



Tamarind

Multicultural children's books for a multicultural world

The Right To
Be Seen

PATRICK HARDY LECTURE
By Verna Wilkins – 29th October 2008

The Right To Be Seen

It is indeed an honour to be asked to speak at this prestigious event. I usually introduce myself as a 'reluctant publisher'. Why? Because publishing did not feature for one moment in my career path. Here I am today, having spent the last 20 years doing something I never planned to do. So why am I here? Why am I a publisher? Why children's books? Why choose the most difficult and cost-intensive area of the industry? Why? Because I had no choice.

Please allow me to take you on a journey. We will start in the Caribbean in the 1950s.

I was born in Grenada, in the Caribbean, an island colonised by Britain. My father was a head teacher of a large school. Reading was high on the agenda in our house and all our books were imported from England. Looking back, I realise that my father was aware of the imbalance in our learning material. What he was teaching, and we were learning, was embedded in a culture far away. He was instrumental in introducing Caribbean History into a curriculum dominated by England's past. On calm, tropical twilight evenings, he told us of our African heritage and our lives as Caribbean people. He wanted us to know who we were and what our real history was. It took me many years to appreciate his efforts to give his children a sense of self and personal value. What he could see, and I could not, at the time, was that all our printed learning material, all the material that was highly valued and used throughout our formative and subsequent years either ignored us or gave some far away writer's interpretation of who and what we were.

My learning to read took place in a social vacuum. I learned about the flora, fauna and lives of people who lived in the temperate regions of the world. The fiction and non-fiction that inhabited my imagination were alien to me. I read stories of white children sitting around the fire in the evenings, indoors! Fires indoors? My reality was 90 degrees in the shade! The underlying messages I learned from my imported reading was that all white English children lived in middle-class families. There was always a mother and father, two children, Janet and John and a dog called Rover, or was it the car that was a Rover? I read *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. It was not until I read Dickens in my teens that the layers of British society came into the picture.

Around me in the tropics, the flora was resplendent with the vibrant colours of hibiscus, oleander, bird of paradise and bougainvillea, but my poetry contained hosts of golden daffodils! I was nowhere to be seen in my early learning. I was invisible. My recuperation is still a work in progress...

I was well adjusted to take up my residence in the UK. My imagination had already preceded me. However, reality came as a shock when I found that the snow I sang about in my hot Caribbean Christmases eventually turned to grey-brown slush. In my imagination all those hundreds of miles away, it stayed white and soft and desirable.

My children were born in the UK. Their learning material would be set in a familiar space. I didn't consciously investigate their early reading and they were early readers. One day, after a few weeks at his first school, my older son came home with a booklet the children were making in class. On the cover, was a face – the caption

said 'This is Me'. He had painted his face bright pink! My heart gave a sickening lurch. Self-denial? Is that what the psychologists call it?

Is this you? I asked feebly.

"Yes." – came the confident reply.

"Are you that colour?"

"No. The teacher gave out flesh colour to everyone!"

"Oh. Fine. I have a lovely brown crayon and we can fix that right now."

"No!" he said. "It has to be that colour. It's for a book!"

I had no choice. I had to become a publisher.

My son had already learned, at that early age, that he did not qualify for entry into a world aimed exclusively at children.

The early years are the formative years – the years in which the personality takes shape and attitudes form. Those years are important and apart from food, children need love, security and recognition. They should be seen. They have a right to be seen.

I chose to publish picture books because I had learned that children read pictures long before they learn to read words and that pictures can lure them into the world of words. Reading the work of Nicholas Tucker was a great help:

"Children's early learning, emotional development and understanding is dominated by visual images. They read pictures slowly, not necessarily only as a way of helping out with the print of the texts, but also as a first step towards reading the world around them..."

So who's in the picture? Who is in this world? Ignoring significant groups of children is damaging. It damages the excluded and the included in equal measure. They both acquire behaviour patterns not conducive to peaceful co-existence in our shrinking, interdependent world.

Thus began the life of the reluctant publisher, completely unfettered by the reality of publishing. If I knew then, what I know now I am sure I wouldn't be speaking with you this evening. But I am; and it's OK.

I needed to produce books. I had no money for authors. So, I started to do what I deemed to be logical. I went to a local school and spoke with teachers. This was in whitest, greenest Surrey.

