TURNING THE PAGE:

A Guide to Writing Cultural Diversity in Fiction

Vaseem Khan

Project Partners:

Hachette UK
The Society of Authors
The Crime Writers' Association
Spread the Word
A.M. Heath Literary Agency

Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Credits:

Author: Vaseem Khan

Advisory Panel:

Jo Dickinson, Hodder and Stoughton (Hachette UK)
Nick Davies, John Murray Press (Hachette UK)
Martin Reed, The Society of Authors
Maxim Jakubowski, The Crime Writers' Association
Ruth Harrison, Spread the Word
Euan Thorneycroft, A.M. Heath Literary Agency

Funded by: UK Research and Innovation, Arts and Humanities Research Council

TURNING THE PAGE: A Guide to Writing Cultural Diversity in Fiction

Designed by: Vaseem Khan

www.vaseemkhan.com

Contents

Executive Summary

Turning the Page: A Guide to Writing Cultural Diversity in Fiction is aimed at offering advice to authors and industry professionals in tackling the problems associated with cultural appropriation in literature. It is also aimed at promoting more diverse characters in fiction. The project was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

The research included:

- An online survey.
- A series of qualitative interviews with authors and industry professionals.
- A 'literature review' of a selection of publicly available articles discussing the subject.

The Problem

In recent years, issues of cultural appropriation and authenticity of voice have come to the fore in the publishing industry. Authors and editors are increasingly reluctant to include ethnically diverse characters in their work for fear of being 'called out' due to perceived transgressions.

This applies to authors writing outside of their own culture or ethnic identity who find themselves accused of 'taking voice away' from the culture they are appropriating or of misrepresenting that culture.

Although there has been plenty of critique on the subject there is presently very little advice for authors who do wish to utilise such diverse characters.

The project and its aims

This research aimed to place the issue of cultural appropriation within the overall context of the current drive towards greater diversity in publishing. It further sought to analyse the phenomenon, and present a series of recommendations for authors wishing to write characters outside of the author's own cultural identity. It also sought to provide information for readers about this topical issue.

Main findings

The starting position of this project was that all authors should have the right to write as they wish as long as they approach the subject with empathy and carry out due diligence

to avoid misrepresentations. A survey completed by 1033 individuals from across the industry, including authors, readers, and industry professionals revealed that 95% of respondents agreed with this statement.

The research was divided into five sections, as follows.

In *Section 1 Diversity in fiction: a review of the landscape*, the current debate around diversity in the publishing industry was examined.

Firstly, I attempted to define what we mean by increasing diversity in the industry. This included increasing the number of industry staff and gatekeepers from diverse backgrounds, publishing more writers from diverse backgrounds, and increasing the incidence of ethnically diverse characters appearing in fiction. One way of achieving this latter goal is to empower authors of *all* backgrounds to write such characters. This is the focus of this project.

I further examined the *benefits* of increasing diversity, and found that as well as issues of fairness, and a wider range of voices adding positively to our fiction output, there is also a strong economic case for greater diversity in the publishing industry.

Lastly, I looked at the reasons why diversity has been so difficult to achieve. Reasons include issues such as the structural makeup of the industry, the assumptions publishers make about reader audiences, and the phenomenon of 'comping' - of comparing new books to previously published ones.

In *Section 2 Cultural Appreciation versus Cultural Misappropriation*, I examined the current debate around cultural appropriation in the publishing industry.

I found that accusations of cultural *mis*appropriation usually arise when authors indulge in stereotypes, are disrespectful of their subject matter, or fail to do their homework. I examined recent examples of books that have fallen into these traps.

I found that most authors, across all ethnicities, believe writers should not be stopped from writing characters outside their own culture. However, due consideration must always be given to the historical lack of access to the industry for voices from minority backgrounds.

"95% of authors, readers, and industry professionals agree all authors should have the right to write characters of whichever ethnic background they wish."

In *Section 3 Write what you know: Mining your heritage* I examined the sentiment that authors should write only about matters of which they have personal experience.

I found that authenticity of voice is increasingly becoming a measure by which publishers judge whether new books should be published.

I further found that, although authenticity can add a great deal to a book - and in some instances is all but essential to depict a particular lived experience - at times it is not clear just what 'authenticity' means. I present examples of authors whose work has been well received but

whose authenticity doesn't meet the strictest definition of the term.

I also found that for authors from minority backgrounds 'write what you know' is sometimes used as a straightjacket by publishers who assume that such writers would be best served by adhering to narrow themes such as tales of racism, colonialism, or the immigrant experience.

In *Section 4 Write what you don't know: Writing in the forbidden zone* I examined instances where writers do cross cultural boundaries in their work.

I looked at the notion of 'cancel culture' - the phenomenon of authors being vilified for writing characters hailing from backgrounds other than their own - and found that it impacted not just white writers but writers from all ethnicities.

I further found that this usually happens when writers are accused of taking the spotlight away from voices deemed more authentic.

I examined instances of books that have been highly successful in spite of the author's ethnicity differing from that of their protagonists.

In *Section 5 Recommendations and Checklist,* I suggest that there is a dearth of practical advice on how issues such as stereotyping and cultural misappropriation might be tackled.

I present a checklist of actions that authors considering writing characters outside of their own ethnicity might take to minimise the potential of getting things wrong and of causing offence.

As a starting point, I found that it is important for authors to consider 'the space they are taking up'. In other words to recognise that there may be more authentic voices better placed to tell this story, but traditionally sidelined by the industry.

I provide the views of various industry gatekeepers and influencers on the issue.

Finally, I make the point that it is only via a coordinated effort across the industry - involving authors, readers, and industry professionals - that we can make progress around a range of diversity issues in publishing.

My own belief is that the vast majority of people in the industry are striving to solve these issues. Progress may not be as swift as some would like but I found that the subject of diversity is high on the agenda of stakeholders across publishing. Personally, I am confident that things are moving in the right direction, and will continue to do so.

Vaseem, London, November 2021

Introduction

An introduction to the project

My name is Vaseem Khan and I am an author. If you're reading this guide then, like me, you have questions about the current debate around diversity in literature. You may be looking for information to help you understand that debate a little better; you may be looking for ways that you can help to address the problem of inclusivity, or, and let's be honest about this, you may simply be lost in the fog of confusion and anger that often surrounds this politically-charged subject. If so, you're not alone.

Not too long ago, I wrote a blog piece about cultural appropriation. The piece I wrote, while allowing for the fact that people from any given culture should have the right to take offence at the inappropriate borrowing of elements from their culture, also made the point that we should apply a measured approach to such issues. We now live in a world where it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate the political minefield of what may or may not cause offence. This applies doubly so to cultural and artistic content because of the way it cuts across society.

Authors, publishing industry professionals, and readers, are being asked to consider, on a daily basis, issues that involve diversity. A particularly contentious topic is when authors write characters not from their own cultural identity or ethnicity.

The fact is that writers borrow from other cultures and experiences all the time. My own feeling is that this is perfectly valid and, indeed, necessary. The point of being an author is to create worlds populated by characters that intrigue us and, hopefully, our readers. In other words, I believe that all authors should have the right to write whatever they choose, including stories involving characters not from their own ethnic backgrounds. To suggest that authors can only write characters that mirror themselves would pretty much kill off fiction overnight. For me, that's a little too close to literary censorship, and that can never be a good thing.

Having said this, there is clearly room for improvement with respect to the historical lack of access to the industry for voices from minority backgrounds, and we'll discuss that in more detail in a moment.

It's also equally valid for authors to write only about lives for which they have a lived experience. In other words to stick to characters from their own background. I don't believe authors should be pressured into shoehorning characters of colour into their books simply because it might be deemed politically expedient in the current climate. Characters should always serve the story, and the author's creative instinct.

My own interest is in enabling those authors who do choose to write outside of their culture to do so in a way that minimises the chances of causing offence.

"86% of survey respondents who were authors and industry professionals believed there is a 'climate of fear' around issues of cultural appropriation and voice."

The blog piece I wrote was read by thousands of people around the world. I was surprised to receive a lot of email from authors – authors of all backgrounds, white and non-white authors, unpublished and established authors – as well as many industry professionals – who all had similar feelings. Namely, that there's a lot of sound and fury surrounding the topic of cultural appropriation, but very little in the way of concrete advice.

The aims of the project

This project – comprising a series of five videos – and this corresponding written guide – is my response to that debate. The aim of the project is simple: to provide authors and industry professionals, such as agents, editors, marketers, and other decision-makers, with advice and tools on how to tackle the topic of writing diversity into literature given current sensibilities surrounding the issue.

The project is also aimed at readers, providing useful information about why certain types of books make it to market, and about how readers might help in the current drive towards a fairer, more equitable industry.

I don't claim to have all the answers, and much of this is my own take on the matter. But I've spent some time researching the subject, and interviewed those who have experience of the issues, and I hope that, collectively, we have some sound advice to offer.

This guide (and the accompanying videos) will cover topics such as tackling cultural misappropriation, the meaning of authenticity, and how to avoid stereotypes.

Ultimately, I will offer a checklist of things to look out for when considering the inclusion of characters from diverse backgrounds into fiction.

In the first section, I'll be setting the scene by taking a look at the current landscape of diversity in publishing. So, let's begin…

Section 1

Diversity in Fiction: a review of the landscape

What do we mean by diversity in publishing?

Diversity in the publishing industry has a very personal meaning for me. I wrote my first novel aged 17. I was a huge fan of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series and decided that this writing business looked pretty straightforward. I penned a SF comic fantasy and sent it off to a few agents. Then, with the supreme self-confidence of a teenager, I sat back and waited for a contract and the life of riches and fame that I supposed was part and parcel of being a published writer.

Of course, instead of a contract I received my first batch of rejection letters.

Over the next twenty-odd years I wrote six more novels and submitted them to virtually every agent in the country, collecting enough rejection letters to wallpaper my bedroom, until finally receiving a four book deal for my first crime series set in India.

The interesting thing about that long journey is that only one of those unpublished novels – the last one – featured an Asian or indeed any non-white protagonists. As an avid reader, I had consciously taken on

board the idea that books of the type I was trying to write just didn't feature non-white characters. In my mind, I could only hope to be published by writing white characters because those were the sorts of characters readers wanted to read about.

Of course, my thoughts on this have changed dramatically in recent years.

But let me back up a little. Let's define what we mean by diversity in publishing. In other words what is it that we're looking to achieve?

Firstly, diversity means a broader range of people working within the industry. This helps to change the makeup of the hive mind so that the industry can become more attuned to different voices.

Secondly, it means publishing more authors from diverse backgrounds. This doesn't just mean more authors of colour, but also authors from a range of other demographic characteristics such as gender and class.

Thirdly, it means publishing books that feature a more diverse range of *characters*.

Lastly, it means expanding the audience of readers to new and underrepresented communities.

This project is not large enough in scale to tackle all of these important dimensions of change. Instead, I will focus primarily on the third of these elements, namely, how we, as an industry, can publish more books featuring a wider cast of characters.

For me success in this area hinges on how well we can encourage authors of all ethnic backgrounds – white and non-white – to feel confident about writing diverse characters into their fiction. This project is aimed at providing advice in this area.

Why do we need diversity in publishing?

