it from Bridget Jones' Diary.***

I'd never read *Bridget Jones* or any books about people working in publishing . And even for journalism or other writing-

related work, there was never really any push to pursue it in school. I felt very aimless when I was picking my A-

Level subjects. and I didn't pick subjects that really, truly matched what I wanted to do, but there was just no sort of guidance there to steer me towards publishing or any career specifically, and yet there was this big push to go to university.

***Was there an attitude that going into the creative industry wasn't a viable option?***

Not really, my parents were born here

(though they were raised by immigrants, in the 60s' and 70s' when things were much harder) and I have never felt any expectation from them that the creative industry was not good enough. I think my parents were just very proud of the fact that I was going to university, it didn't matter what I studied they would support me the best they could. I ended up switching degrees, so I graduated when I was twenty-five, and that's when I started looking at publishing.

**Tell me a bit about your career journey.**

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**I started out as an admin assistant in journal publishing, then about half a year in I applied and got an editorial assistant job at the same publisher. I later discovered it was very difficult to move from journal to trade publishing if you wanted to be in the editorial team. When I applied for editorial assistant jobs at trade houses, I was told I didn't have the appropriate experience, but no one was willing to tell me how to get the appropriate experience from my current position.**

**If I had known more about publishing before I started applying for jobs, I would have approached it very differently. I didn't have an English degree; I didn't have the financial support to do internships (which were unpaid at that time) so I needed to be able to work and make money. There were a lot of barriers for me so I was absolutely overjoyed when I got that admin assistant role and sideways stepped into editorial, because I really thought it would open doors and get me into trade publishing. Like I said, if I'd known then what I know now, I would have maybe held out for a position in trade or tried to figure out a way to do the internships around paid work. When I got that first job, it felt like I was kicking down doors and inserting myself into places where I didn't necessarily feel I belonged, but I'm very stubborn about getting what I want.**

***I snuck in the backdoor of trade publishing after working editorial academic and education jobs.***

**I didn't want to work in academic, I was worried about going too far down one path, especially as I'd already started my career later than planned. And I didn't want to take a step down and start back again just when I had gained some kind of financial stability, it would have been so difficult. It all comes back to the cost of it, I'm working-class and I didn't have that support system there to allow flexibility no matter how much I know my parents would have wanted to give it to me; if they could have, they absolutely would have done. But I had to figure it out for myself.**

I was quite difficult, but I ended up getting an internal promotion into the business side first at that journal, then moved another step up at a smaller trade publisher.

*When you took on a different business role at a new company, was there a sense of anxiety about the fact that you were moving away from editorial?*

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class and I didn't have that support system there to allow flexibility no matter how much I know my parents would have wanted to give it to me; if they could have, they absolutely would have done. But I had to figure it out for myself.

It was quite difficult, but I ended up getting an internal promotion onto the business side at that journal, before moving another step up at a smaller trade publisher. Now, rather than working on manuscripts, I was working in publishing rights.

*When you took on a different business role at a new company, was there a sense of anxiety about the fact that you were moving away from editorial?*

I enjoyed what I was doing and that I was learning another thing about publishing. One of the things I like about publishing is learning all about the various areas and how they work and I do feel quite grateful to have worked in all these different areas and learnt different aspects. But I did reach out to an editorial director internally at that next publisher, about getting some more experience in editorial. Whenever I asked they'd always say

"Yeah, sure!" then nothing would happen. It was very quickly shut down.

I don't feel bitter about the barriers I've had to overcome in my career though, because I've worked really hard to achieve what I've achieved. I'm very proud of myself, but there have been times when I've been really frustrated and wanted to be an editor and felt like I'm not good enough and eventually I did think:

*...fine, I'll give up on editorial then, there are other roles I can do in publishing, but it does make me sad sometimes, because I would love to have more direct influence over the books.*

Finally, I moved into a business executive role at another trade publisher, focusing on contracts. I still work there now and I've been promoted twice and I feel very supported by my team, there's a great management team.

