

Hunting for Outrage: Is There a Diversity Problem Concerning Men in the Publishing Industry?

In many ways, I am a very predictable woman: when the Chair of the panel I am about to mention said that what he was going to say would make me angry, he was entirely correct.

Before I delve further into my own depths of outrage, I'll set the scene. It's day three of the London Book Fair (for reference, I returned to Exeter about 24 hours ago as I'm writing this), and I, along with several others from the University of Exeter MA cohort, decide to attend a seminar named "Voices Unheard: Addressing Inclusivity and Representation in the Publishing World": the panel was hugely influential, ranging from Nelson (Nels) Abbey, the head of the Black Writers Guild, Natasha Carthew, author of *Undercurrent: a Cornish Memoir of Poverty, Nature and Resistance* and one of the brains behind ClassFestival, and Stacy Scott, Head of Accessibility at Taylor and Francis and Chair of the Publishing Accessibility Access Group, who was joined onstage by her guide dog, Biscuit. I want to preface that for the majority of the panel, these speakers were incredible. It was a privilege to hear about the barriers still facing marginalised people within the publishing industry, especially when Stacy raised very valid points about how few websites and eBooks are truly accessible for people who use screen-readers: as a white, able-bodied woman, I think it is incredibly important for me to listen to the needs of disadvantaged people in the industry so we might work to make it more diverse and accessible for all.

However, the second half of the seminar hijacked this in a way which not only irked me, but a majority of the audience present. Here's a hint: many of the attendees of this seminar were women. For about half an hour, this seminar on diversity turned into a lecture on how, apparently, there is a lack of men in publishing, and consequently the industry has failed in terms of diversity.

Yes, you read that correctly. Because that's why the industry has diversity problems.

Before I scream and devolve into ranting (in case you hadn't guessed already, yes, I am an Aries), I'll give these speakers the benefit of the doubt: I don't imagine they were going out of their way to be offensive to the audience they were speaking to. Their major point focused on statistics, pointing out that the publishing industry is female-dominated and that men are less likely to go into fields related to the publishing industry. This was phrased in much the same way as we might discuss how other groups of people are represented in contemporary industries of all kinds. So, why did this irritate not only me, but so many people in the audience?

Commented [LD1]: Reads a little awkwardly: I would suggest changing to "I want to preface that for the most part, these speakers were incredible."

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When we talk about statistics, it is important to understand that a statistic is just a number: when we add context and parameters to it, we can make a statistic say or confirm any biases that we like. On a simple chart, we may agree that yes, there are more women than men working in the publishing industry (it is important to regard that this study was apparently US-based, and so the context here is already limited). However, this dataset was not divided in terms of roles and individual subsections of the industry. After all, is it really the same message being presented if there are more women in publishing, but they all occupy entry-level Junior or Assistant roles? There may be less men in publishing, but why do these men disproportionately end up in CEO or directorial positions? As I was taking notes, a woman in one of the front rows also made a brilliant point in terms of the fact that the presented statistics did not represent, or even attempt to depict, levels of intersectionality between genders. When we are given a bulk number of just how many women work in publishing, how many of these women are BIPOC? How many are disabled? Of different nationalities? Even in terms of the male statistic, this also does not take into account the same questions when raised in terms of male representation. Nels Abbey raised good points about how specifically underrepresented Black men are in the publishing industry. In terms of the statistical dataset, it was a basic and surface-level approach to an issue which may not actually exist, even before we reach the exceptionally binary approach to how we talk about gender. I know for certain that there were non-binary people present in the audience, who by all right should have been considered as a separate category in this dataset, and who would have thus likely have been presented as an even smaller category in the wider statistic. Since many industries have a bad habit of lumping non-binary people into larger “female” categories, it could potentially be argued that this binary and exclusive approach similarly promoted a form of transphobia which should not have a place in the industry.

A larger point raised in the second half of the panel concerned the way in which publishing does not promote itself as a career path for boys, which in turn leads to less men entering the publishing workforce: in terms of a UK context, specific reference was made here to boys of working-class origin. While this was a valid point – yes, men of working-class origin are underrepresented in publishing – it is also important to regard that, as Natasha Carthew pointed out, there is also a lack of working-class *girls* going into publishing. In this case, the issue here is not so much that publishing is inaccessible to men, but it is an elite industry dominated by the middle-classes; which, to be frank, is something that anyone acquainted with the publishing industry already knows. It is also vital to regard the way in which humanities subjects are viewed, which in turn may impact this. Since humanities subjects are largely viewed as feminine, and in turn are often not regarded as serious or proper subjects when studied, this may be a primary cause behind the lack of male attendance and qualifications in these subjects. As someone whose undergraduate degree in English and current Masters studies in Publishing are centred around children’s literature – a specific and frequently mocked subcategory of the

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humanities – I know ~~first-hand~~ the degradation that humanities subjects face, often at the hands of those who take the more male-dominated, and thus more “serious” STEM subjects. Would we argue that primary education deliberately bars men from becoming primary school teachers – or is it more likely that early years and primary education is looked down upon as a primarily “female” role? ~~Are men told they cannot be nurses, or are they told that they should be doctors instead? This lack of male engagement with the publishing industry – if, indeed, there is any – cannot be put down to alienation on the part of the industry: instead, a more insidious form of misogyny is at work, convincing young men that work in the humanities is lesser due to its association with women.~~

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To be perfectly honest, this part of the talk was just fundamentally rude to the plethora of educated and successful women who came to hear ~~about diversity in their industry~~. When women outnumbering men is discussed in this fashion, it presents women’s jobs and careers – which they have studied and worked hard to achieve – as ones which they have taken from men, thus presenting it as a role that a man should have, and which a woman has gained via fluke or luck. Part of the seminar mentioned how the female winners of The Bookseller’s Rising Star awards outnumbered the men, along with female winners of the Booker Awards. In this case, which bestowed award would be removed from the woman who rightfully won it, just to give it to a man in order to even the numbers? Fundamentally, the women in this industry are hard-working, intelligent, dedicated to their careers and crafts, and are deserving of their awards and accolades. In terms of the seminar, thank everything for Biscuit the Guide Dog.

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