

July 2024

Diversity in Publishing: Does Author Identity Affect Author Treatment in the North American Fiction Publishing Industry?

Chloe Comeau
Vassar College, cpcomeau@icloud.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/aljsr>



Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#), and the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Comeau, Chloe (2024) "Diversity in Publishing: Does Author Identity Affect Author Treatment in the North American Fiction Publishing Industry?," *Academic Leadership Journal in Student Research*: Vol. 7, Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/aljsr/vol7/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-Reviewed Journals at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership Journal in Student Research by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact ScholarsRepository@fhsu.edu.

Diversity in Publishing: Does Author Identity Affect Author Treatment in the North American Fiction Publishing Industry?

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to my research supervisor, Janet Kurusanather, to all the participants in the study, and my mother, Karenmary Penn, who proofread countless times.

Diversity in Publishing: Does Author Identity Affect Author Treatment in the North American Fiction Publishing Industry?

Chloe Comeau
Vassar College

Abstract

The fiction publishing industry has a long history of promoting only straight, white, cisgender voices in the books they publish and the staff they hire. This study employed the Delphi method to investigate the connection between author identity and author treatment in publishing. In a series of questionnaires, 11 participants answered questions and shared their experiences with diversity in publishing. The results indicated that sexism, homophobia, and racism all exist in the industry, and author identity impacts author treatment in North American fiction publishing. Moreover, the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality of authors combined with publishing's long history of featuring straight, white, cisgender voices create barriers to new, diverse stories. Some promising solutions include diversifying agents, editors, publishing employees, and sales and marketing teams, allowing employees and authors to work

from home to combat classism and ableism, and translating diverse titles into more languages so they can be enjoyed by readers worldwide.

Keywords: diversity, publishing, author treatment, fiction

Diversity in Publishing: Does Author Identity Affect Author Treatment in the North American Fiction Publishing Industry?

A lack of diversity in the publishing industry is widespread in both hiring practices and books that are selected to be published. According to publishing company Lee and Low's 2020 global survey, 78 percent of people at the executive level in publishing are white (Roy, 2020). In general, books are often produced to meet the "shifting desires of the public," so minority authors are often asked to produce "sympathetic or tragic narratives that are easily consumed by white audiences" (Smith, 2020). Even in the era of *Black Lives Matter*, publishing companies still are not adequately addressing the lack of diversity in the industry.

This research may be more relevant than ever. Dickey, a librarian and library science educator, helped develop a prototype data mining tool called "The WorldMap" that could "mine, collect, and compare library data of different countries" (Dickey, 2011, p. 150). Dickey (2011) noted a trend in which publishing volumes and language diversity tended to be affected by significant conflicts such as World War II, political movements like the end of Apartheid in South Africa, and global religious upheavals such as the Protestant Reformation. In the present era of social justice, where massive movements, including Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and Stop Asian Hate, have had worldwide impacts, it may be easier to alter publishing trends.

However, even when books with diverse characters are published, they will not always reach a broad audience. Fixing the diversity problem in publishing is complicated. Even with the diversification of publishing, homophobia, racism, transphobia, and censorship would persist. According to Rosa (2017), the director of the American Library Association's Office for Research and Statistics, of the top ten most challenged books of 2016 in public, elementary school, and university libraries across the U.S., nine are "by or about diverse populations" (Rosa, 2017). Five books were challenged for the presence of LGBTQ+ characters. The American Library Association (2021) reported that eight of the top ten most banned books from U.S. libraries in 2019 were censored or banned for LGBTQIA+ content.

This paper aims to examine the publishing industry's treatment of fiction authors and to explore authors' experiences with diversity and censorship in publishing. To address the lack of data on the intersection between author identity and author treatment in the fiction publishing

industry, the Delphi method design was employed. The Delphi method provided the dual objectives of “social forecasting” and “consensus interpretations of social...realities” regarding the topic being studied (Landeta, 2006, p. 478-479).

Literature Review

This literature review explores authors’ experiences with diversity in publishing. Although there is not a great deal written on this topic, and much of that research is limited to children’s literature, some individual observations by marginalized individuals with experience in the industry are included in this literature review. The literature review begins with a quantitative overview of diversity statistics in the publishing industry and includes some individual observations by marginalized individuals with experience in the industry. Specific analyses of racism, including the lack of Indigenous representation in fiction publishing, will follow. After the most prominent issues of racial discrimination are addressed, other forms of discrimination, including homophobia and ableism, will be covered. The literature review will conclude with the gap analysis, which highlights the fact that no other known research has compared a range of perspectives and author experiences in American and Canadian fiction publishing.

Status Quo of the Publishing Industry

Lee and Low Books, a diverse American children’s literature publishing house, conducted a survey in 2019 that “was sent to 2,609 reviewer employees, 17,100 trade publishing employees, 1,528 university press employees, and 516 literary agents” in the U.S. (Lee & Low Books, 2020). In terms of gender, “publishing is about 74 percent cisgender women and 23 percent cisgender men,” and approximately “81 percent of publishing staff identify as straight or heterosexual” (Lee & Low Books, 2020).

The lack of diversity in publishing stretches beyond the United States. Australian authors who publicly identified as members of marginalized communities had written at least one OwnVoices¹ novel (Booth & Narayan, 2021). Booth and Narayan (2021) found that “Australian authors of OwnVoices young adult fiction from marginalized communities faced significant barriers in the publishing industry” (p. 195). Six of the seven study participants reported “exclusion, censorship, and biased audience expectations” (Booth & Narayan, 2021, p. 195).