I also don't feel like my race has held me back personally in my publishing career, but I think there are definitely barriers for people getting into publishing from working-class backgrounds and from ethnically diverse backgrounds as well, because it's typically not really presented or even suggested as a viable career. It's twofold: not only does there need to be diverse representation in the books, but the team behind getting the book out needs to have an understanding and be representative of these different backgrounds, and there is a real gap there. It's incredibly obvious when you are a person of colour and you walk into a publishing house and into their offices and are essentially greeted by a sea of white faces, particularly in creative teams. I know some authors have actually commented on that, too. Whilst I don't feel like my race has held me back personally, I have experienced micro-aggressions in the workplace and uncomfortable situations pertaining to race. These are things that can make it difficult for people of colour to thrive in their workplace.

Which leads us nicely into talking about representation, diversity, equity and inclusion. My standard question here is what really got you into this subject?

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I want to flag that we're focusing in on race here, as it's what I can speak to in terms of my lived experiences. I'm able-bodied, heterosexual, neurotypical... I want to advocate for diversity, inclusivity and equity for all

(not just for me or people similar to me), but for this conversation, I'm speaking from a particular, personal point of view.

So obviously, as a person of colour, it's [DEI] been pretty thematic throughout my entire life. I went to a majority white primary school

– secondary school was a lot more diverse, but it was too late the damage had already been done. It was a similar story at university, then of course publishing is very white, middle-class dominated.

But also actually, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas was the first book I read which really put into words how I felt about race and about being a Black (in my case, a mixed-race) person in a majority white environment. The main character Starr experiences these micro-aggressions and it made me think of all the times I've thought *Am I being too sensitive? Did I imagine that? How did they mean that?*; it really resonated with me. It was a step towards giving me the vocabulary to talk about these things. Even though it's set in a different country there was so much of it I could identify with, such as having to have different versions yourself: code-switching. I didn't not know what code-switching was and that I had been actively doing it for the majority of my life.

A lot of the time, micro-aggressions can leave you feeling quite bewildered (that and racial gaslighting), because your mind's going a million-miles-an-hour and people are trying to tell you that's not what happened, or that they didn't mean it that way and you're being too sensitive. I am also a conflict-averse person so I have found it very difficult to voice my discomfort in the moment, and then later on there never felt like a safe time I could bring it up again.

*It sounds like The Hate U Give also made you feel like you had the right to be angry, like it gave you permission.*

Yeah, **definitely it did. The fact that I was able to articulate things that I'd felt and experienced and didn't know how describe... it was enlightening, it was empowering.**

***You'd loved stories for so long and finally you'd found this book... it gave you the words...***

And isn't that the **point of reading? To give you the vocabulary and the words** ? **The only other time I'd felt like that**

– **and bear in mind, I'd read hundreds and hundreds of books by this point**

– **but the only other time that I thought there might be a character like me is when I read the first Harry Potter book and I thought Hermione was Black or mixed-**

**race. She sounded like me, it was me! When the film came out and she was white I was so sad, it was devastating. I had dared to believe that there could be a plucky female main character who looked like me**

– **maybe I could be a main character too. That's why representation is so important.**

**My background is Caribbean, my grandparents are Caribbean, and I don't really feel like I see many Caribbean characters, or characters of Caribbean descent. There are now more Black British authors but often times**

**(or at least this is my observation) they are from African descent, particularly Nigerian or Ghanaian. I've not read it yet, but the only British-**

**Caribbean fantasy book I've found so far is *Witches Steeped in Gold* by Cian non Smart. I don't know if the same lack of representation is necessarily true in contemporary fiction, but my interest is fantasy and I'm looking and I'm not seeing it.**

***I feel like there's still a lot of books by any author of colour, that are treated as special-***

***interest publishing. It's hard to find books from people of colour, or from any minority background, that aren't about being a minority.***

Yeah, so **this is another issue I have, it's about everyday trauma. The fantasy narratives that are written by people of colour, typically from African descent,**

tend to have a slavery thread in them. Which pisses me off! Not because I don't think they're important, because they obviously are, but I think, you know what? It'd be really cool to just have a magical black person just doing magic and it's fine without the extra layer of trauma in there. You don't always need it. It can exist without it.