Now that we have an idea of what we mean by increased diversity in the publishing industry, it's important for us to reflect on *why* we want to tackle this issue. The industry makes a lot of money and serves a lot of people. If it's not broken, why fix it? The problem is that the industry doesn't serve *everyone* equally, whereas books *should* be for everyone. As I see it there are several good reasons for making the industry more diverse, reasons that we can all reflect on:

"No one wants to be published for the sake of their ethnicity. Quality will always be important."

Firstly, there is the moral case. If we believe in a fair society, then we must recognise that barriers *do* exist, whether conscious or unconscious. These barriers disadvantage certain groups from entering the industry and from achieving success once there. It's important to realise that these barriers are not related to quality – however we choose to define that. No one wants to be published just for the sake of their ethnicity. Quality will always be important.

Aligned to this argument is the notion that literature, by representing society, is a powerful means by

which we can change society for the better. As individuals, we often formulate our views about the world through cultural media. Thus, when we underrepresent or misrepresent people from minority backgrounds in our artistic output, we run the risk of aiding prejudice, and divisiveness. We only have to look at how children talk, the references they use: so many of their cultural cues come from the media they're consuming. It has been well documented that children of colour rarely see themselves represented in fiction. They see no positive reinforcement for their identity. I, for one, find that quite sad.

A third reason is that by publishing a more diverse range of characters we will see better books. That's not to suggest that the books we currently publish are obsolete or lacking in quality. My favourite books range across the spectrum, books by white and non-white authors, books featuring white and non-white protagonists. Some stories *need* to be told from certain cultural perspectives – white or otherwise – and wouldn't make sense if you shoehorned in a diverse cast of characters for the sake of political correctness.

But the fact is that it wasn't until I reached an older age and had the money and desire to look for more diverse fiction that I began to read such books. They completely changed my view of what literature could aspire to. My opinion is that if more authors felt confident in writing a wider range of characters, we would see a tangible benefit to readers. An industry based purely on human imagination does itself no favours by setting limits on that imagination.

The last reason I'll mention is possibly the most important one, and that is the business case for diversity. Whether we like it or not the world is changing. A new generation of readers are emerging who *are* attuned to diversity, who live in a globalised, interconnected world. These consumers may not yet be an economic force, but in due course they will be. Similarly, many traditional readers, for want of a better phrase, are increasingly willing to take risks. In my opinion the industry sometimes treats readers with kid gloves for fear of alienating them. For me, readers are intelligent consumers and always looking for innovation. A market study by author Chris McCrudden in 2017 estimated that 11 million readers in the UK alone might be interested in reading books that include diverse content. Whether you agree with this figure or not, the fact is by recognising that such a potential audience exists the industry can reorient its output and align itself with readers' evolving sensibilities.

Why has a lack of diversity in publishing persisted for so long?

Now that we have some idea of why diversity in publishing might be a good thing, the next question to ask ourselves is: why has the problem persisted?

A recent report entitled Rethinking Diversity In The Publishing Industry examined many of the issues involved. Led by Dr Anamik Saha and Dr Sandra van Lente, the study interviewed over 100 professionals in the industry and highlighted a number of key structural problems:

Firstly, the industry makes assumptions about audiences. This

affects how writers of colour and their books are treated. The report suggests that such books are either excluded entirely, 'whitewashed' or 'exoticised' in order to appeal to the target market. A prominent assumption is that white readers won't relate to stories about non-white characters. Publishers fear that books by writers of colour are too niche and will not appeal to their core audience.

This is aligned to perhaps the biggest structural problem in the industry, a phenomenon known as comping. In 2018, Laura B. McGrath, an associate director at the Stanford University Literary Lab, summarised this topic in an article for the Los Angeles Review of Books. The article is entitled Comping White and looked at how the practise of comparing titles when making new book acquisitions leads to a lack of diversity. In McGrath's words: "The logic is straightforward: Book A (a new title) is similar to Book B (an already published title). Because Book B sold so many copies, we can assume that Book A will also sell so many copies."

In other words, everyone is looking for the next *Gone Girl*, the next *Harry Potter*. Comping speaks to the basic risk averse nature of the publishing business. If books featuring white characters written by white authors are the ones making money then why change the status quo?

This attitude works its way up and down the chain**.** Agents become afraid of taking on books that don't fit this model – what's the point if you can't sell such books to a publisher? At the other end of the chain booksellers are reluctant to stock such books fearing that their regular customers won't buy them. It's a vicious cycle. Such books are considered too niche so very few are published and so very few find themselves onto limited bookshelf space. Because they're not published or promoted they can't reach a wider market and thus don't sell and the perception remains that they're too niche.

Literary festivals are also grappling with diversity issues. Most event programmers, both in the real world and online, are reassessing how they select panellists. Caroline

"If readers are willing to take a chance on books featuring diverse characters, the industry will take heed."

Maston co-runs the UK Crime Book Club. She says that they have actively begun to discuss diversity when programming their annual roster of events. Like many book groups, Caroline says their group is led by members' tastes, with the remit bounded by the fact that they showcase UK authors. She would like to see more diversity in the group but believes it has to grow organically.

Towards a positive future

I'd like to end this first video on a positive note. My personal opinion is that the publishing industry is making a genuine effort. Talking to people across the industry, I'm convinced that change is an important part of their agenda. While business realities mean that change won't happen overnight there's no doubt in my mind that publishing output will begin to reflect this changing

mindset in a more meaningful way in the coming years.

Readers have an incredibly important part to play in this. The industry responds to readers' buying choices. If readers are willing to take a chance on books featuring diverse characters, the industry will take heed. In other words, readers can directly contribute to a more level playing field, and thus, hopefully, help create a broader canvas for us all to enjoy great books.

In the next section…

In the next section, I'll take a look at the thorny topic of cultural appropriation in literature.

You may also wish to view the accompanying videos available here which replicate this content. Please feel free to alert others to this project who might be interested.

Once you have made your way through this guide, I would be extremely grateful if you could spend a couple of minutes providing feedback via this form.

Section 2

Cultural Appreciation versus Cultural Misappropriation

What is cultural appropriation?

Possibly the most hotly debated topic in the publishing industry over the past few years has been the issue of cultural appropriation. Although there is universal agreement that diversity as a goal is commendable, when it comes to the ticklish business of who should be allowed to write what kind of story things get murky. Issues of voice, authenticity, and identity politics are stirred into the pot and the end result is something that can often lead to controversy. I want to address the issue because, like every author, I have a personal stake in the outcome.

In Section 1 of this guide, I expressed the opinion that authors should have the right to write whatever they choose, including stories involving characters not from their own ethnic backgrounds. My belief is that to bring more diversity into fiction the industry needs to

reassure writers that, if properly approached, they should have no qualms about introducing characters into their writing that are not from their own backgrounds. But there are clearly more complex arguments to be made around the issue – debates about cultural misappropriation and the historical lack of access to the industry for voices from minority backgrounds.

A climate of fear?

Because of these issues, at present, many people believe that there is a 'climate of fear' in the publishing world. Everyone is terrified of making a mistake, afraid of being charged with the crime of literary misappropriation. Clearly, this has an impact on the sorts of books that are acquired, published, and marketed. These are the issues I want to explore in this section.

Some time ago, the Internet went into meltdown because pop icon Adele had her hair braided into Bantu knots, a traditional African hairstyle. Accusing her of 'cultural appropriation', numerous outraged Twitter users took to the Internet to express their anger, while others leapt to her defence.

Who was right? What is 'cultural appropriation' anyway? And why should we care?

Defining cultural appropriation

When we talk about cultural appropriation, what we really mean is cultural *misappropriation*: the adoption of elements of one culture or identity by members of another culture in a way that is *deemed to cause offence*. It particularly becomes an issue when the culture engaging in the alleged misappropriation has historically disadvantaged the culture from which it is appropriating. i.e. when one culture is the dominant one and borrows from a weaker culture any sense of historical injustice can be magnified.

The trouble is that the lines are not only blurred but continually being redrawn as to *what* might be perceived as offensive.

Let's consider some examples.

The Washington Redskins football team, after years of petitioning, finally agreed to change its name and logo – that of a Native American in feathered headdress. The logo was deemed racist by many in the Native American population, understandably so, given their fraught history with white colonisers.

Recently, several actors have been criticised for taking on roles outside of their culture. I'm certain Scarlett Johansson intended no offence when portraying an iconic Japanese character in *Ghost in the Shell*, yet offence was taken. In this instance, historical context is important, given that her casting followed a long line of such perceived slights by Hollywood. For instance, in the 1930s, white Swedish-American actor Warner Oland played a Chinese detective named Charlie Chan in no less than sixteen films.

To our modern eyes these images are clearly insensitive, but the truth is that they were disquieting even then, symptomatic of both a cultural and power inequality in the arts.

Cultural misappropriation versus cultural appreciation

Having said all this, I remain firmly behind the idea that authors – and creative artists, in general – should be allowed to express themselves beyond the bounds of the culture into which they were born. To not have that right would mean that *I* could never pen a novel with white protagonists. I could never set a story in cultural settings deemed outside of *my* heritage.

But who is drawing the lines here? Who's in charge of what is and isn't permissible for a particular individual or situation?

There is, some argue, a fine line between cultural misappropriation and cultural appreciation. After all, in an increasingly interconnected, globalised world, cultures are continually mixing – it's inevitable that we will see a sharing of ideas, traditions, fashions, symbols, and even language. For me (and many others), this is a good thing, a way for cultures to understand and empathise with each other, and to normalise what at first might seem different or strange.

"...a problem arises only when authors are lazy, disrespectful, insensitive, or merely using someone else's lived experience to create a titillating story that distorts the actual experience of the community they have chosen to portray."

Of course, there are clearly cases of cultural appropriation that *should* be called out. Other instances are beyond trivial – or deliberately misinterpreted.

Personally, I think that the matter comes down to common sense and context. We won't all agree on every such situation, but by taking a deep breath before reacting, we might better serve the issues at hand.

Cultural appropriation in literature

I have argued that authors should have the license to write as they wish, unrestricted by artificial boundaries imposed upon them by their cultural heritage, as long as they are willing to do the necessary homework and treat their subject with due respect.

This argument now needs to be examined more closely. Because, of course, there *are* instances where authors have incited great angst by writing about cultures outside of their own.

In 2009 Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* was published. The book went on to huge commercial success, but was later hit by a deluge of criticism. Stockett, a white middle-class American, had written a story about African American maids working in white households in Mississippi in the 1960s, filtering her portrayal through what was labelled as a 'white saviour' trope. The book was accused by many in the African American community of the shallowest portrayal of black people's experiences in that era.

Undeterred, Hollywood soon turned the book into a (very successful) film. One of its stars, black actor, Viola Davis, later said in a 2018 *Vanity Fair* interview that she regretted

doing the movie because, in her words: “I felt that at the end of the day it wasn’t the voices of the maids that were heard. I know Aibileen. I know Minny. They’re my grandma. They’re my mother.”

Other critics suggested that Stockett had painted superficial stereotypes, failing not only to deliver the truth of the lives of her black protagonists, but also harming any ‘history lesson’ that other communities – especially white Americans – might take from the piece. The book offered only glimpses of the cruelty inflicted on African Americans during that period.

