

Including More Diverse Voices in Publishing Panel

Panelists: Margaret Young, Madeleine Dresden, Tarienne Mitchell, Camlyn Giddins, Marci Monson, and Chris Schoebinger

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Camlyn Giddins: Hello, and welcome. This is our Including More Diverse Voices in Publishing panel. And so I really just want to get straight to it so we have enough time for the Q&A that we're looking forward to with our audience, and please feel free to put your questions in the chat.

And so to get started, I'm just going to ask a general question to each of our guests here and let them introduce their work and their response.

And so the question is: in your work, what were the main challenges and lessons you learned regarding these topics? And there are five different topics that they can comment on. These topics are: (1) appropriation (2) supporting the efforts of diverse populations to have their voices heard (3) various kinds of representation (4) how these issues affect our youth, and then (5) kind of the why for all of that; why is any of that important or of value? So I will go through, actually whoever is ready, honestly, to give an answer to any of that, please feel free to just unmute your mic. Introduce your name, your title, and your work, and we'll dive into this conversation.

Margaret Young: I can start off I'm Margaret Blair Young. I have been a writer, all of my life. For a long time I specialized in, sort of, English-Spanish books, but then paired up with Darius Gray in 1998, and we wrote three historical novels, really, really researched on black LDS pioneers, and then we made a documentary. That was my first real training on how to support and not assume that I was going to be driving a project. Because I had originally thought that I would do this on my own before I met Darius. We we met in a rather miraculous way after I already had this plan that I would do it, and it became very clear to me that I had no capability of

doing it well. He had to point out to me numerous times where I had overstepped, where I had not perceived things well. We had the experience of, he wrote a prologue for our first novel, where he talked openly about racism that he and his family had experienced.

Deseret Book was not pleased with that prologue, and somebody at Deseret Book rewrote it. That was the first time Darius and I had a real fight, because I went along with it, and Darius let me know that I did not understand how serious the implications were of allowing a white voice to silence what he had said and submitted, and to take out the incidents of racism that his son had experienced. That was my first big lesson. I continue learning the lessons. I now work largely in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where we are trying to get the cinema industry started.

And again, taking the lessons that I learned from Darius to not commandeer, but to catalyze. I went to the Congo, thinking that we would take an American team, and did take a fantastic American team with me the first time, and they said there's no infrastructure here, so the team fell apart, and we decided—I have a tendency to go with whatever looks really interesting and maybe adventurous—and so I said, “Let's, there's no infrastructure. Let's do it anyway.” And every person who went from the USA to the Congo took equipment. I took lighting.

One of our actors took computers. My brother took cameras. They have cameras, but they didn't have good ones.

They were already making films, but they didn't have the equipment to make them well. So we went and we basically left everything up to them, including modifications to the screenplay. So it became all theirs. And if you see advertisements for Heart of Africa, you'll see that the center name is not mine, it's Tshoper Kabambi, the director. When I gave all of the equipment with the others, and we had talked about the script and the changes they wanted to include, including changing it into their language, French and Lingala, I then left and said, I'll see you in a month, make the movie. So absolutely turning it over to them. I believe that as we tell the stories—and Heart of Africa is inspired from a true story of a dear friend of mine, actually my godson, Aime Myubi, also Congolese, who is now making movies himself. As we tell the stories of people, we communicate to them, “Your story matters.” As we, my initial efforts in the Congo to do oral histories and then how to bind their own books because that libraries are often either non-existent where they have like thirty books total. This is for an entire university.

So teaching people how to write life stories and then bind them gives them books. And with, we interviewed Tshoper's parents, and I presented them with their oral histories bound, and it was the sweetest thing. His father, who had been cheated out of his education, who had worked graveyard shift for much of his life to support his children and to get them educated—education

is not free in the Congo—that he, after he was given the book, he called his son and said, I've been poor all of my life. But things are good. You're making movies, and there's a book about me.

That's all I'll say.

Camlyn Giddins: Thank you, Margaret. Thank you so much. Who else is ready to comment on one of our topics?

Tarienne Mitchell: Well, Hi. My name is Tarienne Mitchell. I am an archivist at the Church history library, which is in downtown Salt Lake. I'm also the subject matter expert in black history in the Church.

