

A Conflicted Cultural Force': What It's Like to Be Black in Publishing

An author, literary agent, marketer, publicist, editors and booksellers talk about how race affects their careers — and the books you read.

Interviews by **Concepción de León, Alexandra Alter, Elizabeth A. Harris and Joumana Khatib**

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The nationwide protests against police brutality and racial injustice have set off conversations in nearly every industry about the treatment of Black workers, and book publishing is no exception.

The industry has long been criticized for hiring and retaining so few employees of color — according to a survey of the work force released this year by the children's book publisher Lee & Low Books, only 5 percent are Black. But the calls to diversify have intensified in recent weeks, as Black professionals have publicly shared long-suppressed frustrations about how racial prejudice has affected their work. In publishing, that has included discussions of hiring practices, workplace microaggressions and publishing companies' treatment of books by Black writers.

Publishers say they are listening. They are seeing books about race and racism dominate best-seller lists, and several companies have committed to changing their hiring practices and the books they publish.

Eight publishing professionals — working in different facets of the industry, including an author, literary agent, marketer, publicist, editors and booksellers — told us what they are seeing now and what they've seen before, how being Black has affected their careers, and what they hope the future will bring. Here are their responses, which have been condensed and edited.

Tracy Sherrod

Editorial director, **Amistad**



"It's assumed that Black editors don't know white books and white publishing, but we do," Tracy Sherrod said. "What do you think we've been reading all these years?" September Dawn Bottoms/The New York Times

'The only really painful thing about racism in publishing is the books that are not around.'

It took seven years of interviews for an editorial assistant position. I used to make a joke that I was the oldest editorial assistant in the world. But it didn't matter to me because I was very, very happy to be working with books. Once I discovered that this could be a career, there was nothing that was going to stop me. And I think that's the spirit of all the Black editors in publishing: There's nothing that's going to stop them from doing this job.

I think publishers hold certain beliefs about what is universal, and oftentimes we don't fit, our stories don't fit into that equation. At Amistad, I'm trying to feed our community by shining a spotlight on Black stories, Black culture, Black history. Because oftentimes what's in the headlines is not the full story of our humanity. What I think has changed or not changed in publishing is that there's more diversity in terms of what is being published in the African-American marketplace, in terms of the variety of stories that are being told. But there's only like seven of us Black editors who have some authority, real authority and power — and it's not full authority and power.

Given my sales history, I think if I weren't a Black woman, I would probably have a higher title. But titles don't really matter to me, just the opportunity to publish books for my people is what matters most, so I don't really focus on that. People who have racist ideas and racist actions do not bother me. I don't let any of those issues influence what I do or the way I think or what I publish. That is a personal problem. I don't let it become my problem. Racism is prevalent in all aspects of American society, and publishing is no different.

Sometimes there are proposals that come along, and you know in your heart that this is an important book on an important subject, but because the editorial room is all white, you may not be able to acquire it, so the only really painful thing about racism in publishing is the books that are not around, the books that didn't get to be published. When I was interviewing for those seven years for an editorial assistant position, I was told multiple times that Black people didn't read. That's an unfortunate belief. Because it's just not true.

We saw this moment in the '70s and late '60s, and that's how Toni Morrison, Marie Brown, Charles Harris, all of those people got into publishing. And then it happened again in the 1990s when Terry McMillan, Alice Walker, they landed on the New York Times best-seller list at the same time, and most of the people in publishing did not know who they were, particularly Terry McMillan. They were like, "Where did she come from?" Whereas we had been always reading Terry McMillan, and this was her third book, "Waiting to Exhale," so we expected it to be on the best-seller list. We knew, her fans, because we're part of the community.

I don't feel comfortable overpaying for a book as an editor of color. I feel a responsibility to watch out for my authors' careers so that they can continue to publish. If an author gets a particular advance, they need to ask their agent, "How many copies do I need to sell to earn this out?" Because it's going to be tougher for them to publish again if they don't earn it out. It hasn't been proven to be the case, from my observations, for white authors.