Let’s look at a more recent case.

In 2019, the novel *American Dirt* attracted huge publicity. The fictional story of a Mexican mother and son’s journey to the border after a cartel murders the rest of their family, the book has been criticised by some. The author Myriam Gurba says that it ‘opportunistically, selfishly and parasitically’ appropriates the stories of Mexican immigrants to America. Until the book’s release, the author, Jeanine Cummins, had identified as white (something she publicly stated), only revealing in the lead-up to publication– and once the negative scrutiny began to take off – that she has a Puerto Rican grandmother. Cummins’ subsequent book tour was cancelled due to the level of vitriol she received and concerns for her safety, something that none of us would wish on any author.

The key issues

These two novels sit on a spectrum of portraits of cultures beyond those of their authors. Each has met with overwhelming financial success, and an avalanche of criticism, particularly from the communities they are purporting to empathise with. For some, the mere fact that they were written by people outside of those communities was bad enough.

For others, this wasn’t an issue.

Instead, the problem was that they were written (in the opinion of their critics) either tritely or without carrying out the due diligence expected of an author embarking on such a mission. In a certain sense, these authors were accused of not showing enough respect for their topic, or relying on ‘white privilege’, and then being rewarded for doing so, the implication being that authentic voices from these communities are rarely given the same opportunity, platform, or rewards when *they* pen such stories.

In a 2020 Guardian article columnist Nesrine Malik stated that ‘The problem is that publishers, broadly, are only interested in such stories when the protagonists are flat-pack characters that can be assembled quickly into a neat stereotype that fits comfortably into the white, mainstream readers’ worldview.’ Malik does not condemn the fact that authors sometimes tackle subjects outside of their ethnicity, merely the quality of their output.

Many authors – including many from minority communities, myself included – have publicly stated that we have no problem with authors writing beyond their own culture. To prevent authors from so doing would destroy the very essence of what it means to be a writer of fiction.

After all, if we think about it rationally, every novel includes *some* elements of experiences beyond our own. I write crime fiction. I haven’t murdered anyone lately, but I have

been appropriating the experiences of the minority group known as ‘murderers’ for years.

For me, a problem arises only when authors are lazy, disrespectful, insensitive, or merely using someone else’s lived experience to create a titillating story that distorts the actual experience of the community they have chosen to portray.

The novelist Hari Kunzru has stated: “Should the artist go forth boldly, without fear? Of course, but they should also tread with humility.”

I agree. Humility – for the subject matter – is the key criteria here.

“...in 2019, Booker-prize winning author Bernardine Evaristo, a black woman, stated that it is ridiculous to demand of writers that they not write beyond their own culture.”

Can mainstream authors safely ‘appropriate’?

It would not be unkind or incorrect to suggest that the publishing industry has a fear of change, a fear that, should they print a wider range of books, readers might be put off by ‘unconventional’ names on the cover, or ‘challenging’ settings and protagonists – unless these are written by ‘mainstream’ authors.

This is not a criticism of mainstream authors. There are clearly some who decide to include diverse characters and do a great job of it. One argument is that when popular authors do this, they aid in the process of normalising such characters for readers, thus making it easier for writers from those cultures to portray their own experiences. Again, the other side to this view is that this practise can take opportunities away from already marginalised writers.

Elly Griffiths is one the UK’s bestselling crime fiction authors. Her latest series features key protagonist Harbinder Kaur, a female, gay Sikh. Elly is a white, straight author with Italian ancestry. When I interviewed her, Elly told me that she was uncertain about going down this route – acutely aware of her “white privilege” and the cultural appropriation debate. At the same time, she felt that characters often “appear to authors and thus writers should not shy away from using them, though they then have a responsibility to bring those characters to life in a truthful way”.

As part of her research she asked a British Asian Sikh friend to read the book. In the event the book was also passed to the Sikh friend’s mother, and that “older generation viewpoint” added a different dimension to Elly’s cultural understanding. For instance, a Sikh mother would always insist on making a freshly-cooked meal for Harbinder, not simply warming up stale food! And Elly had named their dog Sultan. Sultan is a Muslim name, not a Sikh one, so unlikely to have been bestowed upon the dog in question.

Elly is an example of an author who embodies the qualities of empathy, humility, and respect that are vital to writing characters of differing ethnicities.

As authors, if we do our research, if we set out to highlight rather than to denigrate, to depict a particular culture with truth and empathy – warts and all – then we will have fulfilled the tenets of our creed, and should not feel remotely guilty in so doing. I feel that I am on safe ground saying this. After all, in 2019, Booker-prize winning author Bernardine Evaristo, a black woman, stated that it is ridiculous to demand of writers that they not write beyond their own culture.

I know that many authors and readers will agree with this – though not all, and that is perfectly fine. In a survey, I carried out as part of this project, out of 1033 respondents, 95% stated that all authors should have the right to write characters from ethnicities different to their own.

Again, readers are particularly important in this equation. They can act as a catalyst for change. If given more choice, I am certain most readers would happily embrace a good story, no matter how diverse the characters or the author's cultural heritage. In other words, they can make up their own minds!

In the next section…

In the next section, I'll take a look at how an author's heritage can be both a blessing and a curse.

You may also wish to view the accompanying videos available here which replicate this content. Please feel free to alert others to this project who might be interested.

Once you have made your way through this guide, I would be extremely grateful if you could spend a couple of minutes providing feedback via this form.

Section 3

Write what you know: Mining your heritage

Write what you know

Write what you know. Probably the most common piece of advice that any author will hear and possibly the most frustrating. While at one level writing what you know makes a great deal of sense, the fact remains that the vast majority of books are *not* about what the author knows.

Write what you know is often taken to mean that an author should write only about matters of which they have personal experience. Of course, this *can* be highly productive. Many writers find it easier to draw upon their own experiences. But limiting yourself to such a narrow bandwidth puts constraints on the imagination. Whole swathes of fiction would disappear overnight if authors only wrote what they knew: science fiction and fantasy for a start. Think about that. No *Game of Thrones*, no *Star Wars*.

In terms of the debate around diversity, write what you know is increasingly being equated with identity politics and the slippery notion of authenticity.

What exactly is authenticity?

Authenticity in the publishing industry is now generally taken to mean the validity of a literary voice with respect to the author of that voice. In other words, the question being asked is this: *Does this author have the right to write about this particular topic? Is their voice authentic?*

The trouble is who decides whether a particular writer is *authentic enough* to write about a given topic?

Let me illustrate this by means of some famous examples where I think the nature of the debate becomes fuzzy.

Authenticity isn't always clear cut

One of my favourite authors is Kazuo Ishiguro. Ishiguro was born in Japan, but moved to the UK aged five. He did not return to Japan for thirty years. Yet his first two novels were set in Japan. However, his most famous work, *The Remains of the Day*, possibly the most English novel I have ever read, is set in England with a cast of very white, very English characters. Ishiguro's work has been critically acclaimed and he is a recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature. The fact that he has written both English and Japanese-set works – without raising anyone's hackles – or being vilified for cultural misappropriation – speaks volumes. On one level it indicates that as long as someone has lived in a particular country or can claim a particular heritage, it should entitle them to write about that culture. Right?

But just how *long* do you have to live somewhere to earn that entitlement? How much of your heritage must be of that culture and how recent must it be?

Let me give you another example: my own. I spent twenty-three years and seven novels trying to get a publishing deal. I wrote literary novels, thrillers, fantasy, science-fiction. All of these books were written completely from my imagination. Getting rather sick of collecting rejection letters, I finally decided to write a book purely for myself, a book that drew heavily on my own experiences and heritage: in other words, I wrote what I knew.

I was born and grew up in London, but my parents were from the subcontinent. Almost fifty years ago they moved to the UK. I didn't visit India until the age of twenty-three, when I went there to work with a large hotel group.

Following ten wonderful years there, I returned to England and have since written two series set in India. The first began with *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, an attempt to capture my incredible memories of the subcontinent. I was subsequently offered a four-book deal for the series by Hodder & Stoughton. Later, I wrote *Midnight at Malabar House,* the first of a historical crime series set in 1950s Bombay, featuring India's first female police detective.

Reflecting on the ingredients that went into these novels, the first thing that strikes me is that my heritage aligned perfectly with the books that I had written. That meant that issues of authenticity, and possible cultural appropriation, were instantly nullified.

However, if one takes a closer look, you will see that my respective protagonists, Inspector Ashwin Chopra and Inspector Persis Wadia,

are not quite aligned with my own cultural identity. Chopra is a Hindu, Persis a Parsee. I grew up in a Muslim household.

In this respect, my affinity with the setting clearly helped. I lived in Mumbai for a decade and came to intimately know and understand the people that live there. I spoke from a position of authority and this allowed me to command a degree of trust with my agent, editor, and, ultimately, readers.

This trust is an incredibly important – and sometimes intangible – component of the reasoning as to why some authors are given license to write about particular subjects, while others are quickly torn down for doing so. Sometimes this trust is earned, at other times it is conferred – because of the author's perceived personal knowledge or experience of the subject matter.

Not being bound by absolutes

Alexander McCall Smith is a great example of an author who has managed to write successfully about an ethnicity that is different from his own, earning the trust of millions of readers. McCall Smith is the creator of the *No.1 Ladies Detective Agency* series, set in Botswana. The lead character of the series is the wonderful Precious Ramotswe, a middle-aged, African woman of, and I quote, 'traditional proportions'. Alexander McCall Smith, on the other hand, is a male, white Scotsman.

McCall Smith's authority rests on the fact that he was born in Africa – in present-day Zimbabwe – and at the age of thirty-one travelled to Botswana to set up and teach at the law school of the University of Botswana. He subsequently became a regular traveller to the country. His empathy for Botswana and its people is evident in his books. In his own words, he says: "I find Botswana a very interesting and admirable country. I respect the people who live there… I admire their patience and their decency… They lead good lives, with honour and integrity. Mma Ramotswe is one such person."

McCall Smith doesn't claim any direct African heritage, though his time in Botswana sharpened his umbilical connection to the continent. The lesson here is that in the matter of heritage, we shouldn't be bound by absolutes. Many of us have multiple tentacles of lineage winding around and through our DNA.

Take my own example. Clearly, my ethnic heritage is from the subcontinent. I have mined that heritage to write books set in and about India. Yet I was born and grew up in England. Thus, being British is also part of my DNA. Does this then allow me to write stories set in Britain? Can I mine what I know about life in Britain?

Here's where things get a little murkier.

I know, from past experience, that for writers of colour it isn't so easy to *write what they know* when it comes to their British heritage. Such authors are often expected to write about their *other* heritage – the heritage of their parents and grandparents. If they *are* given license to tell stories about their British experience they're steered towards immigrant tales. And although there are many wonderful and important books documenting those experiences, this also means that many stories that might be told never see the light of day and

minority writers often end up feeling a sense of frustration.

Writing the Future

In 2015, the Writing the Future report commissioned by Spread the Word, found that the "best chance of publication" for a minority writer was via literary fiction that confirms stereotypes dealing with themes such as "racism, colonialism or post-colonialism". The report's editor, Danuta Kean, states that a survey of authors found that minority writers feel pressurised into using cultural stereotypes.

