Ebb and Flow: Advances and Retreats in the Battle to Make Children's Books more Inclusive and Diverse

Anna McQuinn

I'm very happy to be described as a writer, publisher and campaigner – since entering children's publishing in 1991 I've worked hard to make children's books more inclusive. In fact, very recently I was called a 'diversity superhero' by Letterbox Library. I 'Googled' superhero and I was a bit shocked at what I found, frankly, but that's a rant for another day. I never envisaged that I would grow up to be a superhero – I was born and grew up in a small town of about two thousand people on the west coast of Ireland – about as far from multicultural, diverse London where I now work as you can get!. I went to a tiny school, which had only 29 pupils – this is the entire school plus some concerned parents.

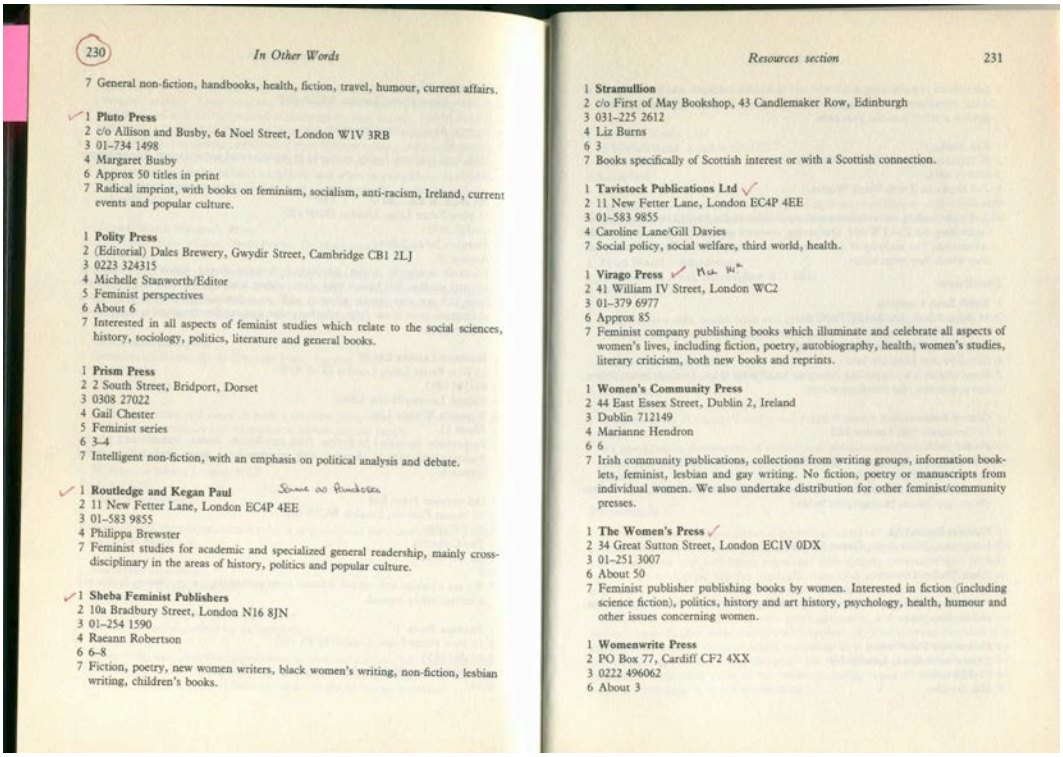
The local National School.

I was a reader from very young – I devoured books (and anything else within reach that I could read – the back of the Corn Flakes packet at breakfast …). Most of the books we had were imported from England, so my reading was peopled with girls called Hilary, Gwendolin, Pamela and Penelope (I'd never heard this last name spoken aloud and in my head she was always Pee-ne-pole!). Then someone gave me Walter Macken's *Flight of the Doves* (1968). I will never forget it. Two young children run away from an abusive step-father in London to try to find their granny in Galway. I so remember when I came to that bit – I'd heard of Galway – in fact I'd even been there! Suddenly, the book felt *real* rather than just the wonderful imaginative escape reading had been up to then. Someone like me (who said Mammy, and strand, and briars) was in a book!

My love of reading led me to read for a BA at University College Cork, then a postgraduate qualification in Education, and then an MA (a feminist reading of the Gothic novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*). This was the late 1980s, years before Ireland's Celtic Tiger, and so, like a quarter of a million other young people leaving the country every year, I became an economic migrant, leaving for England in 1988. I had decided that I wanted to work in publishing. My teaching qualifications were not recognised in the UK and in any case I'd become interested in publishing, and in particular in feminist publishing while studying for my MA. The first organisation I joined was Woman in Publishing – in those days, we couldn't search the internet – and WiP had an extremely

useful directory, ran courses and other events to help women in publishing to network and progress. I also bought *Rolling Our Own: Women as Printers, Publishers and Distributors* and *In Other Words: Writing as a Feminist*.

