

Krishan Trotman

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SPEAKERS

Omkari Williams, Krishan Trotman



Omkari Williams 00:20

Hello, and welcome to Stepping Into Truth, the podcast where we take on the issues of race, gender and social justice. I'm your host Omkari Williams, and I'm very glad you're here with me today. I love doing this podcast. I'm privileged to speak with people who are out in the world making a difference with their day jobs, their programs, their art and their activism. If you would like to support me in doing this work, you can do so for as little as \$3 a month by becoming a member of my Patreon community. You can go to patreon.com/omkariwilliams and sign up. There's also a link on my website omkariwilliams.com.



Omkari Williams 00:22

My guest today comes at social justice work through the lens of lifting up multicultural voices. Krishan Trotman is an executive editor at Hachette Books recently profiled in Essence Magazine as one of the few African American publishing executives. She has committed over 15 years to publishing books by and about multicultural voices and social justice. Throughout her career as an editor, she has proudly worked with leaders and trailblazers on this frontier, such as John Lewis, Stephanie Land, Malcom Nance, Zerlina Maxwell, Ed Gordon, and Lindy West. And it is my great pleasure to welcome Krishan to the podcast. Hi, Krishan, how are you today?



Krishan Trotman 01:48

I'm great. Thanks for having me.



Omkari Williams 01:49

Oh, no, this is good. I was so excited when I got your books. And we're gonna get to that. But I actually want to start by sort of taking a step back. You are an executive editor at Hachette Book Group, and they are a major publishing company. And the publishing world has long been notorious for being overwhelmingly white. And I would love for you to start this discussion by telling me about your experiences in this world of publishing. And what it's like being one of the few Black people, especially a Black woman in the publishing world?



Krishan Trotman 02:30

Well, yeah, you're completely right, there's about 1% of African Americans in editorial, it's just been a real challenge to understand why this is the case. For me, I started as an editorial assistant, and starting at the bottom is always hard. But what I found nowadays that is really hard for companies, for some reason, I don't have the answer, but it's been really hard for them to retain African Americans when they come into the company. I think a large part of that reason is because there's just not a lot of, there's not enough people of color at the executive level and the VP suites. And when you come in, and you're struggling to, you know, in New York City, where a lot of publishing exists, to pay your bills, and to keep the job and to keep up with the heavy workload, but there's no inspiration about like, where this could all go, that makes it hard to retain people. So I actually think that if there were more African Americans, in the top level positions, we will see a lot of that changing and see more people of color and publishing.



Krishan Trotman 03:41

Because personally, I don't understand. We have multiple departments outside of editorial, but in all the departments, there's the same story. It should be pretty easy to get more African Americans into the finance department or art department or, you know, publicity or marketing. But for some reason, it's just it hasn't been I think, as top frame in terms of importance, as it is now. So the great thing about where we are now, I think a lot of companies are woke. They've been forced to be woke and we should see change. My biggest fear is that, you know, will these companies sustain the change, because we've seen these things come and go in publishing where there's this big wave of interest in having more people of color, having more authors of color. And then so if that sort of dies

down, and a lot of people lose their jobs, you know, so now going forward, we really do have to think a lot about getting them in but also retaining them.



Omkari Williams 04:38

Yeah, that's a really interesting point you make, I mean, I grew up in New York City, and I grew up with friends whose parents were in the publishing world, and yeah, they were all white. And we would go to their offices some times, you know, like so and so's dad wanted to take us out to lunch or whatever. And I never ever saw anyone who looked like me in the that space. And even though I was a huge reader and obsessed with books, there was something about that, that kind of just pushed me out of that as even thinking about it as a possible career path. Like, "Well, you know, there's just not room for me". And I don't think I even thought about it that specifically, it was just that was the implied message was that world was for a very specific type of person.



