

Lack of Ethnic Diversity in Canadian Publishing

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Abstract

I will be looking at the obvious and systematic lack of ethnic diversity in Canadian publishing through the writers in the industry and their personal accounts. I will be focusing specifically on the article, "On Glibness and Diversity In Canadian Media" by Saachi Koul, and the chapter "Editing Indigenous Texts as an Indigenous Editor" by Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm among the research I do to reflect on how the lack of diversity is systematically being ignored in Canada.

Keywords: Canadian Publishing, Diversity

In her article "On Glibness and Diversity In Canadian Media", Scaachi Koul describes a small Canadian media and publishing industry in which there is a disturbing lack of diversity among Canadian writers. Similarly, in Akiwenzie Damm's article, she describes an industry in which there is a lack of diversity among editors. It is interesting to see the acknowledged lack of diversity over and over again in the publishing industry, and not seeing a whole pile being done about it. Time and time again, we hear from writers who identify the lack of ethnically diverse literature in Canada, and nobody who holds any power really takes any notice. It is this very obvious lack of diversity in the industry that filters the writers that are actually getting published, meaning that the only ones that are getting any visibility are overwhelmingly white authors. This is surprising and shocking, as Canada is a very multicultural country. What, then, is the reason for there to be such an overwhelming lack of diversity amongst Canada's writers? Are we not all Canadians, as a country made of immigrants? Another important question that should be answered by the Canadian publishing industry is how

should the country be represented? The unfortunate norm seems to be, as a majority white country with some immigrants from here and there, each with a harrowing story of diaspora and immigration every once in a while. It is a shame that Canada's publishing industry cannot seem to successfully diversify and support its writers. Unfortunately, it seems to be that the industry does not lend a hand to writers of colour very often, and when it does, it is out of necessity or out of trial; never for the genuine interest in, or talent of the author and their work itself. Writers of colour in Canada are either invisible, or visible but for all of the wrong reasons.

Scaachi Koul describes an incident in which multiple publishers pitched in money for an "Appropriation Prize". Essentially, Koul describes an event in which the white writers and editors, and people in the publishing industry do not understand being told "no" and what Koul describes as, "PC culture gone wrong." Blame this type of racist behavior on an older generation of people, if you will (as a lot of people seem to do) but that does not make it acceptable. Instead of appropriating other cultures by having white writers try and emulate a cultural experience, Koul suggests—wait for it—that, "You have to actually find people who write and speak and live from different perspectives". What a fascinating idea; that a multicultural country such as Canada would actually represent its inhabitants through its literature and media. The notion of having to argue and explain the reasons why there should be more ethnic diversity within Canadian publishing seems ridiculous. It is interesting to think about the reasons why white writers, editors and publishers feel the way they do about not being able to write about the cultural experiences of other ethnicities. Why is it such a pressing issue for white people to not be able to speak in place of others? It is another depressing case as presented by Koul, to see that people in the field of presenting media to the people do not care at all about the actual interests of those people. For example, Koul states that Steve Ladurantaye, managing editor of CBC News contributed to this offensive "prize" as did editor in chief of the National Post, Anne Marie Owens. It is a shame that while holding a position in which you have the power to reach a large audience, these editors and executives made fools of themselves and made a case point for everyone to see just one contributing factor to why diversity among writers and editors is so scarce.

However, Koul does include in her article that not only does there need to be more diversity among writers who are being published, but they actually need to be promoted and paid (standard practice, one would think) She reminds us that having a white author write a “thoughtful” portrayal of Indigenous life—or any other aspect of life that is from a culture that is not your own, is “meeting the laziest kind of diversity metric, one that doesn’t actually shift power balances or change the status quo.” So what editors and publishers in Canada cannot seem to grasp is that that is exactly the point of supporting the diversification the publishing playing field.

Writer Madeleine Thien similarly calls out publishers in Canada for not including writers of colour or supporting diversity in major literary awards. As an experienced novelist, Thien has noticed over the course of time that in literary awards there is usually a token ethnic writer while everyone else is white. After ten years of seeing the same pattern of exclusion, Thien realized that it was not just as anomaly as she had originally thought. Thien reminds us in her speech at the literASIAN writers festival that the book critics have been granted with the important and powerful role of deciding which works of literature will be visible. To keep writers and pieces of work invisible from other cultures, intentional or not is an abuse of power and too common in Canada’s publishing industry. Thien points out that most critics, if not from a culture that is not white, “do not have a great depth of knowledge, whether that be historical context or literary precedents.” This contributes to the lack of acknowledgment of literature that is not white. From Thien’s speech, it is apparent that there is a never-ending cycle in the industry of critics and publishers lacking the knowledge to promote and support diverse authors and therefore making the industry harder for our Canadian writers to have the opportunity to immerse themselves in their work. Part of the problem I believe, as well, is the fear of gaining any knowledge about other cultures. While a lack of depth of knowledge sounds at first like a valid reason to not be endorsing authors of different races, it is not a valid reason when nobody is trying. The industry needs to get critics and publishers in who are diverse themselves. Perhaps a white critic would not relate the same to a book written by someone of Asian descent, for example, and so they would not advocate for that novel to be published. As a result, it would be ideal to get a working critic

who would understand the work to decide if it is of value and worthy of literary prizes, etc.