Others felt the reception for their work had been affected by the limited cultural awareness of their editors. One author stated: 'I think there was some doubt (among editors) about the authenticity of my story. People in the UK simply didn't know about the community I had written about in the Caribbean.'

To address this problem, the report suggests that engaging more minority staff within the editorial and agenting professions would help address the misconception that a manuscript is not 'authentic' when it reflects an aspect of a non-white culture unfamiliar to mainstream white editors.

Euan Thorneycroft is an agent of almost two decades experience. His agency, A.M Heath, receives some 15000 submissions annually. Euan estimates that less than 10% involve main protagonists that are not white, though that is changing.

"...most people are guilty of unconscious bias."

In recent years, he finds himself thinking more about issues such as voice and cultural appropriation. He doesn't believe an agent's job is to "police writing", but rather to work out the best way to help an author to get published, and this can involve considering how an author's book will be portrayed in relation to the author's own identity. If an author is writing characters *outside* their identity, Euan will ask questions such as "Is this a token use of such a character? Why does your story *need* this character? Have you done your homework?"

He believes that most people are guilty of unconscious bias. But he also believes that "it is unfair to suggest that a middle-aged white man would not be able to appreciate a story about say, a female Indian police officer."

Having said this he also believes that an authentic voice, may, in many instances, be better placed to tell a particular story. This is certainly true, and nothing I have so far said should take away from authors who choose to write within their own lived experience.

Giving agency to all writers

Over the past few years we have seen examples of creative media where agency has been given to the storytellers to not only mine their own heritage, but for the resulting product to be sold as it stands without the need for it to be filtered through a white lens.

In 2018, the film *Black Panther* made headlines. Grossing over a billion dollars at the box office, it was notable because of its almost all-black cast, black director, and black writers, a first for a big-budget

mainstream Hollywood production. Explaining the film's success, many commented on the fact that it represented a celebration of black culture unhindered by stereotypes or assumptions. Audiences certainly responded enthusiastically, from across the ethnic spectrum.

In 2019, the novel *Queenie* by Candice Carty-Williams won Best Book at the British Book of the Year Awards. *Queenie* is the story of a young London-based black woman whose turbulent love life hides darker secrets. *Queenie* is a book that could only really have been written by a young black woman of Queenie's generation. The book does touch, lightly, on race and mildly critiques the way white people perceive the issue. Far from turning off white readers, they have embraced the book. Personally, I believe this is because the book gives them a perspective about the race issue that they very rarely encounter.

Children's fiction has a particularly poor track record in terms of diverse characters. Back in 2017, an Arts Council study found that only 4% of children's books published in the UK that year featured black or ethnic minority characters. It's surprising how few people know this.

But this too is changing, and some of that change stems from minority authors mining their heritage to bring new stories to the industry.

In 2018 *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi was published, the first in a Young Adult fantasy trilogy featuring an all African cast, and set in a fictional world that represents traditional West African folklore. Adeyemi, a Nigerian-American, mined her Yoruban heritage for the book. She received one of the biggest ever YA publishing deals and the book was a subsequent hit.

These examples are, admittedly, few and far between, but, collectively, they point to a fundamental shift. Consumers are increasingly indifferent to the ethnicity of either the protagonists or the authors of fiction. If a story is well told, they will part with their hard-earned cash. Writing what you know, within *this* context, clearly gives something of an advantage to those who share the heritage they are writing about. So if you, as an author, find yourself in that position, there is a clear case for you to mine that experience.

In the next section…

In the next section, I'll take a look at cultural appropriation in literature that has met with a positive reception.

You may also wish to view the accompanying videos available here which replicate this content. Please feel free to alert others to this project who might be interested.

Once you have made your way through this guide, I would be extremely grateful if you could spend a couple of minutes providing feedback via this form.

Section 4

Write what you don't know: 'Writing in the forbidden zone'

A trip to the High Arctic

Some years ago, I decided to write a historical crime novel set in the High Arctic, on a series of islets known as the Queen Elizabeth Islands. At the heart of the book lay a small community of island-dwellers known as the Inuit. I set the book there because I was excited by the environment: temperatures of below forty; snow blizzards and crashing icebergs; polar bears.

By the time the book was ready for submission, the publishing world had been overtaken by a storm of soul-searching, manifested in a desire to implement greater diversity and a less clear-cut mission to ensure that authors had the 'requisite authority' to write about a particular subject. In other words, cultural appropriation was now a buzzword, something that might set off silent tripwires, torpedo book projects and cancel careers. A new dimension had been added to the evaluation process applied to a work before deciding whether to publish.

In the end, I decided not to submit the novel. I am not Inuit, and have never lived on the Queen Elizabeth Islands. My research was done the old-fashioned way – through books, browsing Internet documents and travelogues, and speaking to those who *had* experienced life in the High Arctic.

Others writing such stories have met with greater success. In this section, I will examine instances of cultural appropriation in literature that, in my opinion, have been done well – or, at the least, have achieved widespread acceptance.

Cancel culture impacts all writers

Today authors are routinely vilified for writing characters hailing from backgrounds other than their own, with some accusing them of taking the spotlight away from authentic voices. In some cases, this is justified, particularly where authors have been lazy in their research, indulging in stereotypes and otherwise being disrespectful to the truth of the community they are portraying. In other cases, I find it troubling that an author's intent is automatically judged to be malevolent (without any evidence for such a judgment) or drowned out by the clamour of those who simply don't want *anyone* to write outside of their ethnic sandbox.

To be clear, this isn't a phenomenon that affects just white writers. Many authors from minority backgrounds feel trapped within their cultural tramlines. They are often expected to write books that make use of their ethnic background. When they stray outside of their designated lane, they too run the risk of finding themselves in the firing line.

In January 2019, Chinese-American author, Amélie Zhao, was all set to launch her young adult fantasy novel *Blood Heir.* The book depicted an instance of slavery, and Zhao was accused, on social media, of racism, of using the black experience of slavery inappropriately. The accusation snowballed to such an extent that the book's launch was cancelled before it had even had a chance to be judged by the reading market.

This sort of reaction is becoming increasingly common. Sometimes, the reaction can be justified in light of the genuinely offensive content of an author's work, but at other times the fire of outrage is stoked on the smallest of pretexts, often by people who haven't read the book.

For me the troubling nature of this so-called cancel culture isn't just that it stops authors from practising their creed – to *imagine*, to *invent*, to create fictional plots using whatever raw material happens to inspire them; the problem is also in the arbitrary nature of the yardsticks being applied.

A balanced approach

One of my favourite authors is David Mitchell. Mitchell's fifth novel, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zuet*, was set in eighteenth-century Japan. Mitchell is English, but lived in Japan for eight years. The book was nominated for numerous awards and few questions were raised around his right to pen such a work. While Mitchell had no Japanese ancestry to prove his bone fides, his affinity for Japan, and his dedication to researching the novel became legend.

Eight years. But what if he'd spent only a year in Japan? Or three months? Would he still be 'allowed' to write that novel?

The notion that there are invisible gatekeepers out there judging who can and cannot tell certain stories is a problematical one.

When taken to extremes 'cultural vetting' is a form of literary censorship, enabled by an age of hypersensitivity and fear. Ultimately, it means writers – and the publishing industry – will evolve to take less risks.

None of this, of course, is intended to suggest that writers have carte blanche to insult or misrepresent another culture in fiction, or to exploit another culture's history just to 'make a quick buck'. Of course not. Any writer indulging in such shallow, self-serving behaviour deserves to be called out.

But the argument against cultural appropriation, if taken to its logical extreme, results in absurdism. No writer could write anything outside of their lived experience, and we'd be awash in boring memoirs and not a word of fiction.

"The notion that there are invisible gatekeepers out there judging who can and cannot tell certain stories is a problematical one."

Perhaps this is the right moment to mention a book that for me, at any rate, is an exemplar of cultural appropriation 'done right'.

Schindler's Ark

In 1980, an Australian writer named Thomas Keneally walked into the Beverly Hills shop of Poldek Pfefferberg, a Jewish Holocaust survivor and purveyor of briefcases. Learning that Keneally was a writer, Pfefferberg insisted on showing him his extensive files on a man named Oskar Schindler, a Nazi Party member who he claimed had helped save the lives of a thousand Jews – including Pfefferberg – during the war.

This then was the seed that led to Keneally's Booker-winning novel *Schindler's Ark*, later turned into the Oscar-winning Spielberg film *Schindler's List*. Keneally was not Jewish nor had he any direct experience of the Holocaust to call upon. He wrote a book completely outside of his cultural identity. What he *did* do was put in the work: he pored over documents, conducted interviews, and even went to Poland, with Pfefferberg as his guide, to visit Kraków and the sites associated with the Schindler story. He did his homework.

I have read the book. It is magnificent, told with brutal honesty, but using the skills of a seasoned writer to bring to life the terrible circumstances described in the novel. Keneally's empathy is there for all to see.

Ultimately, the debate over cultural appropriation will rage on for years to come. Not just the matter of who can tell other people's stories, but *how* it should be done.

Increasingly, writers are being accused of appropriation *whenever* they represent a minority group, no matter how they do so. This has the

knock-on effect of scaring away agents, editors, and publishing executives from even considering such work. The circle narrows until we choke off a good chunk of literary endeavour.

A level playing field

Again, it should be said that there is nothing wrong with attempting to address the systemic imbalances within the industry. Without checks and balances, the publishing industry has a tendency to choose the easiest option, which means publishing mainstream writers penning stories about people of colour, simply because the industry has an easier time of selling the well-known, mainstream writer. Although there are some benefits to this, in that it can help showcase minority characters to a wider audience, it becomes a real problem if these are the *only* portraits of minority characters that readers are receiving.

What I would really like to see is the industry championing writers from different backgrounds – but to then not restrict them by saying, we will back you, but only so long as you write in your own cultural playpen.

A level playing field means *everyone* has the 'right to write' as they wish, as long as they follow the golden rules. Do your research. Don't indulge in stereotypes. Write with empathy and humility. Present verifiable facts, particularly when tackling matters of identity and cultural history. If possible, use a sensitivity proof reader, someone familiar with that culture.

Put simply, writers should write in a way that reflects cultural appreciation, not cultural misappropriation.

Non-white authors also write across cultures

Imran Mahmood is a British Asian crime fiction author and criminal barrister. His debut novel *You Don't Know Me* (now a major BBC drama) was written in the form of a book-length narrative statement employing the voice of a young, black teenager. Imran states that he chose to write a black character because his book was about the criminal justice system and how it sometimes fails people. For Imran, the story chose the characters, not the other way around. With thirty years as a barrister, he understands that there will be those who challenge his right to tell this story but he defends the decision he made.

'It's about respect,' says Imran. 'About listening, remembering, inhabiting a character's life to try and tap into their day-to-day existence with as much authenticity as you can muster. For instance, what moral conundrums drive this character? What choices, big and small, do they make in their everyday lives? A writer should reach the humanity in a character before trying to tackle historical baggage and issues attached to their ethnicity.'

He adds that he didn't "consciously factor in a white audience" for the book, though it did very well with that audience. He says this indicates a "brave new normal" for the industry where all writers can write all sorts of books and they will be judged solely on merit. But to get there he thinks that publishers need to put marketing budgets behind books featuring such diverse characters, and "press such books into readers' hands".