¹ OwnVoices refers to a movement for a more accurate representation of diverse titles in fiction. OwnVoices stories feature a character in the author’s novel who shares the author’s marginalized identity (Booth & Narayan, 2021, p. 186).

Racism in Publishing

The lack of representation for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) authors and publishing employees is a longstanding issue in publishing. Acevedo-Aquino et al. (2020) assembled a group of writers, teachers, and publishers to reflect on their knowledge of publishing and the importance of the availability of diverse books. According to Acevedo-Aquino et al. (2020), “mainstream publishers have no intention of marketing books to diverse communities—they acquire titles with one market in mind, and that's middle-class white [readers]” because those books traditionally sell the best (p. 29). This singular focus on sales numbers contributes to the lack of diverse representation in fiction.

On the other hand, the publishing industry has seen a recent demand for more BIPOC authors. However, Smith (2020), the Black author of *Got the Whole World Watching: A Young Black Man's Education*, claimed that BIPOC authors are restricted in their writing. BIPOC authors “are asked to produce books solely because they have the potential to sell quickly. For writers of color, this more often than not means that [they] are called upon to produce work that responds to a particular moment of social unrest related to [their] racial group and that mines [their] personal stories for sympathetic or tragic narratives that are easily consumed by white audiences” (Smith, 2020, p. 96). This treatment of BIPOC authors contributes to token diversity, in which BIPOC characters are only included in books to bolster claims of diversity without sharing valid BIPOC experiences with readers. Indian journalist, literary critic, and author Roy (2020) suggested that if “publishing houses truly [reflect] the diversity of the country, and [hire] more inclusively, perhaps their lists [will] grow beyond the relatively small world” of white, English-speaking authors.

Lack of Indigenous Representation:

The absence of Indigenous representation in publishing is another indicator of the lack of diversity in the industry. Indigenous people in publishing and beyond are harmed not only by discrimination against BIPOC voices but also by the historical silencing of Indigenous voices. In North America, in particular, history is steeped in Indigenous culture, but there is also a long history of discrimination against and oppression of Indigenous peoples. Consequently, according to Reese (2017), the founder of *American Indians in Children's Literature*, there are very few Indigenous characters in children's literature, with only 0.9% of characters being Native American or First Nations as of 2015.

Additionally, Quigley (2016), a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe, argued that while it is impossible to stop misrepresenting Indigenous persons in fiction, “non-Native

authors should not be allowed to create false narratives of Indian people to fulfill their own purposes” (p. 373). The author proposed that schools throw out the “antiquated texts and [begin] a new chapter in teaching American Indian literature” (Quigley, 2016, p. 374). Garrison et al. (2018) agreed and argued that people must “recognize all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities” (p. 4).

Homophobia in Publishing

Another long-term problem in publishing is homophobia, a situation made worse by a lack of LGBTQ+ authors and publishing employees. In order to publish books that accurately represent the LGBTQ+ community, there should be more diversity among professionals who decide what gets published. Authors' writing practices regarding LGBTQ+ characters have evolved in recent years. According to Wickens (2011), a professor of literacy education at Northern Illinois University, “in significant contrast to early texts, many authors in recent years have sought to promote inclusion of LGBTQ individuals and to present LGBTQ characters in a positive light” (p. 148).

Unfortunately, although author practices are improving, Booth and Narayan (2018) found that barriers to distributing diverse books persist. In a secondary paper, Booth and Narayan (2021) further explored the responses of two of their surveyed authors who identify as LGBTQ+. Both authors reported that librarians and school staffers have “enforced barriers on multiple occasions,” and those in charge of designing the curricula are “unsupportive of using LGBTQIA+ fiction in classrooms” (Booth & Narayan, 2018, p. 45). In order to properly represent the LGBTQ+ community in fiction, publishing practices must continue to evolve despite societal barriers.

Ableism in Publishing

Finally, ableism, or discrimination against disabled persons, also exists in publishing. According to Lee and Low's 2020 study, 11 percent of employees in the American publishing industry are disabled. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) reported that 26 percent of Americans were disabled; therefore, disabled representation in publishing is inadequate. According to Leary (2020), a disabled journalist, during COVID-19, “the same publishers who once denied disabled and chronically ill people the ability to work from home are requesting that their staff do just that” (p. 80). This demonstrates a double standard for disabled versus non-disabled employees in publishing.

Gap Analysis

The information presented covers the general lack of diversity in publishing in terms of race as well as LGBTQ+, Indigenous, and disabled representation. It also touches on how authors of marginalized identities are treated in publishing. However, there are several gaps in the current scholarly conversation about diversity and discrimination in publishing. First, most of this research has focused on children's literature and children's publishing. This study focuses on fiction for adults. Also, only Booth and Narayan (2021) directly examined how author identity influenced author treatment, which is the focus of this study. The Booth and Narayan (2021) study was limited to Australian publishing. This study concentrates on publishing in Canada and the U.S. and attempts to generate a consensus from a range of perspectives and forecast possible solutions for the publishing industry. A series of questionnaires were used to gather and compare the perspectives of editors, agents, and authors of a wide variety of marginalized characters.

