

# Publishing in the Caribbean

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## An Interview with Pamela Mordecai

by Holger G. Ehling

*Pamela Mordecai, who (as selections in the present issue of Matatu indicate) is one of Jamaica's foremost poets, is director of Sandberry Press Publishers, based in Kingston. This interview was conducted at the International Frankfurt Book Fair, on 9 October 1993.*

**HOLGER G. EHLING:** *Publishing in Jamaica, publishing in the Caribbean in general, must be quite a difficult task: the economic situation is poor, and efforts at trading any goods are hampered by the fact that the islands only provide small and isolated markets. How can one make ends meet as a publisher?*

**PAMELA MORDECAI:** In some cases it's true that publishers are not able to make ends meet. I think that people have to network and be in touch with each other. There are one or two people who have very good networking systems throughout the region and the immediate market is obviously the island or the country in which the individual book is published. The next market is the regional market, then there is the international market. And there is this wonderful thing that one thinks about when one comes to the Frankfurt Book Fair: "Rights."

I think first of all it's how to access the national markets, but the national markets are very small for all kinds of reasons, including the fact that books are now expensive and not many people have extra disposable income. To reach a regional market, one must discover an efficient distributor. This is not the easiest thing – we have now resumed attempting to distribute our books for ourselves. The distribution equation is sometimes a little bit of a bumpy ride.

I think the international markets are the difficult ones. I have decided that the sensible thing to do is make co-publishing arrangements. We are about to complete our first co-publishing arrangement with an Australian publishing house, and this is very important, because about 250 books in the next run we will do, of the next poet we publish, will go to Australia. This is an increase of

250, because virtually no books go to Australia now, and very few Caribbean books actually reach Australia – a problem that the Australians have spoken about and which I am trying to assist in, not only in respect to our own books, but in respect to other books from the Caribbean as well.

Rights are certainly very important, and I think the more Caribbean publishers become aware that there is money, that there are resources to be tapped through rights agents, the more easy their task is going to become. One or two of the publishers are already doing that, those who are more experienced – in the sense of longer-lived publishers like Mike Henry from Kingston Publishers or Ian Randall from Ian Randall Publications.

*Is there any systematic approach to getting this kind of information across to publishers; are there seminars or workshops on rights issues for publishers in the Caribbean?*

There aren't any seminars that I am aware of. I know a little bit about this, because my husband chaired a copyright task force, and we just signed the documents accessing the copyright conventions that we have joined recently. So, our most recent interest has been in copyright, our most recent seminars have been with respect to copyright. People are excited about that. The further matter of selling rights has not had that kind of exposure. There haven't been workshops, there haven't been conferences. In fact, I got to know about it because I am a writer as well and have been concerned with people negotiating with me about the rights to my own work. This is why individual publishers become very important in this context, because there are very few experienced people in the Caribbean, and they have not been able to share their experiences as it should have been done. I would like to convince our book-industry association to organize workshops on this matter; if I don't succeed, I will do it on my own.

*What kind of books from the Caribbean can be sold into the European and American markets?*

Well, the first thing I have to mention is the cooking book. I have had a lot of interest in the two cooking books I had at the stand during the Book Fair. Apart from that I have to confess that I have talked to people about the Caribbean Poetry Series, which is our own series, with some success. The children's books I have reserved for the last, because I think they are real possibilities. For those I have talked to several people, made some contacts, and I hope to make some more contacts. I think I am going to be able to sell some rights to children's books here at the Book Fair, and if I don't do it myself, my colleagues will sell some. What I think local publishers have to do, though, is to look at what the international market is interested in, and that seems to be books, children's books