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# Issues Hindering the Development of Jamaica's Publishing Industry

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## **Abstract**

This article is an overview of the issues affecting the publishing industry in Jamaica. It will examine broad concepts such as the state of the economy, national literacy, and reading culture, as well as specific issues hindering the development of Jamaican publishing and literary culture. Through a wide range of sources from UNICEF analyses to newspaper interviews, I have assembled a market picture of a slowly developing industry in a slowly developing nation.

## **Key Words**

Jamaica, publishing, reading culture, literacy, authorship, self-publishing

## Introduction

Jamaica is a small Caribbean commonwealth of 2.8 million people, but its cultural influence throughout its diaspora and the world is strong. It is an Anglophone nation with Jamaican Patois as its vernacular. As a developing nation, it suffers from an unstable economy and is working on improving its formerly critical literacy, poverty, and murder rates. It achieved political independence in 1962 and 'saw the emergence of a handful of local book publishers' beginning in the 1980s (*Birth of the BIAJ*, 2017). Most of these publishers began as 'local marketing representatives for the British publishers who had dominated the Jamaican market for centuries,' but Jamaica eventually established about a dozen publishers of its own (*Birth of the BIAJ*, 2017). The Book Industry Association of Jamaica represents the country's publishers and printers, and works to nurture the growing literary scene through events like the Kingston Book Fair and lobbyist activity. 'The total Jamaican book market is estimated to be around £12m a year at retail prices' (Andrew, 2006). Other Pan-Caribbean organizations, such as the Caribbean Literature Action Group and the Caribbean Publishers Network are also concerned with furthering indigenous regional literature and publishing.

## Economy

Jamaica has maintained an 'unimpressive' rate of economic growth 'since the end of the first decade of Independence' (Andrew, 2006). As is the case in most Caribbean nations, Jamaica relies heavily on tourism, natural resource mining, and agricultural exports. Though poverty and unemployment rates 'have been in decline over the past two decades', the current global financial crisis has struck Jamaica's mining and agricultural industries and slowed its tourism (Andrew, 2006). Though it shows overall positive trends, Jamaica remains

'one of the slowest growing developing countries in the world' and is expected to lag behind global recovery from the economic crisis (World Bank 2017).

As such, Jamaica's market is populated by individuals working within a precarious economic situation. As of 2016, overall unemployment was at 13.7%, youth unemployment was at 29.2%, and women were twice as likely to be unemployed as men (World Bank, 2017).

About a third of total employment in Jamaica is self-employment, most of which is 'low income petty trade and related activities' (UNICEF, 2017). 'About 45 per cent of all Jamaican households are female headed,' and higher female unemployment rates and persistent income inequality ensures that those households are lower earning (Hill, 2011). As recently as 1991, '44.6%' of Jamaicans were living below the poverty line, though that number has steadily improved to the current rate of '19.6%' (World, Bank 2017). Jamaicans, on average, do not have a plethora of disposable income to spend on luxury items like books.

Jamaica's weak economy has also hamstrung those attempting to establish small independent presses. 'Strong demand for local currency loans and tight Jamaican dollar liquidity' has resulted in an average interest rate of 24.52% on small business loans (*Interest Rates*, 2014). Ian Randle spoke about establishing his publishing house in the 1970s, where he had to 'take out loans at 65 per cent interest and if [he] exceeded [his] overdraft, [he] had to pay back 100 per cent on the excess' (Ellington, 2013). These startling interest rates mean that anyone wishing to establish a small press will most likely need to have reserves of personal wealth, and those individuals are the minority. The instability of the Jamaican Dollar is also reflected in the sales practices of its publishers: Jamaican publishers often

price their books in US Dollars on their websites, even though textbooks sales are not aimed at an international market.