One teacher kindly offered to look at any book I produced and promised that she would advise me as to its usefulness in the classroom. I wrote a birthday book. After all, this was something common to all children. So if you look at Tamarind Books: we don't do 'issues', we do stuff that all children have in common – loose teeth, birthdays – that sort of thing. The helpful teacher was my editor and *Kay's Birthday Numbers Book* was published in 1987. A simple story of a six-year-old black girl's birthday. A group of friends from varying ethnic groups come to the party. A friend recommended an experienced illustrator, Elaine Mills, and she was a great help. The teacher was delighted with the finished product, but said that in order to get the children to use the book as a resource, I should do a puzzle. I designed a triangular wooden tray puzzle (very costly!). So we had a book and a puzzle. As a set, it became a good resource for the early classroom. We went on to produce two more books and two more puzzles. The clues for the puzzles were in the book. The puzzles had the faces and other scenes from the book. Some school children in and around Surrey got their first glimpses of multicultural Britain through handling the puzzles and reading the books.

Sales were slow. With the help of my family, we sent out leaflets to schools and posted the few orders we attracted. My sons were a great help, but began to rebel when they got strange looks in the post office when they went in with a black plastic bag full of brown paper packages! They were asked many times about the contents of those parcels. They wanted their mother to be like the other mothers. To feed them, taxi them around and keep her head down.

Tamarind grew slowly and, in the meantime, the make up of classrooms all over the UK continued to change. Schools in many parts of England were becoming more and more ethnically diverse.

With my growing sense of awareness I read everything I could find about importance of literature in all its forms. I learned that literature:

- is a catalyst to integration,
- is an indicator of integration,
- can be a tool for promoting intercultural dialogue and social cohesion in a diverse society.

It was the nineteenth century philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau who wrote:

“I do not know how I learned to read but I remember my first books and their effect on me. It is from my earliest reading that I date the unbroken consciousness of my own existence.”

And it was the twentieth century writer Malorie Blackman who said:

*“A number of things made me want to write books for children. The dearth of books featuring black children as the main protagonists was a spur to becoming a writer. I grew up reading books which ignored black children. Apart from anything else, it was very lonely.” Later on Malorie added... “I was 23 years old before I read a book with a black main character, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. ...”*

Malorie has made sure that this does not happen to her daughter. She has done that and much more. As an award-winning author of more than 60 books, she continues to produce a formidable list. It was Malorie who encouraged me to join the City Lit writing classes run by Elizabeth Hawkins. I did, and I learned so much with her tuition. I am proud to say that Elizabeth and Malorie have joined the happy band of Tamarind authors.

To leave my script for a while – my son, who painted himself pink, has grown up and I am now a grandmother. As it was for Malorie, so I was determined that it wouldn't happen to my grandson, so I wrote a book when he was three just for him. It turned out to be part of a series dealing with vocabulary like up and down and in and out and the first is called *Let's Feed the Ducks*. I got Pamela Venus, who's a brilliant illustrator, to do it. So Max has a book about him.

On his first day at school he said to his mum,
“Can I take my book?”

And she said, “Yes, you can, but everybody has books at school, the teachers will give the children books.” She's answering a question he hasn't asked. “But, can I take mine?” he persisted.

“You can if you want to but they have got books in school.”

“OK, fine, but I'll take mine!”

To the first little boy he met, he said, “Hello, my names Max, what's yours?”

The little boy answered “Tim.”

Max says, “This is my book, where's yours?”

And Tim says, “I don't have a book.”

So he says, “But didn't your Grandma know she has to do a book about you?”

So we can change things!

Tamarind continued to grow slowly, with teachers being consulted all the way. They made suggestions for expanding the list according to their needs. However, distribution was a problem. I tried to break into the trade market by going into bookshops. In Surrey, one bookseller told me to take the books somewhere else. “Brixton.” was his first suggestion, “There might be a need for these books there!” I tried to tell him that the books were not *for* black children but for *all* children. I tried to explain that they were ordinary everyday stories with ordinary children doing what all children do. “We won't stock them. We don't have that problem here!” I rushed out of the shop before he told me what the perceived problem was. There was quite a bit of that in the early days!

One day, when my list had grown to six books, I visited a large bookshop in Ealing. The high street was visibly multicultural. The book buyer assured me that black people seldom visited the shop. There were no books in the shop window or on display tables or on shelves anywhere which spoke to anyone who wasn't white! I timidly commented on this but offered to do a small window display with the covers of Tamarind books. “This could be a signal to black people that they are included in your merchandise: a business opportunity maybe?” I suggested. Not only did he accept my offer, he bought six of each of my books. I was over the moon.

I prepared the window display myself. It was three weeks before he put my cover display in the window. On the day he did this, he realised that during the intervening weeks, all the books that he had bought had sold. He was

surprised, and said so. I was delighted, but very concerned that a bookseller was surprised when books he put out for sale had actually sold! A disturbing thought! But he bought some more.

