

Summary Report on MiPA General Meeting—May 11, 2021

Diversity in Publishing

Speakers: Mary Taris & Kyra Ostendorf



Mary Taris founded [Strive Publishing](#) after decades of seeing firsthand the persistent lack of Black books for herself, her children, and the students she was teaching. Mary finally took action, launching Strive publishing in 2018. She is a founding member of the Minnesota Black Publishing Arts Collaborative. She serves on several boards as well.



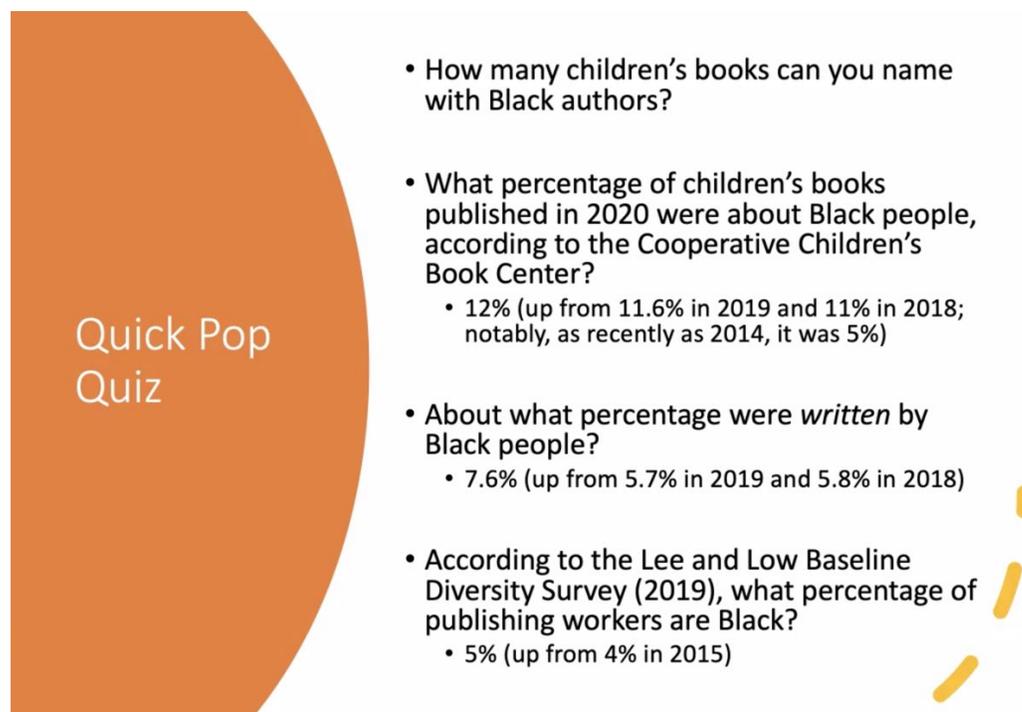
Kyra Ostendorf joined [Free Spirit Publishing](#) as publisher in 2019. She oversees the day-to-day operations and supports the company's mission to meet kids' social, emotional, and educational needs. Previously, Kyra was vice president of education at Kaplan Early Learning Company and at Redleaf Press, where she identified and developed prospective authors, resulting in over 200 publications.

Preliminaries:

After MiPA President Suzzanne Kelly introduced the board, there were several important updates. MiPA is looking for board candidates, so let [Jennifer](#) or [Suzzanne](#) know if you are interested. Information on how to vote among the candidates will be out in the next month. A new version of the MiPA website will also be out soon. Our Executive Director Jennifer also highlighted the many books submitted for the MiPA Awards which have diverse characters and themes, showing the covers for eleven of them. Our virtual Gala for the book awards will be on June 26th so watch for details. MiPA's Vice President Paul Nylander introduced the speakers and how they have worked together to advance the goal of publishing children's books with diverse characters and themes.

Overview:

The goals for Mary and Kyra's talk was to describe their collaboration, the need for more diverse authors, their success stories, and subjects they have been thinking about. They began by showing the following chart, which shows the relatively small percentage of Black children's books, authors, and workers in the industry. Mary said there were signs of improvement over the last few years, but more is needed.



She mentioned that the "[We Need Diverse Books](#)" effort, which began in 2014, has helped. In the 1980s Mary finally read a book that reflected her life, and it changed her direction. "Year after year, I would have to do so much work to find relevant books for my children or students, I decided to do something about it. I jumped in and my whole life changed."