Methodology

Context

By investigating the experiences of authors, the hope was to learn more about the challenges of publishing books with characters with marginalized identities. The prediction is that white authors with minority characters would report fewer instances of rejection based on their characters' identities than BIPOC authors with minority characters. Also, BIPOC authors would likely report racist experiences and be more aware of discrimination issues in the publishing industry. It is hypothesized that white authors would not be as aware of racial bias in publishing if it had not affected them personally.

Design and Approach

This study used the Delphi method design. According to Dalkey and Helmer (1963), its purpose is "to obtain the most reliable consensus of opinion of a group of experts;" it is a "series of intensive questionnaires interspersed with controlled opinion feedback" (p. 458). According to Landeta (2006), the primary value of the Delphi method is its mix of "social forecasting" and "consensus interpretations of social...realities" regarding the topic being studied (p. 478-479). Green (2014) stated that the Delphi study attempts to provide insights and predict future trends using informed judgment. The Delphi study requires that "experts must be consulted at least twice on the same question so that they can reconsider their answer" (Landeta, 2006, p. 468).

According to Green et al. (2007), “Delphi forecasts were more accurate than forecasts from traditional surveys of expert opinion for 12 of 16 studies” (p. 110).

Another key benefit of the Delphi study is its use of anonymous questionnaires, eliminating situations where “certain individuals tend to dominate the decision-making process” (Green, 2014, p. 1). The Delphi method reaps the benefits of expert collaboration without “undesirable psychological effects [like] inhibition [and] dominant personalities” (Landeta, 2006, p. 469). Moreover, the Delphi study gathers the opinions of “experts from various backgrounds” to provide a more well-rounded consensus on complex issues (Jandl et al., 2021, p. 55). Therefore, the Delphi method is helpful for this research.

Design Rationale

Additionally, the explanatory sequential method was considered in which “the researcher first conducts quantitative research, analyzes the results, and then builds on results to explain them in more detail with qualitative research” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 15). This type of study gathers, examines, and then combines qualitative and quantitative data under one umbrella to gain “a better understanding of the research problem” (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 3). According to Othman et al. (2020), this method is designed to “merge and mix different data sets” (p. 75).

The main reason the explanatory sequential method was valuable for this research is the qualitative component was included to aid the “interpretation and clarification of the results from the quantitative data analysis” (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2016, p. 197). As indicated in the literature review, quantitative statistics about diversity in publishing already exist (Reese, 2017; Lee & Low Books et al., 2020). This study sought to gather qualitative data on the authors’ experiences. Using a Delphi method allowed for surface quantitative questions to be asked in the beginning and followed up with a deeper qualitative investigation.

The key reason the Delphi method was the best choice was its end goal of forming a consensus and creating solutions for the future (Landeta, 2006, p. 469). Based on the literature review, a clear consensus was reached that more diversity is needed. The goal was for a Delphi study to generate some workable solutions regarding how to diversify the publishing industry and improve author experiences.

Other future prediction-type designs were considered, too, including the social forecasting method, which uses “*swarm intelligence*” and relies upon “not the experts but [the] common man” (Malhotra et al., 2012, p. 122). The advantage of using the Delphi method over the social forecasting method for this research was that the Delphi brought together a panel of

experts for discussion based on their experiences on a topic that, as is the present case, had little written on it. Participants generated responses to questions, made informed predictions about the future, and proposed possible solutions.

Data Collection

The research was conducted using expert sampling² because a non-random, purposeful sample that included a mix of marginalized identities and featured authors and people working elsewhere in the publishing industry was needed. A list of people who met the research demographics and might be willing to participate was formed, and they were emailed. Table 1 outlines the steps in the data collection procedures.

Table 1

Steps of Data Collection with Descriptions

Step	Description
Informed Consent	Informed consent forms were completed by the participants.
Initial Questionnaire	Initial questionnaire included a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions. The author participants also had the opportunity to share any comments via open-ended questions. The questionnaire provided general ideas of opinions and experiences in the publishing industry.
Analysis of Initial Questionnaire	Initial questionnaire responses were summarized. A secondary questionnaire was created.
Secondary Questionnaire	A secondary questionnaire was sent to the participants. The questions were open-ended.
Analysis of Secondary Questionnaire	Responses to the secondary questionnaire indicated that the authors were close to a consensus that included several proposed solutions. The responses were summarized, and a final questionnaire was created.

² Expert sampling is a form of purposive sampling in which the researcher selects a non-random sample of experts in the research field (Etikan, & Bala, 2017)

Final Questionnaire

A final questionnaire was sent to the participants. The questions were open-ended, which allowed for more freedom with responses.

Data Analysis and Possible Solutions

Results were summarized on the level of consensus among participants, and the ideas for improving diversity and publishing where noted.

The following figures show the breakdown of how the Participants identified their race/ethnic background, sexual orientation, and gender.

Figure 1.