*I'm cynical about this, too. Are there really zero people of colour who are writing non-trauma related fantasy books? No, it's the people that are reading the manuscripts and deciding what sells, and they're saying slavery sells, trauma sells.*

Exactly, and it's actually quite deflating when you read a book that's by an author who's Black and British and it's focused on these things. And the British element

(compared specifically to America) is important to me personally as I think the British experience is quite unique. I'm looking for more Caribbean-British fantasy characters, so if you're reading this: that's what I want to see.

How do you think the publishing industry is currently tackling these issues and what needs improving?

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I'm not a race educator, I'm not a DEI professional in any kind of way, I'm just talking to you about my own observations and personal experiences as a person of colour working in publishing. But as a starting point, companies need to invest in professional anti-racism and unconscious bias training. It needs to be mandatory, and it needs to be yearly. It also needs to be organised in a way where the sessions are safe spaces and people can speak freely, e.g., ensuring employees aren't in the same session as their line-manager or other higher-ups.

DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) should not be an add-on or extra, it needs to be integral and intentional part of all publishers' ethos. When George Floyd was murdered in 2020, it began a lot of conversations about improving diversity, equity and inc

clusion in all industries, publishing included. But that was three years' ago, and often I still feel like I'm shouting into the void. For instance, in response to the growing Black Lives Matter movement, a lot of places set up voluntary DEI councils.

I was originally on my company's DEI council and I did think, *hmm, I shouldn't really be doing this for free*, but I also didn't want conversations to take place that I wasn't a part of, and I felt that I needed to be there to help steer the conversation in the right direction. I was on it for over a year, and it was really frustrating. There were a lot of strong opinions in the group and I did not feel comfortable during a lot of meetings. There was no real mediation and things started slowly falling apart; we just did a lot of talking with no real action. When I decided to leave, I told my manager, "My ancestors were forced to work for free. They struggled and sacrificed, and I'd be doing their legacy a disservice by allowing myself to be exploited."

It would have been worth it if things were happening, I'm not that fussed about being paid as I wanted to make a change in my company. It was important enough that I wanted to give my time for free, but it was such a frustrating and anxiety-inducing experience. I know people in other DEI councils for different companies who feel the same way.

And really, you can't ask people to give up their time without paying them or without finding a way to compensate them for the labour that they are doing to try and help make the company – which they probably love – better. It's just not fair. Especially considering how emotionally intense it is for everyone involved because you're talking about hard topics. And people who sanction these groups also need to empower them to make positive, impactful changes; and/or employ an experienced, qualified DEI professional whose job it is to listen to and take the feedback from the council. The professional could then take it to a higher level or be themselves empowered to implement policies within the company to actually make change happen. Otherwise, it's all just performative, and lip-service.

The way it can be policed is quite alarming as well, I know someone else in the creative industry whose writing on DEI was heavily amended and edited, and the reason given was that their company didn't want to spark questions about what it was they were doing. Which goes against *the whole point of DEI*. There are businesses that will crow very loudly and proudly about their DEI efforts, and yet they are not willing to be engaged in conversation about it. And that's a problem.

People are scared to make mistakes, or of not getting it right on their first try. But the point is to come to these things with love and open-mindedness, to be open to criticism and to be willing to learn. Talking specifically about anti-racism as opposed to general DEI, anti-racism is a lifelong unlearning. It's not something you can do one course on and say, "Cool, I'm not racist anymore." It's not a tick-box exercise, you have to actively engage with it in all areas of your life 24/7.

I think a thing that a lot of white people in particular struggle with is that they are racist. You can be the nicest person in the world but, you are part of a racist system and you are benefiting from it, you will definitely have some prejudices. We all do. Maybe you don't act on them, but you need to be aware of them because you need to think about how they impact your daily life and the lives of others around you. We all have those kinds of thoughts, but actions speak louder than words and this is where it really does count.

And in terms of accountability, when people talk about intention and say they didn't intend to cause harm, it doesn't matter: harm has been done. They need to take the steps to apologise and do better. Take your ego out of it, take your entitlement out of it. It's hard work because it's so ingrained, it's the way the system is set-up.