What amazes me now, looking at these, is the amount of feminist publishers and magazines and pamphleteers there were (including the wonderful *Older Feminists' Newsletter* and the *Older Lesbians' Newsletter* – there's one for all the 20 somethings who think they invented feminism!!). I know some have been replaced with blogs and other internet forums, but, sadly, many have gone. You can see from my annotations on the pages from *In Other Words* how many I applied to.



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7 General non-fiction, handbooks, health, fiction, travel, humour, current affairs.

Pluto Press
2 c/o Allison and Busby, 6a Noel Street, London W1V 3RB
3 01–734 1498
4 Margaret Busby
6 Approx 50 titles in print
7 Radical imprint, with books on feminism, socialism, anti-racism, Ireland, current events and popular culture.

Polity Press
2 (Editorial) Dales Brewery, Gwydir Street, Cambridge CB1 2LJ
3 0223 324315
4 Michelle Stanworth/Editor
5 Feminist perspectives
6 About 6
7 Interested in all aspects of feminist studies which relate to the social sciences, history, sociology, politics, literature and general books.

Prism Press
2 2 South Street, Bridport, Dorset
3 0308 27022
4 Gail Chester
5 Feminist series
6 3–4
7 Intelligent non-fiction, with an emphasis on political analysis and debate.

Routledge and Kegan Paul
2 11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
3 01–583 9855
4 Philippa Brewster
7 Feminist studies for academic and specialized general readership, mainly cross-disciplinary in the areas of history, politics and popular culture.

Sheba Feminist Publishers
2 10a Bradbury Street, London N16 8JN
3 01–254 1590
4 Raeann Robertson
6 6–8
7 Fiction, poetry, new women writers, black women's writing, non-fiction, lesbian writing, children's books.

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Stramullion
2 c/o First of May Bookshop, 43 Candlemaker Row, Edinburgh
3 031–225 2612
4 Liz Burns
6 3
7 Books specifically of Scottish interest or with a Scottish connection.

Tavistock Publications Ltd
2 11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
3 01–583 9855
4 Caroline Lane/Gill Davies
7 Social policy, social welfare, third world, health.

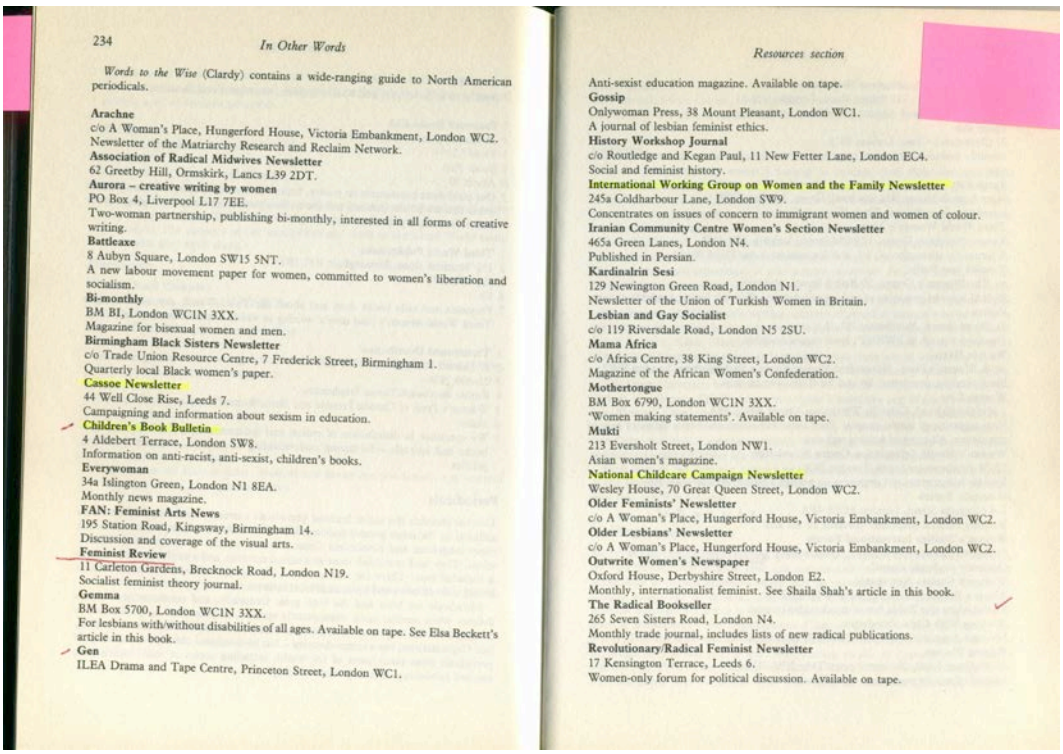
Virago Press
2 41 William IV Street, London WC2
3 01–379 6977
6 Approx 85
7 Feminist company publishing books which illuminate and celebrate all aspects of women's lives, including fiction, poetry, autobiography, health, women's studies, literary criticism, both new books and reprints.