And I would like to tackle representation and how important it is. For one I'm working in an archive that supports a global church. It's very important that we are getting the stories of the whole church and not just what we tend to get—European centric or United States and white stories, but we want to make sure that we are representing all the stories that are out there among our Church members.

With my, in libraries and museums and archives in general, the representation of the staff is typically isn't very diverse, and so sometimes when we are going out to get those records, it's hard because they're, in some communities there is a natural distrust of people that aren't from the community. And so the quality of the story might not be as good of a story as we, as if we would want as we would have gotten if someone was coming from that community. We do try our hardest, and we do the best that we can. I often think of how this affects people. For example, we get tons of videos of trek and pictures of trek from people all over the world. And I think it's great that they are honoring that tradition of the white pioneers that came from, that were being persecuted and trekked all the way to Utah. There was a video of people trekking along the Chinese, the Great Wall of China.

And I just thought it would be great if they, if those youth also knew the history of the Church in China and could celebrate those stories and reenact those stories and celebrate the pioneers in their own lands. And this is why I think representation is extremely important. To see yourself in Church history helps people get through the tough subjects, like the ban in the priesthood, if they knew, if every person of color, like Elijah Able's story, or Jane Manning James. I feel like maybe more people would stay in the Church when times of struggle come up because they have those examples to look to when they're going through some of the same things that those early pioneers have gone through and since.

And so representation I feel is extremely important. And a lot of the records that we get in the archive end up being stories that end up being told across the pulpits. They end up being in the manuals, may end up being in your Sunday schools. And without those records, those stories are lost to the people that it will impact the most.

Thank you

Camlyn Giddins: Tarienne. I look forward to diving in a bit more in the Q&A. Marcy we'll come to you next since you're ready. Okay?

Marci Monson: Yes, of course. I'm Maci Monson. I work for Gibbs Smith Publishing. I'm the marketing and publicity manager.

We are kind of a unique publishing company. We are small to medium sized, and we're based in Utah. So that just makes us unique in that way, that we're not in New York and we're not gigantic, and we don't publish, you know, hundreds of books a year.

And so I think because of that, people in the publishing industry are aware of us, and we, I feel like we've always been pretty good at, we do a lot of children's books, and we've always been pretty good at making sure that the illustrations and children's books are representative. And that's been important to us.

But something we've been talking about lately, especially since June and the Black Lives Matter discussion is becoming more global, and we've just been talking about, you know, we have a couple of diverse authors, but why don't we have more? And you know, the first meetings, the first commentary was kind of like, well, we don't pick our authors based on, you know, their background or their race or anything. We just pick good books. But the discussion that we need to be having is: are we looking in the right places? Are we giving more people the opportunity to submit to us? Are we searching out people with diverse stories and diverse voices? We do mostly nonfiction, and so our, we don't tell stories quite as much in, you know, in the fiction way, but we can be telling diverse cookbook stories, diverse recipes.

We can be telling diverse children's stories, and we can be telling diverse design book stories as well. And just because what we've always done or who we've always found are these certain people, doesn't mean that that's what we should continue to do.

And it's something we've been talking about a lot. We have a series of books, our Women's Voices series, and originally the covers were designed by a man.

And that's something that we kind of talked about is if this is going to be a women's voices, we also need it to be a women's pen, you know, women's Illustrator series, and just kind of trying to always have those discussions.

If we're looking in the right places. If we're seeking out the right people.

In our children's books. It's very important to us that children can see themselves in our books. We have a series of alphabet books that we are always trying to remind our Illustrator that all of the kids should not be white, and all the kids shouldn't be fully able. We should, we need to give kids a chance to open a book and see themselves.

And I mean we're, at this company, we're so passionate about children's literacy and, you know, a huge part of that. I've heard so many stories of people saying, "I never saw myself. I never was able to see myself in a book." And so we want to provide that. And we have a mid-century book coming out in the spring for children, and we have a kid, an old timey wooden wheelchair that makes me so happy every time I see that illustration.

