

Multicultural Children's Publishing:

A FAMILY AFFAIR By Kathryn Mora

Beginning in the mid-1970s, independent multicultural children's publishers opened the door to a diverse world long neglected by the mainstream presses. The oldest of these still in existence, Children's Book Press, produced handsomely illustrated bilingual editions of folktales from Asia, Latin America, and indigenous cultures around the world. (The

JUST US BOOKS

Based in East Orange, New Jersey, Just Us Books was founded by Wade Hudson and Cheryl Willis Hudson in 1988 to focus on books about Black experiences, history, and culture and their universal connections.

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In the late seventies, a decade before Wade and Cheryl started their company, they were on a mission to find quality books reflecting the African-American culture for Katura, their young daughter.

press has since expanded to publish contemporary picture book stories and poetry collections.) Other presses soon followed. Among them were Just Us Books, Lee & Low Books, and Cinco Puntos Press. These three award-winning children's publishers too found their niche in a challenging industry and, as a sign of their success, have now been in business long enough to incorporate a second generation.



Cheryl and Wade Hudson with their children, Katura and Stephan

The founders of these three presses and their children share their experiences.

who helps you to believe in yourself, it opens up a window of discovery and gives you the freedom of having your dream, intellectually. Books can do that," says Cheryl Hudson, vice president and editorial director.

Wade and Cheryl first met in Cambridge in 1971. They knew they were kindred spirits, both searching for meaning in life and the right causes to take on. Wade had already written and produced several plays, and Cheryl had developed some book ideas.

In the late seventies, a decade before Wade and Cheryl started their company, they were on a mission to find quality books reflecting the African-American culture for Katura, their young daughter. Even bookstores in their predominantly Black neighborhood did not carry many Black children's titles and few of quality. Not easily discouraged, Cheryl began creating African-American characters that twisted and turned in the shape of letters, forming Katura's name, and

hung them on her bedroom door. By the time Stephan was born in 1982, Wade and Cheryl had fashioned several more characters, and the *AFRO-BETS@ ABC Book* was created.

Determined to bring quality Black-interest books not only to their children but to all children as well, they approached mainstream publishers. They were rejected over and over. Some publishers liked their ideas but told them there was no interest in African-American books. Eventually, they self-published *AFRO-BETS@ ABC Book* and it won the Multicultural Publishers Exchange Book Award of Excellence. That same year they started Just Us Books.

While growing up in somewhat different settings, Cheryl and Wade both flourished because of the love and support received from their family and community. Wade grew up in Mansfield, Louisiana, a tiny town where neighbors were considered aunts and uncles. "If they saw me doing something wrong or right, they'd let me know," says Wade.

The second of eight children, Wade lived in a segregated community in the 1940s. He lived in poverty but didn't know it. His memories are of playing ball and spending time with his brothers and sisters.

"As a kid I used to write positive stories and poems. I knew there was so much more to us than what we'd been told in the books selected by the all-white school board," says Wade. "I saw our wonderful talents and gifts and just started writing about them. My community instilled in me that I'm blessed to be a blessing to others. Whatever I've achieved it's not the individual catalyst, but part of a group effort. When I left to go to college, I was going for my community of 40 people. A lot of weight on my shoulders, but I had a lot of encouragement and support. Most of the people hadn't achieved much, but to see someone among them succeed was important. You'd think there'd be jealousy, but there wasn't. We need to have a strong sense of community for developing our inner self."

Cheryl is a native of Portsmouth, Virginia, her mother a teacher of French and English for 35 years and her father a highly educated businessman. She spent her early life in a segregated school system. Hayes, her older brother, an internist specializing in rheumatology, was a mentor until his death in 1999.

After graduating from Oberlin College, Cheryl worked as a textbook designer for Houghton Mifflin, Macmillan, and other publishers. She describes what she learned: "Try very hard to get it right for kids. Try to be accountable to the audience when writing books for kids, it's important to like and respect them, to have the right illustrations and text."