Bar graph of how many Participants identify as each race/ethnic background

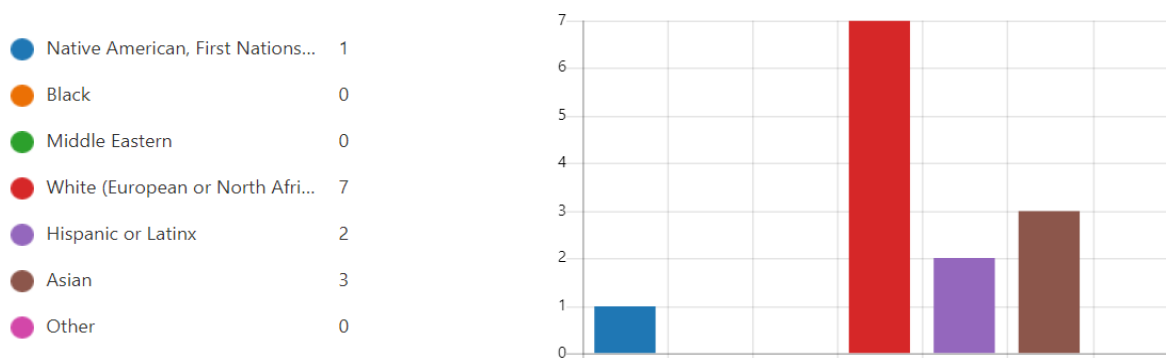


Figure 2.

Bar graph of how many Participants identify as each sexual orientation

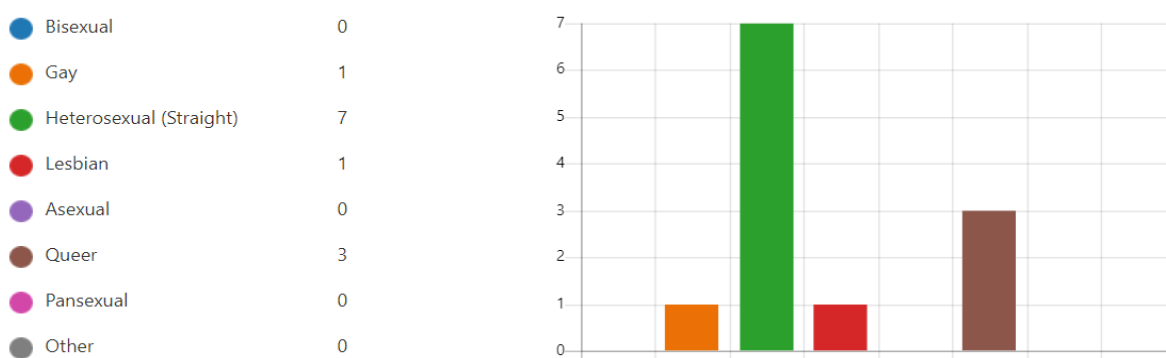
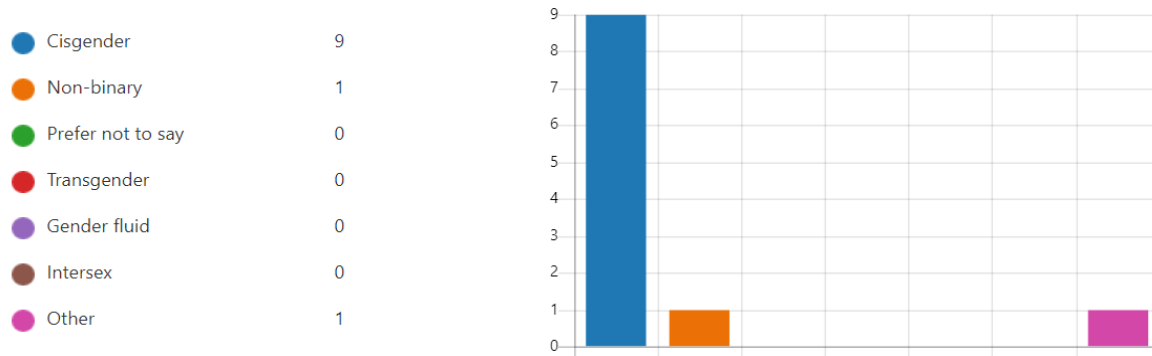


Figure 3.

Bar graph of how many Participants identified as each gender



Limitations

The use of 1-1 communication “[provided] indirect information filtered through the views of interviewees” (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 188). The use of questionnaires was “an unobtrusive method of collecting data” and “[provided] an opportunity for participants to directly share their reality” whilst enabling the “researcher to obtain the language and words of Participants” (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 188-189). However, answers via digital communication could be challenging to interpret as the ability to adapt a line of questioning in response to the immediate verbal and non-verbal feedback from the interviewees was not an option.

The main challenge was the participant's commitment to the study. It was crucial to maintain communication with them to ensure they remained committed and comfortable. This was mitigated by confirming participants' willingness post-recruitment, reinforcing that participation would not be overly demanding of participants' time, and checking in to make sure participants were comfortable with all stages of research.

Unfortunately, one participant was lost to attrition, or the “premature drop out of participants from longitudinal studies,” after Round 1 of the Delphi study (Le Brocque, 2005, p. 54). “Participant attrition from longitudinal research studies is a concern for social scientists because the loss of certain subgroups of participants may result in subsequent data collection phases becoming increasingly biased” (Le Brocque, 2005, p. 53). In this study, the participant who dropped out was the only participant identified as Indigenous, resulting in no direct comments about Indigenous members of the publishing. As such, it is possible the loss of this participant caused the lack of Indigenous representation in this study.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, the analysis method is critical discourse analysis (CDA). The results of the data collection are reported, and CDA was used to analyze these findings to address the

research question: Does author identity impact author treatment? Author experiences are discussed first, reporting the highlights of the stories the authors shared about their personal experiences with publishing. Then, four proposed future paths for publishing will be outlined: diversifying agents, editors, and publishing teams, ensuring diversity in sales and marketing teams, allowing authors to work remotely, and translating diverse titles. This section concludes with the hopes authors expressed for the future of the publishing industry.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis is “a qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities” (Mullet, 2018, p. 1). The CDA depends on the concept that “the way we use language is purposeful, regardless of whether discursive choices are conscious or unconscious” (Ribisl et al., 1996, p. 1).