### **Literacy and Reading Culture**

Literacy has been a critical issue for Jamaicans and Jamaican readership for decades. Adult literacy is estimated to be about 88.5% as of 2015. Literacy is lowest among those 65 years and older, at 68.02% literate, and highest amongst those between 15 and 24 years, at 96.46%. Women have significantly higher rates of literacy than men, with up to 12% difference among some age groups (UNESCO, 2016).

Jamaican literacy is 'among the lowest of other Anglophone Caribbean countries,' but it is on a clear upward trend (UNICEF, 2017). The Jamaican Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL) was 'established in 1974,' after UNESCO surveys concluded that '40-50% of persons 15 years and over were unable to read' (Ward ,2017). JAMAL was established to 'eradicate illiteracy in Jamaica [... ] improve the literacy skills of the population,' and assist with integration into further education and vocational training (Ward, 2017). In 2008, with great success in improving the literacy rate achieved, JAMAL transitioned into the Jamaican Foundation for Lifelong Learning (JFLL) which now focuses on 'non-formal, adult, basic, and continuing education and as a facilitator for lifelong learning to Jamaicans who lack secondary level education and certification' (JFLL, 2016). The JFLL also focuses its efforts on the 45% of the population that live in 'deep rural communities to market education as the main gateway to success' (JFLL, 2016).

Since literacy is no longer critically low, most literacy efforts are focused on schoolchildren. Though access to education is high, 'educational achievement is relatively low,' particularly

among poor children (UNICEF, 2017). Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teacher training, and lack of resources means that 'a significant number of students' progress through grades without achieving appropriate reading levels (Campbell, 2014). Read Across Jamaica Day, started in 2005, is a school day celebrating the fun of reading 'to promote literacy' (*Read Across Jamaica*, 2013). The USAID Education Strategy is also underway in Jamaica, a programme which 'refocuses basic education' with the aim of achieving 100 per cent literacy and better reading levels (*Read Across Jamaica*, 2013).

Despite improvements in child and adult literacy, Jamaica still lacks a strong reading culture. Poverty is an obvious limiting factor in the development of readership. Access to books can be difficult: there are only 'two major bookshops' in Jamaica, and some towns and schools lack libraries entirely (Wright, 2015). Non-profits such as 'Reading Owls' are currently working to improve access to books with international book donations for rural school libraries (Ballantyne, 2016).

There are also several sociocultural issues that hinder reading culture. Jamaica has pervasive, archaic perceptions of masculinity that shape views about how boys should behave, meaning 'boys are usually not encouraged to read' (Campbell, 2014). The divide between standard English and Patois, where most Jamaicans speak Patois and use English only in classrooms, means that written and spoken English can be 'more challenging' (Campbell, 2014).

### **Textbook Publishing**

Jamaican children are required to attend school between the ages of 6 and 11, after which attendance becomes voluntary (UNESCO, 2016). As of 2009, Jamaica was determined to

have achieved universal primary education 'with net enrolment over 90% and gross enrolment approximately 100%' (UNICEF, 2017). 94.9% of Jamaican students complete the last grade of primary school, and 90.7% continue to secondary education (UNESCO, 2016).

'The Jamaican Ministry of Education publishes its own materials' for some subjects at primary-school and lower-secondary level and 'distributes them free of charge' (Andrew, 2006). The Ministry also selects, purchases, and distributes textbooks for the remaining subjects taught in schools. This scheme aims to 'assist in raising literacy levels and to help parents with the cost of their children's education' (Patterson, 2011). The Ministry has spent about \$800 million Jamaican dollars (about £4.9m) to secure textbooks for the 2016/2017 academic year (Patterson, 2016). 'Schoolbooks represent about 80 per cent of sales' for Jamaican booksellers (Andrew, 2006). Even outside the governmental textbook scheme, there remains a good market for better quality textbooks, supplementary texts, and revision materials.