Throughout the 80's and 90s, arguments grew around inadequate provision in schools for our multi-racial society. In May 1988, an article in the Education section of the *Independent*, Peter Wilby examined the issues behind the Macdonald Report. This report followed an inquiry, after a 13 year old Asian boy was stabbed to death in Burnage High School. The headline in the *Independent* read: 'Most schools lack an adequate response to our multi-racial society'.

Wilby commented on the fact that arguments raged around how schools should respond to the advent of a multiracial society. Actually, many schools responded by introducing ethnic minority customs, festivals, food and music. Much of this emphasised differences and ignored similarities. While some of the provision was good, there was a dearth of books which included black and Asian children unselfconsciously. Many of the early books showed the families in stereotypical situations and situations in which their skin colour was the cause of their problems. Many books treated, and some still do treat 'diversity' as an issue. It is as if including a person who is not white creates problems.

Right from the start, Tamarind books depicted ordinary families, leading ordinary lives. The children had birthdays, lost their teeth, moved house and did all the things that all families, whatever their ethnic origins, did. However, what made the difference was that our tooth fairies were drop-dead gorgeous, computer-literate and adequately prepared for night work. Our giants were female and very approachable, apart from the few bad attacks of the hiccups which totally devastated entire villages. Our mermaids were eco-warriors, loved sailors and lived in the warm seas of the Caribbean.

The *Independent* article highlighted Tamarind's work and subject matter and commented on the fact that we show our children growing and changing with humour instead of hard luck stories. The article caught the attention of other newspapers.

In December 1988, Sandra Hempel did a profile in the *Sunday Times*: 'Desk-top publisher puts the white world to rights'. Not my words, and I'm not sure that I agreed with her statement, but it brought 450 letters onto my doormat in the following couple of weeks. It was extremely difficult for a one-woman band to respond, especially as I still had a job outside Tamarind in order to supplement the publishing! I wrote to the *Sunday Times* about the response. They did another article in June 1989, 'Righting the Sin of Omission'. Both articles put Tamarind in the limelight.

What struck me most was the number of letters that demonstrated a deep and unmet need for help. Some stories were heartbreaking. One mother wrote, "To look at most children's books and toys, one would think that black children do not exist. That sin of omission is bad for them and for their self-confidence." Some parents find it hard to support their children in the face of this strange invisibility. Many wrote as if my books offered a lifeline. However, a number of authors and illustrators also pledged their support and I am delighted to say that some of them still work for Tamarind to this day. Some booksellers also requested stock. The Newham Bookshop has been a consistent buyer. John Newman remembers to this day, my visits to the shop, all those years ago, with bags of books. He made my day, not very long ago, by telling me that he'd never had a return on a Tamarind book!

Back in the 80s, legislation played an important part in children's right to be seen. The implementation of the Children Act in 1989 brought with it the need to consider the racial origin, cultural and linguistic background of all the children that we care for and educate. This act forced organisations and childcare workers to examine their practice. It is the first piece of legislation that actually spells out the importance of providing childcare services that meet the needs of black children and their families. The statement 'treating all children as individuals and with equal concern' has hopefully become one that practitioners are familiar with and teachers would think twice before giving black children 'flesh' coloured crayons to colour their self-portraits!

In some cases, there was an acute lack of understanding regarding the implementation of legislation. I have always and still to date, continue to visit schools on a regular basis. One school librarian proudly took me into the library to show me how progressive her school was. Her books were catalogued under subject matter. I found Tamarind books safely labelled under 'M' – Multicultural. I tried to explain that multiculturalism was not a subject but a way of life! Many schools, however, were succeeding in making a positive difference.

When October was appointed Black History Month (BHM), in the world of books, it was a great opportunity for teachers to review their curriculum in terms of inclusion and to provide a global perspective for learners. I

believe that BHM, if implemented carefully, could mean that eventually it will become redundant as inclusion becomes the status quo! And history will be everybody's stories!

Over the years of responding to requests to visit schools during October, I realised that BHM was not properly resourced. This provided an opportunity for Tamarind to produce a series of biographies for National Curriculum. For the 9 - 12 age group, we produced biographies of successful black people living and working in the UK today. A successful series which includes Malorie Blackman, the writer, Benjamin Zephaniah, the poet and author, and more recently Rudolph Walker, the actor. While interviewing these protagonists for the series, I was horrified to hear from five of the eight so far, that they were all given negative careers advice by their teachers. Malorie, despite being a top performer in English, was not encouraged to go to university, but was told to do business studies at the local college. Patricia Scotland, now Baroness Scotland of Asthal, and our current Attorney General, was told that she should just hold onto her then job as a Saturday girl at Sainsbury's and hope to get to be a supervisor with the passage of time! Low expectation was a bugbear that wore heavily on black children.

Blame should not be placed wholly on teachers. Publishing is, according to the 2004 supplement *In Full Colour: Cultural Diversity in Book Publishing Today*, "a missed opportunity". Publishers could miss out on a substantial market for literature among minority ethnic communities if they fail to employ staff who have an inside knowledge of those markets. According to the 2003 Arts Council England and Office of National Statistics report *Focus on Cultural Diversity*, minority ethnic communities are heavily involved in literary pursuits from reading to creative writing. The under-representation of these groups in the industry is made more apparent when compared to their interest in literature and the arts.

The proportion of black people reading for pleasure is, according to the data, 72%. The proportion among the Asian population is 61%. Minority ethnic groups are well above average in their involvement in creative writing, a fact that is not reflected by publishers' white lists. About 7% of black and 10% of mixed-ethnicity people had written stories or plays in the past year, compared to the national figure of 4%. Minority-ethnic users also beat the overall national figure for public library use.

According to the survey, 47% of all people had visited a public library in the past year, but among Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Chinese and other ethnic groups, the number of library users was higher than the national figure by as much as 10%. The opportunities presented to the publishing industry by minority ethnic communities are not lost on respondents to this survey. But many feel that the industry will struggle to take advantage of these opportunities if it does not employ a more diverse workforce.

Indeed, only last Saturday, I did a workshop at the Lewisham Library. In these workshops, I demystify the process by which a book is made. It is called 'What's in a Book?' Participants gain a clear working insight from the idea to the bookshelf of some of Tamarind's popular titles. It's great fun. They see roughs of the books to come, and they are encouraged to write. Adults and children join in these interactive sessions – delighted to discover the stories behind the stories. The library was very busy all day with ethnically diverse groups, borrowing, browsing and reading.

In common with all industries, the publishing industry depends on sales. Many myths abound about book buying and black people. For the last four years, Tamarind has taken a stall at the Afro Hair and Beauty Show, held annually at Alexandra Palace. This is Tamarind taking the mountain to Mahomet to dispel the myth that black people do not buy books. Many yummy mummies go to Alexandra Palace to buy hair and beauty products. They are not there to buy books! However, year on year, we sell large quantities of books to parents who constantly enquire as to where our books are sold. Many comment that they never see books like ours in shops. That show provides a lucrative market for us.

Another factor worth noting at these fairs is the reactions of the children to our stand. Tamarind books have stunning illustrations of black children and adults on the covers. The look of surprise on the faces of the children who have never seen themselves depicted so beautifully and so confidently on the covers of books, and with so many in one place! The delight among the parents, some of whom buy the Black Stars range, even though the content of the range might be too young. The comment is usually 'My children need to see this!' They need to know that success is possible; they need role models for success.

I am optimistic. With the heightened awareness in many areas of publishing, much is changing for the better in the area of diversity, but there is so much more to be done. I think there is an element of fear. Many, I believe, are fearful of getting it wrong – of offending ethnic minority groups – saying the wrong thing and being labelled racist. That is a great inhibitor and deprives many readers of the right to be seen. We need to move on. It is not

necessary for an editor to have experienced a certain way of life before they commission a book. Editors, by and large, are intelligent and creative people. I am sure they can handle the challenge to provide great diverse lists for our consumption. I believe that with open discussion and cooperation, our fears will diminish and publishing will be well poised to take advantage of the change.

About a year ago, Tamarind became an imprint of Random House Children's Books. We launched the union at the South Africa High Commission. The High Commissioner Lindiwe Mabuza is an author on the Tamarind list and is one of our best ambassadors for reading, here and in South Africa. Very recently we launched a biography of Rudolph Walker at the Trinidad High Commission. All these links are productive. People feel included and it brings in positive exposure in the press. Together, we are exploring the unorthodox markets that Tamarind has opened. We are tapping into the market in schools and preparing a global and inclusive list, with more books, more readers, keeping alive with new initiatives and great fun.

At Random House, I have the support of Philippa Dickinson. I would like to thank her for the courageous step of taking Tamarind on board. We launched with three new picture books, one new biography and paperback re-issues of two successful hardback biographies. In the coming year, for the first time in our history, we are doing 10 new titles. Together, we are doing our share to redress the balance in publishing.

I am acutely aware that publishing is a business, but it is a business that holds great power. It holds the power to include, the power to ignore and the power to create heroes. We try to handle that power with caution because we need to co-exist successfully in our shrinking, interdependent world.

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