Omkari Williams 05:29

And I share your concern that this might become a moment, rather than the beginning of a shift in that dynamic, where we actually see people of color brought into the publishing world, and retained because they have mentors, and they have people who share their life experiences and who share their understanding of a specific part of the world. And just keep encouraging them to stick it out for not a lot of money, certainly in the beginning, and a lot of work. So I think that that's a really important point. And I hope that as things go on, more people show up in the ranks and stay so that they can bring the next generation up. And I mean, I'm sure that for you, that would be an amazing thing to witness to just see, you know, five or six people of color come in, and stay and learn the ropes, and then bring in the diversity and the understanding that that kind of energy has.



Krishan Trotman 06:41

Yeah, I mean, I've never thought I would see, you know, the day day in my life, where the New York Times bestseller list was covered in Black authors. I mean, it was the most beautiful, you know, it has been the the best looking bestseller list I've ever seen in my life. And I never imagined that African American authors would be dominating that list. And so I now just believe anything is possible. And I would love to see, you know, the shift be maintained. It's really hard to maintain it, though, if there aren't people in those positions like myself to to help do it.



Krishan Trotman 07:19

The reason why I'm in this position is because I actually met an African American editor, when I was in college, she came into my class one day, and like you said, like, immediately, I was like, "Oh, this is an option for me". And it's a great job. Being an editor of books, you learn a lot, it's a creative job. But I just think people don't think of publishing that looks like us, because we don't really, you know, sometimes there's just not enough connections. And so we don't really hear about these sort of opportunities. And for me, it had to be actually meeting an editor, becoming her intern. Asking to work for her and becoming her intern that has put me where I am today.



Krishan Trotman 07:58

And she was a senior editor at the company, and she helped me understand that I could actually grow in my position to a senior level, see? And if I would not, if I would have just come in, as a young Black woman, I'm not sure that I would have had that same vision, just because there's just not enough people that look like me, we didn't publish a lot of books by people of color sometimes. So it would have just been, you know, sort of hard to envision a sort of career that I could have. But working with her and meeting her really helped me understand the possibilities, and you know, what I could create with my career.



Omkari Williams 08:36

This is why representation is so important. You know, once some one person does something, then it's really possible for so many other people to see themselves in that role. But that first person, whether it's the first person entirely, or just the first person that you encounter, makes a huge difference. So I'm very grateful to that editor. And I really am excited about the idea that you'll basically be her for someone else down the road. Yeah, you know, and that that's very cool. So before we get to your books that you've written, I want to just ask you what it was like, because you've helped a lot of writers get their work polished and published. But now you are a published author. You've co written a series of books and are on the other side of that process. Tell me about what it was like shifting from editor to author.



Krishan Trotman 09:38

Well, it was so much fun. It was nerve wracking and extremely hard. I completely appreciate my authors 1000 times more than I did before. I just can't believe they do these things all the time. Like I mean, my books were you know, I wrote four books. So it was that was that a huge undertaking that nobody really does. But it was, you know, they were

short, 40,000 30,000 words and the average book that I'm working on is about 90,000 words, you know. So it really changed my perspective. And I really understand a few things about the writing process that I sort of had an idea about before. But now, I've just as an author, I really understand it fully. A lot of people think that you have to be born, like writers are somehow born or like, you just have this special talent.

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Krishan Trotman 10:32

And a lot of writers stop themselves from writing because they compare themselves with people that they think have these talents, these magical abilities that no one else can really get, unless they maybe study really hard or go to certain programs at the best schools. But a lot of the writing process is really done in the editing phase, with your editor and you having sort of a vision for you, what will you want, and your editor, if you have a really good editor is really going to go in with you as a partner to help you really get to execute what your vision is.

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Krishan Trotman 11:08

And I think that is what makes some of the best books and wonderful writers that we love, like the late Toni Morrison, she had a really long term relationship with her editor. She's edited some authors that were game changers and literature, including like Angela Davis. And it's all about surrounding yourself with the right help and the right squad of people that can help you produce something great. It's not about taking it on for yourself and feeling like you have to be this perfect creator. So I just think that that's an important message for a lot of writers to keep in mind that I don't think is discussed enough. We think about, you know, the classics. And you know, the James Baldwin's of the world is like, how did he become James Baldwin? He was born with this gift of communication, but I'm sure he had wonderful editors working with him to really hone his craft and to really get it right. So that's one thing I learned.