A white editor can be rewarded for acquiring an expensive Black author. If you did the research, you'd probably find that most people who have acquired a book by a Black author for a large advance, they're promoted, get a new job. I've seen people make their careers off of it. Why do I think that is? Because if a white person puts their stamp on a Black book, it suddenly becomes more valuable. Black editors most definitely must be fiscally responsible to keep your job and to have the pleasurable opportunity of publishing our voices. It's assumed that Black editors don't know white books and white publishing, but we do, because what do you think we've been reading all these years?

Tracy Sherrod is the editorial director of Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins.

Interview by Concepción de León.

Kerri K. Greenidge

Author, **'Black Radical: The Life and Times of William Monroe Trotter'**





"Whatever breakthrough successes I have had have been due to Black women who have steered me in the right direction," Kerri Greenidge said. Mark Elzey Jr for The New York Times

'I tend to think, being a historian, that triumph over racial discrimination or racial bias isn't like, one person gets through and then the floodgates open.'

I knew entering graduate school what I wanted to study, which was African-descended people in New England. And from the beginning, I was told that nobody was going to publish that, unless I was writing about slavery, or unless I was writing about the busing crisis. No one was interested in that history, because No. 1, it hadn't been done before, and No. 2, there weren't that many Blacks in New England. My

book on William Trotter, every place I submitted the manuscript to, the response was that no one was going to read a book that didn't have white people as a protagonist, and who was going to read a book about a Black man that nobody had ever heard about?

If there's one thing I would say about my own story in terms of racism in publishing, it's that whatever breakthrough successes I have had have been due to Black women who have steered me in the right direction. Black women have been the ones who have guided me and told me how to navigate situations. In that sense, I've been very lucky. But until I plugged into that, it was very, very frustrating, in terms of being told that no one was going to read certain Black stories, despite the fact that I had a doctorate and presumably had a little bit of expertise.

The reception for the book was not something I expected. I just wanted to get the history out there and change the narrative we have about Black history and about Black New England and Blackness in spaces that we don't think about it being in. That was my goal, and the accolades are just the icing on the cake.

I tend to think, being a historian, that triumph over racial discrimination or racial bias isn't like, one person gets through and then the floodgates open and everyone goes in after them. I don't particularly have any belief that this moment is going to fundamentally change the industry. I think that what that will take is a fundamental change to all of the avenues through which people produce work. All of that has to change before publishing can change.

Particularly in this moment, there is this idea that what America has to do is come to a moment of reckoning and we'll all learn the error of our ways and things will be reformed, and from a historical perspective that's not the way history works. I point out to my students that the first time the phrase "postracial" was used was the 1910s. That's not to say that I don't think the current moment is a significant moment in a long struggle for rights and equality for Black people, because I think it is. But I also think people are very shortsighted about history and what it takes to make a sustained change.

In terms of publishing and academia, I think those two fields will only catch up if the political momentum on the streets turns into something. Seeing young people starting a movement in the streets in the middle of a pandemic gives me hope and confidence. Seeing this generation of young people turning years of trauma into something that's exploding around the world is inspiring.

Kerri K. Greenidge is an assistant professor in the Department of Studies in Race, Colonialism and Diaspora at Tufts University.

Interview by Alexandra Alter.

Janifer Wilson and Kori Wilson

Owner and operations manager, Sisters Uptown Bookstore



Kori Wilson, left, with her mother, Janifer Wilson, at Sisters Uptown Bookstore in Harlem. Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

'Twenty years later, I still exist.'

JANIFER WILSON: I opened this store because, as a child growing up in southwest Georgia, I never saw any depictions of anybody that looked like me in the books that we were studying. I grew up feeling invisible. I wanted to give back to the community where I chose to live, so when the children would come, they could see books presented and housed, to let them know: "I can have my own business" or "I can be an adventurer."

The struggle of the book business has been astonishing. I've not made money as a book vendor over the last 20 years. That placed the business into the area of a labor of love versus a business that is earning income. Thank God, I had a job, and I made enough money where if the store didn't make money, I was able to pay the store's bills. Someone actually told me, "Oh, she's not going to make it because Black folks don't read." But 20 years later, I still exist.

