



Knights of

Article Author:

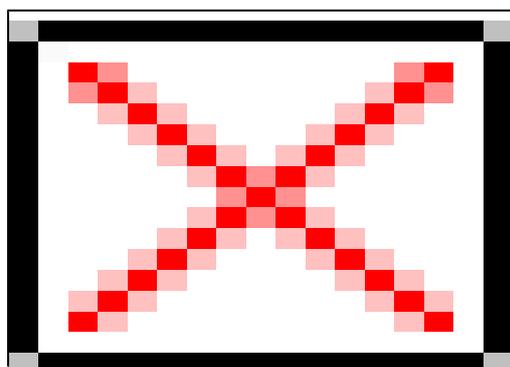
[Andrea Reece](#) [1]

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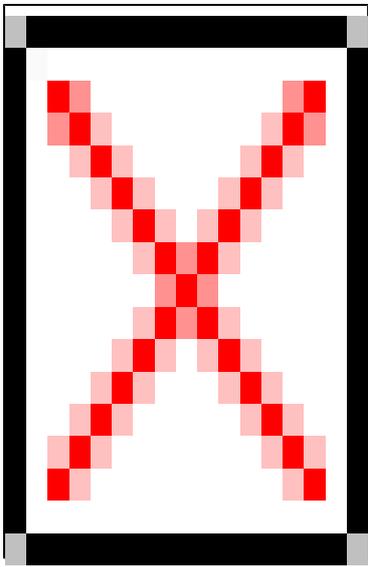
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Meet the publisher doing things differently

In case you haven't realised, **Knights Of** is the publisher intent on doing things differently. The company was created in late 2017, and born out of frustration. Founders David Stevens and Aimée Felone were then both working at a major UK publishing house, he as creative director, she as assistant editor, and both had clear ideas about the way publishing needs to move in the 21st century. Finding little support in house and feeling painted into a corner, David handed in his notice. Aimée followed him two months later and together they drafted a business plan for a publishing company with inclusivity as its driving force.



They took their pitch-deck to investors and raised the seed capital they needed in just three weeks - terrifyingly fast? says David. There is always a long gap between the 'I'm in' moment and money actually appearing in the bank account but they reckon the foundations of the company were formed in that time: 'With no real work as such, it was basically six months of Aimée and I sitting at a small desk and asking each other questions,' says David, 'But it meant that even now, three years later, we can act as one mind.' One of their first and most defining decisions was that they wouldn't work quietly or behind the scenes. 'Our approach was very much, look, if this is going to effect the change we want, then let's be transparent from the beginning,' says David. They launched with no books - radical! - but a focus on who they were and what they wanted to achieve. 'A big part of why **Knights Of** works is because people know our faces,' says Aimée, 'We wanted people to know who we were so that we could establish and maintain a level of accessibility. Anyone can message us at any time - that's across the board from submissions to sales enquiries to potential job positions.'



The approach paid off and not because it so quickly established them as a force in the market: it also brought them their most commercially successful book to date. One of the people who approached them through the website with an idea for a book was Sharna Jackson. 'Sharna had time off before the start of a new job to write a book and wanted to know if we'd consider it,' says David, 'We sat down for an afternoon ' she presented three potential ideas, we liked one and commissioned it.' That was [High-Rise Mystery](#) [3], a junior crime drama set in a London estate and starring young sleuths Nik and Norva. The book has received huge support from independent booksellers and Waterstones, has thousands of eager readers, and is now set to become a series.

Equally important to them, for sales and profile, is million-selling US author Jason Reynolds. Aimée had been aware of Jason and his books for a while and was perplexed as to why he wasn't published in the UK. They bought **For Every One** - though 'technically it's not a children's book' - published it in October 2018 and brought Jason to the UK on tour, something which proved crucial: 'Jason fell in line and behind and in love with the entire ethos of the company,' explains David, 'He told us the thing that everyone is trying to do in the US is happening right here in the UK in that there is a legitimate shift in how this company is put together and what we're trying to do around commercial fiction.' Jason alerted them to the fact that rights were available for his **Tracks** series. By this time, other UK publishers had woken up to Jason, and David and Aimée found themselves in a bruising competition for the books. They thought they had little chance of getting the deal: 'We were two books in, less than a year old and had absolutely no sales track record, but what we did have was a vision for **Knights Of** and a team that didn't look like anyone else. Jason was offered five maybe ten times what we were offering.' They were told by competitors that they'd lost the books ' 'But they didn't appreciate how incredibly stubborn and driven Jason is'. He wanted to publish with **Knights Of**, and the four books in the series, known in the UK as [Run](#) [4], are now in their catalogue.

Three years after their launch, the team has grown to five: Eishar Brar is their editorial director, Daphne Lao Tonge their marketing director, and Marssaié is creative director. Oh, and last year they opened a bookshop too. **Round Table Books** began life as a pop-up shop in Brixton in 2018, a hands-on opportunity in that nail-biting time of year for publishers when the books are stacked up in Christmas displays, and all you can do is wait for them to sell. It was also a direct response to the **CLPE Reflecting Realities** report that revealed only 4% of children's books published in 2017 featured BAME characters, and only 1% had a BAME main character. 'We thought let's turn this into something positive,' says Aimée, 'Let's celebrate and champion the books that do exist.'

Such was the response from the community, they were soon talking about ways to make it permanent. They raised £50,000 via crowdfunding and the shop is now open six days a week, the editorial team working from a small table screened off at the back. Overhearing customer conversations is a reminder everyday of the importance of what they are doing: 'It's almost become our slogan' says Aimée, '*Characters that look like me on the cover*' but it's something that we hear every day ' we see kids running over to books and picking them up, and we see parents' emotional responses when their five year olds say, 'Look it's me?'

For 2020 they're determined that there'll be no new initiatives, instead it will be consolidation, a concentration on their books and profitability: 'This year has to be the year where we prove we can do all the things we promised we could do to our authors, and to our team' says David, 'This has to be the year where we grow up. We're not a big operation but the thought of it stopping scares the life out of me. If we're going to make the change we want to make, we need to be here for years to come.'

With the drive, commitment and accessibility they've demonstrated so far, expect **Knights Of** to be ringing changes for some time yet.

Find out more, including how to invest, on their website.

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Source URL (retrieved on Apr '20): <http://xn--www-rp0a.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/240/childrens-books/articles/knights-of>

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