Since starting Just Us Books, the Hudsons have published 72 titles, ranging from pre-kindergarten picture books to middle reader chapter books. Eight new titles are planned for fall 2004. Thirty-five to 40 percent of the new book titles are by first-time authors and illustrators. In addition, the Hudsons formed a special partnership with Scholastic, resulting in several top-selling books.

The publishers have received many honors, including their October 2003 induction into the International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent. Past inductees include writer Maya Angelou and novelist Walter Mosley.

They also received the 1998 New Jersey Small Business Development Centers Small Business Success Award and the 1997 *Income Opportunities Magazine* Small Business Pioneer of the Year Award. Several books have been given prestigious industry honors, including *Bright Eyes, Brown Skin* (Publishers Marketing Association's Ben Franklin Award) and *In Praise of Our Fathers and Our Mothers* (Multicultural Council Seal of Approval, *Horn Book* Featured Review, and "CCBC Choices" from the Cooperative Children's Book Center).

In addition to selling their books to libraries, they quickly learned to explore nontraditional outlets. "When we first started our company we recognized we couldn't depend on bookstore sales, either big stores or independent ones. We reached out to churches and organizations in the community, finding ways to get books to people who don't go to bookstores," says Wade. "Most people don't go to bookstores. That's why Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble on the Internet are successful." The Hudsons also put their books in discount stores such as K-Mart. But it is becoming more difficult because these stores prefer dealing with major publishers like Scholastic, ordering 15-30 books at a time. Wade and Cheryl attend large teachers' conventions and educational association conferences, often making contacts with school systems there. Unlike major publishers, who attend the American Library Association and American Book Association conferences, the Hudsons instead go to 30-40 major book fairs and some smaller ones too.

Five full-time people are employed at Just Us Books, and an active internship program "employs" from 5 to 10 college students a year. They work with 4-6 regular art/design and editorial freelancers, contracting more as needed.

Second Generation

Wade and Cheryl's son, Stephan, works on several projects for Just Us Books, both collaborative and as a freelance designer. He graduates from Rowan University in December 2004 with a degree in graphic arts. Katura, a 1998 graduate of Rutgers University, is marketing manager/associate editor. "I officially became employed for Just Us Books in October 2002 and report to my father. Now I'm part of writing the marketing plan, not just editing it. As a freelancer I performed tasks, but now I identify manuscripts and give my opinion. I own the projects," says Katura. "But now I need an assistant. Have to check with my boss, Dad."

"But let's clear up one thing," she adds. "When your parents own a company, you're never really gone. You're writing for their web sites, reviewing manuscripts, and all this during Thanksgiving break."

At 13, Katura and a friend volunteered to file and answer phones during spring break, her first work experience. While attending high school she worked each day after school for a few hours performing duties such as filing, writing business letters, and editing. She remembers writing bios for 40 authors and illustrators, editing them down to a few lines for *In Praise of Our Fathers and Our Mothers*. After graduation from college Katura worked at several internships in order to get experience outside the family firm.

“They were involved with the company as children and if they didn’t want to come to a conference, we never forced them. We tried to let them know that the opportunity was there—it’s your company, too,” says Wade. “When Katura worked during summers while in high school, what we didn’t want was the head of the family dictating what they did. Katura ran track and Stephan was also involved in sports. We didn’t want to make them feel they were taking a back seat to the company, either. We tried to create balance.”

“It’s a joy to work with Katura and Stephan, and my brothers, Willie [director of sales operations] and Major [shipping manager] since 1991,” says Wade. “Our accountant told us, ‘If you want headaches, hire your family.’ Maybe there’s truth in that, but for us it’s good to travel to conferences with the family because they feel a part of it—a team effort.”

“Lot of times I went with them to conventions,” says Stephan, creator of the company’s web site and logo, as well as the illustrator of *Poetry from the Masters*, a collection that his father edited. (*Langston’s Legacy* was written by Katura with the original concept and design by Cheryl.) “Although, I was there, I just didn’t know how to handle it when I was young. People would say to me, ‘Oh, your parents are book publishers—rich’ and whatever. It got so that I just wouldn’t mention it because it wasn’t that way at all. They didn’t do it for profit, but more to bring quality Black-interest books to children.”