But it's about sustained action, not just in your work life but in your personal life, too. It needs to be a constant thread, living your life in an anti-racist and inclusive way and being open to learning about and understanding different perspectives. It's a lot of work and a lot of emotional labour that people are not willing to invest, because unless it really touches their lives, it's hard to care about. Empathy is so important.

Also, we need to stop saying BAME

(Black Asian and Minority Ethnic). It groups together culturally distinct people and it creates the idea of

“white.. and everyone else.” If you break down the different groups covered in “BAME” there are disparities there, too. It’s ignoring or burying important distinctions. Culturally, an Afro-Caribbean descendant British person’s lived-experiences will be so different from say, an Indian descendant British person’s experiences. There will obviously be some similarities, as with any two groups, but it shouldn’t be either “white” or “other”.

I wanted to touch, briefly, on the fact that this interview is anonymous and talk about why that is.

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Because I am making criticisms about the publishing industry, I don’t feel comfortable with people knowing that I said it. I worry that there could be unforeseen repercussions.

*I’ve written a piece that isn’t necessarily complimentary about the industry, and the article on the power of language touches on some of the problems around DEI, but of course we have the privilege of being white.*

When you are a person of colour who talks openly about race and DEI you can be seen as a troublemaker. People can think, “This person is going to cause problems, we won’t hire them.” But if you’re white, you’re more likely to be seen as a maverick, a hero who’s championing DEI. I need to feel safe, and I’m nervous about people’s reactions to this.

But it should be the default to be an empathetic and kind human being, because what is the purpose of mistreating someone or preventing someone’s access just because of their sexuality or the colour of their skin? It’s what people are born with. Having empathy, allowing space for people’s lived experiences and their voices is never going to be a bad thing for both the books that are produced and also those who work within the industry

Finally, what book are you currently reading?

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I've just finished *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood. I loved it, it was so good. It took me a while to settle into the different narratives but once I had, I thought the pacing was brilliant. Then today, I've just started *Unraveller* by Frances Hardinge.

*Thank you again to anonymous for taking the time to talk with me. As you predicted, I've had to edit out a lot of us just laughing.*

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### Recommended resources from *anonymous*:

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#### Books:

- *The Good Ally* by Nova Reid
- *Anti-Racist Ally* by Sophie Williams
- *Millennial Black* by Sophie Williams
- *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* by Reni Eddo-Lodge
- *Invisible Britain: Portraits of Hope and Resilience* edited by Paul Sng and *Invisible Britain: This Separated Isle* edited by Paul Sng

#### Training/Workshops/TED Talks:

- *Build With Bloom* (DEI training and HR)
  - *Becoming Anti-Racist* with Nova Reid
  - *Language Matters.* (consultancy, training sessions and auditing services)
  - *Everyday Racism* (anti-racism training, resources and book club)
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If you have a story to tell, please get in touch...

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If you have **comments** on the **above**, or you **would like to be interviewed** for **First Drafts**, **please reach out [here](#)**. All **enquiries** are **very welcome** but I am **actively looking** for:

**Perspectives from outside of the home counties:** the **above piece** is on **social class**, but I am **aware** that as I am **originally from Buckinghamshire** and **now live in London**, there is a lot I've **probably not discussed or thought about** **because it doesn't apply to my background**. If you **want to tell me what I don't know**, **please reach out**.

**Queer perspectives:** I am **queer myself** and **will likely write a piece on this in the future**, but I **would love to talk to others** in the **LGBTQIA+ community** **about their individual thoughts and experiences**. **What influences or impacts your role in publishing**  
(if **applicable**) **and/or your experiences as a reader? What would you like to see or change on the page?**

**Neurodivergent perspectives:** **what influences or impacts your role in publishing**  
(if **applicable**) **and/or your experiences as a reader? What would you like to see or change on the page?**

**Migrant and/or Non-**

**Western perspectives:** **what influences or impacts your role in publishing**  
(if **applicable**) **and/or your experiences as a reader? What would you like to see or change on the page?**

**Book-**

**buying parents and carers:** **what books do you think are missing from the shelves? What different factors do you consider when buying books?**

**If pro bono is not an option I have a small, negotiable budget to pay interviewees.**

**Anonymous interviews are also an option. More information on the interview process can be found [here](#).**

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