In a 2016 Guardian article, award-winning Pakistani-British author, Kamila Shamsie talks about the novel *In the Orchard, the Swallows* by Peter Hobbs, set in northern Pakistan. She states that if anyone tried to dispute Hobbs's right to have written that book she would be the first to defend him. Her point is that the book is both excellent and sensitively written; it has no interest in peddling stereotypes; there is no whiff of arrogance or entitlement to the novel.

"Sensitivity reads are becoming a formal process at Hachette UK and at many other publishers..."

Similarly, author Kit de Waal, in an article for the Irish Times entitled *Don't dip your pen in someone else's blood* provides excellent insight. The issue of writing across cultures is plagued, she tells us, by historical considerations and thus must be approached without making the mistake of performing the "literary equivalent of blackface". She warns against "stereotyping the other" or using dated imagery, and urges us to create "fully rounded, viable, flawed, sometimes unlikable but believable and authentic people, not representative of a whole culture but representative of themselves."

Of course, there are potential pitfalls when going down this route.

The danger in writing about an ethnicity not your own is not just a lack of basic knowledge. It is in bias, both conscious and unconscious. A perfect example of this is the way Native Americans have been depicted in book and film; the century-long negative representation of their culture demonstrates how an entire community can be demonised and thus, over time, marginalised.

An editor's viewpoint

Jo Dickinson is a senior editor and publisher at Hodder & Stoughton. Jo recently bought and edited *The Last Thing to Burn* by Will Dean, a white English author. The book features lead protagonists who are Vietnamese. Jo says that she felt no uncertainty about taking on the book; she based her decision on her reaction as a reader and considered the book a well-thought out and engaging crime novel. She did, however, discuss Will's research into his Vietnamese characters, checking that the sensitivity readers he had used had given their blessing to the project, and that the story had been "treated with respect". Sensitivity reads are becoming a formal process at Hachette UK and at many other publishers, she tells us.

It's always important when writing from the perspective of the other to ask ourselves what we are trying to accomplish. Kit de Waal tells us that our aim should be not only to write well but to do no harm along the way, to show by our attitudes and our acknowledgements that we aren't just appropriating but are seeking to understand. When an author succeeds in doing this they create a universal piece of fiction, in the sense that readers of all backgrounds will experience similar emotions as they read the book. Long after the characters' voices have faded, readers will continue to be haunted by a shared truth, one that has moved them at some level.

When I first read *Schindler's Ark*, I didn't care that Thomas Keneally was not Jewish. It didn't matter that *I* was not Jewish. What I cared about was the characters Keneally had brought to life, their horrifying plight, their small triumphs, their ultimate escape from evil. At no point did I feel that Keneally had disrespected Jewish people or misrepresented their ordeal or attempted to fetishise their truth for the sake of his book.

Some might say that it's not up to me to decide this, but the fact that there has been no backlash from the Jewish community suggests that the book conveyed an emotional truth that transcends the ethnicity of its author.

These thoughts are echoed by writer K. Tempest Bradford, who teaches courses that educate writers on how to include different cultures in their fiction without resorting to cultural misappropriation. "Even though we need more people from marginalized communities writing their own stories and getting them published, people from dominant paradigms need to learn how to navigate this stuff, too," says Bradford. "Because representative fiction should reflect how the world is and the many identities that make it up."

I couldn't agree with these sentiments more.

In the final section…

In the final section, I'll round up our findings and set out a checklist of recommendations.

You may also wish to view the accompanying videos available here which replicate this content. Please feel free to alert others to this project who might be interested.

Once you have made your way through this guide, I would be extremely grateful if you could spend a couple of minutes providing feedback via this form.

Section 5

Recommendations and a checklist

The need for practical guidance

Across the publishing industry the debate about increasing diversity in fiction is now familiar to everyone. Yet there is a real dearth of practical advice on how issues such as stereotyping and cultural misappropriation might be tackled.

With this work, I've tried to present some perspectives on these thorny topics.

In this last section, I'd like to bring those thoughts together in the form of recommendations that speak to my initial proposition, namely, that all authors should be allowed to write whatever they choose, including stories involving characters not from their own ethnic backgrounds, as long as they approach the subject with respect.

The following recommendations might be useful as a checklist.

A checklist for creating diverse characters in fiction

The starting point for taking on the challenge of writing a character outside of your own culture is to be aware of the space you're taking up. What I mean by this is that if you are a writer with an established platform, and you choose to explore a minority culture, then be aware of the fact that, historically, few voices from that culture have been published. You may find yourself criticised because of this, through no fault of your own.

By reflecting in this way, you will, I hope, not be discouraged from writing your character, but rather be spurred on to put in the necessary effort to do justice to your characterisation. Kamila Shamsie, author of *Home Fires*, offers some excellent perspective here: "If you begin with an attitude that fails to understand that there may be powerful reasons for people to dispute your right to tell a story – reasons that stem from historical, political or social imbalances, you've already failed to understand the place and people you want to write about."

As a first step then, it is important to understand what you don't know. Without assessing the gaps in your knowledge you can't target the research that you need to do to be able to understand the character you are trying to write. Part of this means asking yourself about your own biases. What have you imbibed about a particular culture that may skew your ability to write accurately about that culture? We're all guilty of this, no matter what our ethnic background. It's OK to admit that you won't truly be able to step into the shoes of say a Native American person if you're not Native American or, if you happen to be an Asian person growing up in inner-city Bradford, you won't really know what it feels like to grow up as a relatively well-off white person living in, say, Cornwall.

This leads on to carrying out the research and doing it well. Research can be carried out via multiple sources. Speaking to people from the community you're writing about is clearly important, but again, one individual is not representative of an entire culture. It's important to recognise that cultures are full of sub-communities, all with their own idiosyncrasies. By speaking to multiple individuals from the sub-community you're trying to write about you will be in much better shape to deliver a more honest representation. Online community groups – for example on Facebook – are particularly useful in this respect, as well as reading books written by authors from that community. It's important to deconstruct and analyse what you learn to make sure you're not taking anything at face value. Ayo Onatade has been blogging, reviewing and commentating on crime fiction for twenty-five years. Ayo is a black person of mixed ancestry – African and West Indian. "If you're going to write a black person," she says, "make sure you get the nuances right. For instance, African and West Indian people have completely different attitudes and will react differently in any given situation."

"...be aware of the space you're taking up."

One of the bugbears of many people who see their communities

misrepresented in fiction is the use of stereotypes. But how do you know if the character you're creating is a stereotype? After all, some aspects of a culture are so common to that community that they will, inevitably, form a part of your character's makeup. A way of avoiding falling into the stereotype trap is to ask yourself some simple questions**:**

I. Is the culture I'm writing about being depicted incorrectly? In other words, have you made factual mistakes? For instance, is there evidence that the mannerisms or beliefs that you've given your character are widespread in that community? A simple example I often see is where the traditions of Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus are treated as interchangeable. Though these communities share many commonalities, their religious customs are very different.

II. Is your character being depicted in a way likely to create negative perceptions in the minds of readers? This is not to say that you can't write characters of colour that are negative, but merely that you should check that you're doing so because it is the central identity of that character as opposed to suggesting that this is the core identity of the community that your character represents.

III. Have you given your character personality traits that are deliberately exaggerated to create a particular emotional response? Examples of this are the angry black woman or the nerdy Indian stereotype.

IV. Have you cherry-picked aspects of a culture and used them out of context just to titillate?

V. Are you using ethnic dialect simply for the sake of it? One of the things that often jars for readers is a writer of one ethnicity writing swathes of dialogue in another culture's native patois. I get the same feeling when I watch non-Russian actors playing Russian characters with such a mangled accent that every line seems like a send-up.

It's easy to think of stereotypes. For instance, in the case of the British Asian community, our screens are awash with stories about terrorists, honour killings, and domestic abuse. An entire community has been reduced to one-dimensional negative caricatures. That's not to say that such stories don't have a place in fiction – of course they do. They're topical and, to a certain extent, titillating. My disappointment stems from the fact that they seem to be the *only* stories that present my community to the world. Such stories colour perceptions among people not from that community – every Muslim becomes a potential terrorist or a domestic abuser. Stereotypes have power and can shore up negative perceptions, justifying not only a continuing lack of equity in fiction but on the ground, in day-to-day life.

Empathy is another thing that is often talked about when it comes to writing diverse characters. But what is it exactly? For me empathising with another culture doesn't mean having to write characters that are always good or portrayed in a sympathetic light. Empathy doesn't mean that you can't poke fun at a culture if you happen to be writing a satire or a comic work,

for instance. Empathy is about being able to sympathise with the *truth* of a particular character's circumstances, which may be wrapped up in historical or social factors related to that culture.

"We must be mindful, always, of the fact that minority voices are still few and far between..."

Ask yourself if your character has a genuine purpose within your plot. Or are they simply there because you felt the need to put in a character of colour? It does no one any favours if characters pop up with no rhyme or reason for their existence. If a book genuinely demands an all white cast or an all black cast, then that is precisely what you should write.

Most authors now realise that a simple thing they can do when writing characters outside of their own experience is cultural consultation, which is just a fancy way of saying use a sensitivity reader. This can be as simple as asking a couple of friends from the same background as your character to read your work. But friends are not professionals. A better bet is to use a paid sensitivity reader. Your aim is to ensure – as far as possible – that you haven't employed insensitive language, cultural inaccuracies, or bias. A sensitivity reader can also help with voice – especially for first-person narratives.

Alison Flood writes about literature for The Guardian. She believes that authors shouldn't be frightened when writing across cultures, saying, 'The job of an author, after all, is to imagine themselves into the skin of others', but that this needs to be done in a thoughtful, well-researched, careful way. She points to the increasing prevalence of sensitivity readers in ensuring that mistakes are minimised. For her, what matters is whether the tone of a work is jarring, and whether the author has done the work to understand the culture they are writing about. Good research combined with sensitivity readers can help minimise such issues.

Summing up

I'd like to conclude now by drawing together the threads of our argument. The truth is that we live in a world where the line between what will or will not cause offence is often blurred. Nevertheless, I believe that authors who approach the business of writing characters outside of their own ethnicity with the right attitude, and following some of the advice I've tried to distil into this guidance, will be well placed to make a good stab at it.

We must be mindful, always, of the fact that minority voices are still few and far between, and until that changes there will always be criticism of mainstream authors who choose to write characters of a minority culture. That's why it's so important for the industry to respond by publishing and promoting different voices and for readers to respond by buying such books.

Jake Kerridge has been a national literary critic for almost two decades. He says: 'Cultural appropriation becomes a real problem if the *only* perspective that reading audiences have on other cultures comes from books written by those not from that culture.' He says that this is a problem within the industry, one he'd like to see rectified with a wider range of voices being published. He also asks the question: how

important is authenticity? What he means is that sometimes a measure of authenticity can be sacrificed in the interests of a story that showcases culturally diverse ingredients.

Many commentators are increasingly realising that trying to stop authors writing across cultures by vilifying them, especially on social media, can create a culture of self-censorship, where authors simply become too afraid of writing anything outside of their own race.

