

Why book industry sees the world split still by race

Wednesday, December 06, 2006

By Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, The Wall Street Journal

Brandon Massey's readers tell him they know just where to find his horror novels -- in the African-American section of bookstores. He's torn about whether or not this is a good thing.

"You face a double-edged sword," says Mr. Massey, 33 years old. "I'm black and I'm published by a black imprint, so I'm automatically slotted in African-American fiction." That helps black readers to find his books easily and has underpinned his career. At the same time, he says, the placement "limits my sales."

Should fiction written by black authors be shelved in African-American departments, a move that often helps nurture writers? Or should it be presented alongside other categories, such as general literature, allowing books written by black authors to take their place in publishing's mainstream?

The issue -- stirring up a broader debate between assimilation and maintaining a distinct identity -- has come to the fore because of a recent explosion in black fiction at a time when book sales as a whole are in decline. For the first nine months of 2006, bookstore sales fell 1.6 percent to \$12.1 billion, according to preliminary data from the U.S. Census Bureau. By comparison, major New York publishers say black authors are flourishing. "It's a hot area, and everyone is rushing in," says Judith Curr, publisher of CBS Corp.'s Atria imprint, where African-American authors contribute about 25 percent of the titles published annually.

African-American sections are the rule at Borders and Waldenbooks, chains both owned by Borders Group Inc., as well as many airports and Wal-Mart Stores Inc. outlets. Amazon.com Inc. and Barnes & Noble Inc., the country's largest book retailer, don't follow the practice. There, Mr. Massey's books, which include "Thunderland" and "Dark Corner," are found in the horror section or in general fiction.

Organizing literature by race is one of the few open demarcations between white and black apparent in the nation's malls and shopping centers. For other consumer goods, the matter is less clear cut.

Health and beauty products specifically designed to address the needs of African-Americans are sometimes grouped together. A Duane Reade store in Mamaroneck, N.Y., for example, has an "Ethnic Shampoo" section. In the music business, by contrast, some categories such as rhythm and blues and rap are

dominated by black performers. But retailers don't market these artists under a separate "African-American" sign.

Black consumers spent more than \$300 million on books last year, according to Ken Smikle, publisher of Black Issues Book Review, a unit of Chicago-based Target Market News Inc. That's more than twice as much as they spent in the early 1990s.

Bookspan, the book-club company owned by Bertelsmann AG and Time Warner Inc., says its Black Expressions Book Club boasts 460,000 members, compared with 345,000 for its famed Book of the Month Club. Black Expressions is expected to generate double-digit growth in both its sales and membership through the next few years, estimates Markus Wilhelm, Bookspan's CEO. "The growth has been stunning," he says.

Craig Werner, chairman of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, attributes the current interest in black authors to an expanding black middle class that has both money and leisure time. "As every scholar of the novel has concluded, the novel is a middle-class genre," he says.

For years, classics of black literature – Richard Wright's "Native Son" (1940), Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" (1952), James Baldwin's "Go Tell It On the Mountain" (1953) -- appeared on bookstores shelves side by side with books by white authors.

African-American sections date to the late 1960s and early 1970s, when black culture and identity was generating regular headlines. Writers and activists such as Eldridge Cleaver, Stokely Carmichael and Bobby Seale were redefining the black experience, and booksellers rushed to group them together.

When Borders opened its first new book store in Ann Arbor, Mich., in 1973, it included an African-American section. "In the historical context of the Civil Rights movement, when African-Americans were no longer being defined in terms of white culture, it made complete sense to have a separate department," says Joe Gable, a longtime Borders executive who for many years managed that store. "It still makes sense because race continues to be a defining issue."

The division is perpetuated up and down the publishing food chain. Romantic Times Book Reviews, bible of the huge romance industry, divides its influential "Top Picks" page into as many as 10 categories, ranging from inspirational to paranormal. Getting chosen is a huge boon because libraries and stores will likely buy the book in large numbers, says Gwynne Forster, the author of 26 novels, including the recently published "When You Dance with the Devil." But the magazine lumps black writers of all genres into one African-American category.

Carol Stacy, the magazine's publisher, says the African-American label makes it easier for readers to find those books. "We know we're walking a fine line, but the reader wants to know if a book has African-American characters," she says. Publishers deliberately market books to black readers that way, she adds.

Marva Allen, one of the owners of the Hue-Man Bookstore & Cafe in Harlem, says that the term African-American refers to a culture, not a skin color, and therefore has a special sensibility. "A lot of African-American writers don't write for the crossover market, they write from a cultural identity," says Ms. Allen.

Moreover, she asks, how many white readers will browse through a book when the front cover depicts black characters and the author is black?