Jamaican textbook sales are a point of contention in the publishing market. UK produced textbooks have 'dominated Ministry orders' in the past despite the strong presence of Jamaican textbook publishers (Batson-Savage, 2012). Carlong Publishers, Longman Caribbean, Macmillan Caribbean, Oxford University Press, and Hodder Education (which took over Longman) have historically dominated Jamaica textbook sales. When the textbook rental scheme was introduced, it was 'funded by a loan from the British Government [and] only British books were eligible' for the scheme, totally excluding local publishers (*Birth of the BIAJ*, 2017). The initial scheme also bypassed Jamaican booksellers: 'British Crown agents [ ... ] shipped the books directly' to the Jamaican government (*Birth of the BIAJ*,

2017). Though protests from Jamaican publishers, printers, and booksellers eventually opened the scheme to local companies, Caribbean publishers only hold about 25% share of Ministry selections (Andrew, 2006). 'One of the major criticisms of the [Ministry of Education] has been that the majority of the nearly \$1 billion spent on textbooks [ ... ] goes to overseas publishers' (Batson-Savage, 2012).

The Ministry's preference for foreign-published textbooks is devastating for Jamaican publishers. It is deeply ironic that every Ministry-approved textbook for Jamaican history is published by a foreign company. For these publishers, Jamaica is not even an important market. Only Hodder Education has an office in Jamaica itself, every other major publisher has only a contact person within the country. International publishers tend to treat the Caribbean as a region, rather than individual countries, and try to 'maintain a Pan-Caribbean pricing policy,' for which they have been criticized (Andrew, 2006). The pervasiveness of foreign publishing can be subtle too: Shirley Carby, founding member of the Book Industry of Jamaica (founded to help Jamaican publishers fight the international ones) now heads a publisher that provides 'marketing and distribution services' for Pearson Education (Carlong, 2017).

### **Issues for Jamaican Authors**

As a so-called *island paradise*, Jamaica has acted as a writing refuge for a handful of famous writers, 'such as Ian Fleming, Peter Abrahams, Alex Haley, and Martin Luther King Jr' ("Is Exile Really" 2015). Most famously, Ian Fleming wrote all 14 of his James Bond novels at his villa near Ocho Rios. Today, one can fly into Jamaica's Ian Fleming International Airport and,

for 'between \$5,8000 and \$9,000 USD per room per night,' one can stay at his villa turned hotel (The Fleming Villa, 2017). Jamaicans love to point to the cache of writers that chose to make Jamaica their writer's refuge as examples of the country's contribution to literature, but these writers were all non-Jamaican, already professionally established, and did not publish in Jamaica.

For Jamaica's homegrown writers, a much different set of challenges awaits. 'The small size of the artistic community, minute literary fraternity, and the few publishers, literary agents, book designers... and paid speaking engagements can be claustrophobic,' but at the heart of all these issues is an unfixable problem: it's just a very small country (*Is Exile Really*, 2015).

As previously discussed, Jamaica is pushing back against low literacy and attempting to cultivate a reading public. Strides are being made, but even if Jamaica managed to establish a strong reading culture, the publishers would still be operating within a maximum market of approximately 1.95m adults aged 15+ (Population Review, 2016). To combat this, Caribbean writers and publishers have begun to identify with other countries in the Greater Antilles to give themselves more influence as a united region. Several literary prizes, including three distributed at the Bocas Literary Festival in Trinidad and Tobago, are for Caribbean writers instead of nation-specific.

Because of the relative strength of textbook publishing in Jamaica, those writing nonfiction or academic texts may occasionally remain and publish locally, but novelists cannot achieve any measure of success while remaining in the country and pursuing traditional publishing routes. Jamaica is gripped in a self-perpetuating cycle wherein the literate public do not purchase or read fiction so the publishers do not publish it. Ian Randle, founder of one of



Jamaica's most successful independent publishers, cited giving a voice to 'the region's writers and academicians' as one of his motivating factors for founding his own press, but even he refuses to publish fiction of any kind (Ellington, 2013). Indeed, 'the majority of publishers, approximately 95 per cent, are publishers of academic material' (Roache, 2010). Jamaican authors are therefore left with two options: self-publish or leave.