Women's Community Press
2 44 East Essex Street, Dublin 2, Ireland
3 Dublin 712149
4 Marianne Hendron
6 6
7 Irish community publications, collections from writing groups, information booklets, feminist, lesbian and gay writing. No fiction, poetry or manuscripts from individual women. We also undertake distribution for other feminist/community presses.

The Women's Press
2 34 Great Sutton Street, London EC1V 0DX
3 01–251 3007
6 About 50
7 Feminist publisher publishing books by women. Interested in fiction (including science fiction), politics, history and art history, psychology, health, humour and other issues concerning women.

Womenwrite Press
2 PO Box 77, Cardiff CF2 4XX
3 0222 496062
6 About 3

Annotated pages 230–231 from *In Other Words*.



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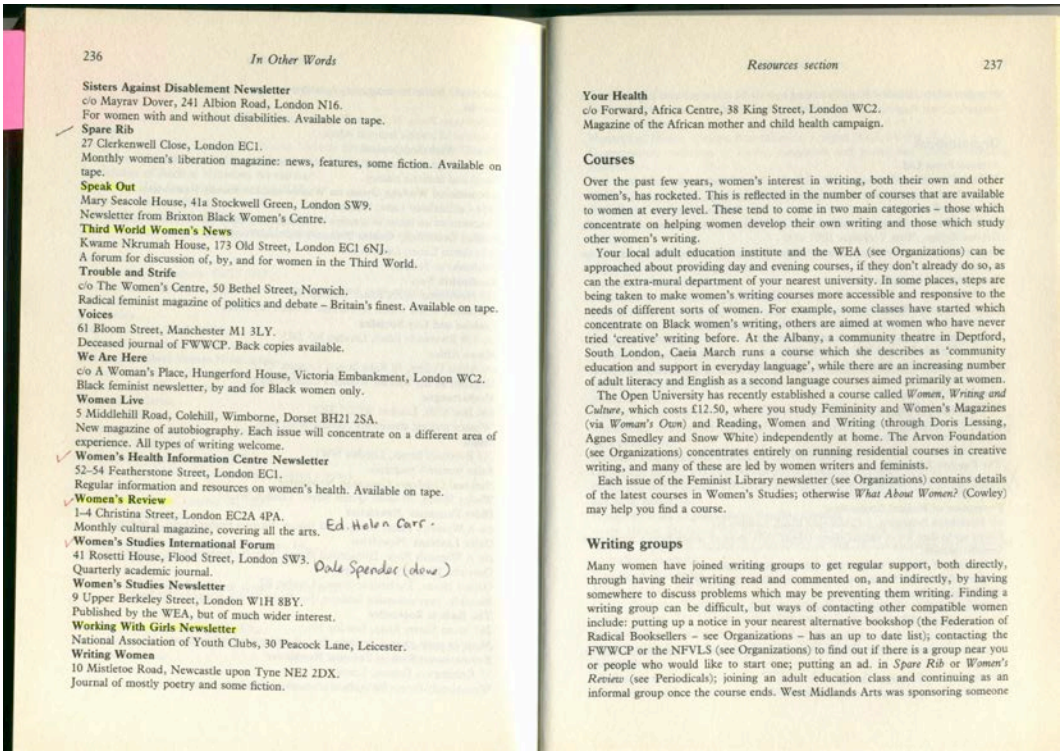
Words to the Wise (Clardy) contains a wide-ranging guide to North American periodicals.

Arachne
c/o A Woman's Place, Hungerford House, Victoria Embankment, London WC2.
Newsletter of the Matriarchy Research and Reclaim Network.
Association of Radical Midwives Newsletter
62 Greetby Hill, Ormskirk, Lancs L39 2DT.
Aurora – creative writing by women
PO Box 4, Liverpool L17 7EE.
Two-woman partnership, publishing bi-monthly, interested in all forms of creative writing.
Battleaxe
8 Aubyn Square, London SW15 5NT.
A new labour movement paper for women, committed to women's liberation and socialism.
Bi-monthly
BM BI, London WC1N 3XX.
Magazine for bisexual women and men.
Birmingham Black Sisters Newsletter
c/o Trade Union Resource Centre, 7 Frederick Street, Birmingham 1.
Quarterly local Black women's paper.
Cassoe Newsletter
44 Well Close Rise, Leeds 7.
Campaigning and information about sexism in education.
Children's Book Bulletin
4 Aldebert Terrace, London SW8.
Information on anti-racist, anti-sexist, children's books.
Everywoman
34a Islington Green, London N1 8EA.
Monthly news magazine.
FAN: Feminist Arts News
195 Station Road, Kingsway, Birmingham 14.
Discussion and coverage of the visual arts.
Feminist Review
11 Carleton Gardens, Brecknock Road, London N19.
Socialist feminist theory journal.
Gemma
BM Box 5700, London WC1N 3XX.
For lesbians with/without disabilities of all ages. Available on tape. See Elsa Beckett's article in this book.
Gen
ILEA Drama and Tape Centre, Princeton Street, London WC1.