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Krishan Trotman 12:07

And I also learned how, you know, tough it is, you know, writing is a thing that you just do in solitude. It's not like you are like an artist where, you know, you can, I don't know, be anywhere and create art, I think writing takes a lot of inner work and private work. And I really admire my authors for dedicating the time to, you know, put these ideas on paper and to and develop their books. I mean, it's a, it was extremely painful to me, I thought of it as like, worse than labor, I felt like I was producing four children. To try to do this and have a full time job. It was it was fun, and I loved it. And but it was just like childbirth, where you really just have to go really deep inside inside of yourself, and really be on a

mission to produce this thing and to do it and try to get it right. And it's a lot of I think spiritual, emotional work also.



Omkari Williams 13:11

I really like what you say about the collaborative nature of it. Because I think that that's true for much art, regardless of the particular medium that we're talking about. And I think sometimes we do ourselves a disservice by thinking that we have to create this thing all by ourselves that there's not going to be any one there to really support us. And I think you're right about how important it is to have an editor that works with you. But also just to know that there is someone out there who will work with you, you are not doing it all by yourself. And I think that makes a huge difference. Because especially right now, when so much of life is very, very isolated. Having that community around you to support you and your creative work, whatever it might be, I think is exceptionally important.



Krishan Trotman 14:08

Yeah, and as a creator, you know what I mean about the emotional and spiritual aspect of it. There's going to be days where you look at your work, or you just wake up and you just hate the whole thing. Like this is terrible. Why am I doing this to myself? This is bad. This was a bad idea. I'm a bad writer. You know, I don't think any writer or any creator is just 100% confident the whole way through. But you have if you have people like an editor working with you who you can send them something and they can give you feedback and you can sort of see for yourself how this is developing. Or they are excited in the moments where you're doubtful.



Krishan Trotman 14:49

You know that is how things are produced when I decided to cross over from editor to author. I did not think that we were going to sell the this series. I am an editor. So I said to my agent when she said, "Why don't you create the proposal and we do this"? And I said, Well, first of all, I'm an I'm an editor, and I would never buy a four book series. I would never buy four books at once. There's no one who's going to do that. Even though I think it's a great idea. It's really taking a chance to publish four books at once. And it's a lot of work. I was very doubtful of this Queen's of the Resistance series. But she wasn't. And she told me, "Well just put it together, we're going to see". And we got a really great reaction when we sent out the proposal. People were interested, people wanted to do it in different ways. But I was completely wrong. So I think that's, you know, a reason as a creator, to make sure you're surrounding yourself with the right people, people that you trust, even

with your work.



Omkari Williams 15:47

That is a really good point. And aren't you happy to have been wrong?



Krishan Trotman 15:51

I am so happy to be wrong. I mean, I usually don't like to be wrong. But you know, in this case, I love being wrong. It really helped me out. It helped me produce a dream I had always dreamed of being an author. But when the occasion came for me to do that, I realized that, you know, I doubted myself, and I didn't think I was ready. But I was just so happy that I was wrong. I was ready, and I did it.



Omkari Williams 16:19

Well, I want to talk about Queens of the Resistance now. Your four books that you wrote. And this is a series of Pocket Books that you co-wrote with Brenda Jones. And they are profiles of four truly remarkable women. Maxine Waters, Nancy Pelosi, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Elizabeth Warren. And I mean, right there you have four women I would love to have dinner with.



Krishan Trotman 16:48

Yeah,



Omkari Williams 16:49

I mean, seriously, would love to have dinner with? So how did you decide to do this particular series. And what made you and Brenda Jones choose these four women in particular?



Krishan Trotman 17:03

Honestly, like we have such a large group of women that we wanted to write books on. So what we did is just, we sort of went with our gut. And we went with what we feel that the consumers, because I'm in publishing, so I think like a publisher, who we thought that the consumers would really be the most excited about, because there's just so many

wonderful women, especially in recent years that are entering Congress that we could have written these books about.



