
Providing a platform for black and ethnic minority writers

Skein Press was set up to publish writers whose work is fresh and thought-provoking and features outlooks and experiences often missing from Irish publishing. Its founders Fionnuala Cloke and Gráinne O'Toole talk to Think Business about the highs and lows of running an independent publishing company in Ireland.

Why did you set up Skein Press?

We set up Skein in July of 2017 to publish beautiful, thought-provoking books. There are always brilliant books being published in Ireland, but, there was nothing that we could find from writers from black and ethnic minority (BME) backgrounds. One glaring lack is any work by writers from the Traveller community. Where are the Traveller authors?

What challenges have you encountered as a new publishing company to keep going?

Funding is our main challenge, as it is for all small independent publishing companies. So far Skein has been a passion project for us and we both continue to do other work for our living. We were delighted to get word last month that the Arts Council are going to give us some funding for 2020 and 2021. This is a major boost for Skein and will go a significant way towards funding our publishing programme for the next couple of years. More importantly, it's a sign that there is a real willingness to invest in writers from BME backgrounds.

What is the environment for new publishers and indeed writers in Ireland?

Our experience has been very positive in terms of warmth, welcome and support from others in publishing and in the literary scene in general, particularly some of the bookshops. There is an appetite from the public too for reading books that give insights into other aspects of Irish culture and experiences.

How well are women from ethnic minorities represented in literature in Ireland?

Representation from women from a BME background in literature is practically non-existent and this needs to change. Investment and proactive support are needed to make this happen. It is no accident that women from a BME background are not visible in literature as they are not visible in many aspects of Irish life. This reflects the elite power structures and inherent inequalities in Irish society. We want to help change this and shine a light on this serious problem.

What in your opinion needs to be done to improve the situation?

Investment and targeted supports for writers from a BME background are needed. At all levels of cultural life strategies are needed to ensure diversity is achieved. We know change happens in stages. For our part, we'll continue to publish beautiful books from BME writers over the next few years. We will also continue to reach out to new BME writers. For example, we are running a workshop in collaboration with Galway 2020 for writers from a BME background later this year to find out who is writing, what they are writing, the challenges they face in their writing lives and the barriers to publication they have experienced. We'll feed this information back to any interested body.

What other communities would you like to hear from?

We want high-quality fiction or non-fiction that makes some readers question their previously-held positions and allows other readers to see themselves featured in a mainstream book. Work from BME writers is our first project and it's a necessary niche right now. The hope is that over time, there will be wider representation in every aspect of publishing – writers, editors, illustrators and company directors.

How do you think we can encourage writers from underrepresented groups to seek publication?

Investment and support are needed to encourage writers to come forward. Traditional methods don't always work. For example, a general submissions policy hasn't worked for us. We have found that reaching out to writers, investing time in their work, committing to publishing their work and facilitating them in bringing their work to publication stage is achieving results.

How important is having a support network to getting published?

Incredibly important. Support from family and community and a robust self-belief are crucial as well as the financial means to actually be able to take the time to write. Also, as very little has been published in Ireland from writers from a BME background, no doubt many writers do not see publication as an option for their work. The traditional methods used in publishing need to be adapted to proactively target BME writers to send the message publishing is for you and we want to support the development of your work.

How was Skein's first title, *This Hostel Life*, by Nigerian author Melatu Uche Okorie received in Ireland and further afield?

We were blown away by its success. We knew the content of the stories was brilliant and her skill

with the short story form was something special, but our expectations, given we were a new company with a previously unpublished writer, were not high. As it turned out, sales were good, there was loads of interest from the media and reviews were positive. We were thrilled when Melatu was nominated for Newcomer of the Year at the Irish Book Awards. Earlier this year Virago bought the rights to publish *This Hostel Life* outside of the Republic of Ireland. As well as all that, English departments in universities are teaching it and a transition year resource has been developed and is being used in secondary schools. We are hoping the NCCA will consider it for inclusion on the Leaving Cert curriculum. Serious issues are raised subtly and with humour in the book, which would be great for class discussion. Melatu's pared-back style is original, which would be perfect for analysis and comparison in relation to the short story form. Perhaps most importantly, however, it is way past time that black students in Ireland see themselves represented in mainstream literature. It would be a valuable addition to the curriculum.

What are you working on now?

We are working with three writers at the moment. Oein de Bharduin is writing a beautiful collection of folklore tales from the Traveller oral tradition which will include illustrations from the talented Leanne McDonagh, an artist who is a Traveller, for publication in 2020. We are also working with Philomena Mullen on her memoir about her life growing up as a mixed-race child in an Irish institution and with Rosaleen McDonagh on her writing which brings to light the experience of Travellers and disabled people.

What are your plans for the future?

In the short-term, we'll publish three books in 2020–2021 by BME authors and continue with this BME project in 2022–2023. We are hoping that the need for a publishing company specifically focused on BME writers won't exist in a few years' time at which point we'll focus on good writing by writers from any background. Long-term we hope to publish at least three beautiful books a year. We'll always be interested in lesser-heard voices and hope to publish writing that is both moving and a little discomfiting.

Interview by Olivia McGill

Published on 12 August, 2019