Stephan adds, “I always have been entrepreneurial, but it’s probably normal for me because I’ve been involved in business all my life, probably because of my parents. That’s what I grew up with. I had access when I was young to information. When I was in school and questions came up in class, I’d know the answers because we had a book about it.”



LEE & LOW BOOKS

Philip Lee, co-founder of Lee & Low Books, grew up in Hong Kong. His family moved to Pomona, California, when he was 13. He studied journalism and broadcasting at the University of California at Berkeley and worked in several small independent bookstores on weekends because he liked the atmosphere. After college he moved to New York and started his career in magazine

publishing, working on publications such as *Vanity Fair*, *Glamour*, and *GQ*. In 1989, while marketing manager at *GQ*, he met Thomas Low, who had retired two years earlier after selling the successful temporary personnel agency he had owned for 30 years.

“My wife was getting tired of my hanging around, so I took writing courses at New York University,” says Low. “I knew I wanted to start something new, but not sure what.”

The two men met for lunch. A few months later, Lee suggested they start a multicultural publishing company. Both men felt a partnership was like forming a marriage, and it

was important to get to know each other first. For the next year they took classes together at NYU, receiving certificates in publishing. In February 1991, they officially began the partnership of Lee & Low Books, housed in two rented offices in midtown Manhattan. Lee became the publisher and editor in chief and Low, president and CEO.

“Number one, be very concerned with quality. That’s one thing Philip and I discussed when we started. The number of multicultural books has increased and expanded widely. I’ve seen a dramatic change in the last 10 years. Our company fills a particular need in education,” says Low. “Most of our books are fiction, but now we’re publishing some nonfiction. I know myself growing up, we didn’t have stories we could relate to as Asian Americans. I grew up in a German and Italian neighborhood in Queens.”

After working at building the business for over a decade, they now have 10 full-time staff members and 150 titles in English and Spanish. The publishers have been presented with dozens of awards for their books and are responsible for launching the careers of 70 new authors and illustrators. They are proud to publish books that make a difference.

“We put together our first book list in 1993 and it’s still successful today,” says Low. Their first book, *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki, illustrated by Dom Lee, won the Parents’ Choice Award, Pick of the Lists by American Booksellers, and was in “CCBC Choices.” Other award winners include *Abuela’s Weave* by Omar S. Castaneda, illustrated by Enrique O. Sanchez, and *Crazy Horse’s Vision* by Joseph Bruchac, illustrated by S. D. Nelson.

“A small press like Lee & Low Books attempts to match the right illustrator with the story. They look for the right connection,” says Bruchac, author of several award-winning books, his latest, *Jim Thorpe’s Bright Path*, published by Lee & Low in May 2004. “Some illustrators create romance and stereotypes. They’re well-meaning, but have no connection with the culture, know nothing about it. Nelson made the illustrations realistic to the period. He felt a connection with my story.” Both men are of American Indian descent, Bruchac Abenaki and Nelson Lakota.

In 2000, Bebop Books, an imprint for the education market, was launched. In four years, it has published over 100 titles in English and Spanish that focus on multicultural themes for children learning how to read. New Voices Award, which gives cash awards and a publishing contract to first-time authors of color, also began in 2000. “It’s always been a challenge to find manuscripts from authors,” says Lee, father of an eight-year-old girl. “Creating a contest serves the dual purpose of bringing new manuscripts to our doorstep that are potentially right for Lee & Low Books, while diversifying the industry.”

“It’s not a cakewalk,” says Low. “I think this article shouldn’t say it’s a good business to get into—you have to make a commitment. I have to say that we worked for it. It’s a very difficult business—very competitive, dependent on the economy and budgets and consumer interest. Everybody’s budget plays into the business. For people to buy our books, I think it’s a privilege and one that we have earned because they are quality. We hung in there.”

