



Photo: Ye Rin Mok

BEHIND THE SCENES

Words:
Okechukwu Nzelu

PATRICE WILLIAMS MARKS on the complex, often secret work of publishing's sensitivity readers.

Hundreds of thousands of books are published every year in the US. Alongside the author, most books are nurtured by a skilled team of editors, cover designers, proofreaders, sales executives, production workers and more. Increasingly they are also the product of work by people like Patrice Williams Marks, a sensitivity reader who helps ensure authentic portrayals of marginalized people and experiences.

OKECHUKWU NZELU: How did you get started?

PATRICE WILLIAMS MARKS: I fell into it. I had a group of writer friends, and we would critique each other's material. If they had a Black character, they would ask me if it sounded right. And I would ask the same if I had a character that one of them fit.¹

ON: How do you find the emotional side of the work?

PWM: One of my first paid reviews was someone whose main character was an older Black man. The character was supposed to be an educated person, but he was using a lot of broken English. All the younger Black characters spoke broken English as well, and most of them were violent. They all were

uneducated. And it wasn't just the dialogue, it was the environment [the author] put them in. They all lived in the 'hood. None of them had fathers. I had to keep stepping back because it was so offensive.

ON: Is the work well paid?

PWM: Sensitivity readers are not cheap. An experienced sensitivity reader can charge as much as an editor doing a developmental edit. I make notes on the manuscript and I send them links to articles or videos that explain key points, so it's almost like giving them a research paper. I never negotiate [my fees], but I point people toward other resources, like the database of other sensitivity readers, so that if I can't help them, they can find somebody else.

ON: Are there issues you come across often?

PWM: Describing Black people in reference to food, like chocolate, while the white character has a fully developed backstory and no mention of their skin tone. Another thing that's odd is when authors write elderly Black people: A lot of times they describe them as having an arthritic hand that's frozen. I've come across that over and over again. I also see a lot of what they call "magical

Negros," where the person has no backstory, and they're simply there to support the white character.

ON: How does it feel to do work that is not publicly credited?

PWM: I have no problem with it. I give clients an agreement which we both sign. I say that I won't mention their name and their project, and they won't mention my name. There are financial consequences if that's broken. People come to us willingly and I'm not the final say. I give suggestions and the client can do with them what they will. But if the client doesn't take the notes, and then they publish the work and say they had a sensitivity reader, then any criticism of the work would fall back on me.

⁽¹⁾ Sensitivity readers are project specific. For example, author Jodi Picoult, who is white, employed Nic Stone as a sensitivity reader for her 2016 novel *Small Great Things* about a Black nurse who treats the baby of white supremacists. In an interview with *Slate* published the next year, Stone spoke about her own use of a sensitivity reader for a book about a woman with bipolar disorder. She told *Slate* that the reader's involvement had "completely changed the scope" of her book.