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Inclusivity and Indie Authors: the Case for Community-Based Publishing

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Inclusivity and Indie Authors: the Case for Community-Based Publishing

Abstract

African Americans remain marginalized within the children's publishing industry, despite the 2014 increase in books about Africans/African Americans. This sudden spike was not paired with a comparable increase in the number of books by Blacks, however, suggesting that power remains where it has always been: in the hands of whites. The homogeneity of the publishing workforce matches the homogeneity of published authors and their books. The marginalization of writers of color is the result of very deliberate decisions made by gatekeepers within the children's literature community—editors, agents, librarians, and reviewers. These decisions place insurmountable barriers in the path of far too many talented writers of color. In this essay I advocate for a model of community-based publishing that uses print-on-demand technology to transfer power from the industry's (mostly white) gatekeepers to those excluded from the publishing process. I will also demonstrate how public libraries place additional barriers in the path of writers of color by adhering to policies that prevent self-published books from being acquired. Indie authors and their books offer important counter-narratives that cannot easily circulate—particularly in low-income communities—without the assistance of libraries and informed, nonbiased librarians.

Biography

Zetta Elliott earned her PhD in American Studies from NYU in 2003. Her essays have appeared in *School Library Journal* and *Publishers Weekly*. She is the award-winning author of over twenty books for young readers. Elliott is an advocate for greater diversity and equity in publishing. She lives in Brooklyn.

Inclusivity and Indie Authors: the Case for Community-Based Publishing

I can't breathe.

I am a Black feminist writer committed to social justice. I write stories about Black children and teens, but within the children's literature community I have struggled to find a home. I am—and likely will remain—an outsider.

By industry standards, I suppose I am a failed author. Since I started writing for young readers in 2000, only three of my thirty stories have been published traditionally. I turned to self-publishing as my only recourse, and now face the contempt of those who see self-publishing as a mere exercise in vanity.

Last year a white Facebook “friend” suggested that my decision to self-publish was analogous to Blacks in the civil rights era choosing to dine in their segregated neighborhood instead of integrating Jim Crow lunch counters in the South. In her mind, self-publishing is a cowardly form of surrender; to be truly noble (and, therefore, deserving of publication) I ought to patiently insist upon my right to sit alongside white authors regardless of the hostility, rejection, and disdain I regularly encounter.

Since 2009 I have used my scholarly training to [examine white supremacy](#) in the children’s literature community where African Americans remain marginalized, despite the 2014 increase in books *about* Blacks. This sudden spike (reflected in the latest statistics from [the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison](#)) was not paired with a comparable increase in the number of books *by* Blacks, however, suggesting that power remains where it has always been: in the hands of whites.

Publishers Weekly’s [2015 salary survey](#) revealed that only 1 percent of industry professionals self-identify as African American (89 percent self-identify as white). [Lee & Low’s 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey](#) puts the number closer to 4 percent, but still makes evident the fact that straight, cisgender, white women without disabilities dominate all sectors of the publishing industry. That the homogeneity of the publishing workforce matches the homogeneity of published authors and their books is no coincidence. The marginalization of writers of color is the result of very deliberate decisions made by gatekeepers within the children’s literature community--editors, agents, librarians, reviewers.

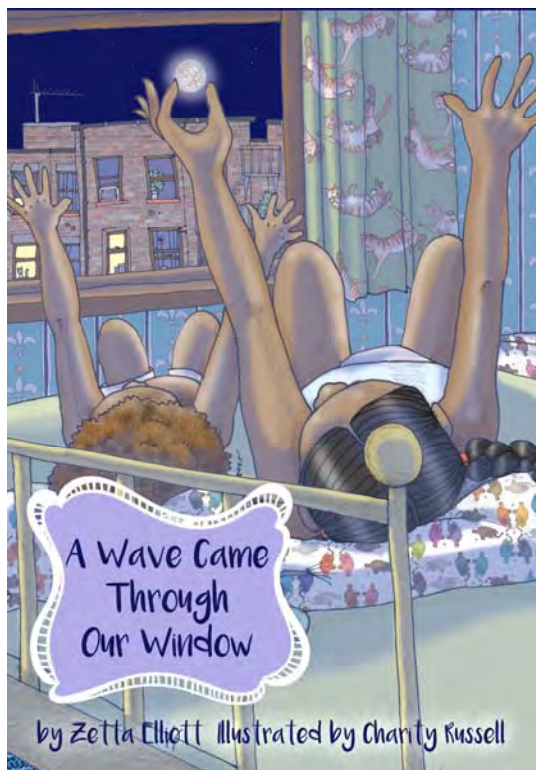
I know better than to turn to the publishing industry when I seek justice for “my children:” Trayvon, Renisha, Jordan, Islan, Ramarley, Aiyana, and Tamir. But I also know that children’s literature can help to counter the racially biased thinking that insists Michael Brown was “no angel,” but rather “a demon” to be feared and destroyed. I believe there’s a direct link between the misrepresentation of Black youth as inherently criminal and the justification given by those who so brazenly take their lives. This erasure of Black youth from children’s literature functions as a kind of “symbolic annihilation.” Despite the fact that [the majority of primary school children in the U.S. are now kids of color](#), the publishing industry continues to produce books that overwhelmingly feature white children only. The message is clear: the lives of Black kids don’t matter.

Police brutality is an issue of great importance to the Black community—June Jordan has called it one of our “[urgencies](#)”—yet the publishing industry has failed to produce children's books that reflect and/or explain this reality. According to *Horn Book* editor in chief [Roger Sutton](#), self-published books “aren’t filling any kind of need that isn’t already being met by established publishers.”

Yet how many children's books do we have about police brutality—mass incarceration—lynching—HIV/AIDS? Homelessness and suicide among queer youth of color? How many books show Black children using magic and/or technology to shape an alternate universe?

These are the kinds of stories *I* write and am forced to self-publish because they are rejected over and over by (mostly white) editors. Many members of the children’s literature community clamor for greater diversity but remain silent when another Black teenager is shot down. They cling to the fantasy that white supremacy has shaped every U.S. institution *except* the publishing industry. Like racism in police forces across this nation, racism in publishing is cultural and systemic; the problem cannot be solved merely by hiring a few (more) people of color.

As a writer who prioritizes social justice over popularity and/or profit, I prefer to invest in alternatives to the existing system. Since 2013 I have self-published [19 books](#) for young readers. You likely won't have heard of any of them, since indie books are excluded from review by the major outlets—unless you pay [\\$425](#)—though *School Library Journal* has just launched a new quarterly column, “[Indie Voices](#).” Without reviews, most public libraries won't add a book to their collection and many ban self-published books altogether.



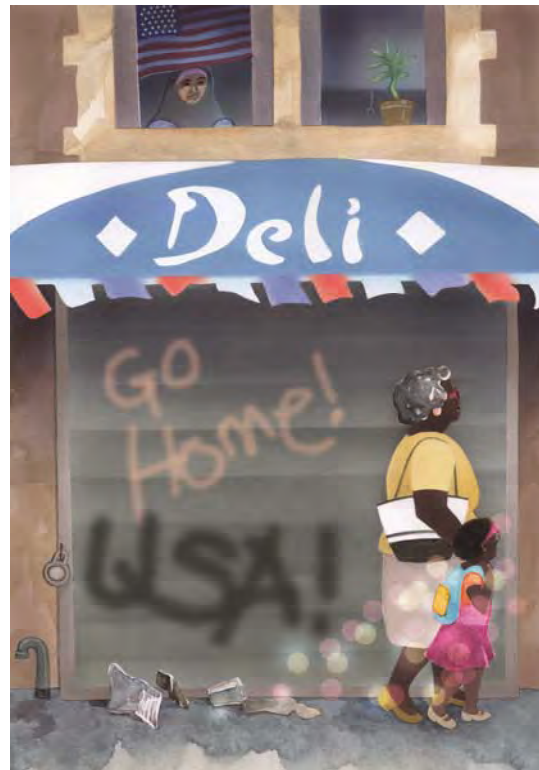
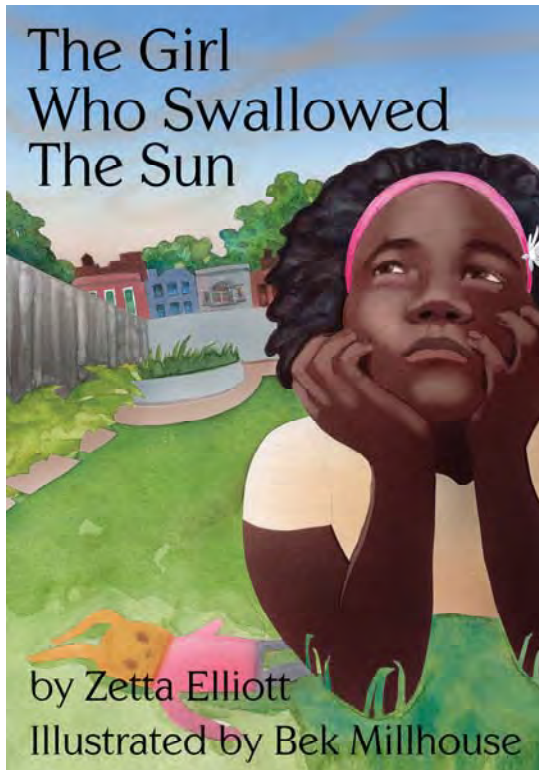
One reason I self-publish is to refute the claim that the low number of books by people of color is a question of “merit.” In the past two years, three of my self-published titles have been included in the annual list compiled by the Bank Street Center for Children’s Literature of the [Best Children’s Books of the Year](#), and one (*A Wave Came Through Our Window*) was starred for outstanding merit. What does it mean when stories about kids of color are rejected over and over by some white women but then declared “outstanding” by others? Most people think of self-publishing as an act of vanity, but when you are Black in an industry that is overwhelmingly white, a different dynamic is at play. As John K.

Young explains in his book *Black Writers, White Publishers* (2006):

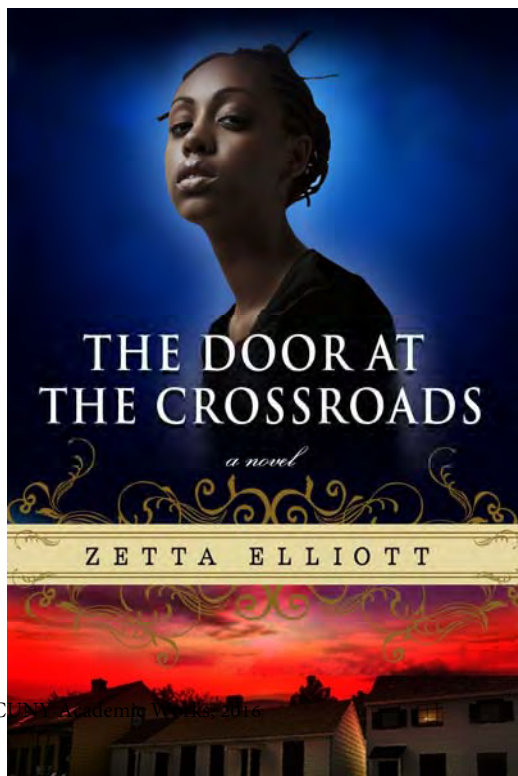
...what sets the white publisher-black author relationship apart is the underlying social structure that transforms the usual unequal relationship into an extension of a much deeper cultural dynamic. The predominantly white publishing industry reflects and often reinforces the racial divide that has always defined American society.

As an indie author, I have the freedom to write about the things that matter most to the members of my community—and can then publish those books in a timely fashion using print-on-demand technology. When traditional presses rejected the Christmas narrative I penned after 9/11, I chose to self-publish *Let the Faithful Come* in 2015 with illustrations that reflect the current refugee crisis. I also use my books to counter rising Islamophobia in the US and its devastating effect on Muslim youth; in *I Love Snow* (2015), my tribute to Ezra Jack Keats' *The Snowy Day* (1962), I made sure a Muslim child was shown enjoying the simple pleasure of falling snow. In *The Girl Who Swallowed the Sun* (2014), a Muslim child stands beneath the American flag draped across her window as the book's protagonist passes a storefront with nativist graffiti sprayed across the grate.





My [Rosetta Press imprint](#) produces stories that are culturally specific and organic, not forced through a white filter in order to be labeled "universal." Organic writing reflects the values, cultural practices, and histories of a particular community; it originates within diverse communities and emerges without outsider approval and/or interference. As an indie author operating outside of the traditional publishing system, I am able to address the needs of those within my community whose stories matter but may not be considered "commercially viable" by corporate publishers.



At a moment when [75 percent of whites have no friends of color](#) and public schools are rapidly "[resegregating](#)," the need for diverse children's literature is greater than ever. I am partnering with other artist-activists to develop a model of community-based publishing that uses print-on-demand technology to transfer power from the industry's (mostly white) gatekeepers to those excluded from the publishing process. I have served two terms as writer-in-residence at Brooklyn's [Weeksville Heritage Center](#) and have self-published three time-travel novels set in that historic, free Black community during the Civil War. In

addition to teaching free writing classes for children and adults, I also developed a picture book about Weeksville, which the center will publish independently in time for the 2016 Brooklyn Book Festival.

I am hopeful that [more public libraries](#) will embrace a community-based publishing model and assist diverse patrons as they become *producers* and not just *consumers* of books. The BPL sends me into dozens of schools every year, enabling hundreds of kids of color to meet an author who lives in and writes about the magic to be found in *their* community. Only twelve of my twenty-two books for young readers are part of the library's collection, and most of those were added recently. But I am hopeful that in the future the bias against self-published books will diminish as gatekeepers realize that it is unfair to punish writers of color for failing at a game that's rigged. Until then, I will continue to self-publish and I will offer my "organic" writing to the members of my community. I will find a home where my creativity can flourish. I will insist upon my right to breathe.

Bibliography

Young, John K. (2006). *Black Writers, White Publishers*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.