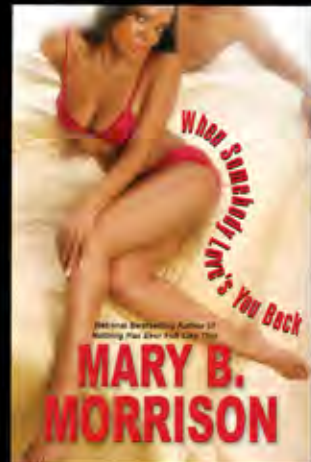


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Three years later came a landmark: the publication of Terry McMillan's third book, "Waiting to Exhale," which ignited the market for books aimed at black audiences. The novel, a breezy look at the daily lives of four black women, perched on The Wall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

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



Satin Nights
by Karen E. Quinones Miller



What They Want
by Omar Tyree



God Don't Play
by Mary Monroe

Source: Essence Magazine

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.

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