In a 2020 article discussing literary appropriation Australian journalist Alex Turner-Cohen suggests that as a consequence of such fears, "diverse characters are becoming less prevalent in literature." She believes that when mainstream writers represent diverse characters, they can reach a wide audience and help challenge misconceptions.

Working together in good faith

The criticisms aimed at the publishing industry in recent years are familiar to most of us. Over the course of this guide we've taken a good look at those failings. My own personality isn't geared towards laying blame. Instead, I think we should look forward, and seek practical solutions to the problem.

I believe those solutions can only come via a coordinated effort involving all those with an interest in creating a sustainable, vibrant and equitable publishing industry. This project is my way of bringing that literary community together. My belief is that the industry – and that includes readers – is made up largely of good people seeking to do the right thing. I believe that change is uppermost in the minds of industry gatekeepers and those who make the decisions as to which books are published and how they are sold.

One way to accelerate change is to provide more tangible evidence to the industry that promoting books featuring diverse characters makes business sense. And that means readers voting with their feet. If more readers make it clear that they are willing to take risks with their own reading choices, the more willing publishers are to cater to that demand by publishing a wider range of books. Clearly, there is a chicken and egg scenario here, but I honestly believe that both sides can add positively to the equation.

"... solutions can only come via a coordinated effort involving all those with an interest in creating a sustainable, vibrant and equitable publishing industry."

Authors too can play their part – by taking risks. No one is suggesting that every author should ditch the characters they want to write or the characters that have made them successful in favour of writing characters of colour. That's not what this is about. If you are a white author with a wonderful story to tell featuring white characters then that is exactly the book you should write and exactly the book that should be published and read.

But what I think we can all consider without being proscriptive is a world where more authors *choose* to broaden their horizons, where more authors take the risk of introducing characters that are ethnically diverse

and still relevant to their story. If this happened more frequently, then, over time, we would see a more colourful cast populating the vast number of books published each year.

The role of influencers

Influencers too have a part to play here. Barry Forshaw is one of the UK's most experienced crime fiction critics and historians, author of titles such as *Nordic Noir* and *British Crime Writing: An Encyclopaedia*. Barry tells me that in one sense the "gatekeepers are now being gatekept". By this he means that diversity is an issue all book reviewers are embracing, though quality will always remain paramount. His feeling is that every writer must have the license to "become whoever it is they are writing".

Mark Sanderson has been a literary reviewer for almost four decades and currently reviews for The Times. He feels that the act of writing demands that authors place themselves into the minds of *each* of their characters, and that "exercising emotional empathy" is the best way to do justice to any depiction of a particular identity. He also suggests that "if a book is good, most readers will be willing to forgive one or two false notes."

Book blogging is an increasingly important phenomenon in the publishing industry. Tracy Fenton runs The Book Club (TBC), an influential private Facebook book group with some 13000 members. Chatting to Tracy, she reveals that in her estimation less than 10% of her members are from non-white backgrounds. Of the 400 odd books she *personally* receives to read a year, she estimates that less than 10% feature main protagonists of colour. Nevertheless, she has seen recent signs of change. After the Black Lives Matter summer, there was a robust discussion within TBC touched off by a single (white) reader asking for recommendations of books written by black authors. Hundreds of books were recommended and others pledged to read more such stories.

How readers can help

My final message is to readers. So much of this rests on your shoulders. If you choose to read books written by writers of colour, or books featuring characters of a range of ethnicities, the industry will soon take note. Part of this is about examining your own unconscious bias; part of it is simply not judging a book based on the disparity between an author's identity and the identity of the characters in the book.

When I write a white character into my fiction – as I have done and continue to do – I would certainly hope that readers can judge that character on its merits rather than prejudging my ability to write about white people because I am myself not white. The truth is that books are subjective. They are personal to both author and reader. They evoke emotions in us; the best books evoke the strongest emotions.

I am, first and foremost, a reader. As a reader, I want to be challenged, excited, intrigued, mystified and titillated. I can honestly say that I have never felt more hopeful about the future of the industry.

And finally…

You may also wish to view the accompanying videos available here which replicate this content. Please feel free to alert others to this project who might be interested.

Once you have made your way through this guide, I would be extremely grateful if you could spend a couple of minutes providing feedback via this form.

References

Akbar, A. (2017). Diversity in publishing – still hideously middle-class and white? The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/09/diversity-publishing-new-faces

Benedictus, L. (2019). Torn Apart: The Vicious War over YA books. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/15/torn-apart-the-vicious-war-over-young-adult-books

Cain. S. (2020). Black Writers' Guild calls for sweeping change in UK publishing June 2020. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/15/black-writers-guild-calls-for-sweeping-change-in-uk-publishing?

Chandler, M. (2020). Publishing must 'radically reimagine' its audience, major diversity study says. The Bookseller. https://www.thebookseller.com/news/publishing-must-radically-reimagine-its-audience-major-diversity-study-says-1207570

Clarke, M. (2021). Botswana's No. 1 Ladies Detective. https://www.holidayextras.com/news/tourist-destinations/botswanas-no-1-lady-detective-3346.html

Desta, Y. (2018). Viola Davis Regrets Making The Help: "It Wasn't the Voices of the Maids That Were Heard". Vanity Fair. https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/09/viola-davis-the-help-regret

De Waal, K. (2018). Don't dip your pen in someone else's blood: writers and 'the other'. The Irish Times. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/don-t-dip-your-pen-in-someone-else-s-blood-writers-and-the-other-1.3533819

Gurba, Myriam. (2019). Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature. Tropics of Meta. https://tropicsofmeta.com/2019/12/12/pendeja-you-aint-steinbeck-my-bronca-with-fake-ass-social-justice-literature/

Kunzru H., Shamsie, K. et al. (2016). Whose life is it anyway? Novelists have their say on cultural appropriation. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/01/novelists-cultural-appropriation-literature-lionel-shriver

Malik, N. (2020). American Dirt's problem is bad writing, not cultural appropriation Nesrine Malik. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/03/american-dirt-problem-bad-writing-cultural-appropriation-mexico

McCrudden, C. (2017). Diversity in Publishing. https://www.booksellers.org.uk/getattachment/industryinfo/industryinfo/Creating-Inclusive-Bookshops/economic-case-for-diversity-in-publishing.pdf.aspx?lang=en-GB

McGrath, Laura B. (2019). Comping White. Los Angeles Review of Books. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/comping-white/

Ocampo, A. (2015). STEREOTYPES defined. https://csusm-dspace.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.3/150788/ContextBTS009.pdf?sequence=22

On Book Street. (2020). Why Diversity and Representation in Literature is so important. https://www.onbookstreet.com/blog/diversity-and-representation-in-literature

Pierson-Hagger, E. (2020). How the UK publishing industry has responded to Black Lives Matter. The New Statesman. https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2020/06/how-uk-publishing-industry-has-responded-black-lives-matter

Quintanilla, I. (2018). Cultural Appropriation In Fiction: Here Are Some Tips To Consider When You Writing Includes Different Cultures. Everyday Feminism. https://everydayfeminism.com/2018/04/cultural-appropriation-fiction/

Rowe, A. (2020). Diversity In Publishing Hasn't Improved In The Past 4 Years. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/adamrowe1/2020/01/31/diversity-in-publishing-hasnt-improved-in-the-past-4-years/?sh=62fd34f15c41

Saha, A. and van Lente, S. (2020). Re: thinking Diversity in The Publishing Industry https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Rethinking_diversity_in-publishing_WEB.pdf

Saha, A. (2020). Why "diversity" in publishing is not enough. New Statesman. https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2020/06/publishing-diversity-black-lives-matter-authors-writers-colour

Sanderson, D. (2019). Booker winner Bernardine Evaristo writes off 'cultural appropriation'. The Times. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/booker-winner-bernardine-evaristo-writes-off-cultural-appropriation-bklfsqhgk

Shukla, N. et al. (2015). How do we stop UK publishing being so posh and white? The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/11/how-do-we-stop-uk-publishing-being-so-posh-white-male

Spread the Word. (2015). Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Marketplace. Kean, D. (Ed) and Larsen, M. (Ed). www.spreadtheword.org.uk/writing-the-future/

Styron. A. (2020). The First Novelist Accused of Cultural Appropriation. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/other-peoples-stories/607606/

Sullivan, K. (2021). Why Diversity in Literature Matters. https://www.tckpublishing.com/why-diversity-in-literature-matters/

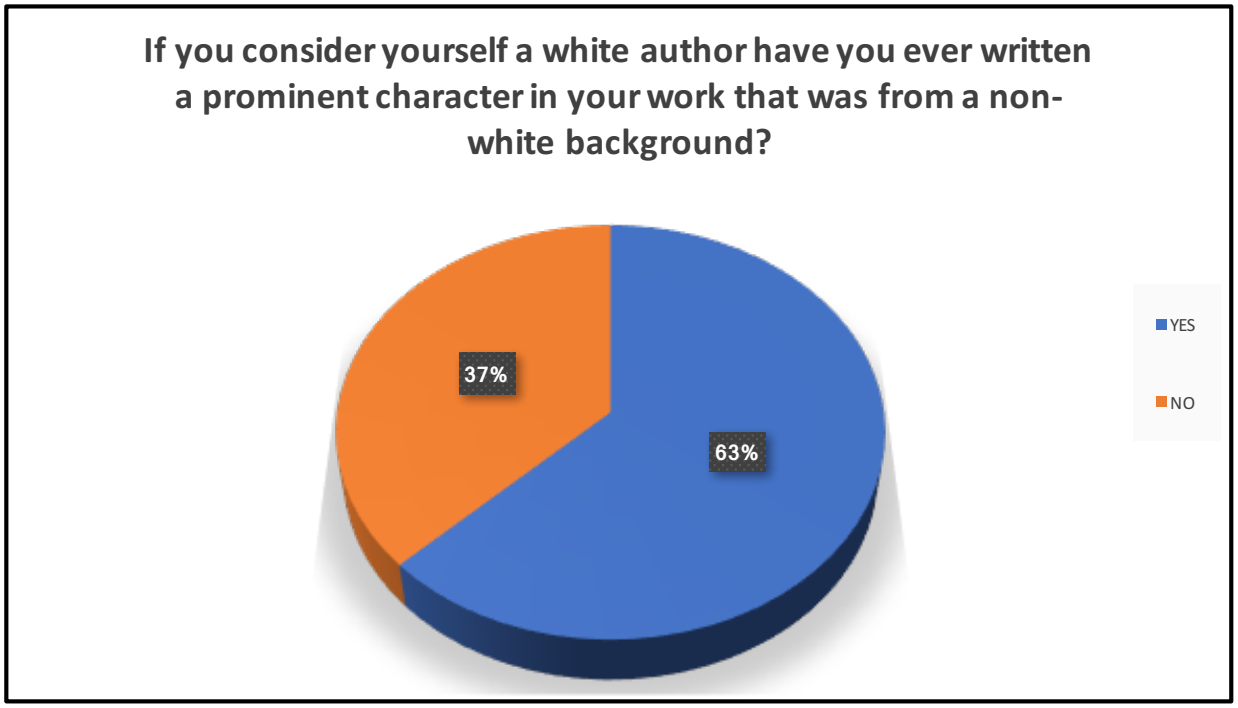
Turner-Cohen, A. (2020). The cultural appropriation debate in literature. UTSoC. http://www.utsoc.com.au/thecomma/2020/2/28/the-cultural-appropriation-debate-in-literature.