Resources section

Anti-sexist education magazine. Available on tape.
Gossip
Onlywoman Press, 38 Mount Pleasant, London WC1.
A journal of lesbian feminist ethics.
History Workshop Journal
c/o Routledge and Kegan Paul, 11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4.
Social and feminist history.
International Working Group on Women and the Family Newsletter
245a Coldharbour Lane, London SW9.
Concentrates on issues of concern to immigrant women and women of colour.
Iranian Community Centre Women's Section Newsletter
465a Green Lanes, London N4.
Published in Persian.
Kardinalrin Sesi
129 Newington Green Road, London N1.
Newsletter of the Union of Turkish Women in Britain.
Lesbian and Gay Socialist
c/o 119 Riversdale Road, London N5 2SU.
Mama Africa
c/o Africa Centre, 38 King Street, London WC2.
Magazine of the African Women's Confederation.
Mothertongue
BM Box 6790, London WC1N 3XX.
'Women making statements'. Available on tape.
Mukti
213 Eversholt Street, London NW1.
Asian women's magazine.
National Childcare Campaign Newsletter
Wesley House, 70 Great Queen Street, London WC2.
Older Feminists' Newsletter
c/o A Woman's Place, Hungerford House, Victoria Embankment, London WC2.
Older Lesbians' Newsletter
c/o A Woman's Place, Hungerford House, Victoria Embankment, London WC2.
Outwrite Women's Newspaper
Oxford House, Derbyshire Street, London E2.
Monthly, internationalist feminist. See Shaila Shah's article in this book.
The Radical Bookseller
265 Seven Sisters Road, London N4.
Monthly trade journal, includes lists of new radical publications.
Revolutionary/Radical Feminist Newsletter
17 Kensington Terrace, Leeds 6.
Women-only forum for political discussion. Available on tape.

Annotated pages 234–235 from *In Other Words*.



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Sisters Against Disablement Newsletter
c/o Mayrav Dover, 241 Albion Road, London N16.
For women with and without disabilities. Available on tape.
Spare Rib
27 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1.
Monthly women's liberation magazine: news, features, some fiction. Available on tape.
Speak Out
Mary Seacole House, 41a Stockwell Green, London SW9.
Newsletter from Brixton Black Women's Centre.
Third World Women's News
Kwame Nkrumah House, 173 Old Street, London EC1 6NJ.
A forum for discussion of, by, and for women in the Third World.
Trouble and Strife
c/o The Women's Centre, 50 Bethel Street, Norwich.
Radical feminist magazine of politics and debate – Britain's finest. Available on tape.
Voices
61 Bloom Street, Manchester M1 3LY.
Deceased journal of FWWCP. Back copies available.
We Are Here
c/o A Woman's Place, Hungerford House, Victoria Embankment, London WC2.
Black feminist newsletter, by and for Black women only.
Women Live
5 Middlehill Road, Colehill, Wimborne, Dorset BH21 2SA.
New magazine of autobiography. Each issue will concentrate on a different area of experience. All types of writing welcome.
Women's Health Information Centre Newsletter
52–54 Featherstone Street, London EC1.
Regular information and resources on women's health. Available on tape.
Women's Review
1–4 Christina Street, London EC2A 4PA. Ed. Helen Carr.
Monthly cultural magazine, covering all the arts.
Women's Studies International Forum
41 Rosetti House, Flood Street, London SW3. Dale Spender (chair)
Quarterly academic journal.
Women's Studies Newsletter
9 Upper Berkeley Street, London W1H 8BY.
Published by the WEA, but of much wider interest.
Working With Girls Newsletter
National Association of Youth Clubs, 30 Peacock Lane, Leicester.
Writing Women
10 Mistletoe Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 2DX.
Journal of mostly poetry and some fiction.

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Your Health
c/o Forward, Africa Centre, 38 King Street, London WC2.
Magazine of the African mother and child health campaign.

Courses

Over the past few years, women's interest in writing, both their own and other women's, has rocketed. This is reflected in the number of courses that are available to women at every level. These tend to come in two main categories – those which concentrate on helping women develop their own writing and those which study other women's writing.

Your local adult education institute and the WEA (see Organizations) can be approached about providing day and evening courses, if they don't already do so, as can the extra-mural department of your nearest university. In some places, steps are being taken to make women's writing courses more accessible and responsive to the needs of different sorts of women. For example, some classes have started which concentrate on Black women's writing, others are aimed at women who have never tried 'creative' writing before. At the Albany, a community theatre in Deptford, South London, Caeia March runs a course which she describes as 'community education and support in everyday language', while there are an increasing number of adult literacy and English as a second language courses aimed primarily at women.