The CDA is used to analyze discourses like “the reproduction of sexism and racism through discourse; the legitimation of power; the manufacture of consent; the role of politics, education and the media; the discursive reproduction of dominance relation between groups; the imbalances in international communication and information” (Kress, 1991, p. 84). The CDA is also used to evaluate the “structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448). The CDA is often used to analyze the linguistic side of social interactions. The CDA is distinctive in the connection it draws between language and society.

Within CDA, the key ideas are that (1) “ideology and language are intertwined,” (2) “language may be used by people uncritically, without reflection on its ideological character,” (3) “within a given institution there is usually one dominant ideology/language,” and (4) “these ideologies often become the normal way of thinking and are not usually regarded as ideological, but rather simply as ‘the way things are’” (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 21). The general analytical framework used for the CDA was outlined by Mullet (2018).

Author Identity and Experience

The following section will discuss sexism and summarize and highlight key experiences shared by women in this study. A brief discussion of homophobia experienced by participants who identify as LGBTQ+ will follow. Finally, a discussion of racism experienced by many Participants in this study will conclude the presentation of the results.

Sexism

Five female participants had stories to share about sexism in the publishing industry. For instance, Participant 5 addressed the author's photo, "Male authors are allowed to look haggard, frumpy, disgusting and are deemed to be 'handsome' whereas not only do I actually have to write an incredibly wonderful book, but I also have to look good doing it! When male writers have deep lines and wrinkles in their author photos it is seen as intelligence, wisdom, and experience. Women are rarely allowed to be seen that way."

The contrast in standards for male and female authors' photos has deeper repercussions than just being a picture. Female authors are tied to their writing on another level than men. While men are allowed to present a literally 'flawed' image of themselves, women are expected to be beautiful, young, and brilliant simultaneously. This double standard is just one of many barriers that creep in and make publishing more difficult for women than for men.

Participant 7 shared the following: "Once, as a member of the editorial board of a literary magazine and small press, I showed up at a meeting to discuss submissions. I had rated one story very highly, as had another female colleague. The male executive director quickly dismissed and shut down discussion of the piece, despite two of his trusted female colleagues feeling strongly that it was a compelling story."

The review of the literature review revealed that little data exists on the treatment of male versus female authors in publishing. Perhaps this was because much of the sexism experienced by women in publishing comes in overlooked but impactful forms, like not having your voice heard as an editor because you are a woman or feeling you must be beautiful to sell books. Participant 5 even shared the following: "Old stinky men always try to touch me. My publicist has to say, 'We ask that you do not touch the author,' or I have to develop ways to shame, humiliate, or avoid them at public readings." Experiences like Participant 5's where women are sexualized as authors can be annoying, frightening, or damaging to authors and their work, and these experiences can cause female authors to avoid public events and sometimes even impact their ability to get published at all.

Homophobia

Another experience shared by two of the authors was an act of homophobia. Participant 6 shared the following: "I do feel that if I had been a straight author, my experience would have been different. But mostly, I feel that if my protagonist had been straight, my book would have had a much more positive reception from the publishing industry." Another participant said that while she herself had not experienced homophobia, "friends and colleagues [have illustrated

that] these issues do exist—from hesitancy to publish stories depicting queer love stories to authors being asked not to discuss their queer identity or books on school visits” –Participant 7.

Author identity can impact an author’s experiences with publishing and publicity. Negative experiences with promoting books, such as not being allowed to discuss LGBTQ+ content on a school visit, may discourage authors from promoting their books in the future. Moreover, as Participant 6 discussed, there is a difference between an author’s identity and their content. However, if a publisher is hesitant to publish a writer’s work, it is hard to know if the hesitancy is about the author’s identity, the characters’ identities, or something else entirely. Given publishing’s history of featuring straight, white, cisgender voices, barriers are more likely to arise for these new, diverse stories.

Racism

Four Participants had stories to share about racism in fiction publishing. Participant 5 said the following about her race’s role in her writing: “I am limited and narrowed by the subjects I can write about, and even when I work against this, readers inherit a way of reading my work that I am always in discussions about home, trauma, racism, refugees, immigrants, identity. These subjects are boring to me.” She argued she struggled to find commercial success with her art because her stories are not what the publishing industry sees as marketable. She said, “I am not a ‘good refugee’—as in I am not sad enough for people so they can be moved by me and feel enough pity to buy my books...I have been writing for 25 years and when I wrote about nature or art or light, publishing was not exciting. When I wrote about refugees, which matches my identity, publishing got exciting. Access to grants, residencies, festivals, invitations to universities, and publishing work got a lot easier because of concerns about identity.”

Participant 9 shared that while promoting books, “I was often the only racialized person at a literary event or publishing meeting. No one ever thought I was a featured author, and I was often only invited to events that exploited my race.” Participant 5 had similar experiences: “Whenever I do events in the U.S. and Canada...everyone is so thrilled because it’s a rare sight, but I must agree to speak about my identity. I follow along and am acrobatic, turning and twisting the conversation to art. When I do an event in Singapore or Malaysia, I can actually talk about art.”

Participant 10 had a different viewpoint. He says the following: “I never think about an author’s race when reading his/her work. It is irrelevant...Either an author has a good story with a good execution, or he does not. Everything else is irrelevant...My religion, age, sexual orientation, favorite dish, shoe size, and what car I drive are irrelevant...An author’s role is not

to advocate for diversity (or any other cause), but to produce the best writing possible...Please let us separate literature and writing from EVERYTHING else. I am a writer, that is all.”

This appears to be an outlier perspective among BIPOC authors. As demonstrated in other Participants’ shared experiences, race is clearly a factor in publishing. Participant 1 disagreed with Participant 10’s view and argued the following: “Separating identity from art is neither appropriate nor realistic. Authors are inspired, and their identities are shaped by their race, sexual orientation, gender, and more. The solution is not to pretend there is not a diversity problem in publishing but rather to accept that fact and start planning how to address the issue.”

Moreover, as several Participants commented, agents, editors, and authors are all shaped by their own identities and experiences, so their receptiveness to stories is similarly shaped. In Participant 10’s ideal world, a writer is defined only by their ability to write, but as almost every other Participant in this study stated, this is not a present reality. Participants’ recommended and supported solutions are explored in the next sections.

Recommended Solutions

As Participant 2 stated, “Only when there is more physical diversity in the publishing industry at all levels from suppliers, agents, and in the echelons of publishing management itself, will there be meaningful change.” Participant 9 added that the key ways to produce diverse books include “diversifying the workforce in publishing [and] educating agents, editors, and publishers on anti-oppression.” Participant 5 noted that “an author can be talented and write good books, but without an agent to advocate for them or an editor in the publishing house to be a loudmouth for their books, things get published and disappear really quick. Agents and editors have to ‘connect’ with the writing, but how can they when everyone is the same.” Participant 7 agreed, adding that “Like other industries, we need those already in power to both recruit diverse creators/leaders at all levels and expand their publishing platforms to make space for those voices and aesthetics.”

Participant 6 also suggested that “publishing [houses] could commit to equity in the authors they publish just as many corporations today are committing to equity in the people they hire and promote.” Participant 8 added that publishing houses should strive to “create pathways for marginalized lower-level publishing employees to advance and reach higher-level positions without getting burned out.”

Promoting authors of marginalized identities could also help diversify the industry. As Participant 9 commented, “I think there has been a lot of work done in acquiring and promoting books by racialized authors, but I do think more work could be done in acquiring different kinds

of narratives, paying more attention to intersectionality, and integrating inclusion in the industry as a whole.” Participant 4 agreed, stating the following: “There should be much more room for work by immigrant authors, such as Latinos, Africans, Filipinos, and others, in addition to the disabled, BIPOC, women, and homosexual and transexual ones. This also applies to main characters in novels, etc., and to stereotyping applied to fictional characters.”

Participant 11 commented that it is important to ensure “opportunities for folks from underrepresented communities to write about their own experiences and to ensure that the publishing industry supports that.” Diversifying sales teams could also help the publishing industry highlight more of its diverse titles. Participant 8 supports this: “We need more diversity in sales teams, marketing and publicity teams, and operation teams (as well as among editors, agents, and publishers) because, without sales, marketing, and publicity support, a lot of books don’t even make it past an editorial meeting, let alone acquisitions.”

Many Participants echoed the sentiment that, as Participant 3 put it, “having more editors of color will help a great deal.” Participant 8 further added that publishing houses should “hire bigger and more diverse editorial teams so that lower-level marginalized editors are able to acquire more.” Participant 6 noted that “it often takes someone who shares the characteristics of the protagonist to understand the universal nature and broader appeal of the book manuscript.” Moreover, Participant 9 reflected that “the one racialized editor I have worked with understood my work better than anyone else’s.”

Participant 10 argued that “editors are not interested in an author’s sexual orientation any more than they are interested in their political views. Their role is to find and publish good writers.” However, as almost every other participant in this study noted, it’s much harder for marginalized authors to get the opportunity to have their work read. As Participant 9 put it: “A sensitive and responsive publishing team will understand the unique challenges marginalized authors face. And they are more likely to understand the barriers some authors face and to see the merit in their stories.” Having diverse publishing teams, editors, and agents available to advocate for marginalized authors and their art can introduce these stories to the world. Arguably, author identity does impact the author’s experience in publishing, but if publishing has more diverse teams deciding what gets published, these stories have a greater chance of finding those who want to see their stories told.

Marketing

Almost all participants agreed that diverse books are marketed differently from ‘normal’ fiction. Participant 3 observed the following: “‘Diverse’ titles are aimed at [the ‘diverse’ market],

which helps these books find limited readership but reinforces the separation of ‘normal’ books from ‘diverse’ books rather than broadening our sense of what ‘fiction’ looks like.” Participant 5 concurred: “I agree absolutely. For example, what if my book was next to someone successful like Sally Rooney in a bookstore? They would find me a lot sooner than in the diversity bin at the back or only on display for Asian Heritage Month.” She went on to say publishing saves “those big budgets for their superstars—the ones that already sell.”