Waldman, K. (2019). In Y.A., Where Is the Line Between Criticism and Cancel Culture? The New Yorker. https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/in-ya-where-is-the-line-between-criticism-and-cancel-culture

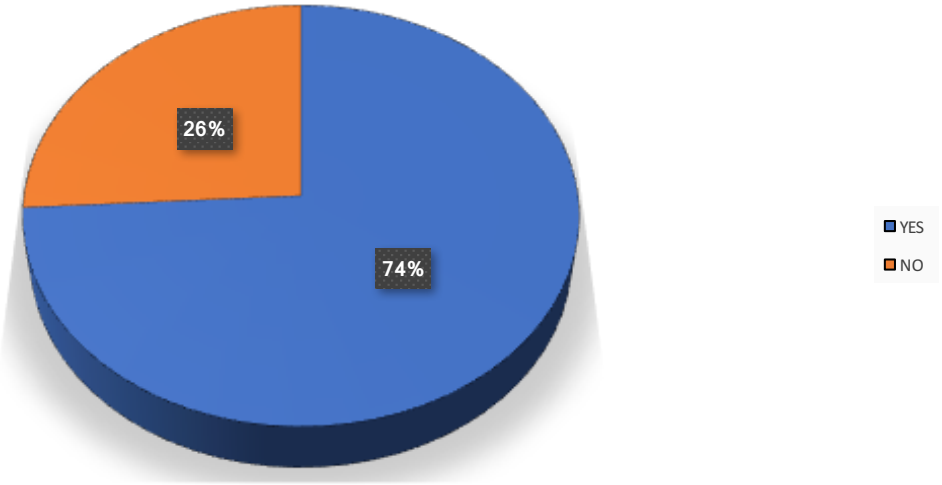
Appendix 1: Survey Results

Survey: 1033 respondents

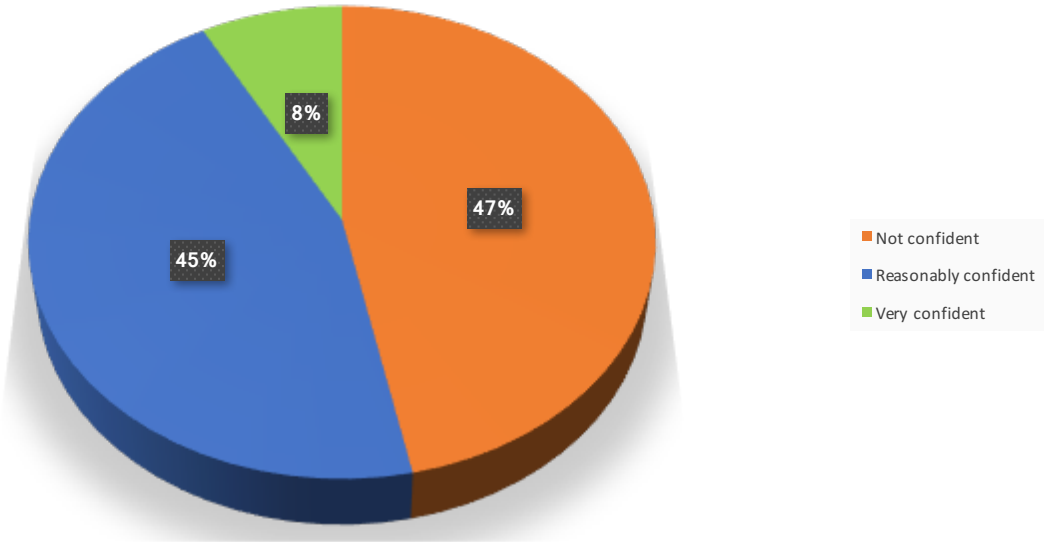
This survey was conducted online between 13th January 2021 and 31st March 2021. It was disseminated via author, industry, and reader networks and relevant social media forums. **In total 1033 respondents completed the survey.**



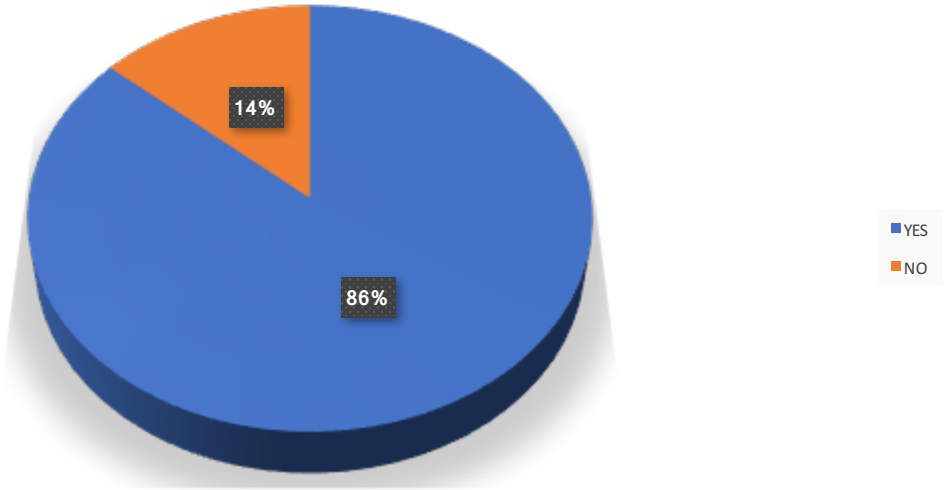
If you consider yourself a non-white author have you ever written a prominent character in your work that was from a different cultural background to your own?



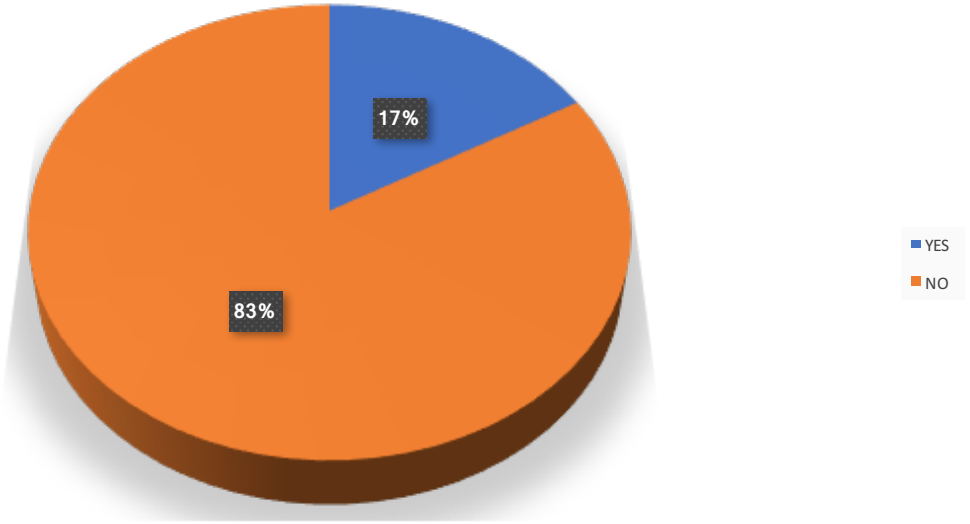
If you are an author, how confident are you of writing a character not from your own cultural background given the way issues of cultural appropriation have recently been highlighted?

