

# Transcript for Episode 107: Interview with Porscha Burke

**Episode Duration:** 54:55

**JENN:** Hello and welcome to the latest episode of the Minorities in Publishing podcast. This is Jenn and for new and returning listeners you may know you can find the podcast on Tumblr @minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com, on Twitter @MinoritiesinPub and basically everywhere you listen to podcasts: iTunes, I think that's Apple Music now, Google Play, iHeartRadio, TuneIn, and Spotify.

So thank you for listening.

We're recording in the year 2020 and looking very, very forward to the year 2021.

I cannot even tell you how happy I am to have today's guest on: Porscha Burke who is Assistant Director of Publishing and Senior Editor.

When you think stealth, I think of various Black women in publishing specifically and that includes Porscha Burke because she has been doing *so much*, behind the scenes, in front of the scenes, all of it, in terms of this industry. And we've been in kind of the same amount of time. She's given so much of herself to this industry and to the mentorship and uplifting of so many people, especially other BIPOC in this industry. And so, it's really an honor to have you on and to be able to talk to you today Porscha.

**PORSCHA:** Thank you so much Jenn. You know how much I admire you, I've been waiting to finally have a conversation with you. And on the record, it's delightful! You are brilliant, you know how much I admire you, how glad I am for the acknowledgement of your brilliance so publicly. From PW Star but also to the attention that your podcast has earned you, plus your very vocal Twitter presence. So thank you so much for allowing me to be here and be part of your incredible mission to get the flowers for all of the BIPOC in this business. Thank you, Jenn.

**JENN:** Oh thank you. It's consistent mutual appreciation society on these episodes, that's always very heartening. It's what keeps me going quite frankly.

And funny enough, we finally work at the same company--

**PORSCHA:** Woohoo!

**JENN:** The year of a pandemic. Go figure?

**PORSCHA:** Right? We finally work together in the year that we can see *the least* of each other in the building. Poetic justice.

**JENN:** Ahhh, nature is funny. The universe has a great sense of humor.

And I do want to point out that Porscha got deservedly promoted this year to Assistant Director of Publishing. And that you're going to kind of broaden even more of your horizons on everything that you get to touch.

Anyone who knows, I'm going to ask the trajectory question of how you got into it, and I'm sorry if maybe that's you know, a kind of a repetitive question for you. But I think because of your background, and also how long you've been in this industry, and that we have, again, I think a lot of synonymous thinking and experiences at least how we've seen it over a longer period of time than those who have entered in the past, four or five years, especially since the quote unquote diversity movement. I have feelings about that term. But people use it. [Laughs]

**PORSCHA:** [Laughs] I don't like that term. I haven't heard that one before.s

**JENN:** Oh yeah, oh yeah.

So I started in 2002, if you count my internships, 2003 if you count me actually getting decent compensation and benefits. And you started, around that time in book publishing?

**PORSCHA:** 2004. April of 2004 was my very first job in this business.

I came into this business from the music world. I worked for a hip-hop label, and needed to get out. I started working for that label in 2001. Great when you're 22 and 23 and get to go to all the parties and you can have liquid happy hours during your business day, your liquid lunches and happy hours during your business day and go back to work. But it was clear by 2003 that that was no longer going to be sustainable.

And I'd actually wanted to work for Random House while I was still in college. I went to the University of Virginia and was not an English major though. And I had no idea about the barriers to entry at that point, right? Many of the BIPOC that we hear from in this day and age, the recruiting opportunities were not manifesting despite the great schools that I went to. I had no idea what it took to enter into the publishing landscape. So, me being an anthropology major and sending my resume, they laughed at me.

And in fact I like to say the record label I worked for was also a Bertelsmann company and was in the same building as Random House while I was working there.

**JENN:** Get out!

**PORSCHA:** Yeah. That's how badly I wanted to work here.

And most people who know me know this part of my story, that I was desperate to get into this company. And so, I actually walked my resume, I will never forget this, I just got off the elevator on the Random House floor, with my resume. That had to be 2002. Gave my resume to the lady—it was a lady receptionist. And got a phone call from someone in HR, who of course no longer works here. ‘Like, that was the most unprofessional thing you could have possibly done. You will never work at Random House! That is not protocol.’ So yeah.

**JENN:** Wow!

**PORSCHA:** So yeah. So then. By the time, you know, I really had to leave the music business.

Long story short, I applied every single day for whatever job I thought I was qualified for for four months. Sent my resume online for assistant editor, editorial assistant. Again not knowing the difference between each of those roles.

And ultimately, I got called in by HR, by a Black HR recruiter, Lisa Clarke—who we all miss terribly. And she called me in. I had no idea what the position was for, just went in. And it turns out that it was for the executive assistant to the Publisher of Random House position. And at the time I was the executive assistant to the president of the record label. So in many ways it was a lateral move, but I was completely qualified for that job.

When I interviewed with Gina and she explained to me what the job was, I remember sitting there like, that’s it? This is all you’re asking me to do? You’re inviting me to have my dream job but you only want what I do right now, plus you’ll respect me *and* my days end at 5 o’clock? There’s no being on call at 2am to find a car service? *And* I get summer hours?

I was just overjoyed, like dropped on my knees and prayed thank you, as soon as I knew I’d gotten the job. So that was April of 2004. Gina knew that I wanted to be in editorial, and immediately, you know, helped me develop relationships with editors to help facilitate that, reading for her, reading for them. And then in 2007, I moved into editorial, working for the then Editor-in-Chief of Random House, that was Jennifer Hershey at the time.

I didn’t come in with the kind of reading pedigree, literary pedigree that anyone else in this business had so I overcompensated, right? I overcompensated by doing assistant work for anyone that needed it, thinking that that would be how I developed credibility in this space. So I worked for a lot of people. And I would answer the phone and do assistant admin stuff for whomever needed it.

And one of those people was the late Bob Loomis, who was Maya Angelou’s editor. And it was answering the phone for Bob Loomis in 2007 as an Editorial Assistant that I got to talk to Dr Angelou for the first time and the second time. And by the second time, she schooled me.

She called me Ms. Burke. I was like, Dr. Angelou, you know you don't have to call me by my last name because I actually hate it. And she was like, *no*. She explained to me that because Black women in particular had been so demeaned and debased by this culture and only called by their first names for so long and stripped of their dignity by only calling them by their first names that she was going to call me Ms. Burke as a conference of respect. So. Yeah.

**JENN:** Wow. And I was— It makes me think of that Oprah episode. I know you know what I'm talking about when someone was like-

**PORSCHA:** Yes I do.

**JENN:** —Ms. Maya and she was like, *mmm mmhmm*.

**PORSCHA:** And you know, so talking about Twitter, when that moment happened recently, it was back on Twitter again and people were so up in arms. And everyone knows— I know where Dr. Angelou was coming from and that actually I wouldn't have been surprised if off-camera she had another kind of talk with that young woman, right, to again confer upon her the dignity of proper address in this world. Using words to convey respect in a culture that tried to strip you and effectively stripped you of any sense of pride and dignity you may have. I wouldn't be surprised if that woman had another, you know, transcendent experience with Dr. Angelou. Because she could cut people down. I watched that happen in some very funny places. But she also uplifted and encouraged in ways that are unparalleled: legendary and iconic ways. So I got to develop a relationship with Dr. Angelou just by doing whatever job people needed me to do.

And I stayed in that part of the division for six months. That was 2007, leading into 2008. The advent of ebook meant that there were dramatic changes. And some, you know it was an angst-ridden time.

[10:00]

**PORSCHA:** End of 2007 I immediately get shifted. I had only worked for my boss for about 6 months before they moved me to be the assistant to the publisher of trade paperback.

And so, I worked for her as her assistant for a year and a half. When trade paperbacks were a specific part of a publishing program, I learned a lot working for her and learned how to look at backlists and select prominent, those backlist titles that are selling decently and so therefore could be candidates for front list publication for reissue for updating photos. At that point we didn't have the words metadata, updating copy and covers, that kind of thing. I acquired my first book, reporting to her.

The funny story of working for her, was, that, okay, what we had relationships with-- do you remember this, Jenn? Especially since I know you worked for a university press. The relationship between university presses and the smaller presses and the major houses, that we would purchase the rights to publish books that you guys had worked on in a trade paperback format

because many of those houses were only publishing in hardcover, or publishing in small so that was my job.

And one of the presses I covered was the New Press. And I acquired my first book for The New Press. It was a book about, called [A Buffalo in the House](#). Very cute, very cute book. Also with some historical significance about the presence of the buffalo in the southwestern United States. But The New Press.

The next book—so I have this great relationship with their subrights director. The next book that the subrights director tried to sell to me was [The New Jim Crow](#) by Michelle Alexander.

**JENN:** I was thinking, I was like, waiting, I was like, was that it? Was it it? Oh my god.

**PORSCHA:** Yep yep, that was it. I had the galley, I went to my boss, like, look, I know this has an academic tone, but I think this is really important. There, she's making a case about the connection with mass incarceration to Jim Crow that I haven't seen anyone make this publicly before. This could be really big. And she was like, nope, too academic, sorry. Nice you had it in. Thanks but no thanks. Yeah. So.

**JENN:** And how many years later even?

**PORSCHA:** More than 10, still on the New York Times Bestseller List.

**JENN:** Mmm hmm.

**PORSCHA:** So that's the business. So there were some other painful acquisitions moments that happened at that time and around that time.

So that by-- I worked for her for a year and a half so the end of 2007 into early 2009, late 2008. And I then moved to go work for two editors on the Ballantine side, so our commercial side. All within the same division, which I know is uncommon, to be able to move around a single company in this way.

What I needed to add my value however I could and I knew, I knew, unmistakably, that part of my value here is the way that I support executives. And I'm confident in that skillset, you know that's something I know I could be great at, and why not lean into the things that you know you could do well.

And so that moved me to two incredible editors who each needed something different in an assistant. An editor for a cookbook and who was also doing celebrity memoirs at that time introduced me to illustrated publishing, Pamela Cannon, whom I still get to work with in some ways today. And then Melody Guy who was the senior editor, solely running our One World imprint.

And One World at that time was very commercial, again it was part of the Ballantine program that we were publishing, what we called at that time, Urban Fiction or Street Lit. We were doing commercial-leaning nonfiction. We did a memoir by Ice T, we did a book called [The Little Black Book of Success](#), which was like a career guide for Black women. We did Judge Karen, her nonfiction sort of perked up advice book. Just a lot of fun predominantly Black, although our mission at One World was “one world, many voices.”

But it was a wild time because I watched how much support that list *did not get*. I watched people definitely tell me, you know you’re splitting your time between two bosses and you’re probably going to see more fruit from your labor leaning into one side of this job than the other, with the other being the One World side of my job. And I watched how much support those books didn’t get.

It was the start of Twitter. If you look at my Twitter feed you’ll see I started in 2008. The reason that I even got on Twitter was because I needed to establish the Twitter account for One World, I needed to establish the Facebook page for One World. I was not on social at that time but our entire company was dependent on Melody and I *knowing* the audience for this book. They were dependent on our authors being directly connected to the audiences for these books because that was the only way that those books would find that audience, if we were a part of getting them there.

Mind you, we’re not marketers, we’re not publicists, right? We’re not even associate publishers to be in control of the marketing plan. We are not cover designers. What it was like to have to fight for representation and for a cover that actually nails both the author’s intent plus what an audience was looking for, I mean those were real struggles. And--

**JENN:** And this was in you said, 2008 so this is upon that election year, the economic crash that came later that year.

**PORSCHA:** Yep. Yep.

**JENN:** And so that sounds like a very intense time to even be establishing a brand.

**PORSCHA:** It wasn’t even *to be established* because One World had already been in existence since the nineties. Where at its founding, the founders of the original One World came at it from a much more holistic POV, right? They did have marketing support, they did have publicity support.

And the way I’ve talked about it and some elders in the business have talked with me about it, namely Marie Brown and W. Paul Coates. In the nineties, there was an interest in fully publishing to, at that point again, to Black audiences, right? To the point where we’re going to support them with an entire imprint that meets the needs of that audience and we’re going to give that audience the same resources that we’re giving to everyone else. We’re at least gonna hire the people in those roles to give the same support that we give to everyone else. But by, I’d

say 2007 because the election of President Obama started to change the tide in a different way, by that point Blackness wasn't popular anymore.

There was always room in book publishing for *literary* Black voices. And yes I do speak about Blackness, our diversity of language, just because that's my space, that's who I identify as, my community, that's the lens that I have, and as I think that's the case, we've heard this, right, when we talk about Blackness, it can often apply in an uplifting way to other communities more marginalized. So I'm hopeful that this lens offers that kind of insight.

But there was always room for literary Blackness. There was always room for Maya Angelou, there was always room for Toni Morrison, there's always room for Edwidge Danticat, there's always room for a Roxane Gay, right?

But not for those commercial voices that are, many of our colleagues look past on the street *at best*, or look down on in their lives, right? There's not the same kind of interest in the stories that their housekeepers or nannies might be reading.

One of our books that my boss had in, and I can't recall who the artist was at that time, it was some celebrity memoir that she wanted to acquire. And when she brought it to her Editorial Director actually at the time, they were like, we don't know who this is, sorry, it must be. Like sorry we don't know who this is so we can't offer you the support you may be looking for to acquire. Went home, came back I guess after the weekend, they say to her, "Oh you know what? I showed this proposal, or I told my nanny about this proposal and she totally knew exactly who you were talking about! So maybe we should take a chance on that."

And you're like, are you serious? That you have an Ivy-educated Black woman whose opinion you know you care enough about that you have her on your staff, but that wasn't enough for you to believe in what she would bring to the table. It wasn't until you conferred with your help that you believed in the viability of this project. Right? And that's the access to the other Black and brown people that many of our colleagues had in their lives.

And so no, how could you expect them to have a fully supportive publishing program? How could you, especially when it wasn't met with the same degree of passion for particular audiences, for serving particular audiences at retail, which is something I still hope all our diversity movements to learn the term you just taught me, reaches. I really hope it reaches retail in a meaningful way. So.

**JENN:** I'm sorry to interrupt. When you're talking about One World specifically, I think a lot of people don't realize that One World existed prior to the reestablishment of it, under Chris Jackson, a Black man.

**PORSCHA:** Yep.

**JENN:** And I knew One World existed, I didn't realize it was from the nineties though. I didn't realize it had existed for that long a period of time. And you said that there were two founders of One World in the nineties?

[20:02]

**PORSCHA:** Yes. So Cheryl Woodruff is the number one in mind and it was Anita Diggs-

**JENN:** Oh Anita! Oh yeah I remember Anita. She used to teach at the CCNY Publishing Certificate Program.

**PORSCHA:** Yep she's still in this business.

**JENN:** Yes she is. And we friended each other on Facebook.

**PORSCHA:** [Laughs]

**JENN:** So Cheryl Woodruff and Anita Diggs.

**PORSCHA:** I'm going to say Cheryl Woodruff and Manie Barron. Because Manie began acquiring—Manie, rest in peace, we all miss him dearly. He was acquiring for Strivers Row, which was the Random House version of One World. And then Cheryl founded One World at Ballantine. And the two imprints merged together in the early 2000s and became One World. And One World published Strivers Row so.

**JENN:** Got it.

**PORSCHA:** There is a storied One World history that included actually the history of One World founded by Cheryl Woodruff in the 1990s and Strivers Row, which was the Random House version of that very Afro-centric, at the time, publishing program founded by the late Manie Barron. And so they came together when Random House and Ballantine merged to form a single imprint.

And it was again, very commercial leaning. The mission of Strivers Row rooted in the Harlem Renaissance, the mission of One World, really capturing- again, think about what was happening in the 90s. The burgeoning of hip hop and breaking into the mainstream, the golden age of that particular art form. The explosion that that art form had in film, right? We're thinking about Spike Lee, we're thinking about television, *Living Single*, *In Living Color*. Like, Blackness was very popular. And it was very contemporary, very everyday Black voices were very popular at that time. But the respect that those voices had in literary spaces was a question mark, and you could see that.

By yeah, 2008 and 2009, the recession, and the breakdown of a lot of our publishing income, so to speak, where we had to, quote-unquote, I think a lot of people in publishing have heard this

term: we need to publish to our strength, right? If you're hearing this, then that means we're reverting back to something that is very white, and/or if it is, quote-unquote colorful, then it will be literary. It will be what we understand and what we think the broadest possible audience can engage with and that we know how to sell well. And if we don't know how to sell well to communities of color, then we're just not going to take chances on those books for a while. And so that became what happened. We no longer published books under that imprint, my boss left the company. And we saw that these books were not getting their support and we were both going to leave the business.

And I was going to look for another job. I was actually going to go work for Martha Stewart. I was in that interview process. And went back to my boss and asked her for a recommendation. And she was like, "Okay you can leave, like you know that I will support you" and she's been kind of super supportive in my career. And she was like, "or you can come back and work for me."

And by that point her job had changed, because we had merged with Bantam Dell by that point. And we had brought Spiegel & Grau onto our team, which is how Chris Jackson got to be a part of the Random House empire, the Random House division in that respect. And the Dial Press came along with us, which is how we got the wonderful and the late Susan Kamil. So her job was different, she was like, you will have the bandwidth to still acquire and we still want you to acquire the voices that we were looking for in the previous One World. And so I went back to work for her. And did that for a number of years.

It was not easy to acquire the books that I wanted to acquire. Again I came from the music biz, I came from the hip-hop world, I grew up in the hip hop world. So I came with relationships that—rappers are storytellers, I want them all to get book deals and do all these great things. And at every point it was, nope, we don't do that kind of book well here.

And no matter what powerful resources I had or alliances I had that didn't necessarily, that wasn't as significant matched up against your Editorial Director's taste, your imprint publisher's taste, or their belief in what is saleable.

So that was a frustrating time. And I thought, okay I'm going to go back to school. Which again, you know, you have a job that you know you can do. And that gave me time to pursue an MFA. Got my MFA, and as I was, as I was doing that, my first full year in school, I learned Chris Jackson was bringing One World back.

And Chris could have called his imprint *anything*. Like I still, I think that's one of the boldest and gutsiest and most admirable moves. Chris could've called his imprint anything. It could've been Chris Jackson Books, Ta-Nehisi books, anything at all. But he wanted to have our company do right by a publishing program that didn't get its just dessert. And so, he brought One World back. And had the support of our publisher in doing that. Also a very bold move.

And what's interesting to me, though, is that this current One World, there are very few books that, like there's very little crossover, I guess, between those two One Worlds. Which is just like very exciting to see. The poets though, Nate Marshall, for sure, I wish we could've acquired back in 08. *The Black Futures* project, I wish we could've had on that list, I would've expected to have on that list. And Alicia Garza for sure would've been on that list.

But *The Water Dancer*? I don't know about that. *Between The World Me*, sure that would've been an original One World book, an uplifting book. But I don't know about *The Water Dancer*. *The Water Dancer* was much more a Random House book than that kind of Ballantine book. And certainly published Styles P on the original One World, Dana Dane, Nikki Turner, Tracy Price-Thompson, Angela Nissel, those aren't voices that the current One World is publishing. And I get that.

Like in order to get a company to take seriously and do something different, he needed to make a clear distinction between the One World that hadn't succeeded in this space and the One World that needed to be, not just respected in this space but respected industry-wide. And he did that really successfully and really smartly and in a way that opens the door for so many more of those voices across our *entire* publishing program, which now is a behemoth for all of our mergers now that we also brought the Crown Publishing group into our fold at the end of 2018.

Yes there is a One World History.

**JENN:** And you are part of that history! That is part of your trajectory. And I appreciate hearing all this because it's just like, wow Porscha's seen some stuff! Porscha's seen a lot of things!

And there was this question I had for you before I pressed record, was being in one place. And you technically were in one place, right? Like you were in different divisions, and worked with different people and got to touch different entities too in terms of the product itself. But essentially you are under the big umbrella.

**PORSCHA:** I never left the Random House division, at all, not once.

**JENN:** And that feels rare to me. Nowadays. Like I feel like if someone started in the nineties or the eighties, it's like okay. But I feel like, and maybe I'm projecting, it feels rare that I hear about people, I never left this. And I'm like, never? Never?!?

**PORSCHA:** Yep. So it's a blessing. You know, some of what contributed to that are things that I'm not as proud of.

Again, you know, I said upfront, that I came into this business underread. Like when I wear my Well-Read Black Girl t-shirt, I actually wanted to like, write in, 'not that' at the top of it. Like, Not That Well-Read Black Girl. That's what I came into this business feeling, not even imposter syndrome. You're working with Pulitzer Prize winning, National Book Award winning-editors

knowing that you didn't have that background. While folks were spending their time after school in a library or in a bookstore, I spent my, I spent my school afternoons in the Def Jam offices chatting with Redman and Flavor Flav and throwing shade at LL Cool J and hanging out with road managers for A Tribe Called Quest.

So what would I be doing in this space? What I did in this space is that I served. What I did in this space was support executives. So when those are all the relationships you have and those relationships are what you can lean on, right, in your employment? Then honestly I can't move very far from those relationships if I want to succeed. That's a very different way of being confident-- of how you play your confidence in your job skills and in your abilities.

So I can see and I admire my colleagues who have what it takes, who have the wisdom and the book knowledge and the understanding of authors and their titles and how they all fit together. And are so strong in that knowledge that they can be more mobile. But that wasn't me.

[30:10]

My value-add was my relationships and so it kept me rooted and people know this, I'm kind of a poster child for my company in many ways. But I then was able to develop that sense of, the knowledge, the information, right? I worked for a company that made it possible for me to go back to school, right? Had to do that on my own time. I was able to do that and upskill myself. So why would I leave?

**JENN:** And I'm curious about what you were saying. Because you talk about your background and going to school for anthropology in college and the Def Jam and all those things. And they add an immense amount of value as well to this industry. And I question the industry or when we are looking for this kind of assembly line, if that makes sense?

**PORSCHA:** Mmm hmm.

**JENN:** Where it's like, we all have to be that book read. We all have to be this this this and this in order to even emerge within this business with an awareness of the business itself. And I feel like, you know— I know you know, there are things you learn and there are things that you just inherently know that *they* will never know.

**PORSCHA:** Mmm hmm.

**JENN:** And what I'm seeing is what value you brought from the very beginning, is this completely other perspective for people who are quote-unquote, not well-read. So how do we get to those people? How do we get to them? If we're all sitting here in these silos of 'the avid readers.' Then we're just kind of continuing to cater to that. And that's a part of what I loved about Lisa Lucas' campaign for the National Book Foundation. She's like, I want to make readers. I said, that's what we need to do, if we're going to survive we need to make readers. [Laughs]

**PORSCHA:** Mmm hmm.

**JENN:** Like we need to make them. And not just assume everyone's going to always be a reader at the same time. So it's interesting you say that.

And I was thinking of all these conversations that we're all involved in and I'm sure you're involved in even more than *any* of us [Laughs] in a lot of ways. Of, what *are* we doing to get people like Porscha Burke? How do we get Porscha Burke when Porscha Burke doesn't know that she wants to be in publishing?

**PORSCHA:** So there's a lot. One, have you seen—there was some study, maybe last year or the year before, what is time these days? But that Black women are actually the most, the largest book buying demographic?

**JENN:** Yes I always refer to that, because I'm just like, you know we read *all the time*.

**PORSCHA:** Right, that was one, is about having people who work in house, and *enough* people, right, so that you can believe them, because one person is easily dismissed, as we have seen, as I have certainly seen. But when there are ten, twenty, fifty of you, it's a little bit harder to ignore. So being able to have people who can say, yes, Black women are buying books, and they are readers who deserve to be marketed to, who deserve to be reached out to, who deserve to be looped in on what you're publishing—that's one.

And then two, is the other piece. There's, okay, staffing has to change. And recruiting has to change in order for staffing to change. Because the spaces where we could guarantee someone we could—how do I say this? The spaces that we were used to finding candidates who we expected to succeed in this space were not spaces that were very diverse, right? Or, all of their own barriers to entry is at the expense of a Columbia publishing course, if that is the elitism of an Ivy league institution, right?

We have now made a concerted effort, again something I'm proud of, we have made a concerted effort recruiting with organizations like a Henry Street Settlement or like Year Up, right, those organizations that are directly reaching out to under-resourced communities to grant them access to spaces that they wouldn't have otherwise had. There are so many more of those kinds of programs and initiatives and nearby alliances for us, or our HR team that didn't exist before. So we're doing that.

And now over time that we have had the opportunity to open the conversation to how exclusive we've been. You know, it's, you could get a lot of shade, for 'having the conversation isn't enough', which I can fully hold. It's not enough to stop at having a conversation. But when you recognize that, talking about, especially racial inequity in this business, wasn't something we did, right? We didn't talk about, why is it that the One World editor also has to market and publicize her title. We're not talking about, why can I name all of the Black people who work here on one hand, right?

It takes actually being able to confront that and talk about it and talk about it not just in an emotional way but be able to talk about it in a fact-based way, that can impact change. Because why Ta-Nehisi's book is so important in our business, right? Because that book, again especially talking about our division which published that book, it gave everyone a framework for having a difficult conversation on race and body politics that we *weren't having before*. And taking it past how guilty some people may have felt, or how ashamed some of us may have felt, or how weak and unempowered people may have felt. It took it out of feeling and brought it into fact and reality. Supported for, by large and powerful social justice movement which also you know, included trends that we wanted to publish into. But that book in particular, because everybody read it, and it was short, so everybody read it. And everybody came to a conversation and an awareness about race that was radically different than anything that we had done before.

And with that, with the release of the Lee & Low survey in 2015, which you know, publishers did not want to be there. And that was embarrassing, for people who saw themselves as so liberal and so progressive and who were in other areas of their life. That was fighting for women's equality and pay equity and feminism and being more conscientious about LGBTQ audiences. They're believing that they are progressive. And they are. But here is a huge blind spot that they weren't even paying attention to.

And so, with all of those things, to be like, okay you know what, let's start to change this. But let's start changing things that we're still comfortable with, right? So we're going to start to change the way we recruit for entry level positions, right? We're going to make these alliances. We're going to start being more intentional with bringing in more BIPOC and employees who, you know, come from any kind of marginalized background. Like we're going to be more intentional about that. But at the entry level, that's what we think we can change.

You do that for two or three years and they are hungry and you find that they are very hungry diverse-- if they are queer publicists, or Black editors, like there's so many people who want to be in this business, right? So now they're here but when they get here, they're like, pardon my French, what the fuck is this? Like you're so gung ho about recruiting me and you clearly had so much passion for me to be here but when I get here I'm being gaslighted every day. Like I get here and I'm hearing things *still* like oh you know, I don't think that these people read books. There's a huge disconnect from them between what they expect this organization to be and how it really is.

And so then that has been a huge ground flow of change as well because now those folks do have more seniority, they do know a little more about how the sausage is made, they do have alliances and relationships to help impact change and that's not just relationships within a single division, or a single company, a single publisher. In part because of the internet and how connected so many of our younger employees are, and we're just coming into it. Their communities are *large*. They're talking to each other. POCs in Pubs exists now, right, with all of its networking opportunities. Your podcast... There are so many different touchpoints for people to have a community, a very visible community that is forcing a lot of change to not just

be lip service anymore. And so that's how they're making it happen, that's where my confidence comes from.

[W.] Paul Coates and I had this disagreement, which makes me laugh, because I'm hopeful that I'm gonna come out right here. That that's the interest in diverse publishing, to use the term, is not just a trend. That in 15 years, it'll cycle downwards the way that is has every other 15 to 20 years in history if you're following the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights movement to Ms. Morrison being an editor to Ms. Marie Brown being an editor to Manie Barron then into the 1990s and then cycling back downwards to where we are here. The change in staff and the change in the vocal and expressive and very public-facing nature of our staff and their demand for *real* representation, their demand for real agency. Their refusal to just be quiet and accept mistreatment because it pains you. That kind of demand is going to make it really difficult for them to cycle backwards and say we don't believe in serving these communities anymore.

[40:09]

**JENN:** It's a big hope.

And there have been the consistency of articles, one that came out yesterday--

**PORSCHA:** Mmm hmmm.

**JENN:** That literally said, why is publishing so white. And it was so funny because it came out and I was just like, wasn't that a hashtag like four years ago? [Laughs]

**PORSCHA:** Yes it was. Yes it was. [Laughs]

**JENN:** Was it? I was just like, interesting New York Times, very interesting.

And they pinpointed it, as you say, Toni Morrison and the direct correlation, how much books by and about Black people dropped when she left Random House as an editor and pursued her writing and also teaching more concretely.

And what was always funny, I think, you probably saw the commentary too was that, the writers, one person who was Asian and I believe the other person who was white, said *we were shocked*.

**JENN:** They're both journalists and we were just like, wow. [Laughs] They were like, 95% of the books in da da da da da in 2018 were about white people. I was like, *they were shocked*. Or 89% as I think they said. I was like, y'all are funny. Y'all are hilarious. Oh shocking. What a life to live.

**PORSCHA:** Right? Oh so clearly your career wasn't impacted about that. So like, imagine you're the editor who only gets 5% of your shots are even possible, right? Yeah it must be nice.

The thing I like about that article was obviously the inclusion of Miss Marie Brown.

**JENN:** Yes. Legend. Icon. Miss Marie.

**PORSCHA:** Absolutely. And still out there, still selling books still working with authors who are changing the game. And to see her again be respected and be a part of this conversation, is, it just deeply satisfied me.

But the other thing is, they made it all about fiction, right?

**JENN:** True.

**PORSCHA:** So their ability to get to that 89% number is because they were only looking at fiction.

And if we think about the books that were on the New York Times bestseller list over the summer and how Black the bestsellers list had been, those were all nonfiction titles right, and we've seen that.

**JENN:** And some children's lit too but also kind of, it was *racialized* children's lit, it was *social justice* children's lit, so nonfiction and a couple fiction. Yeah you're right.

**PORSCHA:** Yep. And so, actually my take, and I'd be curious, Jenn, would you agree, the voices actually that the previous One World had been publishing, right, moved into the children's space before they moved back into prominence in the adult space, which I'm kind of still waiting for.

And part of me thinks that, for the same reason that we've seen so much progress in terms of DEI in the children's and YA world is that, you know, would you agree, that you see that from the agents too, who were selling to One World, to Atria before, and then to 37 Ink, to Amistad, that they pivoted into selling children's, because that's where the audience could still be found. And the support for those books could still exist, because no matter what, parents wanted a better world for their kids, a more inclusive and representative world for their kids. Teachers and educators and librarians were always at the front lines of understanding that those readers needed representation because they always had access to them. They couldn't turn a blind eye to their young Latinx girl who struggled with books that were anti their existence. Would you agree?

**JENN:** I definitely see that as a direct correlation. Because admittedly, there's, if we're looking at the bestseller lists, and I mean indie lists as well as the New York Times bestselling list, especially the paperback? That is *really* dominated by BIPOC. And certain stories like *The*

*Children of Blood and Bone*, and *The Hate U Give*, which has been on since, it's never left, *The Hate U Give* has never left the bestseller list, for hardcover anyway. I don't think it's even available in paperback. Yeah it's selling that well in hardcover. So I definitely see it.

There's also CCBC or the CBCC? They do annual counts just on race of how many books and children's books are Indigenous, Pacific islander, such and such and those numbers are pretty bleak too. And what's also increased, continually, especially since 2015 is the representation, because they look at the representation versus the author.

**PORSCHA:** Ohhh. Yeah.

**JENN:** So more *white people* are starting to write about us and *making money from it* in the children's lit world.

**PORSCHA:** Oh yeah.

**JENN:** [Laughs] Yep. And *that* grinds my gears too. Because they'll be like, woooo okay. We'll see who's benefiting from this. *Again*. Like, again.

**PORSCHA:** I'm not. I'm not going there. We'll leave that to when we have lunch...

**JENN:** Yeah that's a part 2, part 3, part 4 episode where it's just, like: and so...

**PORSCHA:** Nope, nope.

**JENN:** Yeah, I mean I'm curious about all that too 'cause I read across genre, but again because I now work in children's lit and I volunteered with We Need Diverse Books for the first three years, just like seeing it so fast and just seeing how many agents and you're absolutely right, that I saw more agents start representing kid lit who didn't do it before.

**PORSCHA:** Representation really exists.

**JENN:** And they were getting sales, they were getting faster sales.

**PORSCHA:** Yeah. We'll save Own Voices for another day. I don't know.

What I can say is, what's been hard to stomach is the white author who writes in a Black voice. And again I know that my lens by using Blackness can feel very restricted and one note.

**JENN:** But you're right. Dialect. And this happens so much in children's lit. Oh my God. I've read so many messed up manuscripts—

**PORSCHA:** Mmmm hmmm.

**JENN:** --about people really trying to capture “slave talk.”

**PORSCHA:** Woof. Woof. And stop.

So for that writer to then say, when, especially in this age of beta readers, authenticity, sensitivity readers, right, that those readers exist, and writers can be confronted with some questions, right, about how fair their representation of XYZ community is.

And the counter can be: well, I hear you but I’m not writing my book for people like this. I’m not writing my book for Black people, I’m writing my book for white women to confront their whiteness. And so however I say it, if it’s not offensive to them and is going to bring them along in their allyship, then I’m gonna keep it, and miss anything you may have tried to correct. And what do you say to that, especially when the book goes on to sell more than half a million copies?

**JENN:** Mmm.

**PORSCHA:** You know? How do you? What can you say to that, when you’re like, okay, well, you’re trying to make a difference in your community and the way that you’ve done that is making a difference in your community but it’s still problematic and hurtful to the community that you’re exploiting in order to make the point to the people who look like you.

**JENN:** And how do you even break through that wall of recognition because again you’ve had more experience in that because I am coming from a more managing editor production background--

**PORSCHA:** Mmm hmm.

**JENN:** —for the past decade plus of still being in the room for some of those conversations but not in those sales and acquiring meetings and all--

**PORSCHA:** Mmm hmm

**JENN:** —those that hear those, those really grating questions too. And it’s very interesting how people just continually feel like they want to do good. They’re not looking at the periphery, they’re just looking at the end. So they’re not taking in the world, the 360, they’re just looking at that kind of 90 degree lens.

