

## ALA and We Need Diverse Books

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Libraries are, in so many ways, America's "last best hope" in promoting diverse voices in the public discourse, and promoting equity of access to information. We are proud of our advocacy and policy work in these areas. Our professional values have proven relevant during the events in Ferguson, Missouri; during the discourse (or debate) about the insensitive and racist comments used to introduce Jacqueline Woodson when her book *Brown Girl Dreaming* won the National Book Award; and throughout the years-long campaign by the state of Arizona to dismantle the Tucson Public Schools' Mexican-American Studies curriculum. We have preserved and promoted community, challenged bigotry, and fought for change via our advocacy and our support for legal and legislative actions aimed at ending discrimination and preserving civil liberties.

Yet we believe that the incidents described above – and many more like them – demonstrate the urgent need for America's libraries to increase and intensify their actions and advocacy on behalf of diversity.

And so the Office for Intellectual Freedom and the Office for Diversity/OLOS began to brainstorm. What do libraries uniquely bring to this discourse? How best can we act to address the challenges to providing more access to more diverse information? Inspired by the national "We Need Diverse Books" campaign, we began to gather information from literary agents, small press publishers, big publishing houses, and authors of color. We were disappointed to find that the characters in most books, and the authors of these books, remain predominantly white. According to the University of Wisconsin's Cooperative Children's Book Center, only 3% of the 3,200 books written for children in 2013 were about black people and only 2% were written by African American authors. Publisher Lee & Low, using the CCBC's statistics from 1994 – 2012, found that while 37% of the U.S. population are people of color, only 10% of the books include multicultural content.<sup>1</sup>

Further, the Office for Intellectual Freedom looked at its Banned Books Week lists and discovered that authors of color, and books with themes about issues concerning communities of color, are disproportionately challenged and banned. Young adult author Malinda Lo analyzed ALA's Top Ten Banned and Challenged Books lists for the last decade and discovered that 52% of the books challenged or banned included diverse content.<sup>2</sup> OIF and the Freedom to Read Foundation have been aware of this problem for decades and have supported change in the courts and in public policy. But, in fact, the situation is not improving.

In our conversations with the publishing and library community, we have discovered:

- Big publishers are struggling to survive and are less likely to take risks on unknown authors. While they are strong allies of the American Library Association and share our concerns about diversity, their business model does not seem to provide opportunities for authors of color or

for the publication of minority or niche stories and ideas that may not always find a wider audience.

- The independent and neighborhood bookstores that have traditionally supported and promoted new and local authors and unique books are also struggling. Many of these stores have closed. Borders, always a strong supporter of alternative voices, is no longer in business.
- Small publishers are a promising outlet for authors of color. But these small operations do not have big marketing resources or access to the networks to promote their authors to a national audience.
- While many writers do not have the tools, connections, or information on how to access traditional or non-traditional publishing processes, writers of color in particular are unlikely to have the tools, connections, or knowledge needed to get their works published - or to promote and market their works if they are published, whether by traditional or non-traditional means. Many of the writing institutes that supported this work have folded, and libraries and educational institutions often can't provide writers with the resources or programs that would equip them with the knowledge needed to become published because of a lack of funding (and sometimes a lack of interest.)
- Large library systems serving large cities or regions often utilize centralized collection development that do not reflect the local concerns and interests of the neighborhoods served by the system's branch libraries.
- Acquisitions lists and collection development tools often do not include small presses or independent book distributors.
- Many libraries' collection development policies still discourage purchase of "self-published" books, despite the fact that new publishing models have transformed self-publishing from a vanity undertaking to a legitimate outlet for new authors and niche ideas.

### **Possible Actions for ALA**

1. Create conference programs collaboratively on the topic of We Need Diverse Books. In San Francisco, the IFC program will be "BlackWordsMatter." We will invite a literary agent, a small press entrepreneur, and a black author—and possibly a local poetry slam group—to highlight the problem and provide solutions on how to promote a diversity of voices. IFC did a similar program with REFORMA a few years ago and it was "standing room only."
2. Work with local librarians in the Chicago Public Schools and Chicago Public Library to create a small, one-day model for aspiring writers on how to get published. We already have a volunteer

head librarian from an Englewood branch. This model would become the source for writing a grant to collaborate with existing Chicago not-for-profits to create a venue for high schoolers and adults to get published.

3. Work collaboratively with the "We Need Diverse Books" campaign through the Freedom to Read Foundation to fundraise on behalf of initiatives supporting diverse books and the authors that write them.
4. Sponsor a staff event, similar to the Office for Diversity's reading of *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, with Tony Diaz, President of Librotraficante, to promote staff awareness about the need to support diverse books and authors of color.
5. Continue to gather information and book recommendations from such sources as the American Indians in Children's Literature blog, so that ALA can create lists promoting books written by authors of color or dealing with issues of concern to communities of color.
6. Continue to work with Chicago Humanities Festival on their year-round programming. ALA's collaboration with them has produced programs featuring authors of color, and CHF is committed to this mission. They are planning to host Jacqueline Woodson this spring!
7. Assign more resources and work with the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Committee to promote and publicize the Coretta Scott King Award, the award-winning authors, and their works, collaborating with ALA Publishing as appropriate/necessary.
8. Connect voices and resources; ALA affiliates, offices and staff; librarians; publishers; authors; agents; editors; and promoters of diverse books.
9. Promote the depiction of multiple races in picture books.
10. Create awards to recognize publishers who publish diverse books.

Other ideas are welcome and we have solicited them from the ALA youth divisions and others. This is a work in progress—at the brainstorming stage. At the same time, ALA has been doing many programs and services to support diversity of books for decades. What we envision is an intentional gathering together of all we have done and all we will do in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2013/06/17/why-hasnt-the-number-of-multicultural-books-increased-in-eighteen-years/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.diversityinya.com/2014/09/book-challenges-suppress-diversity/>