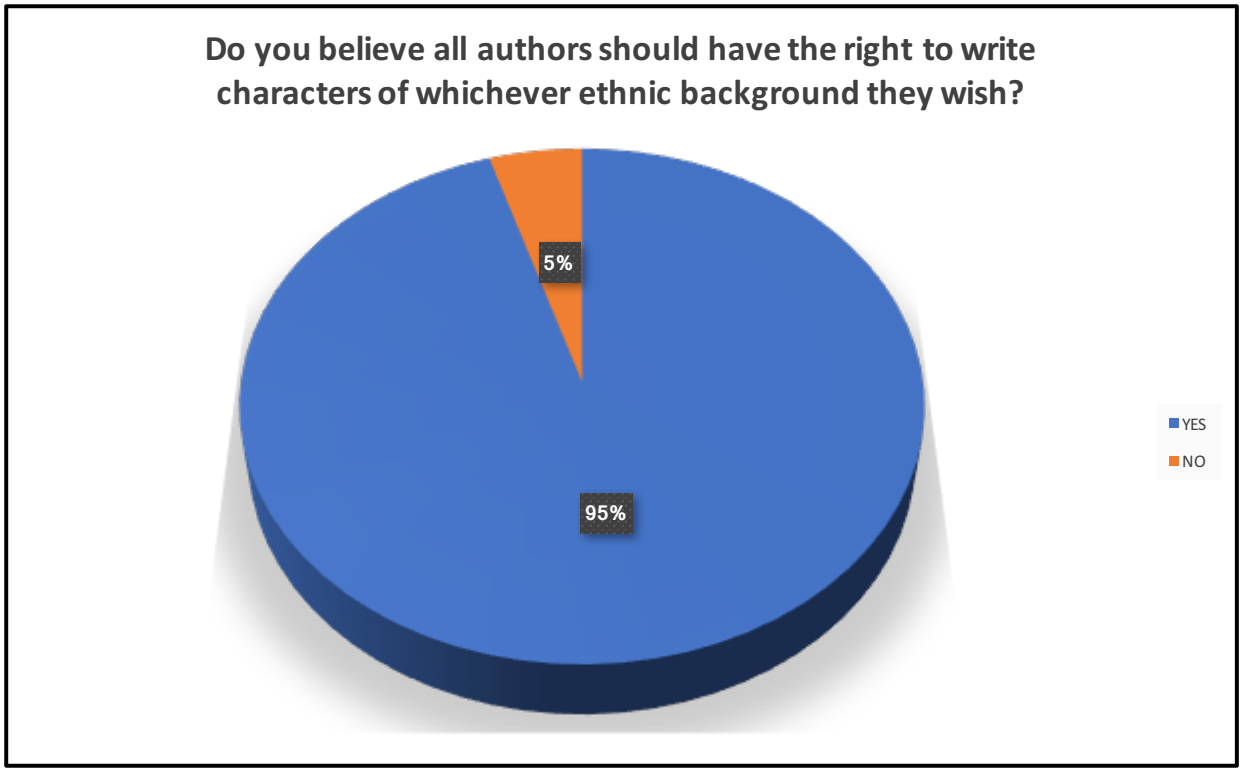


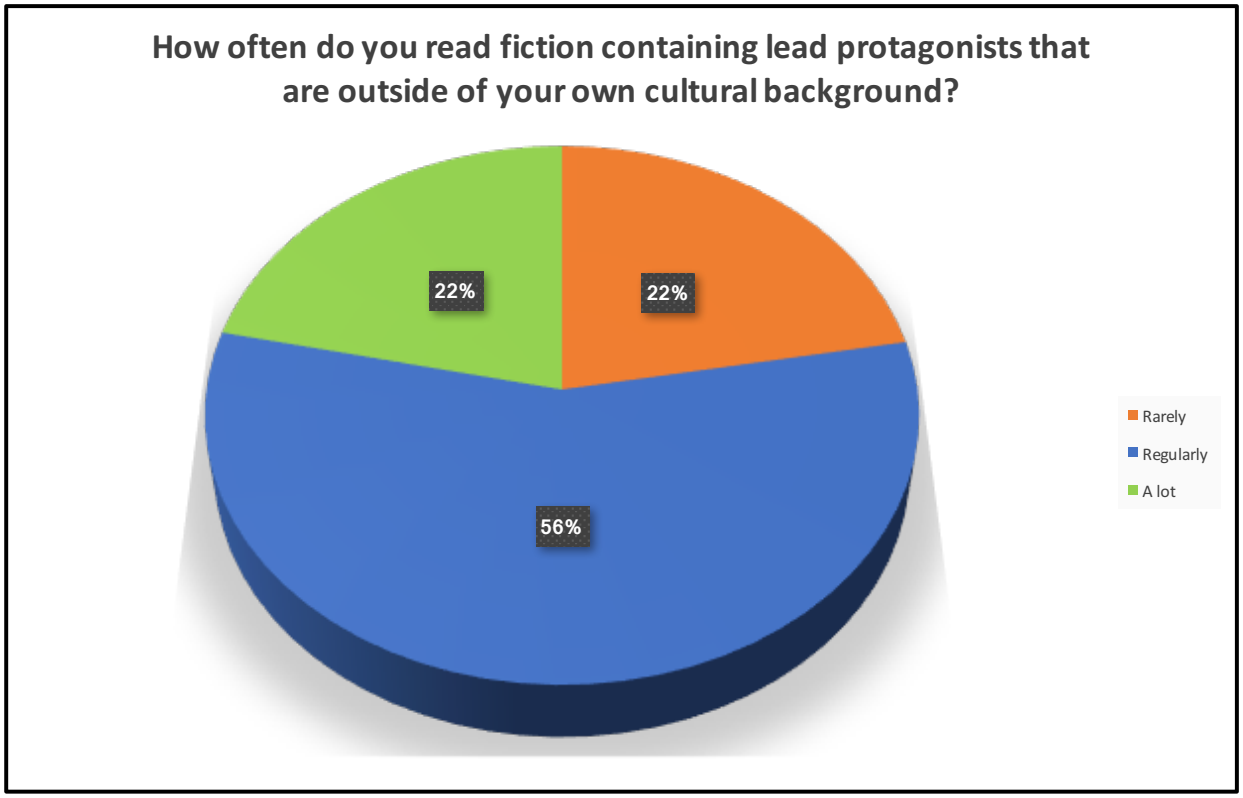
As an author or an industry professional do you feel that there is a 'climate of fear' around such issues ie. the fear of making a mistake and being publicly criticised?

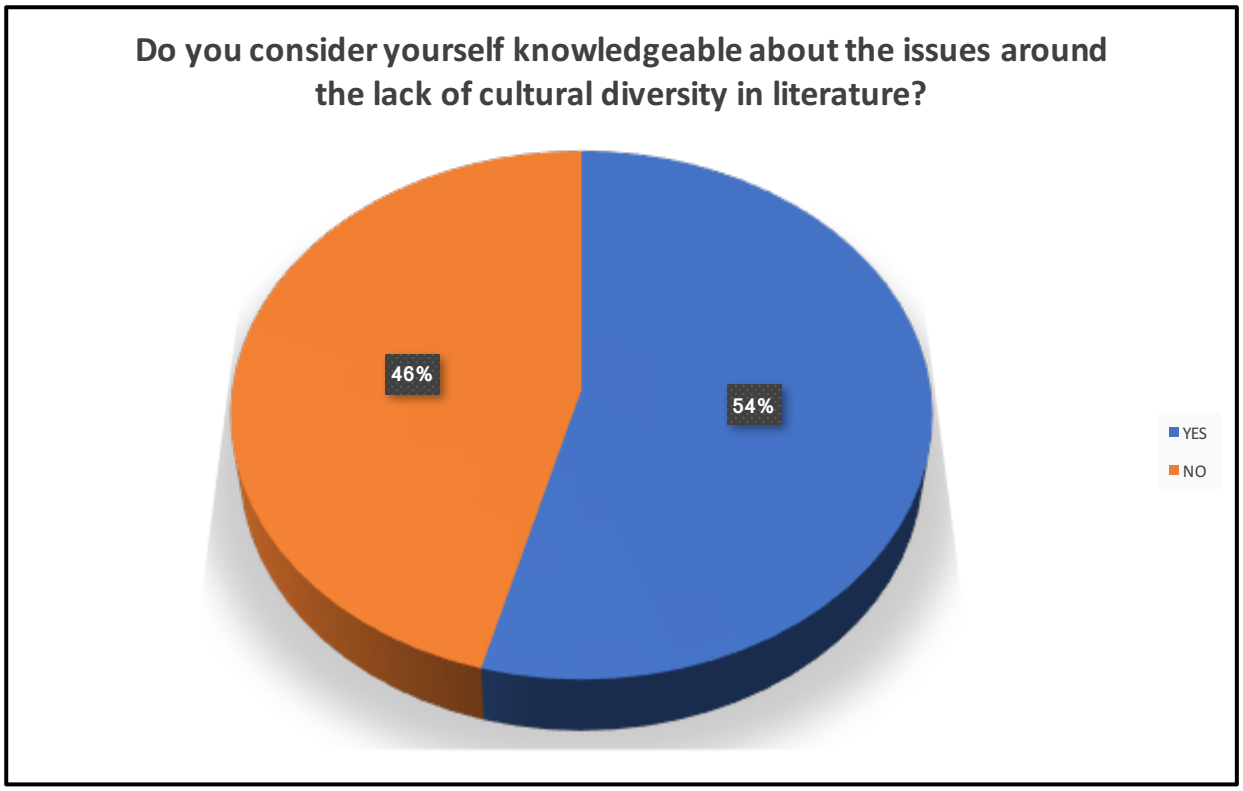


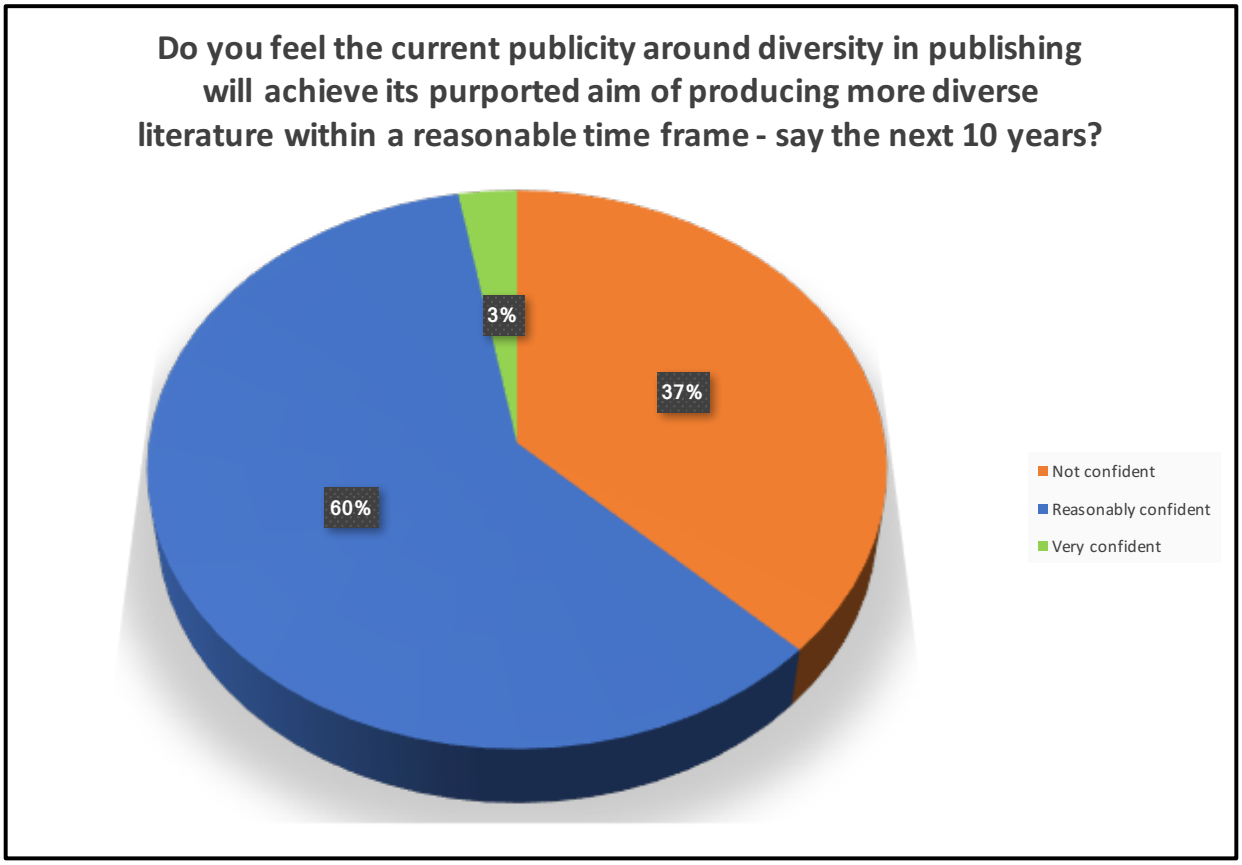
As an author or an industry professional do you feel that there is enough advice on how to tackle such issues?




Do you believe all authors should have the right to write characters of whichever ethnic background they wish?
5%
95%
YES
NO


How often do you read fiction containing lead protagonists that are outside of your own cultural background?
22%
22%
56%
Rarely
Regularly
A lot


Do you consider yourself knowledgeable about the issues around the lack of cultural diversity in literature?
46%
54%
YES
NO


Do you feel the current publicity around diversity in publishing will achieve its purported aim of producing more diverse literature within a reasonable time frame - say the next 10 years?
3%
37%
60%
Not confident
Reasonably confident
Very confident

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the generosity of many people. I would like to thank the advisors to this project named above, those who agreed to be interviewed, those who are quoted in this guidance, and all those who completed the survey that forms part of this work. I would also like to thank Ben Crocker (of Sourcy Films) and his team for their work on the videos that accompany this guide, and all those behind the scenes that helped to disseminate the results. Finally, I would like to thank, once again, the Arts Council for supporting this research.

About the Author

Vaseem Khan is the author of two award-winning crime series set in India, the *Baby Ganesh Agency* series set in modern Mumbai, and the *Malabar House* historical crime novels set in 1950s Bombay. His first book, *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra,* was a bestseller, now translated into 16 languages. He is a previous winner of the Shamus Award in the US. In 2018, he was awarded the Eastern Eye Arts, Culture and Theatre Award for Literature. *Midnight at Malabar House*, the first in his historical series, won the Crime Writers Association Historical Dagger in 2021.

Vaseem was born in England, but spent a decade working in India as a management consultant. When not writing he works at the Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science at University College London. The latest book in his Malabar House series is *The Dying Day.*

Website: www.vaseemkhan.com
Facebook: www.facebook.com/VaseemKhanOfficial/
Twitter: twitter.com/VaseemKhanUK
Email: Please contact Vaseem via his website form

Author image by Maël Hénaff. Instagram: @maelhenaff

Contact via: www.vaseemkhan.com

Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND