



FEATURE

The more things change

Mass protests for racial justice prompted a reevaluation of publishing's racist systems. A year later, a handful of organizations have made demonstrable change.

BY SAMANTHA EDWARDS ILLUSTRATION BY ELICSER

BY NEXT YEAR, Jen Sookfong Lee will have published 10 books with six different publishers, ranging from multinationals to small independents. Yet, during that time, she's only ever worked with one non-white editor. At mostly white literary festivals and events, she's been mistaken for other Asian-Canadian authors such as Madeleine Thien and Evelyn Lau. And when the hashtag #PublishingPaidMe, which highlighted the pay inequality between white and BIPOC authors, went viral last summer, Lee learned white authors she considers peers received advances that were sometimes 15 times more than hers. "#PublishingPaidMe was the worst hashtag," says Lee. "I've literally never felt so bad about myself."

Canadian book publishing has a diversity problem. This isn't breaking news. In 2018, the Association of Canadian Publishers launched a survey to measure diversity within Canadian publishing and found that 82 per cent of respondents were white and 48 per cent of leaders – three-quarters of whom were white – said they had no future plans to support initiatives related to diversity and inclusion in their workplaces.

But in response to the murder of George Floyd and mass protests

calling for racial justice, conversations about diversity within Canadian presses were pushed to the forefront. Publishers both big and small began announcing commitments to address the lack of diversity within the industry, from introducing anti-racism training for staff to publishing more books by BIPOC authors.

Last August, HarperCollins Canada launched Open Inbox, an initiative for BIPOC creators to submit their unagented, unpublished middle-grade manuscripts. Indigo joined the #15PercentPledge, a commitment to dedicate at least 15 per cent of its shelf space to BIPOC authors by the end of 2021, and appointed Chika Stacy Oriuwa – a psychiatry resident at the University of Toronto and spoken-word poet and writer – to its board of directors to help inform its diversity and inclusion efforts. Acknowledging "the hard truth that our support and work for diversity in all its forms is not represented in the books we publish," ECW Press announced it would hire one or more BIPOC acquisitions editors and give them full financial reign to develop titles of their choice. Lee was one of the editors hired.

If other Canadian publishers follow through on their commitments, these initiatives could have a lasting impact on the industry for decades to come. In a notoriously opaque industry, however, actually tracking that progress is difficult.

“I think with the bigger publishers, it was good that those statements came out,” says Lee. “But my question has always been: when you have a company that is a multinational, that has so many layers and levels of staffing and protocols, how does that change occur?”

The overwhelming whiteness of CanLit ripples through every facet of the industry. It starts with the type of people who major in English or publishing at post-secondary institutions, who can afford to do low-paid internships, and who get promoted to more senior roles. In turn, that impacts which books get acquired, how they’re promoted each season, and which ones become bestsellers. It shapes the programming of literary events and reinforces the culture of Canadian publishing. In order to address these fundamental inequities, change is needed across the board.

Last June, Penguin Random House Canada released the most comprehensive action plan of Canada’s multinationals. It outlined several efforts, ranging from improving diversity within its workforce to scrutinizing the advance levels it pays BIPOC authors versus white authors.

Since then, the publisher has hired the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion to conduct a diversity survey, which found that 73 per cent of employees are white and less than 15 per cent of managers are racialized. PRHC also started anti-racism training with the Black- and Indigenous-led organization Future Ancestors and is sponsoring a new award in Greg Younging’s name for an Indigenous student pursuing their master of publishing at Simon Fraser University. It’s also expanding recruitment efforts to reach a wider swath of candidates. “This means further refining and more deeply applying inclusive, equity-oriented principles in our hiring practices from job posting to job offer, further demystifying publishing to reach people who might not have seen roles in our industry as a clear possibility,” Kristin Cochrane, CEO of PRHC, tells *Q&Q*.

On its website, HarperCollins Canada outlines an action plan that includes strategies “to remove barriers and better attract and retain employees in BIPOC communities.” When asked for information regarding the racial makeup of its Canadian office, the initiatives it planned to develop, and how many manuscripts were accepted via Open Inbox, HarperCollins Canada declined to comment.

Of course, not all publishers have the resources for such large-scale initiatives, which is where the Association of Canadian Publishers has stepped in. Last summer, ACP created a new subsidy program for members seeking anti-racism and equity training, reallocating funds that would have been used for in-person programming that was cancelled due to the pandemic. ACP also launched a public database of freelancers from diverse backgrounds.

ACP executive director Kate Edwards says she believes over the last year there has been a renewed effort to increase diversity within Canadian publishing. “What I think is different is you’re seeing companies being quite public about their internal diversity, equity, and inclusion plans,” says Edwards, who points to Owlkids Books’ recent open call for submissions from BIPOC communities as an example. “I’m very encouraged that these initiatives are being publicized and people are saying, ‘This is what we intend to do and these are our objectives.’ That’s something to measure against in the future, which we haven’t necessarily had in the past.”

But for BIPOC of Canadian Publishing – a collective founded by Aeman Ansari, an editor in Toronto; Hana El Niwairi, senior rights associate at the Cooke Agency International; Marina Ferreira, production associate at Podium Audio; and Paige Gunning, consumer engagement coordinator at Penguin Random House Canada – the responses from last summer have been largely performative. The collective stresses that immediate, radical action is required to actually change the industry in a meaningful way.

“The whole business structure, workplace environment, and mindset of publishing institutions need to change,” the collective said in an emailed statement to *Q&Q*. “Adding more BIPOC authors and employees when the system is fundamentally problematic is a Band-Aid at best; without actual power and a willingness to dismantle the existing systems and reimagine a different, equitable, and liberated industry, changing the numbers and faces within the system only pushes the problems further down the line.”

“The whiteness of publishing has always been apparent to me, and it really led me down this path of asking why,” says Léonicka Valcius, an associate agent with Transatlantic Agency. “I think all of my career has been trying to find those answers.”

What she found isn’t exactly surprising: the industry is very low paying and until recently it relied on unpaid internships; during the hiring process, the idea of “good fit” is measured against the status quo, which means people with different perspectives or experiences can be perceived as unqualified or unprofessional.

Valcius has worked her way up the publishing rungs – from an intern at HarperCollins Canada to French book buyer for Scholastic Book Fairs to sales at PRHC to her current role as a literary agent – and is now in a position to help break down some of those barriers. “I work almost exclusively with writers of colour,” she says. “That has always been really important to me.”

Valcius believes her strengths as an agent come from her experience working in sales but also from knowing how to advocate for her clients in an industry that historically hasn’t prioritized people of colour. She sees parallels between how the healthcare and publishing industries operate, where small dismissals accumulate and eventually lead to worse outcomes for people on the margins.

“Somebody putting you lower on the list to be triaged in the ER or choosing to go to another patient before you, those small choices accrue to having an overall poor experience in the medical system,” she says. “I think it’s the same with publishing and the experience of marginalized writers across all sorts of different identities. If an editor has 15 manuscripts to read in a weekend, how do they organize those manuscripts? If a sales team has 100 books to pitch in an hour, how do they organize those books? The reason I have chosen to work exclusively with people of colour is because I don’t have to make those triages. All of my time and energy goes to people of colour.”

As for how the industry needs to change, Valcius says publishers need to treat equity and justice goals the same as they would business goals: set targets and actively work toward them. “Honestly, the important work is done internally and it’s not for show,” she says. “It’s work that has to be done at management and personnel levels, at logistics and training. None of that is sexy and none of that is Instagrammable. But it’ll show up in their retention rates, the happiness of their employees, and the longevity of their work.” **Q**