In a Globe and Mail article written by Dakshana Bascaramurty, she talks about the 2014 #weneeddiversebooks movement. This movement was specifically targeted to address the lack of diverse children's literature, but the same idea applies to all facets of publishing. Writer S.K. Ali believes that, "authenticity in depicting these characters lies in who tells the stories." This is an important belief; one that is at the heart of the problem it seems, of not including non-white writers in publishing. Instead of hiring an author who has lived these experiences, white authors are given the task of writing about another culture instead. S. Bear Bergman puts it best when he says, "You can research on the Internet all you want, but you won't know that this thing doesn't go with that thing unless there's somebody who's lived it for 40 years to tell you." Author Jael Richardson says as well that, "there has been a common perception that white writers are experts at writing and diverse authors are experts on diversity." It is the lack of trust and acknowledgment that writers of colour are not being seen as good of writers as white people. There are pressures put on writers no doubt, but more so with ethnic writers. They need to be successful and make the numbers just as other writers, but instead, if they are not successful, Bergman says, it is seen as the writers' fault. Taking on a writer of colour is seen as a "trial effort" more than it is hiring someone for their talents and expertise.

Jen Sookfong Lee writes about her experiences with working in a white-dominated industry. She says that this placement made her, "feel both visible and invisible, as well as profoundly uncomfortable." The fact that Sookfong Lee addressed not just being excluded, but also visible is key to understanding where the industry is going wrong in terms of including writers of colour. If, for example, there is a literary contest or festival in which the majority of writers are white and you have one token ethnic writer, it just seems as if the industry is putting them in for their physical appearance and not their writing. Instead of tokenizing writers of colour, we need to weave a variety of writers from all walks of life into the industry, as they are a part of what life is like in Canada. The country is by no means only made up of all white people. Sookfong Lee's article is one that is appalling when you read about how some authors have treated her in

the past. Sookfong Lee relays to us that an author told her that she couldn't take "one more Asian woman writing about her dead grandfather." Remarks like that are the type of visibility that I believe Sookfong Lee mentions. Rather than being seen as a talented writer; one who is taking their time to share a story about their knowledge on certain experiences, fiction or not, she was just seen as the "Asian female writer" in the sea of white writers. Sookfong Lee even said that she has been mistaken in the past for being Madeleine Thien. For someone to say to Sookfong Lee essentially that her story is unoriginal and overdone, it is not fair to a wide demographic of people. Just because the writing does not fit in with the white narrative, it does not mean that it is unfit for the rest of the industry. That is not to say however, that every writer of colour can only write about a very specific sliver of experiences—ones that only adhere to the multicultural experience of living as an immigrant in Canada. The industry's problem is not making ethnically diverse writers visible as just writers. This goes back again, to the problem of white publishers not accepting that the narrative either does not fit in with the white, Canadian ones, or it does not specifically address the target audience, which the publishers think is whatever race you are. This happened to Sookfong Lee, when her editor said that the novel she was writing did not "build on my existing audience" meaning that it was not solely about the Chinese Canadian experience. While it is important for writers to talk about these experiences, that is not the only topic that they know about. They are not simply just "experts on diversity".

As we have found out, there is overwhelming evidence that the Canadian publishing industry is not supporting and encouraging writers of colour to be successfully published. The entitlement of the critics and publishers and editors in the industry is preventing the breaking out of ethnically diverse writers who have so much to contribute to Canadian literature. By not taking a step back and seeing how tremendously white the whole industry is we are excluding so many demographics of people who do not have an accurate representation of their shared experiences in literature. There are countless books on the experiences of white people coming of age, experiencing death, and going through all sorts of life trauma, but for a lot of people in the country, that is not so easily found. As a multicultural country, Canada is failing most of its inhabitants by not including a

wide range of writers in the industry. Unfortunately, it seems that the industry needs to learn that one person of colour does not speak for everybody. The media needs to learn that in order to have a successful and diverse team of writers, they need to start taking writers of colour seriously and weaving them into the fabric of the industry, just as it is in everyday life. Writers of colour in Canada are not just a trial or a token, but they are a vital part of what is missing in the white-dominated publishing industry.

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