

PUBLISHER SPOTLIGHT:

LEE & LOW BOOKS

by
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Every issue, we like to take a look at an indie publisher. Jason Low is the publisher and a co-owner of Lee & Low Books, the largest multicultural children's book publisher in the United States. Founded in 1991, Lee & Low celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2016. That same year, the Eric Carle Museum selected Lee & Low as the recipient of its Angel Award for the company's dedication to diverse books and to a new generation of artists and authors who offer children both mirrors and windows to the world.

IndiePicks: Please introduce us to Lee & Low Books.

JASON: Based in New York City, the mission of Lee & Low Books is to publish books for children that are about everyone and for everyone. Our books focus on diverse characters from minority backgrounds (ethnicities), sexual orientations, and disabilities. We were founded over 25 years ago, and through our own publishing efforts and other acquisitions, we are now the largest multicultural children's book publisher in the United States.

IndiePicks: Why is diversity in publishing—especially children's publishing—so important?

JASON: The company mission is to fill the void caused by the lack of diverse books available for children. This "representation deficit" has been tracked and studied for over two decades by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) in Madison, Wisconsin. The CCBC's statistics show

that the number of diverse books each year amounts to just 10% of all books published. This becomes more confounding when compared to the U.S. Census Bureau 2015 report (census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-tps16.html) that children under the

age of five years old became majority-minority. The US Census predicts that by 2020, children under the age of eighteen will be majority-minority. So then why are publishers not publishing books that accurately reflect what children look like today? The main reason is the publishing workforce is predominantly white. While this was never a secret, our team felt the need quantify this further. In 2016, we created and distributed the first publishing staff survey called the Diversity Baseline Survey (DBS). (See blog.leeandlow.com/2016/01/26/where-is-the-diversity-in-publishing-the-2015-diversity-baseline-survey-results for more information.) The survey was distributed to 8 major review journals and 34 publishers. Over 13,000 surveys were deployed. The results were not surprising, but very telling: the industry is overwhelmingly white at 79%, cis-women 78%, heterosexual 88%, and able bodied/without a disability 92%. The one exception is at the corporate/executive levels, which showed boardrooms tended to be more evenly staffed by white men at 40%. So, while not perfectly aligned to the CCBC numbers, the DBS numbers were strikingly similar and the lack of diversity in books reflects this data.

Publishing is not unlike other industries, which also struggle with their own diversity problems. Over the years, we have generated various awareness campaigns like the Diversity Gap Studies (blog.leeandlow.com/2014/02/20/wheres-the-diversity-hollywood-85-years-of-the-academy-awards). Our hope is to keep the conversation going and find new ways to talk about why diversity matters.

IndiePicks: Share a company triumph or a moment you're most proud of.

JASON: We have had much to celebrate over the years. For starters, the quality of the books has always been a top priority for us. For a press our size, we receive a considerable number of starred reviews (16 stars in 2017), which is a testament to the authors, editorial staff, and the fascinating stories we continue to discover.

Another thing worth mentioning is the relentless, methodical way that we have pursued solutions to the



diversity problem: Through our publishing program we have filled the gap in history textbooks by publishing books about people who have made significant contributions to society, but have somehow been omitted from the narrative. Recent examples are: *Tiny Stitches* (NAACP Image Award winner) about medical pioneer Vivien Thomas, who invented the surgical procedure to prevent blue baby syndrome; and *Marti's Song for Freedom/Marti's versos por la libertad*, a bilingual picture book about José Martí, a brilliant Cuban political writer and courageous fighter for freedom.

We believe the key to cultivating a growing, thriving pool of authors of color depends on actually nurturing more of them. We launched two writing contests: The New Voices Award for unpublished picture book authors of color and The New Visions Award for unpublished middle grade/YA authors of color. Worth noting, the 2017 New Voices Award attracted 59% more aspiring authors than in 2016.

When we learned that young adult readers were having trouble finding books that featured diverse characters, we launched our Tu Books imprint in 2010.

Recently, we took note of the lack of diverse early reader books and responded by creating our "Dive Into Reading" series. We've published seven books under this series since 2015. Next, we plan to address the lack of diversity in the chapter book format with "The Story of..." series, planned for release in 2018.

Thinking long-term, we partnered with Simmons College and their alumni to form The Lee & Low and Friends Scholarship The \$100,000 scholarship fund will provide students of color, destined for publishing, financial support toward completing their degrees. We hope this will begin to address the issue of a predominately white publishing staff by helping more people of color to consider publishing as a career. A little early financial support could potentially go a long way.

IndiePicks: What do you have in the works right now?

JASON: Our latest graphic novel, *I Am Alfonso Jones* was just released this fall. The reception has been extraordinary and the book's powerful message of opposing wrongful police shootings could not have come at a better time. As we've seen, issues related

to police brutality have not subsided and have only gained traction as the #takeaknee protests in the NFL and high schools across the country have become more widespread. *I Am Alfonso Jones* was just added to the 2017 Best Books for Teens list by the New York Public Library.

As the political rhetoric from the oval office increases, it is by no coincidence that the majority of our newest titles happen to fit nicely into a #resist roundup. *Ahimsa* and *Step Up to the Plate, Maria Singh* are set during the Gandhi era and the peaceful-protest movements. Likewise, Simon Ortiz's *The People Shall Continue*, a groundbreaking picture book originally released in 1977, was recently republished and has proven that it has not lost its cultural or political edge.

IndiePicks: What do you like about being an independent publisher?

JASON: Although I have never worked for a large publishing house, I have worked for many other companies before entering the field 20 years ago. What

I like about working for an independent publisher is our ability to make concrete plans and act on those plans. In the early days of the company, there was no lack of good ideas, but the main hurdle was our modest size and lack of resources. We could only offer to publish the books and send them out for reviews. Today, we have the resources to publish more books than ever before and have developed the ability to support our books in different and meaningful ways that will reach a larger audience.

"We are taking participants from the first spark of inspiration all the way to having something tangible to share."



ABOUT EVERYONE • FOR EVERYONE
LEE & LOW BOOKS