“In the last decade, publishing to push a profit is even

greater in the retail end. There are fewer independent book stores and it's harder to find an audience for multicultural books. If they don't sell quickly, they get returned to the publishers," says Lee. "In the last ten years the school and library market has become more important to us than ever before. We've been fortunate that we're able to publish the multicultural books that we want. Clearly institutions are a more important market now."

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person, family happiness, what you've done with your life," says Low. "It doesn't just involve material things. You have to be proud of what you've accomplished, being up-front with people, providing opportunities and treating them fairly. I feel we've done some good."



The second generation: Jason (left) and Craig Low

Second Generation

Late in 1996, Lee wanted to relocate to Seattle.

Uncertain if the company could survive two owners on opposite coasts, Low spoke to his son Craig. His eldest son, Jason, had already built a web site for the company.

"We'd never discussed this idea before," says Craig, then working as a financial consultant for a large pension firm.

"But I kept abreast of how the company was growing and read all the new books. At that point in my life professionally, I was looking for a new challenge."

Craig looked to his older brother for advice. "I told him that Lee & Low is a worthy cause and you might as well work someplace you enjoy. My advice that day prompted him to make the move," says Jason.

Both sons began working full time for Lee & Low Books in January 1997, Craig as vice president of sales and Jason as vice president of marketing. "I never had any intention of going into a family business," says Jason, who earned his BFA in illustration at Parsons School of Design. "There's a lot of satisfaction here. It's good having something tangible like books. Every season I feel we have a shot at success selling the particular books. And it's the recognition we receive. Our books stand up to the large publishers, evidence that we stuck to our mission, 'All kids can enjoy the books and they're long-lasting.' Very few books go out of print. It's our company. We can make those kinds of decisions, to publish books that we feel a personal attachment toward. We read

books, and if we're moved, others will be too."

Jason is now married with two sons. He is thinking of the future. "The company will keep going. Craig and I talk about that when we get together with our kids. We know that time flies. When our boys grow up, what if they want to go into the business? We are building something that is generational. It wasn't designed to be passed along, originally, but it worked out that way."

Although semi-retired, Thomas still enjoys coming in a

few days a week. Lee is still involved in editorial and handles major West Coast accounts. Jason and Craig handle the marketing, publicity, and key accounts on the East Coast.

"For all intent's and purposes, we have been running the company for the past three or four years. We still consult with Tom on major decisions, but on a day-to-day basis we, along with our key managers, keep the company going," says Craig, also married with two sons. "I feel very confident that we can lead the company into the future. We have an excellent staff, which is critical to accomplishing the goals we set forth. Tom has shown me how critical it is to be able to make definitive decisions without looking back. Sometimes you may be wrong, but you chalk those instances up as learning experiences. I've witnessed so many people paralyzed by indecision."

Craig adds, "If we can't sell more books, then we cannot increase salaries, provide more benefits, create new positions for our staff, invest in exciting new projects, and pay for larger office space. Everything comes back to sales."

Describing the future for Lee & Low, Jason states that he always likes what his dad came up with after he sold the agency in 1987. "Tom said his next company would be a utopia company. Everyone would be compensated well, employee retention high, a lot of effort into the employees—keep everyone happy and diverse. It would be Tom's management style, not looking over everyone's shoulder, having dreams and goals to grow the company to a healthy size, be challenged, and learn something new every day.

"So far it's working," adds Jason.



Lee and Bobby Byrd at Bobby's 60th birthday party

CINCO PUNTOS PRESS

In 1985 writers Bobby Byrd and Lee Merrill Byrd opened Cinco Puntos Press, named after Five Points, a well-known intersection in El Paso, Texas. They specialize in fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and children's bilingual books from the American

Southwest, U.S./Mexico border region, and Mexico. In 1999, Cinco Puntos Press was presented with the prestigious

American Book Award for Excellence in Publishing by the Before Columbus Foundation and inducted into the Latino Hall of Fame.

“The press got started because we were so dispirited writing in our 9 to 5 jobs,” says Bobby, co-publisher. “We got into publishing so we’d have more time for writing. Although it hasn’t always worked out, publishing has enriched our intellectual and imaginative lives. We’ve done things we hadn’t ever done before. Living and publishing here, we’ve become more part of Texas and more involved in political issues.”