And I’ve seen it so much in the sensitivity reading I’ve done, when you get the dialect and everything. And people are like, oh I wanted to write about slavery and I wanted to show slavery was bad. And I was like, we know slavery was bad. I have a hard time feeling like anyone in this day and age doesn’t understand slavery was bad. I personally don’t want another slave book. I don’t want any more slave books, personally. I’m like, you need to be going somewhere very

different if you're going to write a slave book. Per me, per me. And that's my very very specific scope, and exhaustion.

And it's so interesting to have these conversations and actually hear these authors just like, the *intentionality* of just wanting to do good and reflect, and them not having the skills or ability to be able to do that. *At all*.

**PORSCHA:** *Mmm hmm.*

**JENN:** Because as you say, I'm speaking to these people, and I want them to learn. And I don't think that should—I don't think what you say should kind of affect what I say, because my intention is good. I'm just, what?

**PORSCHA:** The main capture is wow, if they could rest on the rationale can also come back to you. 'Well you know, they're not sophisticated enough to be able to make these kinds of changes, like that's a different caliber of writing that they're incapable of.' You're like, are you serious? Do you know how many hoops Black authors who want to speak in their own voice about their own stories have to jump through in order for their work to be seen as having enough merit to be in this space? And you want to tell me this other writer doesn't have the chops to deliver the kind of changes we're asking for? But *they* get a book deal? Like, really the degree of insult that you're putting forth is *remarkable*.

[50:21]

**JENN:** Yeah.

**PORSCHA:** And again, to our earlier conversation, I understand that there are people who would refuse to be insulted in that way, right? And people who upon such an incident, would be like, I'm out, I'm not going to stay here if this is going to be what I have to face on a day to day. And I have to respect that. I know, and for how many people actually whom I respect who made that choice and I especially think about a lot of literary agents who had been editors in-house before they stepped down to their agency, because they refused to continue to play that game anymore, right? I have a lot of respect for that. I just also acknowledge that not everybody has that sense of courage, and self-confidence to be able to draw that particular line in the sand. I look forward to more people feeling so empowered but I also have a lot of compassion for those people who don't necessarily have that wherewithal. And are inclined to endure and look for solutions to improve their everyday, instead of stepping away from it.

**JENN:** Thank you for that. And that's an increasing value to hear that I think for a lot of people who might be thinking about it. I feel like you and I are just in it.

We're in it until retirement. Like, we're just like, alright, like just keep giving me a paycheck, I'll keep doing my work. Like I mean, I don't want to simplify that much but we're invested, we're invested! We're invested.

Thank you so much Porscha, this has flown by. Because I gave Porscha a whole list, and I'm just I'm like, oooh tell me more about this. And I've just enjoyed this so so much. That I hope you actually come back because I feel like we just have a part 2 brewing.

**PORSCHA:** I would love to.

**JENN:** Thank you.

**PORSCHA:** We could talk about Queens.

**JENN:** Yes we still have to talk about Queens! I might just have a Queens episode. Like you and me and Danny Vasquez.

**PORSCHA:** Yes! Yes!

**JENN:** We'll be like, let's just talk about Queens.

**PORSCHA:** Let's do it. I can't wait.

**JENN:** So Porscha, how can people reach out to you? Not to submit to you-- because that needs to go through the proper channels. If you listened to this podcast for the past several years, you know what that means.

But you are on social media and if people just want to follow and hear about what you're doing. You teach also, and they might want to join your class and get as much intellect as they can from you because you have a wealth of knowledge. Is there, like, do you have a website?

**PORSCHA:** My social, my Twitter is public, so my Twitter is @Porscha\_ , so that's PORSCHA underscore. And I'm there, you can DM me, you can follow me, I do generally follow back. I'm easily found. You can look at Porscha in Random House and you will see more of me than you could hope for. So please do!

I am here, I am very grateful to be a part of the publishing community in all of the different ways that I am. I am very inspired by this community, every day, and I'm here to serve. Like it is my purpose to really help connect people who have something important to say with the people who really need that message. And if you are a part of that network, a part of that world and you share that mission and purpose in any way, I'm honored to be in touch and be in a community with you.

**JENN:** Thank you. And congratulations again for another much-deserved promotion and recognition of your contributions to publishing at large, but also the breadth and scope that you have brought into every position that you have held. And I love seeing that. I'm so happy to see that. Especially on the Igloo. We have an internal thing at PRH called Igloo, which is super

helpful. Because I'm like, ohh that's where all that info is. So it's just really, really nice to see you shine. In a year that has been cloudy, you have been that ray of sunlight. And I mean that sincerely.

**PORSCHA:** Thank you so much Jenn. I really, really appreciate that.

**JENN:** And for everyone who's listening, thank you for listening. I hope your 2021 is going very well, that you're keeping safe. And once again you can find the podcast Minorities in Publishing at [MinoritiesinPublishing.tumblr.com](https://minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com) and on Twitter @MinoritiesInPub.

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