The Open University has recently established a course called *Women, Writing and Culture*, which costs £12.50, where you study Femininity and Women's Magazines (via *Woman's Own*) and Reading, Women and Writing (through Doris Lessing, Agnes Smedley and Snow White) independently at home. The Arvon Foundation (see Organizations) concentrates entirely on running residential courses in creative writing, and many of these are led by women writers and feminists.

Each issue of the Feminist Library newsletter (see Organizations) contains details of the latest courses in Women's Studies; otherwise *What About Women?* (Cowley) may help you find a course.

Writing groups

Many women have joined writing groups to get regular support, both directly, through having their writing read and commented on, and indirectly, by having somewhere to discuss problems which may be preventing them writing. Finding a writing group can be difficult, but ways of contacting other compatible women include: putting up a notice in your nearest alternative bookshop (the Federation of Radical Booksellers – see Organizations – has an up to date list); contacting the FWWCP or the NFVLS (see Organizations) to find out if there is a group near you or people who would like to start one; putting an ad. in *Spare Rib* or *Women's Review* (see Periodicals); joining an adult education class and continuing as an informal group once the course ends. West Midlands Arts was sponsoring someone

Annotated pages 236–237 from *In Other Words*.

And, while I didn't get called for any interviews, I was heartened to be invited in for advice and a chat more than once. In fact, it was my teaching qualifications and experience that got me my first job – as an editor with NFER-Nelson (where I worked for two years and edited the UK's first SATs). I felt that if I got some solid editorial experience, I could then do another round of applications.

Then came my Damascus moment. I don't quite know how I came to hear about it, but I went to a Letterbox conference. Hearing all the passionate speakers I realised that while it might be exciting and invigorating to work in feminist or academic publishing, it would be publishing, so to speak, for the converted. But, if I were to move into children's publishing, I would have a chance to influence young minds and perhaps to help create the feminist readers of the future!; see also www.letterboxlibrary.com/.)

Letterbox Library
A CHILDREN'S BOOKSELLERS CELEBRATING EQUALITY & DIVERSITY

And so began a course of reading that brought together my two passions: child development and politics. I started with *Untying the Apron Strings*, edited by Naima Browne and Pauline France (OUP), first published in 1986. It presented arguments and research to challenge ideas of biological determinism, quoting from Archer (1978), Griffiths and Saraga (1979), Bland (1981), Maccoby and Jackline (1974), and Fairweather (1976). Looking at them again now, I particularly love the comment In *Untying the Apron Strings* (p.52), 'given the theoretical criticisms of biological explanations it is surprising to find so many people *still* continuing to promote such ideas.' (my italics – this was in 1986!). *In Other Words: Writing as a Feminist* edited by Gail Chester and Sigrid Nielsen (Hutchinson, 1986) was also a huge influence. To quote a paragraph from Caroline Halliday's chapter 'I tell my 3 year old she's real…: writing lesbian-feminist children's books':

> Reading a bedtime story is not as calm as it used to be. Not if you are a lesbian mother with a daughter who as a disability. A child needs to find her/his self, her likeness in the books she uses, not some patriarchal notion of the 'normal' child. … Writing for children in this context demands thinking out and expressing the most exciting politics I can manage, to present positive and accurate images of children and adults with disabilities … and at the same time reduce the racism and class stereotypes. (p.46)

I love that she names the 'stereotypes of physically perfect, white, middle-class children who live with mum and dad' (p.46) as a '*patriarchal* notion of what is normal' (p.46) (as opposed to the apolitical justifications that are routinely trotted out nowadays – we were confident about our political language in 1986!). Halliday also said she wanted 'men to write and present alternative images of themselves and boys' lives, to the macho, role-playing stereotypes of Tarzan, or, daddy out washing the car' (p.47).

She went on to say:

> Feminist children's books *must show the multiracial society* in this country, in which children and woman live in different classes and are affected by race and class divisions. The books must explain how people live in different ways here and all over the world. (p.47))

This challenged my thinking. I regarded myself as someone whose feminist politics fed a desire for equality across class and race, but I had not given as much thought to the effect of stereotypical images on the development of young Black children as I had, for example, thought about their impact on young girls.

So began another tranche of reading. *Reading Into Racism Bias In Children's Literature and Learning Materials* by Gillian Klein (Routledge (1985)) being first among the books I devoured. Klein presented evidence from studies which showed that providing Black children with positive role models (both real people and in books) led to a positive shift in self-image. She also describes how Black children were quite capable of reading, but had little motivation to read when they didn't see themselves or their experiences reflected in the books they used.

Klien helpfully provides references to resources, reports and articles for teachers by ILEA (Inner London Education Authority), CRE (Centre for Research in Education) and NUT (National Union of Teachers). She talks at length about two librarians (p.20) who began to respond to the mismatch between ethnic-minority readers and the books that were available in Britain in the 1970s. Janet Hill and Judith Elkin provided bibliographic information on children's books that took account of racial and cultural diversity to enable teachers, librarians and others working with children to find these books. But they also highlighted the dearth of material available and, with others, set about improving the supply and creating demand. Klien notes that Judith Elkin 'had far more to choose from in her 1983 series of six articles for the journal *Books for Keeps*: '"Multicultural books for children"'.

This groundswell of research, consciousness raising, and demand for better material was garnering a positive response. Publishers like Frances Lincoln, Gollancz, Magi, Soma, Tamarind and Child's Play published strongly diverse lists, and even mainstream publishers like Penguin and Puffin made a real effort, as described in *Books for Keeps*. In September 1988, their News section celebrated Puffin's 'three new booklists': Equality Street (multicultural list); Ms Muffet Fights Back (non-sexist list) both compiled by Susan Adler, an equal-opportunities librarian; and Special Needs, compiled by Beverley Mathias, director of the National Library for the Handicapped Child. These were lists (under the three headings) of books published or about to be published by Puffin. I was lucky to be part of this wonderful momentum as I got my first job in children's publishing at Child's Play at the end of 1991.

In 1991, also following that life-changing Letterbox conference, I joined The Working Group Against Racism in Children's Resources. Sitting alongside Verna Wilkins, Nandini Mane, Abiola Ogunsola, Steph Smith, Eileen Brown, Asha Kathoria, Rita Mitchell, Lorna Stoddart, Robert Roach and Felicity Weitzel (among so many others who gave of their time), I learned so much. In 1992 we came to the conclusion that, in addition to campaigning *against* racism (*Little Black Sambo* was still widely distributed at the time), the time had come to *celebrate* publishers who were producing books we would be

happy to promote to schools and libraries. We set about producing *Guidelines and Selected Titles* and were thrilled to hit a magic 100 books that we were happy to stand by. The introduction to our publication in 1993 pulled together some of the research and arguments for the importance of inclusive non-biased books for children; we included the criteria we had used; and included a checklist which had developed out of our reviewing so teachers and librarians could use it for future reviews. We were disappointed that so many of the books were American imports, but felt happy that the momentum was moving in a positive direction.

The publication was a great success. It pulled together in one place what was available, and teachers and librarians could be confident that the selected books had been vetted by a diverse group. The working group was invited by publishers, editors, teachers and many others to give workshops based on the selection and on the criteria, and the book collection itself was available for use at conferences and courses, etc. In fact it was so successful that we followed it with a second, up-dated publication in 1996 with an introduction by James Berry.

Between 1991 and 1995 my own working life had also been moving forward. I had worked at Victoria House Publishing in Bath, at Readers Digest and at Frances Lincoln. In 1995 I was asked to start a new list for DeAgostini Editions and it was wonderful to be able to start a fresh list that I hoped could be inclusive from the beginning. The list was successful, but the Italian owners decided to shut it down after only two years. The sales director and I did a management buy-out in 1997 (a learning experience in itself) and started Zero to Ten publishing, which in turn was bought by Evans Brothers. In 2002 I was made redundant, and in 2004 I started my own small imprint Alanna Books.

The year 2004 saw another resurgence of focus on the lack of diversity in publishing. *The Bookseller* magazine in association with the Arts Council of England and Decibel carried out a survey and published the results in a report called *In Full Colour*: *Cultural Diversity in Book Publishing Today*.

Nicholas Clee introduced the report with a leader called 'Diversity Makes Business Sense'. He argued that 'the moral arguments for cultural diversity are backed by strong economic incentives', pointing out that the advertising industry estimates that 'Black and Asian communities have an annual disposal income of £32bn'. He went on to say that 'the book industry is much engaged at present with the project of "expanding the market"', and that publishing would have to adapt (by becoming more diverse) in order to reach changing audiences.

This message, that publishing needed to become more diverse, not just because it was the right thing to do, but because it would lead to commercial success, was a great step forwards. It seemed that we'd won the moral arguments and now the commercial ones too - it kicked into touch any counter-arguments that diversity was a 'nice to have' luxury.

A less rosy picture was painted by *Are you Simpatico?* (*In Full Colour*, p.13) by Benedicte Page of *The Bookseller*. In it Andrea Levy argued that despite successes of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, 'Black writers need to be better than their white counterparts to be accepted for publication'. The article also bemoaned the fact that publishers are happier with novels that deal with issues of race, effectively ghettoising writers. The Bookseller report was followed swiftly by the launch of the Diversity in Publishing Network (DipNet) to tackle the issues raised by the report.

Diversity in Publishing Network

Embargoed for 00.01hrs February 9 2005

NETWORK LAUNCHED TO PROMOTE DIVERSITY WITHIN PUBLISHING

'British publishing is, to put it baldly, the whitest creative industry around'

Hari Kunzru

Next week sees the launch of a new network to promote diversity within the publishing world. The Diversity in Publishing Network (DipNet) has been established in response to the issues raised in 2004 when the Arts Council England and *The Bookseller* conducted a survey into cultural diversity in publishing.

The first ever survey of its kind, *In Full Colour* found that nearly half the people working within publishing who were surveyed felt that they were working in a 'white, middle-class ghetto'. *In Full Colour* also found that management levels were almost exclusively white and that representation in other areas was poor.

DipNet aims to promote the status and contribution of people from diverse ethnic groups in all areas of publishing, as well as to provide a forum for discussion. The network will encourage debate on all areas within the publishing process by programming a series of events throughout the year. These will cover topics relating to editorial, sales and marketing through to issues affecting authors, illustrators, booksellers and the end users – bookbuyers. Support for people working within publishing, as well as those seeking to enter publishing, is also part of its remit.

Alison Morrison and Elise Dillsworth, who have a combined experience of 26 years in the publishing industry, are the co-chairs and established the organisation. They both feel that there is an

Press release from the Diversity in Publishing Network.

March 2006 saw the launch of my first title as Alanna Books, a small inclusive list, launched by a small Black girl in *Lulu Loves the Library*).

Lulu dancing.

The timing seemed perfect – for, shortly afterwards *The Bookseller* had another report, this time focusing specifically on children's publishing called *Books for All – Diversity Matters: Growing Markets in Children's Publishing.* Despite the rather odd cover with 'Wake up to a new Britain' – as if these children had just arrived yesterday!), it was full of interesting articles. In 'Challenge of the Culture Club' Verna Wilkins of Tamarind said the difficulty was *not* in teaching BME (black and minority ethnic) children to read, but in getting them to continue to read when 'they cannot identify with the material they are presented with, or because the book's context and curriculum exclude them'.

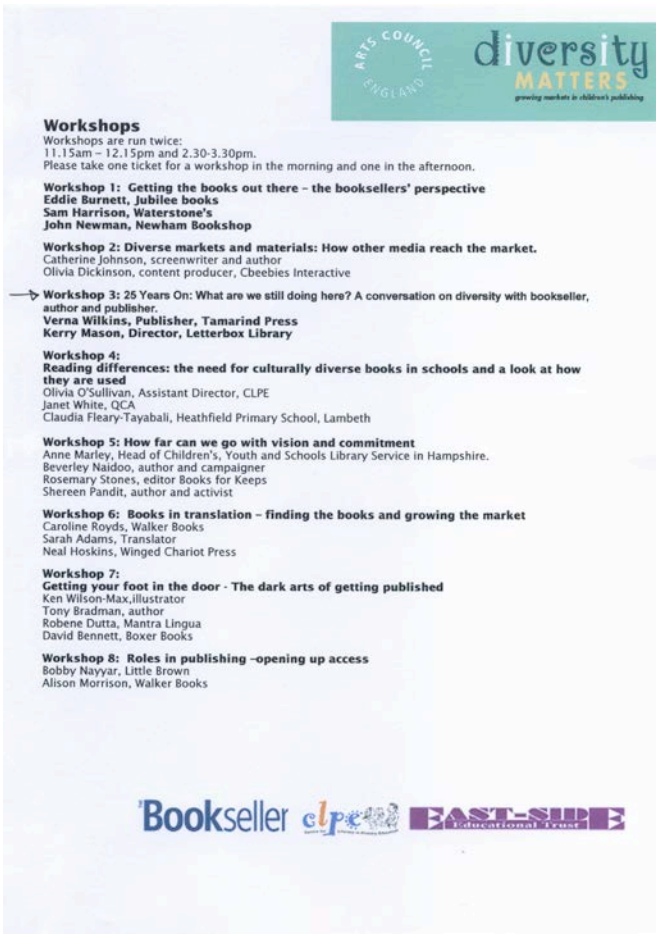
While this was not news to those actively campaigning in the area, it was progress to see it in a mainstream trade journal. Verna Wilkins also spoke about the dozens of manuscripts submitted to her publishing company by parents telling her that 'they haven't found suitable books, so they have attempted to write some themselves'.

This issue of demand outstripping supply was also raised in another article, 'Young and Demanding'. In fact Jenny Morris, owner of the Lion and the Unicorn bookshop, said 'the interest in publishing that kind of book for the general consumer market has almost disappeared', naming 'a few brave publishers such as Frances Lincoln' as continuing to publish culturally diverse books. I remember reading this in disbelief – 25 years on from when the librarians Janet Hill and Judith Elkin first raised the issue of demand outstripping supply and we're still here, and it seems we'd already peaked and I'd missed it!

What was positive was development and growing maturity of that demand. It seemed to me that not only was demand outstripping supply, but that young readers were looking for a more complex, mature and sophisticated read than what was on offer. Young teenagers (themselves growing up in diverse classrooms) who were interviewed by the report bemoaned the mono-ethnic approach of books that focused on one race or culture. As one teen eloquently put it, 'we're not integrated enough in books – publishers aren't letting us mix in'. Literary agent Jennifer Luithlen spoke highly of Bali Rai's work as appealing not just to Asian children but to *all* British teenagers. Another teen in 'The Culturally Diverse Young' added, 'the reason why people don't want to read ethnic writers is because they think they're going to drone on about racism', echoing the comments in the previous report by Benedicte Page about publishers expectations that BME writers should write about BME issues.