Bennett J. Johnson, vice president of Chicago's Third World Press and a longtime publisher of black authors, says the practice appeals to a universal proclivity to think in terms of race. In that sense, publishing is merely a reflection of how the world works, he says. What publishers don't understand, Mr. Johnson suggests, is that the practice reinforces the notion that the U.S. remains a nation of "two separate societies."

Before the 1990s, many black writers who wrote about black characters produced ambitious epic stories in the manner of Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon." There was little room for black authors who wanted to write popular genre fiction such as romance novels, horror stories or erotica.

Leticia Peoples says she found the attitude of white publishers so frustrating that in the late 1980s she decided to publish her own line of black romance novels. "I called a couple of romance companies to find out why they weren't accepting black manuscripts and I heard things like, 'We don't have to do it because black women will read what's on the market' or 'Black women can't write, so where would we get our writers?'" says Ms. Peoples. She launched her own line in 1989 called Odyssey Books.

Three years later came a landmark: the publication of Terry McMillan's third book, "Waiting to Exhale," which ignited the market for books aimed at black audiences. The novel, a breezy look at the daily lives of four black women, perched on The Wall Street Journal's best-seller list for 36 weeks.

Says Ms. McMillan: "It was contemporary -- which was important -- and it was written in a voice that a lot of black women could identify with." The author says she doesn't tailor her novels for any audience and opposes putting books in black sections -- where hers are found -- a practice she calls a "disservice" and "racist." At the same time, Ms. McMillan says she understands the sales incentive for booksellers. Her solution: Put books by African-Americans in both places.

As a practical matter, segregating books by race and culture makes it less likely that black writers will hit the national best-seller lists -- whites make up a majority of book buyers -- limiting their chances of earning bigger paychecks. Nadine Aldred, who writes as Millenia Black, says that writer Jennifer Weiner might not have become a best-selling author if her books had been sold exclusively in a Jewish-American section. Ms. Weiner, whose books include "Good in Bed" and "Little Earthquakes," agrees. "If my books were perceived as Jewish 'chick lit,' there would be a narrower appeal," she says. In October, Ms. Aldred filed a lawsuit against her publisher, the American arm of Pearson PLC's Penguin Group, in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. In the suit, she alleges that her editor asked her to change the characters in her newly published second novel, "The Great Betrayal," from white to black or race-neutral. In an attempt to lure black readers, the proposed cover art featured an African-American couple, the suit adds.

Ms. Aldred says she objected because she thought the suggestions would deprive her of the opportunity to attract white readers. In her filing, Ms. Aldred says the publisher eventually backed down -- the final cover features an unmade bed -- but she still sued, alleging racial discrimination.

"In commercial fiction I'm finding that there is a huge expectation that because you are black, you should know the climate and the boundaries, and adhere to them," says Ms. Aldred.

Penguin says it is contesting the allegations, saying in a written statement that "our commitment to writers from all backgrounds is evident in the quality and diversity of our (publishing) list." The company declines to make further comment.

Barnes & Noble is bucking the rest of the industry. The chain offers an African-American studies department, but its black fiction is shelved alphabetically by author within various genres.

Mary Ellen Keating, a spokeswoman for the retailer, says it wants to expose "all titles to all customers." The only exceptions are stores in Atlanta and Oakland, which offer stand-alone displays of African-American authors because of the substantial black populations in those cities.

At Borders, whose superstores carry an average of 90,000 titles, executives say the African-American sections are a convenience for readers. Merchants and publishers say such sections also brighten the chances for new, undiscovered writers. There are no publicly available sales numbers to determine which approach works best.

Tananarive Due, who writes supernatural suspense tales, says that when she started out in 1995, she was embraced by black booksellers. Her book tour was

almost exclusively in black stores. "There is nothing worse than the release of a book without an audience," she says. "Frankly I'm glad my books were launched as they were. The African-American readership has been my rock and given me the opportunity to expand."

That support has been crucial for writers such as the recently married Mr. Massey, who lives in Union City, Ga., a 25-minute drive south of downtown Atlanta. From writing books "I made close to six figures in 2005, which was my best year so far," he says. This year he expects to generate roughly the same amount. He has sold the film rights to his second novel to a film unit affiliated with his publisher, Kensington Publishing Corp. in New York.

Mr. Massey nonetheless worries he's being shortchanged by being shelved in African-American departments. "Most nonblack readers aren't going to the African-American section," he says. His goal, he says, is to compete with Dean Koontz and Stephen King.

Judging a Book

Books written by black authors are often designed to appeal specifically to black consumers. Top five best-selling fiction titles by black authors in November:

I Say a Little Prayer, By E. Lynn Harris
When Somebody Loves You Back, by Mary B. Morrison
What They Want, by Omar Tyree
Satin Nights, by Karen E. Quinones Miller
God Don't Play, by Mary Monroe
Source: Essence Magazine