This is the first time we actually made money to pay our bills and actually be in the position to order a lot more books. We saw thousands of dollars paid into our bank account. This whole surge that we have now with Covid and Black Lives Matter, I have some sort of feeling deep in my spirit in terms of sustainability. To have our business surge in a matter of weeks as the result of an unfortunate incident with a man losing his life and the whole world getting to see it has just impacted my spirit and soul. I get so tearful when I think about how this came about. I'm just prayerful that this is going to be the new way.

KORI WILSON: This is one of the first times in our history where what our mission is and what my mom created in this space is being recognized and actually is connecting to revenue. Definitely we were considered a niche in the business, just putting African diasporic literature at the forefront. It did make a difference as far as notoriety and being recognized in the industry as an independent bookseller. With the larger publishing houses, when they would have their book tours for upcoming seasonal releases, we weren't part of that group.

JANIFER: I think the publishers are going to be forced to look at how they have done business in the past. I think it's going to cause a different relationship with booksellers and publishers. Before, we were just ordering books and there was no real relationship. But I think they're going to need our information and ideals on how they can best move forward in this industry. Now there are folks in marketing who are reaching out to us to partner.

KORI: We really want to be outlets for independent and self-published authors. We were one of the main places that people would come and ask to have a book event or a book launch, so they can try to get their name out there and get some sales because of that gap in the industry between them and the big guys.

JANIFER: There needs to be Black and brown publishers. We need more publishers in our community that will publish the work and not change it. I think the only way that can happen is we need to get into the industry more ourselves.

Other Black booksellers are now recognizing that we're all one and the plight is the same. We're now communicating with each other as to how we can best move through this era. How can we make sure we all stay alive?

KORI: We house and preserve a very specific area of Black studies and Black culture that interests not only Black people. This is information that should be disseminated to all people. We should have more spaces for that. And with the support that we're seeing, hopefully these Black bookstores that already exist can expand. We can put our heads together and figure out how to continue that.

Janifer Wilson is the owner of Sisters Uptown Bookstore in New York City. Kori Wilson, her daughter, is the store's operations manager.

Interview by Concepción de León.

Linda Duggins

Senior director of publicity, Grand Central Publishing



"You bring all the baggage of the systemic racism right through the door with you, whether you know it or not," Linda Duggins said. James Estrin/The New York Times

'I really hope that people will start having real conversations. I don't care if they're difficult.'

There was a time when we promoted and published quite a few Black authors and authors of color, so that was my primary focus quite a few years ago. I used to be the director of multicultural publicity at Warner Books. We used to do lots of those books, and then a shift happened. I think it was an industrywide shift.

Books written by Black writers and people of color — they look at those books a little bit differently. Do those books work? If they do, great. If they don't, let's start phasing them out. Whereas when you look at publishing as a whole, you have books written by all types of authors and most of the books, from where I sit, they're white writers. Some of those books don't do well, but we don't phase out white authors.

The advantage that I had, starting at this publishing house, was this is a second career for me. I was not 20. And I knew that I was going to navigate my way having direct conversations with people. A lot of younger people don't feel comfortable walking into their manager's office and having a conversation like that. I think it really behooves that manager to have a welcoming spot for their employees to have those conversations.

I have had some experiences along the way. For example, a colleague — who didn't know I was a colleague — there was at a gathering for a Black author, I was in the lobby of the building, and she didn't have her ID. I said, "Oh, great, I can get you upstairs," and she turned to me and said, "Oh, are you related to the author?" And the reason she asked me that was that the author was Black. The thing that was the

most upsetting was this editor had worked on a book by this author, and the book was about the racist practices at the inception of this country.

How many times have any of my white colleagues walked up to another white colleague and asked them if they were related to their white author? Probably never.

I have friends who worked for the company well over 10 years and just said, I'm out. Enough is enough and I just can't take it any longer. My ability to be able to read my white colleagues has allowed me to last this long. I'm not suggesting every single day is a battle for me, that's not what I'm saying at all. But I am clear about the level of fear that white people seem to have concerning Black people. I'm clear about that.

I think people have this false impression that this industry is great, it's books, and people love to read and write. But you bring all the baggage of the systemic racism right through the door with you, whether you know it or not.

With all the conversation around Black Lives Matter, all types of publications are supporting and telling people to support independent black-owned bookstores, which I think is awesome. But it does sadden me to know that the push for the sales is connected to that stacking of dead Black bodies. That thing is sad. So yes, buy books by Black writers, absolutely. But why can't we just buy books by Black writers, period.

I hope to see more Black people and people of color at the executive level. I hope to see real training for all entry-level employees. I hope to see managerial training being set up. And I really hope that people will start having real conversations. I don't care if they're difficult. So what? It's difficult when I'm driving down the highway and I get stopped by a policeman and I'm wondering, "Oh my God, am I going to be shot in my head?" That's difficult. And that's real.

I'd like people, especially Black people and people of color, to know that they should invite themselves to this table we call publishing. Don't exclude yourself. We know the pay isn't great. We know that. But at the same time we have to be part of the dialogue and part of the creating of the culture. It's not an easy transition for a lot of folks. I always look at my training — and by training I mean my white-people training. I went to a Catholic school. So I had a different type of training.

There are some editors who are white who care about those kinds of things, they try over and over and over again. But having Black editors to champion Black writers, that's very very important. We have to be at that table.

Linda Duggins is a senior director of publicity at Grand Central Publishing, an imprint of Hachette Book Group.

Interview by Elizabeth A. Harris.

Cherise Fisher

Literary agent, Wendy Sherman Associates



"Publishing has this way of battering into you its assumptions about Black readers," Cherise Fisher said. Brian Fraser for The New York Times

'You can't publish with cynicism.'

I went looking for "Home to Harlem," by Claude McKay, for a class. When I pulled it off the shelf, I saw it was a first edition. I was struck by the fact that I was holding this book that somebody purchased for Yale. I thought to myself: Claude McKay the man, the Jamaican man who was writing during the Harlem Renaissance, could never have imagined in his mind that a Black woman of Caribbean heritage — my family is from Montserrat — would be a Yale student and read his book.

And I thought about all the people who had touched that book and read it, and I felt a connection to them.

After I graduated, I started working for a publisher. My plan was to work for two to three years, then go to law school, become a lawyer and then a literary agent. I ended up having a career as a book editor for decades, which I loved, before becoming an agent.

The first book I edited was "Do They Hear You When You Cry," by Fauziya Kassindja and Layli Miller-Muro. It was a memoir of the first woman who received asylum in the U.S. on the basis of female genital mutilation, in 1996. Fauziya was born in Togo and escaped to Lagos, then Germany, before coming to America.

Working in publishing is very much an apprenticeship. You work for an editor, and they're teaching you the ropes, and they have to be your biggest advocate. They have to promote you, support you and propel you forward. I've had a lot of good sponsors in that way, people who recognized something in me and were ready to back me up. You really need older or more experienced editors to back you up when you're starting out. So in the case of Fauziya's book, I'm sure the editor I worked for got the proposal, knew immediately I would be a good person for it, so she kept pushing me in front of it.

I'm drawn to books about maximizing life experiences: fitness, self-help, a better love life, a better bank account, a better sex life. One of the things about being an editor is that you can't publish with cynicism. You have to absolutely believe it's important. The process of working on a book is nine months not only of editing, but telling everybody how important it is.

I remember getting "Push," by Sapphire. I read it and felt like I understood the book and what it was trying to do, and saw that it did that well. But I personally didn't want to spend the next year in such a dark novel, so I passed. It wasn't meant for me. Maybe it wouldn't have had the huge impact it did if I'd edited it, because I didn't feel it was right for me.

Even as modern and progressive and as Black as I am — I'm *super* Black — publishing has this way of battering into you its assumptions about Black readers.

I got in "Letters to a Young Brother," by Hill Harper, aimed at men between the ages of 15 and 25. I thought to myself, Who's going to want to read this? How do we penetrate that audience and stimulate those guys to read? I knew that Black women were avid readers because I was surrounded by them. I knew Black men were avid readers for the same reason. As an editor, I don't think I believed at that moment that young Black men were interested in reading books. Now that I'm an agent, I don't feel that same splitness anymore.

I remember the period when several publishers were developing special imprints focused on African-Americans: One World, Amistad. Many of those imprints went away because the publishing companies weren't really invested. It's one thing to acquire those books. It's another to have a full team doing their best to penetrate that market, knowing how to market: what magazines to promote in, having a sales force that understands the market and having retailers that know how to sell those books. The late 1990s were glory days. Places like Borders, Waldenbooks — they moved books by Black authors by the ton. When we lost those retail outlets, sales of those books took a dive.

There is an engine in publishing houses. Not every book gets the same amount of gas. Some books get premium. Some get regular. My hope is that the books people are purchasing right now have the full buy-in from the company. This interest and rush to acquire is fantastic, but we need to take it all the way so those books have a fair chance of success. Their success will be a determining factor for future books by diverse voices. Publishers are large corporate conglomerates. They're not cultural institutions — they're businesses.

Cherise Fisher is a literary agent at Wendy Sherman Associates.

Interview by Joumana Khatib.

Ebony LaDelle

Associate director of marketing, HarperCollins





“We assume that every book by a Black author should be marketed in this certain way,” Ebony LaDelle said, “and it’s just not the case.” Joe Fabrizi for The New York Times

‘Black publishing professionals are becoming exhausted from being heard only when it benefits the company’s bottom line.’

The realization that I could have a career in publishing started at Howard University. I worked at the Howard University bookstore, which was at the time independently owned. I worked in marketing. Black people aren’t monolithic, and having this intro into having creative, different marketing campaigns for Black authors within the bookstore was really exciting and also really empowering. We assume that every book by a Black author should be marketed in this certain way, and it’s just not the case.

As a Black woman, I understand the differences between me, my personal life experiences, the things that are important to me versus a woman who is African, versus a woman who is Caribbean. There are so many layers. So when we talk about subject matter within these books, they’re all different.

As a marketer, I’ve marketed not only books by Black authors, but books by white authors. Figuring out the strongest points of the book, how do we pull that out to engage with the consumer, how do we pull the consumer in with some of the concepts that we feel would resonate. It’s interesting to me that it’s so easy for white marketers to pull those things out from books by white authors, but when it comes to Black books, a lot of marketers don’t know how to promote.

I started publishing in what's called an associates program. This program was essentially to bring in diverse hires. It's like a next level up from an intern. Now, mind you: I had a master's degree in publishing, I had attempted to network as best as I could, but it still didn't translate into me getting jobs. It was frustrating. It just made me wonder if I would've gotten into publishing if it had not been for people seeing me on a day-to-day basis and feeling good about me and my work and who I am, versus that unconscious bias of seeing my résumé, seeing my name, seeing Howard University, and dismissing me because I don't quote unquote have enough experience.

I think there has been a lot of change in that regard, where we're finding that more and more people are bringing in talent of color. But how do we keep them? That is the biggest disconnect, because these are assistants and coordinators who have a different background than a lot of their white bosses.

The other issue is the pay. You have a lot of assistants I remember coming up in the industry who would tell me that their parents bought them an apartment in the East Village or they're paying for their rent, and I had two jobs up until I became a manager. I was leaving right at 5 and going to tutor. But when you present that to white counterparts, they're like, "Oh, you have another job?"

I've been thinking a lot about, especially in the past few weeks, how race has played an impact in me and my work and my mental health, and I keep coming back to Audre Lorde's quote, "My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you" — silence from white people but also my own silence and respectability politics.

I think a lot of Black publishing professionals are becoming exhausted from being heard only when it benefits the company's bottom line. I'm constantly giving myself, my voice, my thoughts, when I shouldn't have to prove myself or my knowledge over and over again. White colleagues are able to speak their mind, but when it's my turn, I can't be direct or forthcoming without coming off as aggressive. I know that I and a lot of people like me have spent hours trying to figure out a way to write an email that appeals to a white colleague or make myself more pleasant in some way, because they can't handle honest criticism. I'm just tired of tiptoeing around my feelings to protect theirs. That's another thing that people are going to have to check if they really are about change. You have to check your feelings at the door.