In publishing, it is hard for marginalized authors to break into the industry, especially when ‘diverse’ titles are not usually broadly marketed. Participant 9 reinforced this idea, claiming the following: “The biggest success story in Canadian publishing in recent years is *Moon of the Crusted Snow* by Waubgeshig Rice, who is Indigenous, but the reason that novel sold so broadly was because it is a post-apocalyptic thriller that used a viral pandemic as its premise. The fact that it was set in a remote Indigenous community certainly sold it to many readers, but the commercial appeal of its premise made it huge.”

On the other hand, Participant 1 observed the following: “Shelving is a double-edged sword, as I think it is important for those who want specific sorts of characters/books to be able to find them. I think, of course, it is true we need to market these diverse books beyond their identity categories.” Participant 3 agreed with this sentiment, claiming, “This is both good (a wider range of voices) and bad (highlighting difference can make work seem like it’s only valuable because it’s so-called ‘diverse’).”

Participant 1 opined, “I maybe agree that more diverse books can often be placed in the literary market because of their diversity rather than being treated as a more commercially viable book.” However, they added, “I don’t agree that we should frame commercial books as ‘normal’ books, though, and I think that’s very reductive. I personally do see fiction being broadened by these, but perhaps because I’m not reading as much of these ‘normal’ books.”

Participant 8 contributed the following: “It’s impossible for us not to crave and want to be marketed more outwardly facing ‘diverse’ books, even if those should be the norm, even if there should be a better way of marking them than just differentiating between ‘diverse’ and ‘normal’.” Finally, Participant 4 made the important point that while it would be great to get more diverse titles produced and marketed by mainstream publishing, “diverse publishers” who give voices to marginalized stories must carry on. Marketing their works more broadly is extremely important for them to interest readers outside their sphere of diversity.”

Remote Opportunities

Many Participants expressed the belief that authors and employees on all levels of publishing should be able to work remotely full-time. Participant 8 argued that “not only would more disabled employees be able to work in publishing if they could work from home, but we'd see diversity increase across the board.” Participant 2 expressed the following: “Before COVID, I would have said that at home, disabled employees would face a tougher climb up the publishing ladder because not being in the office would be seen as existing in sort of a liminal space. I think technology has made that somewhat obsolete. So, I think that would be a good change.”

Participant 9 commented, “I have worked from home for many years, and this has enabled me, as a single mother, to make it all work. I would love to see this accessibility available to disabled people.” Participant 6 added, “I believe this logic holds true no matter what industry we are talking about.” Participant 1 went further, saying the following: “I think that having more remote options for publishing is very important to help increase diversity across the board, both for accessibility regarding disability and accessibility regarding class. You can't expect a trans person of color to be able to afford to live in Toronto to do an editorial internship that doesn't pay a living wage, so allowing them to live in a place that is reasonable for the cost of living while doing this work makes it easier for them to make their way into the industry without needing to hustle intensely in order to make it in.”

As Participants 9 and 2 indicated, most jobs in publishing can be done from home, so employees should be allowed to do so. As seen in the literature review, disabled people are underrepresented in the industry, but according to respondents, allowing people to work from home would likely lead to an increase in disabled representation in publishing and fiction in general.

Translation

Finally, several authors highlighted the opportunities presented by translation. Participant 7 shared that “I think expanding to make space for more translation of global voices would greatly enhance the reading experiences of our populace.” Participant 4 added that “more attention should also be paid to the translation and publication of authors from abroad in US publishing and especially in Canadian publishing.” He asked, “Why should all foreign translations be published only by the UK, the US, or France? With all of its advances in translation, Canada should be publishing them too.” Translation of diverse titles could bring in new readers from around the world as well as allow readers of marginalized identities from around the world the opportunity to see themselves in books.

Hope

One common theme in Participant responses was hope. Many authors reflected that they had seen large strides toward improvement in the publishing industry. Participant 1 commented, "I've seen more diverse authors being promoted, but I believe that a large reason for that is that the industry has found a way for that to be profitable." Participant 7 said the following: "There is hope: writers and publishers of children's books have been driving toward more representation for all readers for a while, and change is beginning to show. For instance, the Society for Children's Book Writers & Illustrators...is currently undergoing a major overhaul." She predicts the fiction industry will follow the children's publishing industry's lead.

Others are more cautious. Participant 2 noted, "I see more acceptance of different voices in general in the industry. However, I still see a tendency to give the biggest advances and the biggest marketing budgets to white writers, especially first-time writers in non-fiction and fiction." Participant 7 said the following: "What we must continue to ask ourselves, though, is this: does it make sense for new leaders to take over old systems? Systems that were built by the old guard in the first place. But we must start somewhere. And this is at least an indication that some within the system WANT to change."

As Participants 1, 2, and 7 said, the fiction publishing industry is already starting to develop and diversify. There have been general strides for improvement. Moreover, the children's publishing industry is rapidly diversifying its systems and publishing output. There are hopeful signs that the larger publishing world is changing, and people within the institutions support this.

Conclusion

Altogether, author identity impacts author treatment in North American fiction publishing. Sexism, homophobia, and racism all exist in the industry. Experiences where women are overlooked, objectified, or sexualized as authors can be annoying, frightening, and sometimes harmful to an author and her books. Similarly, negative experiences with publishing and LGBTQ+ content may discourage authors from promoting or attempting to publish their books in the future. Moreover, the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality of authors and their characters combined with publishing's long history of promoting straight, white, cisgender voices make barriers more likely to arise for these new, diverse stories.