The self-publishing route has been surprisingly popular to date with Jamaican authors. *The Daily Gleaner*, Jamaica's largest newspaper, runs a monthly column entitled 'Pointers to Publishing' with self-publishing tips. It is written by a 'self-publishing consultant' of questionable repute, but it nevertheless reveals a national interest. Many authors have gone the conventional self-publishing route and simply released ebooks to Amazon, but a few have formed their own small publishing companies in response. In 2012, Lloyd Laing and Jovan Alston created eBooks Caribbean, a fully online publisher offering 'formatting, conversion and digitising services' in response to market crowding and general lack of other opportunities (Brooks, 2012). Kellie Magnus and Tanya Batson-Savage began publishing careers by self-publishing Jamaican children's books and continuing to develop their own independent publishing houses (Magnus, 2012; Roache, 2010). Both women were frustrated by the absence of Jamaican children's books, especially in a country with such a rich culture of folktales. Magnus was advised that a 3,000 print run of a children's book would take three years to sell out in Jamaica, she instead decided to print 5,000 of her book and it sold out in six months (Magnus, 2012). Magnus cites self-publishing as a Caribbean writer's 'only shot at getting published', but warns of the cost, the isolation, and the lack of access to industry expertise (Magnus, 2012). Magnus freely admits that she 'knew nothing about children's books' when she undertook her first book, but she has had remarkable success.

Batson-Savage, whose career took a similar path, also commented on the issue of author royalties in such a small market: 'If you are selling 50 million copies, five per cent is good. But if you are selling 1,000 copies, not so good... If you self-publish, the profits are yours' (Roache, 2010). It makes sense: publishers cannot offer reasonable advances on books that will have such small print runs and authors cannot live off a 5-10% royalty from runs this small. In this way, self-publishing seems to make the most sense for children's and fiction publishing in Jamaica.

However, because nearly all Jamaican writers are relegated to the self-publishing arena and self-publishing obviously lacks gatekeepers, the range of quality in Jamaican fiction is uncommonly wide. Marlon James remarked in an interview that 'Jamaica's book industry is generally seen as a hobby' (Wright, 2015). Many self-published writers (and writers-turned-publishers) cited lack of opportunity for first time writers as a major limiting factor. Though Jamaican writers are particularly crippled by this since established houses in Jamaica do not publish fiction, one must admit that editorial gatekeeping does serve a quality-control function on the wider market. Magnus and Batson-Savage are still publishing, but eBooks Caribbean is already defunct, although hardly surprising coming from a company excited to publish authors who 'had difficulty getting their work published elsewhere' (Brooks, 2012). Self-publishing children's authors seem to have the advantage in Jamaica: Jamaicans are happy to purchase books that reflect their culture for their children, but no one seems to know what the small and fickle adult reader market wants to buy. Additionally, these children's books may find success with a Jamaican readership, but they are notably lower in illustration quality than foreign-published children's books. With self-publishers isolated from industry knowledge like market research, higher quality design skills, and international

rights licensing, Jamaican books are doomed to remain within the tiny Jamaican market and never receive attention outside of the Caribbean.

Camille Lizarribar said of the African Writers Series: 'African authors will often turn to foreign publishers because of a general mistrust in local publishing, and to be assured of a higher quality product. Therefore, both writers and books are geared primarily towards an outside audience' (Huggan, 2001, 51). This sentiment mirrors the current state of native-author and native-publisher relations in Jamaica. Since the clear majority of Jamaican fiction writing is self-published, and therefore lacking in quality gatekeeping, 'serious' writers feel they must go to 'real' foreign publishers for proper recognition. Since the Jamaican market is unable to sustain Jamaican writing, the cultural value of Jamaican writing is decided in foreign arenas. "Stories [ ... ] become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and existence of their own history," but Jamaican writers must return to the colonisers (or America) to have their voices heard (Said, 1998, xii).