Krishan Trotman 17:33

So these are the ones that we were really excited about. And we thought that others would be really excited about. And we also wanted a range of women, we pitch the book as intergenerational. So the hope is that adult women can read this, but it's something, they're written in a way where you can also read them with other generations, your nieces or your daughters. And it could be books that you can share in that way. So we wanted the subjects to represent that so we have Nancy Pelosi, and AOC. And they are different age groups.



Krishan Trotman 18:08

And we also wanted to express diversity. So my experience in publishing is that not enough Black authors feel that they can write across platform in terms of they can write about white subjects and Black subjects, I meet a lot of white writers who submit biographies and books about Black people. So I just think is really it was really exciting to me that we are writing a series that represents really what we truly believe Congress should look like and what we're most excited about, which is diversity and inclusion. And we wanted to write a four book series that represented areas in politics that we think are most exciting. And we would like to empower people in which is, you know, telling stories as women from all different backgrounds, and I'm really happy that, you know, we decided to do that.



Omkari Williams 19:03

Yeah, it was one of the things that struck me when I first got the books was, oh, that there was this divergence in generations. You know, I mean, AOC is so young and Waters and Pelosi and Warren are old enough to be her grandparents. So, and yet, to me, there were themes that ran through all of the stories, that the generational difference didn't matter. And I'm wondering if you experienced themes in their stories?



Krishan Trotman 19:38

Yeah, I was also really excited about the their themes. I mean, for me, as a woman, it was most exciting to see that a lot of them well, especially Auntie Maxine, and Nancy Pelosi and Elizabeth Warren had women, specifically, push them into where they are today. And

I just think that that is such a message. And with Auntie Maxine it's just not really known how much of a feminist she she is, I think we talk a lot in relation to her as a powerful Black woman voice, who doesn't take any nonsense. But a lot of the things that she's saying when she's saying, "Reclaiming my time", you know, that all goes back to her views and her perspective, as a feminist. She really is living from that perspective where she's not going to be, you know, shut down, because she's a woman. And I just, I was really excited about that, because before writing the books, I saw her as a strong Black woman, but I just, you know, so that is sort of an inherent thing, or, you know, that's her personality, but it's really coming from the way she lives, her life and her philosophy as a feminist.



Omkari Williams 20:56

That's really interesting, because, I mean, I've been watching her for ages. And, you know, there's no way not to love her, at least for me. And that her way of moving through Congress, her way of engaging in the world, is very intentionally feminist. makes me so happy, because I think that, you know, I had also sort of thought, well, this is just who she is. And, you know, there's, she's just expressing herself, but that the intentionality behind it makes me happy, because it means that she is very deliberately expanding the space for women. That she's very deliberately saying, No, the borders that you've set are far too narrow. And we are going to move past those borders, whether you like it or not, and you can either come along, or you can just sit down. So I really appreciate having that perspective and understanding on her.



Krishan Trotman 21:56

What really inspired me because I come from a working class background. My mom also worked at a telephone company, which is one place that, you know, Auntie Maxine worked when, she was younger and a mother. The thing I love is that she really got started in her in her activism through working as a assistant Headstart teacher. So the Headstart program, you know, is for low income preschool children, because in certain communities, they're not getting the same level of education and resources. So the Headstart program was really great. But for Auntie Maxine's career, she was surrounded by women and Black women, and with this agenda to sort of push the community forward.



Krishan Trotman 22:41

And I don't really think that she really planned to get wrapped up into politics, it was through her passion for these women and children that they sort of guided her in that direction. And you know, there were there were women who told her that she should run

for public office and everything. So I just think these stories are really inspiring because these women, they all start from different places at different times in their lives. Same thing with Nancy Pelosi, she had raised all of her children, you know, she was about to be an empty nester where she could have just, I don't know, just enjoyed her her life and not worked at all. But, you know, another woman saw her for who she is, and saw that she could, she's a real change maker, and invited her and to take her seat.



Omkari Williams 22:54

And I would just like to point out that basically what all of these women have in common with you is that they all had someone in their corner, pushing them along and saying, "I see this in you", and you had the same thing with that editor. And again, it's why representation is so important, why you need people who see you who see the potential that you have, who see a possibility that you may not see for yourself. It's what lays the groundwork, I believe, for us to keep making progress.



Krishan Trotman 23:31

And, you know, I just think that that's something that these women have in common. And to know that they all started from different places, and they were all supported and uplifted the other women, I really enjoyed. And that's those are the things that I really take from these books. And I really want to adapt into my own life, the it's never too late to do something. It's always great to tell a woman when you see her, who you see her as. To lift her up and give her the boost that she needs, because you never know the possibilities of where that could take her.



Krishan Trotman 24:40

So yeah, that's very true. I hadn't, I hadn't really thought about that. But you so you're definitely right. I mean, I have even in creating the Queens of the Resistance series, we are mainly an all female team at the publishing house, with the marketing and publicity that I have two editors helping with this My co author, Breda Jones, Jonell Joshua did the illustrations because it's beautifully illustrated.



Omkari Williams 25:05

It really is.



Krishan Trotman 25:06

Yeah. So I was really proud of that this is a really mainly all female effort, we do have male allies, and the fact that it was three Black woman, Brenda and Jonell and I, who sort of formulated this idea and pushed this forward. And we wanted to publish them all at the same time, because the plan was to go to the DNC is sort of make this like, big statement from a publishing perspective. And I do actually have a publisher, who's really willing to do that to publish four books at the same time to put out a political statement basically, about where they stand on women, and women's rights and women's leadership. And I thought that this beehive that we created, was really beautiful and exciting. And it started with the women that we were inspired by. But it also has just transformed us all and inspired the entire way we went about publishing the books.



Omkari Williams 26:08

Yeah, especially after your main plan went a little south, thanks to COVID. This year, this has been a hard year for people publishing books, because so much of the whole process is about actually getting out into communities and talking to people. And this year, that just didn't happen. But here we are. And it's a beautiful book, and well series of books, and people should get it. Something that I talk about a lot with my coaching clients is the importance of not only reading books about anti racism, or about a Black person, biography, something like that, but also reading fiction, written by Black, brown and Indigenous people, because it's really important to have an understanding of what the lives of people look like. And that is something that I am very interested in how you in your work, are amplifying the voices of Black, brown and Indigenous people and also expanding the understanding in the publishing world of the need for this, if we're really going to achieve the goal of freedom that we are all looking for.



Krishan Trotman 27:27

Yeah, I primarily work as a as a nonfiction editor. But I do think you're making a strong point by emphasizing fiction. What I went into the gate at Hachette, with my agenda and my philosophy is that there just not enough Black authors publishing and a wide range of categories. So maybe there's a bigger selection and cookbooks, but not books, you know, that have to do with science or marketing. And business is really hard to see a female Black author on the business bestseller list. So including fiction, like, we just have to make sure that we are publishing in areas that are where there's just a lack of perspective and diversity.

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Krishan Trotman 28:19

So even if you're writing a biography, I think if you're reading a biography, read a biography about a Black person, I think out of COVID well not out of Covid but out of the George Floyd movement. I've always known this and people and Black people, the minority of Black people in book publishing, we always understand and it's always very frustrating for us, because Black people read across color lines. Like we read everything and everyone, but we there wasn't the same way in the other direction. So now hopefully, we're seeing we're going to see a shift of more whites reading Black fiction, but also just Black authors.

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Krishan Trotman 29:01

As you know, leading experts are thought leaders and the publishers responsibility is to make sure that we're providing that content. And we're providing these experts with the with the platform and publishing to share their stories and share their expertise and their thoughts. And not only to do it in matters of in discussions about race, but we can also talk we can also write and be experts and so many other areas, that I just feel there's just been a deficit. And it's really exciting now because I think a lot of experts and thinkers are excited about getting their thoughts out and sharing their stories and sharing their perspectives and books. So that has been one of the good things that has come out. I just feel that it's sort of an awakening, again, about the possibilities.