That some some child can open it up and say, "Hey that's me on that page." And what a difference that can make in someone's life. We had a children's book that was submitted to us a few months ago, and we all, the whole children's team really loved it and wanted to move forward, but we we went to the author, who's also the illustrator, and said, "Is there any way you can change the gender of, you know, can you give this child two fathers? Can you make it a mixed race family? can you make, anything? Can you give the kid glasses? Just some kind of diversity in this story. And she said, No. And so we ended up rejecting the book, and we're all pretty sad about that because we really love this story. And this book, but it was important to us that we're showing, you know, diversity in representation that way. And it's important to us, we, honestly, the publishing industry is 78% female and 76% white, and so I am not diverse in the publishing industry, other than the fact that I'm religious which I was like, I've got one thing going for me to be, you know, a little unique. But, and most of us that work here are white females in this, in our trade.

Side, but it's important to us because we want children, we want adults, we want people to see themselves in books. And how important that is to be able to see a character and relate to them. We just, this last spring, we published the book version of "I'll Walk with You" by Carol Lynn Pearson, the children song, and that's something we've really been pushing right now because

it's just such an important message. And especially with all the unrest right now that I'll walk with you no matter how you talk, no matter how you look, no matter how you love, no matter how old you are. I'll walk with you, and that message of love. It's just really important to us.

Camlyn Giddins: Thank you. Marci Chris, can I come to you next?

Chris Schoebinger: My name is Chris Schoebinger. I'm the publishing director for Shadow Mountain Publishing, which is an imprint of Deseret Book company. Shadow Mountains specifically publishes content that is not inherently LDS. It's basically family friendly, clean content, morals-based.

And so it's really for a national market. We do everything from fiction and nonfiction to memoirs to cookbooks.

And so Cameron mentioned these five areas. And I guess I want to, I'm going to start with the why to begin with.

Why do we need more diverse voices? Or why do, why do our youth need to to hear that, especially? So a quick story: when my children were young, I had one particular daughter, who after watching the musical, Hairspray, and she after the movie was over, she said, "Dad, where did all the black people go?" I'm like, "What?" and she said, you know, talking about her neighborhood. And she said, "Yeah. Where did all black people go?" And I'm like...

And she said, "Oh, no, wait. I'm sorry. I know someone." And she went to the family in our neighborhood, and I stopped and I said, "Honey. No, no, that family is Polynesian they're not black." And I thought, I'm going to horrible job as a parent. Like my own kids don't understand the difference.

And I thought, as families who live in such predominantly white communities, we have got to do something different. We have got to educate and be able to help teach what diversity is.

And I thought, What can I do? And so as a publisher, you know, my goal is, okay, I can do something. I can reach out and look for more diverse voices. And as a publisher, the hard thing is I'm looking through the submissions that we're receiving and I'm like, how do we, how do I get word, again, I would probably think that, you know, I mean, Desert Book and Shadow Mountain, right. We're, maybe just based on who we are a publisher, we're not getting a lot of submissions from diverse voices, but we need them, and we want them. And when I say diverse voices I'm talking not only about people of color. But I'm talking about people with disabilities. I'm talking

about people with different religions. I'm talking about even LGBTQ authors who have a voice. Because all these people are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and they, and we need to hear all of their stories, and so it's so vital. I mean, if we're trying to, if we truly feel passionate about creating racial equality, then we need to include that in our books, in our stories.

Without it, we're, we can be seen, And we probably are without even knowing it racist. And so it's, boy, white authors have such a huge responsibility, and, you know to look for ways that they can do that. And I would also say that we have a huge responsibility to look for and share anything we can, whether, you know, with authors and up-and-coming writers who have these authentic diverse voices.

And in a nutshell that's, I guess that's my, I feel like, part of our calling and passion is to not only do what we can individually, but then share what we, our knowledge to help others share that as well.

Camlyn Giddins: Thank you, Chris. Thank you for those stories, both the personal and the work and all of that. It's wonderful. Okay, we'll come to you, Madeleine.

Madeleine Dresden: Hello. First off, I just want to say I'm really honored to be here with these incredible people in a virtual room that I really wish I could be with you in person. Autographs, I don't know. Big hugs. Something to that effect because they're amazing, and I just feel like me here. I'm like, I'm a writer. I'm a nerd. So glad you're here.

Hopefully, I have something great to contribute to this already great conversation, but I am an adjunct teacher of writing at BYU, where being one of maybe three faculty of color definitely has its challenges.

And also having predominantly white students means I consider myself in a unique place opportunity to try to introduce them to diverse voices, you know, in opinion editorials that were reading, research, even YouTube videos with arguments that we can watch in class and dissect them.

I take that very seriously to try to engage them in conversations that they maybe haven't had to have growing up because of where they grew up.

But the work that I would like to focus on more today is my work as a writer, so I am writing a Korean-inspired YA fantasy novel currently that my agent is waiting very patiently for, and I have

a different panel on the, different session on the fiction track about pitch wars, which is where I was able to meet my mentors and then get an agent. And so I would love to speak to diversity, when it comes to supporting each other because both of my mentors were women of color and I can't even begin to describe how amazing that was to be able to have those conversations with them, like, "Am I Asian enough to write this book? Are white people going to want to read this? Is this exciting? Is this accessible? Are the names pronounceable, you know? Just being able to have these kinds of conversations that would be a little more difficult to have people who haven't written books like mine. So that was just such a great experience for me. And they also taught me a lot about how to amplify authors of color and their voices with social media and book reviews and things like that. So if there's anyone who would like to discuss, you know, how we can amplify authors of color, I would love to chat about that.

That's something that I'm working very hard on doing myself. And I'm going to skip to number four, about how these issues affect youth, because that informs my opinion on various kinds of representation that are important to me. So as a YA writer, I think one of the reasons why I'm writing for teenagers is because that was a time of my life where books are most formative, you know. That's where you start thinking, am I pretty, you know? Am I going to be popular enough? And you really start projecting like your, the success of your future and comparing yourself to other people. And a lot of that comes to comparing yourself to what you see on the big screen, on the silver screen, what you see on pages and books. And really the only representation, I can think of from that time period was Mulan, she was the Disney Princess for people who looked like me. And while she is my favorite because Mulan is amazing, Halloween was a little difficult. Not gonna lie I wasn't entirely sure. Should I just be Mulan again every year? And it didn't really hit me how much I was missing out on representation and how important that was until the movie Big Hero Six came out, and I saw a protagonist who was half white and half Asian just like me. That was revolutionary. And it actually made me teary-eyed because he had a white aunt like I have white aunts, and, you know, he had a brother who was half Asian. And I was like, what is happening? This is my life. This is represented. I'd never seen that before.

And this was me in my early 20s, you know. How long did it take for me to know what it's like to see myself as a superhero and to see my family in that position of raising a superhero, supporting the superhero, teaching and mentoring the superhero, you know. And I just didn't have that as a kid. And I can't help but wonder what a difference that would have made for kids who look like me if we'd been able to project ourselves into those kinds of influential and significant roles, rather than being relegated to sidekicks or plucky best friends or, worst case scenario, yellow face entirely. You know that's not a great way to make a young person feel represented or to feel beautiful or to feel like anyone will ever take them seriously. So for me, various kinds of representation, something that I'm taking very seriously, and something that I

would like to make a goal for myself is to just write as much as I can because even if, you know, we get three Asian-American authors who make it big, you know, Hunger Games status, that's three. That's really not a lot. And let's say, one of them is Chinese-American, one's Korean-American, one's Japanese-American. You can't just read one best selling book from that author and say, "Oh, I totally get Chinese culture now," or "Okay, yeah. I get Koreans now. The work here is done." So we need to flood the publishing industry with all kinds of examples of what it means to be Asian-American, to be mixed race, to be any color, to be of any religion, to be of any orientation, all of these things need to be represented in as much depth as we've had representation for white, able-bodied protagonists. Because we have, we know that experience is varied and that there's a lot going on there, and we may not realize that as much with, in my case, Asian-American literature, which leads to stereotypes, and which leads to kids feeling like, you know, there's nothing for them.

They're just going to be the kung fu master, who is the sidekick and will maybe save the day or will maybe get drunk. I don't know, like, oh, it's just so many weird things that you see Asian characters relegated to in media. So it's my personal goal to just try to get as much as I can out there and encourage as many other authors of color, especially, as possible to do the same.

Camlyn Giddins: Thank you, Madeleine. Thank you for going there.

Well, we have a couple of minutes before we get to the Q&A, and I wanted to finally like integrate another like aspect that I'm seeing, because I love hearing the why. Why all of these things are valuable to each of you. And I heard some beautiful and personal things, and because this isn't like an LDS kind of, it's not that all of our work is necessarily missionary-oriented. It's not that all of our work is necessarily about the gospel, or about the scriptures, or about Jesus Christ, but, and yet, I love seeing these values that we have. And if I were to integrate some spirituality into it, I'd just like to throw in my two cents to say that I feel like this is also an important why for all of these, because in a sense I see Jesus Christ as someone who sees all of these identities and sees all of these marginalized experiences.

And I would say like even beyond race. There are a lot of experiences that even isolate like Caucasian members of our community, whether it's not talking about anxiety or depression or whatever human experiences are not being seen. I love, I think I love seeing artists like yourselves, who see in that way because I feel that Jesus Christ sees in that way.

And so if as storytellers, and are creators. I think we emulate who we are disciples of by the stories that we are telling. And I also think that we are preparing to live in a kingdom that is much more integrated than our lives here. Personally, I think God is a God that has mastered

integration, and that we will be completely unprepared for what he's prepared if we have not become comfortable living next to diversity, if that makes any sense. So does anyone have any like additional comments on that topic or for those values?

Margaret Young: Yeah, I definitely do. I just wrote a letter expressing some of that same stuff Camlyn. On Sunday, I wrote the letter.

Darius was given a priesthood blessing years ago, in which he was told that the Savior saw him, specifically him, from the cross. And I've known about this. I actually kept a copy, and made sure it was safe.

And I pondered that line and thought, "Boy, is Darius that special that the Savior saw him?" And then the more I've contemplated it and put it with what it says in the book of Moses that Enoch's heart swelled wide as eternity.

Take that the whole idea of enlarge thy borders forever from Isaiah. Enoch's heart swelled wide as eternity. The Savior saw Darius, but saw everyone.

In the letter I saw, he saw the slave child at the auction, and he saw the person who purchased that child—the histories that brought us to every particular moment of our lives, how we're dealing with each other. I think that we don't have it quite right with thinking that families can be together forever is our nuclear family. I think it is the human family and that we are expected to transcend borders.

We are expected to have our hearts swell wide as eternity and become part of all of humanity and lift all of us up. We all do this together.

Camlyn Giddins: Thank you for those thoughts, Margaret. We have time for maybe one more. If anyone would like to.

Tarienne Mitchell: I would like to add something. So we often joke about this in our, in my department. But, you know, when Jesus have visited the Nephites and he asked for the record. And there was a story missing.

And they were like, why didn't you put that story in? I often think about that in my work, that when He comes back and He's like, why aren't these stories in there, that we're going to be held accountable for not telling everyone's story. It's the ones that people, that He wanted people to hear. And so having these having these records and being accountable for them weighs heavily

on us sometimes. And I would hate to have, to be responsible for not telling someone's story if I had that opportunity. So I think representation also falls into that. The Lord, it was it was extremely important to Jesus, and it should be to us as well.

Marci Monson: One thought if I can add to it. I just, you know, as a non-diverse person in many ways, I just keep thinking over the past few months, like the importance of conversation, the importance of opening up.

You know, why is this important? Apparently, I'm gonna cry about this, but, you know, just the importance of talking about this. And, you know, where are these stories, and who's stories are we missing. Just the beauty of having those conversations. And that's something I can do is, you know, address that all the time at my work, in my family, with my friends, just the importance of addressing who's missing.

Camlyn Giddins: Thank you, Marci. Thanks. And I actually, like, living in this community. I've decided that I will no longer say that Utah is not diverse.

I will never, you will never catch me saying that because even though that's a popular rumor to spread, because I know that there are so many intricate details of every individual story that that adds to diversity, so.

Wow, my heart is full. I would love to keep talking, but I'll, I'll leave some time for the Q&A now. Thank you for your comments, and we'll hear what else you have to say.