Marlon James is currently Jamaica's most famous literary export, as the first Jamaican to be awarded the Man Booker Prize for his novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. This novel is Jamaican to its core, following the repercussions of an attempted assassination of Bob Marley in Kingston in 1976, written in a blend of English and Patois, and laying bare the violence that did – and still does – plague the island. Two of the three major covers use the green, black, and yellow colours of the Jamaican flag and the 2014 cover features the doctor bird, a species of swallow tail hummingbird that only lives in Jamaica. This cover is particularly poignant: the doctor bird may not be a commonly known symbol for the country, but it is an instantly recognizable silhouette for any Jamaican. However, for all its

deeply felt roots, James has said 'in several interviews [that] he had to leave Jamaica to be able to write' (*Is Exile Really*, 2015). In Jamaican newspapers, these interviews cite numerous issues, such as 'the limited number of outlets for fiction, the absence of prizes, lack of financial awards and an almost "not-existent" reading public,' but in foreign interviews, the real driving force behind his emigration becomes clear: Marlon James is gay (*Is Exile Really*, 2015).

Homophobic violence runs rampant in Jamaica, where there have been numerous publicized attacks and murders of gay men. Murder rates in Jamaica are already uncomfortably high, with about '45 slayings per 100,000 people' annually, giving it the 'sixth-worst homicide rate' in the world (*Jamaica Homicides*, 2016). In 2006, *Time* conferred Jamaica the ugly title of 'the most homophobic place on earth' (Padgett, 2006). The article cited the influences of homophobic dance hall lyrics, the aggressively conservative church, and apathy from the government and police toward hate crimes. In the decade since its writing, Jamaica has made no real changes, and homosexuality 'remains a criminal offence' (Oppenheim). Marlon James avoided direct physical violence during his time in Jamaica, but was subject to an 'exorcism carried out by the "ex-gay" movement' (Oppenheim, 2016). Jamaican newspapers treat James's homosexuality as a footnote and waffle about market issues and the other, wealthy writers mentioned earlier who chose to come to Jamaica to write. The threat of homosexual violence is already a gravely arresting factor when it comes to developing a healthy arts scene, but James explained that the fear of homosexuality has also widened the gender divide in Jamaica causing an imbalance in academia, especially in literature, as it is seen to be inherently feminine (Wright, 2015). An interest in reading and

writing might label young men, depending on the neighbourhood, as too girly and therefore 'battyboys'.

Though it remains a national treasure, Ian Fleming's lavish writer's retreat is hardly an accurate reflection of Jamaican writing. It is instead a direct example of a practice that has existed for generations, where wealthy, white, foreign men take their riches and establish remote homesteads amongst the beach and jungle. These men (and indeed, white tourists in general) remain in areas of painstakingly cultivated beauty, do not mix with the general public, and reinforce the national stereotype of 'beach, mountains, and friendly Rasta natives.' It is also worth noting that Peter Abrahams, one of the aforementioned list of Jamaica's beloved expatriate writers, was murdered in his home in Jamaica two months ago (*Journalist Peter Abrahams*, 2017). Jamaican writers face a myriad of industry obstacles before and after publication, but one must not forget that living in Jamaica has a higher implicit threat to personal safety.

## Conclusion

Jamaica's economy and poverty rates need to stabilize before non-essential industries like publishing can really thrive and, as such, Jamaica is decades away from being able to support a strong national publishing industry. Though Jamaica shows overall positive development and appears to be improving, albeit slowly, in all relevant areas, issues like its non-existent reading culture will be tricky to address. Efforts by the Book Industry Association and the various literary schemes are undoubtedly affecting positive change in Jamaican reading, but until Jamaica makes big changes in book accessibility, reading culture, and average individual income, it is unlikely to be able to support traditional fiction

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publishing soon. Jamaica is small enough that a powerful and diverse national publishing market may never be a viable goal, but with continued growth it could absolutely support a stronger book market than currently exists in the country.

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