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Lee and Bobby also refer to their publishing company as “the house that *La Llorona* built.” *La Llorona*, or the Weeping Woman, is the Spanish account of the ghost of Medea; it is said to be the best-known Hispanic folk tale in the Southwest. In 1987 international storyteller Joe Hayes from Santa Fe, New Mexico, suggested they publish his version of the *La Llorona* tale for children. The bilingual children’s classic is in its sixth printing and has sold over 90,000 copies, grossing up to \$40,000 a year. It was their first children’s book. Since then, Cinco Puntos Press has published over two dozen children’s books by Hayes.



Cinco Puntos authors Luis Alberto Urrea (left) and Benjamin Alire Sáenz, nicknamed “Los Vatos”

“Joe Hayes is one of the best Anglo bilingual storytellers in America,” says Joseph Bruchac. “He has great sympathy and grace in his approach in telling the stories of the Southwest cultures.”

Bobby and Lee met at a writer’s conference in Aspen, Colorado, almost four decades ago, married the next year, and have lived in the Southwest since the late sixties. Bobby, born in Memphis, Tennessee, is author of nine books of

poetry, most recently *The Price of Doing Business in Mexico*. He received a fellowship in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, a D. H. Lawrence Fellowship, and an International Residency Fellowship to live in Mexico.

Lee, a native of New Jersey, studied education but stayed home with their three young children and waited on tables in-between. She wrote the award-winning collection of short stories *My Sister Disappears*, published by Southern Methodist University Press in 1993. Her second book, *The Treasure on Gold Street (El Tesoro En La Calle Oro)*, illustrated by Antonio

Castro L., was published in 2003 by Cinco Puntos Press and won the Skipping Stones Honor Award. It is about a real person named Isabel who is an important part of Lee and her family’s bilingual and bicultural neighborhood in central El Paso. “This book came out of publishing kid’s books, which we didn’t know anything about at first. I didn’t even plan this book; it’s just thinking about the neighbors. We also have an interest in young adult writers, especially the Latino and Chicano writers.” To date, Cinco Puntos Press has 75 book titles, 60 percent of those children’s books. They expect to have eight new titles by fall. They have published several other award-winning books, including *Grandma Fina and Her Wonderful Umbrellas/La Abuelita Fina y sus sombrillas maravillosas* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, illustrated by Gerónimo García.

“Two of our first three books established us as a publisher of fine literature in our area, such as *The Weeping Woman*,” says Bobby. “When we started doing bilingual books with our distributor, Consortium, in 1995, three out of four were adult. Now three out of four books are children’s books. Our focus is now on young adult books for Latinos becoming adults. The children’s books keep us alive and bring in more money.”

“Our bread and butter are bilingual books,” says Lee, co-publisher. “The kids’ books are steady sellers. We mostly do kids’ and young adult books. However, we don’t limit ourselves. We might get some odd mainstream in, if we like it.”

Lee said her partnership with Bobby is key to their success. “When one of us gets discouraged, the other keeps it moving—and my faith in God helps. But after 9/11, everyone was discouraged because the economy was so bad. It seemed to hit all the publishers. It’s been good to have our distributor Consortium.” They do not limit their business to bookstores. Direct sales to the educational markets have become a strong part of their press.

“I’m afraid if we’d known what it entailed, we probably never would have done it,” says Lee. “Fortunately we were not the only people who had to figure out how to make a living with a publishing company. It was a relief to have a real community of publishers to work with and talk back and forth and give each other the strength to continue.”

In 2001 the press relocated to downtown El Paso with

retail space for teachers to buy books. In addition, Bobby and Lee present publishing workshops for children in the El Paso School District. “Many of our books are based on the local area, the underserved and poor areas,” says Bobby. “We provide good role models for them. Also, it’s a moneymaker for us and each child receives a book.”