Authors are inspired, and their identities are shaped by their race, sexual orientation, gender, and life experiences. The solution is not to pretend there is no diversity problem in publishing but rather to accept and address that fact. These barriers affect authors personally as

well as professionally. While there is no one way to fix the lack of diversity in the publishing industry, some promising solutions include diversifying agents, editors, publishing employees, and sales and marketing teams, allowing employees and authors to work from home to combat classism and ableism, and translating diverse titles into more languages so they can be enjoyed by readers worldwide.

References

- Acevedo-Aquino, M. V., Bowles, D., Eisenberg, J., Elliott, Z., Gainer, J. S., & Valdez-Gainer, N. (2020). Reflections on the #OwnVoices movement. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 46(2), 27–35.
- American Library Association. (2021). *Banned & Challenged Books: Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists*. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>.
- Blommaert, J., & Bulcaen, J. (2000). Critical discourse analysis. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29, 447–446.
- Booth, E., & Narayan, B. (2018). Don't talk about the gay character: Barriers to queer young adult fiction and authors in schools and libraries. *English in Australia*, 53(2), 40–49.
- Booth, E., & Narayan, B. (2021). Behind closed gates: The barriers to self-expression and publication for Australian young adult authors of OwnVoices fiction. *International Research in Children's Literature*, 14(2), 183–198.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Disability impacts all of us*. CDC. www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods* (5th ed.). SAGE Publishing.
- Dalkey, N. & Helmer, O. (1963). An experimental application of the DELPHI method to the use of experts. *Management Science* 9(3), 458-467.
- Dickey, T. J. (2011). Books as expressions of global cultural diversity. *Library Resources & Technical Services*, 55(3), 148–162.
- Etikan, I., & Bala, K. (2017). Sampling and sampling methods. *Biometrics Biostatistics International Journal*, 5(6), 149. doi:10.15406/bbij.2017.05.00149

- Edmonds, W. A., & Kennedy, T. D. (2016) *An applied guide to research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publishing.
- Garrison, K. L., Carmichael, P., & Manck, K. (2018). #Ownvoices for IASL: Curating a list of authentic voices for Indigenous children's and young adult literature. *International Association of School Librarianship*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.29173/iasl7130>
- Green, K., Armstrong, J., & Graefe, A. (2007). Methods to elicit forecasts from groups: Delphi and prediction markets compared. *Foresight: The International Journal of Applied Forecasting*, 8, 17-20.
- Green, R. A. (2014). The Delphi technique in educational research. *Sage Open*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014529773>
- Gibson, W. J., & Brown, A. (2009). *Working with qualitative data*. SAGE.
- Ivankova, N. V., Creswell, J. W., & Stick, S. L. (2006). Using Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Design: From Theory to Practice. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 3-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05282260>
- Jandl, M., Hollomey, C., Gendera, S., Stepien, A., & Bilger, V. (2009). Migration and irregular work in Austria: A case study of the structure and dynamics of irregular foreign employment in Europe at the beginning of the 21st century. Amsterdam University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mzcw>
- Kress, G. (1990). Critical Discourse Analysis. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 11, 84–99. doi:10.1017/S0267190500001975
- Landeta, J. (2006). Current validity of the Delphi method in social sciences. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 73(5), 467–482. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2005.09.002>
- Leary, A. (2020). Publishing needs to face its ableism problem. *Publishers Weekly*. 80.
- Le Brocque, R. (2005). Methodological issues in the effects of attrition: Simple solutions for social scientists. *Field Methods*, 17(53), 53–69.
- Lee and Low Books (2020). Where is the diversity in publishing? The 2019 diversity baseline survey results. *The Open Book Blog*. <https://blog.leeandlow.com/2020/01/28/2019diversitybaselinesurvey/>

- Malhotra, S., Das, Lalit K., & Chariar, V. M. (2012). Design research methods for future mapping. *International Association for Development of the Information Society*. 121–130.
- Mullet, D. R. (2018). A General Critical Discourse Analysis Framework for Educational Research. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 29(2), 116-142.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X18758260>
- Othman, S., Steen, M., & Fleet, J. (2020). A sequential explanatory mixed methods study design: An example of how to integrate data in a midwifery research project. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 11(2), 75-89.
- Quigley, D. (2016). Silenced: Voices taken from American Indian characters in children's literature. *American Indian Quarterly*, 40(4), 364–378.
<https://doi.org/10.5250/amerindiquar.40.4.0364>
- Reese, D. (2017). When worlds collide: Recent developments in children's literature. *Knowledge Quest*, 45(3). Gale Academic OneFile.
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A478640862/AONE?u=anon~2ee7c2f6&sid=googleScholar&xid=067da75b>
- Ribisl, K. M., Walton, M. A., Mowbray, C. T., Luke, D. A., Davidson, W. S., & Bootsmiller, B. J. (1996). Minimizing participant attrition in panel studies through the use of effective retention and tracking strategies: Review and recommendations. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 19(1), 1–25. doi:10.1016/0149-7189(95)00037-2
- Rosa, K. S. (2017). The state of America's libraries 2017. *American Library Association*. 1–27.
- Roy, N. (2020). Let's talk about publishing's diversity problem. *Financial Times*.
- Smith, M. D. (2020). Building a new future. *Publishers Weekly*.
- Wickens, C.M. (2011). Codes, silences, and homophobia: Challenging normative assumptions about gender and sexuality in contemporary LGBTQ young adult literature. *Children's Literature in Education*, 42, 148–164. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-011-9129-0>