Kyra said her background is in early childhood education and that she has always been passionate about social issues. She told a story about the "power of invitation." Once she was at a national conference where an African America man gave a powerful speech. After she joined Redleaf, she saw that man at another national conference, introduced herself and asked him to write a book. He immediately refused. But she kept in contact, asking him to write, and after several years he wrote a book. By then she had also helped publish books by other Black authors, and at a few years later at another national conference, four of her author clients were all on a prestigious discussion panel, and each mentioned they were Redleaf authors. When asked why, they all said, "Because Kyra invited me." As you as publishers think about people you work with, remember the power of invitation, and that one success with a diverse client can lead to many more. You get street cred.

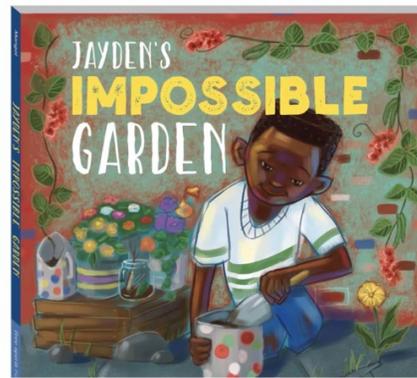
Mary added that, “relationships are the key. Being a member of MiPA, led me to Karen Pavlicin a publisher at [Elva Resa](#) who taught me how to get books to the right people. She became my publishing mentor. She invited me to a [Minnesota Book Publishers Roundtable](#) about diversity, where I met people from Free Spirit Publishing. I said, you know, we should find a way to partner. That was the beginning.”



Our Partnership

Writing Contest:

Their first work together, in 2019, was to sponsor a We Need Black Authors writing contest. “One of the Free Spirit staff ran with the idea, we got the word out, and in our first year we had over thirty applicants. We set up judging criteria, calculated, and found the top three. There were cash prizes, \$1,00, \$500, and \$250, and two of the three will be published.” Mary said, “I had the vision to get more Black authors involved, but could never have pulled this off alone. They have a well-oiled machine over there at Free Spirit. And it was valuable, even for those authors who weren’t selected.”



Jayden's
Impossible
Garden



Méлина Mangal
Illustrated by Ken Daley

Our first winner, a beautiful book, full of hope and joy.

Mary sees this contest as a wonderful learning experience for her. In 2021 the contest is being extended to a twelve-state Midwest region and applications are now open at [FreeSpirit.com/contest](#). Mary hopes the Black authors will get out in the community and into schools to show what is possible. She never saw a Black publisher, author, or artist as she grew up. Their winning author is doing a farmer’s market “book walk,” where the book pages are on large posters that can be read during the walk. Looking ahead, Free Spirit is hoping to increase its percentage of Black authors.

Questions and Answers:

Q1. How do you handle publishing costs, editing, art, proofing, printing, distribution, etc. for the contest entries?

A1. We don’t charge an entry fee. Free Spirit can absorb the business costs, and then retains most of the profits in an agreement with the author. They also pay the contest awards. We have a discount cost agreement with Mary for books that she sells. The books have quickly sold out.

Q2. Please tell us more about Free Spirit, its goal, size, etc.

A2. It's been around 40 years, has 350 books in print, publishes about 35 each year, and has 24 people on staff. They publish books for children, teens, and education.

Q3. Who owns the right to the books?

A3. The publishing rights are with Free Spirit. It is a standard publishing contract.

Q4. Mary, what else have you gained from this relationship?

A4. Mostly, I have the joy of seeing another Black author get published. Now that we are going to the whole Midwest, maybe we'll see even more. It gives both of us more credibility. Free Spirit sees it as the beginning of a pipeline.

Q5. Mary what are your publishing goals?

A5. Books are the stories of our lives. We need to tell the Black stories. But selling books is hard, for everyone. The whole book business is hard. My future plans include getting grants to do community programming, like writing workshops and partnerships, becoming a resource to authors and less a publisher.

Q6. Mary, will you be expanding beyond children's books?

A6. Yes, but you know, with the murder of George Floyd, I was inundated with submissions. So many want to share their stories, grief, and emotions. We got lots of poetry submissions. There are different ways to tell your story—spoken word, a video, or a song. Adults do want to see themselves in books too.

Q7. What help do white authors need to include characters of color?

A7. Be prepared to pay for sensitivity readers. There is strong conversation about this on Twitter. There is an "own voices" movement. For example it is good to have a Black illustrator.

Kyra summed up by reminding us all to search for Black partners. It's not enough to just say "Black lives matter." Maybe we can really make a difference.

Remember we will have our Gala on June 26. We will take a summer break and will have a speaker from Ingram Spark in the fall and later a speaker from Versa Press.