Ebony LaDelle is an associate director of marketing at HarperCollins.

Interview by Concepción de León.

Erroll McDonald

Vice president and executive editor, Pantheon



"I don't think that as a result of white people reading certain books, we're going to be living in a postracial America," Erroll McDonald said. September Dawn Bottoms/The New York Times

'Publishers are now in the ironic position of making money off books by authors that they once held in disfavor.'

I do not believe, regardless of what publishers say, that they are not informed by systemic racism. I know it's very difficult for them to talk about it, if only because publishing presents itself as a sort of bastion of progressive liberalism. I could describe countless instances involving not only myself but other Black people in publishing that will certify what I'm saying. But I'm not interested in rehashing episodes of rank discrimination involving hiring or promotions. What I'm here to testify is that it's there, and it has not gone anywhere.

When I first started in publishing, the mantra was, "Black books don't sell. Black people don't read." What that ignored was that white people don't read, and white people don't buy books. It takes a majority of Blacks *and* whites to turn a book by a Black writer into a best seller. I find it very interesting that nowadays because of the outrage at the murder of George Floyd, the preponderance of books on the nonfiction best-seller list are books about race or by Black writers. Publishers are now in the ironic position of making money off books by authors that they once held in disfavor.

There is, in a curious way, a greater openness to books by and about Black people, but that has not necessarily changed the structure of the industry. Every major publisher now is singing the "diversity of voices" blues. They want to increase diversity of voices, but diversity of voices doesn't have anything to do with anti-Black racism in publishing.

Many a publisher is issuing lists of books that mostly white people should read to inform themselves about the issue. It almost seems as if these books are being bought and read as if they were a genre of self-help book. The scandal for me is that, as a result of reading these self-help books, will there be self-improvement? As with most self-help books, the answer might be no. After all of this hoopla, after all of this self-education, I worry that we're going to wake up and be exactly where we were before any of this happened. I don't think that as a result of white people reading certain books, we're going to be living in a postracial America.

The industry is predominantly a white industry. The number of Black editors in New York City is shockingly de minimis. I work for the largest American book publisher, and I cannot name more than a handful of Black editors there. That is not particular to Penguin Random House, that is endemic to the industry. And I think unless you have systemic change from top to bottom, publishing will remain a conflicted cultural force, that preaches something but doesn't practice it.

Race has affected my career both positively and negatively. Black editors are subject to a certain kind of racial profiling that white editors are not subject to. I've had to, to one degree or another, fight against that — fight against presumptions of what kinds of books I should be interested in or publishing.

Positively because it's allowed me to spread my wings, publish all kinds of things against imagined stereotypes. Several years ago, in the wake of outrage at police violence, I was able to simply go out and commission a book called "Policing the Black Man." It was simply assumed that I would do such a book, so it facilitated things in a certain way. But I have interests that extend far and wide. There have been occasions where the very fact that I was proposing something seemed especially fascinating because it was coming from an unexpected source.

My condition as a Black man in racist America and, by extension, in the publishing industry, which is informed by systemic racism, has not changed in 40-plus years. What has changed are responses to that condition. It's a far better place to be at a publishing company nowadays than it was, say, 40 years ago, when people would say overtly racist things. Now that is not that case, but that doesn't mean that the plague has disappeared. It is there and one has to deal with it in one way or another every single day. But the industry claims to be open to change, and that is a huge difference. Publishers 40 years ago were not talking about these issues. These issues just simply didn't exist.

You shouldn't be able to walk into a publishing company and imagine apartheid. And by that I mean there should be integration from the lowest positions on up to the highest positions. Every aspect of the publishing chain, from marketing to sales to publicity, should contain a rainbow coalition of people. That is my dream, as opposed to having a mostly white hegemony that seems that it would never change.

Erroll McDonald is the vice president and executive editor of Knopf and Pantheon, imprints of Penguin Random House.

Interview by Concepción de León.

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