Second Generation

Their second child, John William Byrd, became vice president of shipping during high school, passing the job and title to his brother Andrew Merrill Byrd after leaving for college in 1992. Their older sister Susannah Mississippi Byrd worked periodically in administration until 1989, when she left for Emory College in Atlanta. Today Andrew lives in San Antonio, is married with two children, and works as a computer programmer for an insurance company that serves the military.

After graduating from college in 1993, Susannah met her future husband, Edward Holland, on the Appalachian Trail. Little did they know they would work for Cinco Puntos Press for several years, own the house next door to her parents, and run the press out of both houses. Susannah became director of marketing and Edward, director of business. “I hadn’t planned to move back to El Paso, but when I found out we were pregnant I wanted to be close to my family,” says Susannah.

She adds, “When Bobby and Lee started the business it was about creating and publishing great books. When Eddie and I came in, it needed to grow. We already had the great books, but needed to market the books. We started in 1995, the same year Consortium Distribution began. My job was to develop each book, to publicize and promote—get the books sold.

“Having your dad as your boss is really good. He boosts my professional ego—pushed me in new directions, had confidence in me, and allowed me to develop. Even though I had a baby shortly after, I was still able to work. That’s the

thing new. However, Susannah will consult for the press.

“I told myself I would never follow in my parents’ footsteps, but found out that’s exactly what I really wanted to do—to my great distress,” says brother John, now marketing director. After graduating from college in 1997 with degrees in anthropology and zoology, John considered a career in medicine or research biology. He worked in a lab but realized that it wasn’t what he wanted to do with his life. Instead, he wanted to write. He worked as a copy editor in Austin, Texas, and later as a freelance writer prior to starting full-time with Cinco Puntos Press in January 2004.

Susannah co-edited *The Late Great Mexican Border* with her father, who is the author of *Using a Bilingual Storybook in the Classroom*. She is currently working on a resource guide for publishers, distributors, and bookstores. Last year, John and Bobby, along with Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, edited *Puro Border*, a collage of short stories about the “frantic commerce in drugs, human beings...money and other economic units” on the U.S.–Mexican border.

“We’re really amazed what a great editor John is, and he’s taken over lots of stuff we’ve never had time to think about doing,” says Lee. “He’s a lot more of a peer in some ways now.”

“My plan for the next couple of years is to set up a good infrastructure to free up my parents’ time so they can do what they do best and love to do—write. I want to be able to focus on writing more too,” says John.

John notes that many people think Latino books are only for Spanish-speaking people. “One of my big goals is to change that perception. Just because they speak about a certain culture doesn’t mean their books are only for that specific culture. It’s a struggle. Our distributor has difficulty convincing bookstores.”

The other family-run publishers second John’s sentiments and welcome the company, in more ways than one. “I couldn’t be happier that Just Us Books and Cinco Puntos Press

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thing in a small business, you do editing, production, whatever needs getting done. I learned that knowledge comes with experience, and I can do most anything. I’m not hindered by thinking, ‘I’m not educated in that field.’ I’ll learn what I have to in order to get the job done. That affected my life.”

“It’s always been very miraculous, but nothing we planned. Even though they worked with us all through high school, we expected the kids to move away and never move back. When Susie did come back with Eddie, they were a natural,” says Lee. “However, at first there was a little bit of confusion for me. Susie was really good at marketing. I felt my territory invaded.”

Today Susannah works for the mayor of El Paso, after helping to get him elected. In January, Edward began teaching for the El Paso School District. They both wanted to try some-

are in business. There’s room for more multicultural publishing companies. The challenges are always there. We’ve been around longer than some of these big publishers,” says Philip Lee.

“The books are for everyone. The more we learn about each other, the more we find we’re all the same. The books are more about universal themes and connections rather than ethnic: to struggle, to better one’s life, to have your own voice,” says Wade Hudson. “Kids feel that universal connection.”

He quotes Frederick Douglass, founder of the abolitionist newspaper *The North Star*, in 1847: “We are one, our cause is one, and we must help each other if we are to succeed.” 

Kathryn Mora is a journalist, playwright, and teacher living in Saratoga Springs, New York.