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Krishan Trotman 29:51

Just understanding that if you do want to write a book, it doesn't have to be a memoir about a struggle. You know, we have so much to give and so much to contribute. We have so much of our culture that is missing and our literature that we need, we have a big job in terms of updating and really getting our children and ourselves a new perspective and a new narrative on our history. So there's just a lot of work to do. And as an editor, I make it my responsibility to publish across platforms, my strongest interest is usually women's interest and cultural studies, as I put it, in, I just stick with that agenda. Those are the things I'm excited about. And I try to do it from different perspectives. So I will publish a celebrity memoir, but I also publish people like Malcolm Nance, who writes about Trump and is one of the one of the greatest thinkers in my opinion on Trump and has a really keen understanding about politics. And also people like Zerlina Maxwell, who are creating new narratives with her title, The End of White Politics. So, you know, we can do a lot as people in publishing and providing diversity and content.



Omkari Williams 31:10

I really appreciate that you reference both Malcolm Nance and Zerlina Maxwell, because they are such amazing thinkers. And their contribution to the conversation right now is so important. So I hope that people listening, go out and look for their books, because they are really important voices. And I also really agree with what you're saying about just reading across platforms, because it's true. I mean, if you grow up Black in the United States, you're going to read white authors, all the time in school, that's predominantly what you're going to read. But the reverse isn't true. And that's a gap in our educational system that needs to be filled.



Omkari Williams 31:52

And we, as adults, can make the choice to fill back out for ourselves. And I think it's really important because it, there's so much information and so much understanding that just comes from reading what other people's experiences are. So thank you for that, that I think that's enormously important. So to end, I would like you to tell us, what three things listeners can do to just advance this whole perspective in this conversation? And what three things would you ask them to do?



Krishan Trotman 32:28

Okay, so we published the Queen's of the Resistance books, because we wanted to put out positive narratives about politics. I think people think of politics and they think of darkness and you know, unfairness, but we wanted to publish books that celebrate democracy, and celebrate the changemakers who are doing the real work and the right work. So I would like to have say, you know, one, make sure you vote. So we can make sure that we are having the right people in place. And also to support movements like the Black Lives Matter movement, and let the activists in your communities or even not, even on your social media, your social network, and just say, let them know that you're thankful for what they're doing, because they are definitely on the front lines. I see politics and activism can work together based on these women like it, Maxine and AOC, they can actually work together, they can be good once we have the right people doing the work. So in addition to voting, make sure you're thanking those activists on the streets, fighting for Black Lives, fighting for women's rights, etc. And lastly, support our stories. Support the Queen's of the Resistance series by buying the four books for yourself, and you can give them to the women in your family and various generations to empower them.



Krishan Trotman 33:57

My advice is always to read at least one biography a year, it will really get you far in life and really empower you. And with every purchase that you make of books about women and people of color, you are allowing for the next person to come along and do it. Because in book publishing, that's how we look at what works, we look at what people want to read. So if you want, you know, the literature to change, if you want more diversity in narrative, the first thing to do is to purchase books, you can write them, and you can do other things, bookstagram or whatever. But the purchase means a lot because the numbers really help tell a story.



Omkari Williams 34:38

That is so true. I mean, when you're talking about what's going to get published, numbers are the first thing that a publisher is going to look at. And if the numbers aren't there, then the odds of specific book getting published go way down. So thank you for that suggestion and for all the suggestions and just thank you so much. For being on the podcast today, I've really enjoyed speaking with you. This has been great. Thank you so much Krishan.



Krishan Trotman 35:07

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.



Omkari Williams 35:11

And thank all of you for listening. We all know that Coronavirus has hit small businesses really hard, but independent bookstores have taken a particularly hard hit. So if you're able to buy Krishan's books, *Queens of the Resistance*, please order them from a local bookseller. Or if you can't buy them, get your library to buy a set and then read them from there. And you all know I'm big on the importance of story. Read about these women, read about other leaders and let yourself be inspired to take action and build your activist muscle.



Omkari Williams 35:45

I will be back with another episode of *Stepping Into Truth* very soon. Until then, remember that change starts with story. So keep sharing yours.