The Bookseller report was followed swiftly by plans for a Books for All initiative to run the following year. Booksellers agreed to devote store space for BME writing during May and June 2017. So, while I was disappointed at the need to restate some, by now, very old arguments, I was very excited that the book industry seemed to be accepting the commercial as well as the moral arguments for inclusion, and taking positive, practical actions. It seemed to me that the Books for All campaign was limited by its one-month duration, but it was hoped that this would be a pilot for future initiatives.

I was also excited that the demand of readers was growing and maturing. It seemed to me that important as consciousness-raising was, there was a growing appetite for books that were what I would call *naturally* diverse and inclusive; which were not *about* race or focused on minority *issues*, but rather had regular stories that *just happened* to feature a BME character or family. For me, it had always been important that BME children (and girls and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) characters and those with disabilities) had a right to be in *any* story. Then in June 2006 the Arts Council organised the Diversity Matters conference. There were talks and panel discussions and workshops, including one, ironically called *25 Years On: What Are We Still Doing Here? A Conversation on Diversity*, with bookseller, author and publisher Verna Wilkins of Tamarind and Kerry Mason of Letterbox. For, welcome though the conference was, it was 15 years since that Letterbox conference in 1991, and over 30 years since those demands from the two heroic librarians. It was valid to ask why were we still having the same discussions.



Diversity Matters: Growing Markets in Children's Publishing conference.

And this, can I point out was 2006. Yet here we are again in November 2014 – almost another ten years later – talking about the right to be included. Of course it's not wrong to have this discussion, in fact, sadly, it is very necessary. But my question is: what can we do to make sure we're NOT having the same debate in 2024?

I have some suggestions. First, know your history. We have been fighting for the right of children to see themselves in books and so feel that they belong since at least the 1970s. We've done the research. We already know that:

babies are aware of and negatively affected by bias from as early as 18 months;

not seeing themselves in literature negatively effects children's motivation to read and learn, their self-esteem and their mental health;

narrow 'norms' offered in literature also damage 'mainstream' children, limiting their dreams imaginations and their capacity for empathy and understanding;

publishers are not 'charities', but we also know that demand continues to outstrip supply and that there are lots of customers for inclusive books;

the argument that books with pink glittery (able-bodied, white, straight) princesses / blue macho (able-bodied, white, straight) heroes is 'just what children want' is spurious;

we're not asking for bland, politically correct, inoffensive stories in grey covers about beige children set in some 'ideal world';

we just want books that have a range of characters that reflect the *real* diverse world we live in;

There have been volumes and volumes of studies and reports and articles and books and blogs explaining and defending and proving over and over and over and over and over. So I think we can safely stop explaining and defending and proving.

We already know!

We need to act!

We cannot allow children's reading, development, imaginations and dreams to be limited by narrow revenue categories however convenient and successful they are for retailers. While the industry regards inclusive or diverse books as *not* commercial they are pushed off the shelf by the 'easy sell' of pink glitter and adventure stories. So, while ours might be a political campaign, *it is fought in a commercial arena* and money talks. This was brought home to me recently by the storm that erupted over *The Independent*'s book reviewer Katy Guest's decision to no longer review books that had 'for boys' or 'for girls' in the title (this was in support of the Let Books be Books campaign). Wow! Was she attacked! Scrolling through comments, what saddened me (aside from the violent nature of the attacks) was the amount of energy, space and time people spent defending the need for diversity, arguing about biological determinism. I thought, you know, we don't need to do this, *we already know*. (What I did suggest was that to counter all those who threatened to never buy *The Independent* again, anyone supporting Katy should not limit themselves to tweeting support, but should go out and buy *The Independent* that Sunday – buy two copies! You can read my blog about it at www.annamcquinn.com/blog/heads-above-the-parapet). I felt we needed to put our money where our mouths were and show *The Independent* that its editorial policy had customers.

So what can *you* do?

1. **Read**
   Look at your own reading choices and any that you have influence over (children, colleagues, students, family, customers…);

2. **Buy**
   If the industry thinks there isn't a market, we have to show them (give more diverse books as presents, at Christmas, as donations…);

3. **Order**
   If your local bookshop or library or school doesn't have the (diverse) book you want, don't just get it elsewhere, order it, demand they stock it (if it's a school, donate it)! (Otherwise they may never realise that there's a demand).

   (The #WeNeedDiversBooks campaign in the USA asked all librarians attending the American Library Association conference to ask at every publisher's display what diverse books they were offering);

4. **Recommend**
   To friends, family, colleagues, in blogs, on Twitter ….

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