

**Publishing Diversity with *The Boy & The Bindi*:  
A Case Study of the First Children's Picture Book From  
Arsenal Pulp Press**

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## ❁ ABSTRACT ❁

This report is a study of the creation process and marketing campaign of *The Boy & The Bindi* by Vivek Shraya: the first-ever children's picture book produced by Arsenal Pulp Press, an independent publisher based in Vancouver, British Columbia. The opening chapter will provide information concerning the lack of diversity in children's books as of 2016. Chapter Two will walk readers through the editorial and design processes of the picture book and its lasting effects on the press. The third chapter discusses the media coverage the book received and how authors who are willing to promote themselves benefit a publisher. In the fourth and final chapter, the future of publishing children's books at Arsenal will be explored, with a brief look at how a second title was acquired. Recommendations will follow pertaining to how Arsenal can move forward with publishing future children's picture books.

KEYWORDS: Vivek Shraya, Arsenal Pulp Press, *The Boy & The Bindi*, diversity, children's picture books

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## ❁ TABLE OF CONTENTS ❁

Approval	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Table of Figures	vi
 Introduction	 1
 Chapter One: Beginnings	 3
1.1 Cultural Diversity in Children's Books	3
1.2 Once Upon a Time at Arsenal Pulp Press	5
1.3 Acquisition Practices	8
 Chapter Two: Creating <i>The Boy &amp; The Bindi</i>	 14
2.1 Vivek Shraya's Manuscript Proposal	14
2.2 Editing	16
2.4 Designing	22
 Chapter Three: Marketing for Story Time	 26
3.1 The Mentorship	26
3.2 The Teacher's Guide	29
3.3 The Influence of an Author	31
3.4 First Reviews	33
3.5 Sales	35
 Chapter Four: Looking Ahead	 38
4.1 The Second Picture Book	38
4.2 Recommendations	41
 Conclusion	 43
 Bibliography	 45

## ❁ TABLE OF FIGURES ❁

Figure 1. Spread from <i>The Boy &amp; The Bindi</i>	19
Figure 2. Arsenal's submission guidelines	21
Figure 3. Arsenal logo re-design	23
Figure 4. Cover of <i>The Boy &amp; The Bindi</i>	24
Figure 5. Cover of <i>From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea</i>	38

# INTRODUCTION



Recently, authors, publishers, and other creative types have been commenting on the longstanding homogenous content from English-language children's book publishing: white culture continues to dominate stories and illustrations, overshadowing authors of colour and multicultural content. But the world is more diverse than what is shown on the pages of children's books; therefore, content for young readers needs to reflect it with more representations of people of colour, LGBTQ communities, and various religions.

Thankfully, more and more publishing houses are coming to the realization that the world is not as white or cisgendered as depicted in past literature. Arsenal Pulp Press is one such house, and it publishes to represent diverse writers and content, to encourage readers to look at the world a bit differently. This report is a case study on how Arsenal's first-ever children's picture book, *The Boy & The Bindi* written by transgender writer and performance artist Vivek Shraya, and illustrated by Rajni Perera, contributes to children's book publishing that is more inclusive.

Chapter One will provide information on the state of culturally diverse children's books in North America as of 2016 and will move on to explore Arsenal Pulp Press' history. The chapter will also give an overview of how books are acquired at the press, and culminate with how *The Boy & The Bindi* was acquired and released in the fall of 2016. The second chapter will detail the book's pitch along with its editorial process, and how it impacted Arsenal's publishing program. This chapter will also look at the design and production of the book.

The third chapter will walk readers through the marketing plan for the picture book. It will explain how Arsenal prepared to venture into children's book marketing, expected hurdles, and what was done to limit any obstacles in the campaign. This chapter will also look at the media coverage the book received

early in its release. The fourth and final chapter will explain the publishing program for future children's books at Arsenal, ending with recommendations for what could be done to better edit and market them.

This report was written based on a four-month internship with the press, working in the editing and marketing departments. Interning at Arsenal was a delightful experience. Their mandate to publish diversely aligned with my own beliefs in creating opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard. Upon learning that they were to take on a children's picture book, I felt it appropriate to base a project report on it as it resonated so deeply with my passion for artistic expression in LGBTQ and POC communities. Being privy to the process behind each book on the fall 2016 list also allowed me to correspond with Vivek Shraya to gather necessary information for *The Boy & The Bindi*.

The purpose of this report is to guide readers through the process an independent publishing house went through to release a title in a genre new to them. It will outline what was done at every step from title acquisition, editing, design, and marketing, ending with recommendations for Arsenal, and other publishers, to consider when foraying into diverse children's picture book publishing. At the end, readers should be more knowledgeable about how Arsenal approached its first-ever children's picture book, and be aware of the need for more inclusive children's books.



# CHAPTER ONE: BEGINNINGS



## 1.1 CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

In 2015, the Cooperative Children's Book Centre (CCBC) released its yearly report called *The Diversity Gap in Children's Book Publishing*, which put forth statistics “on the number of children's books by and about people of color published in 2014.”<sup>1</sup> Lee & Low Books, the largest independent publisher of multicultural books in the United States, posted this study on their website. It states that much more work is still required if the publishing industry is to ever publish more stories that are diverse in content and / or written by diverse writers.

The report concluded that in 2014 “the number of books by/about people of color jumped to 14 percent (up from 10 percent in 2013) of the 3,000 to 3,500 books the CCBC reviews each year.”<sup>2</sup> Though this is a miniscule increase in the creation of more inclusive books, it is nonetheless a step in the right direction. However, the charge for more diverse children's books seems to be a story of always taking one step forward, and two steps back. An issue that works against more diverse publishing is the ethnic make-up of authors. The CCBC study shocked the industry when it announced that in 2014 there were only 393 books published about people of colour; however, of that amount, less than half were done by writers and illustrators within the culture(s) they were writing about.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, the issues of diversity in the industry concerns both quantity and quality: the absolute number of diverse children's books versus how many writers of colour there are creating stories about their own culture. But there is another problem that contributes to the slow growth of diverse children's books. According

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1 Hannah Ehrlich, “The Diversity Gap in Children's Publishing, 2015,” *Lee & Low Blog*, March 05, 2015, accessed June 25, 2016, <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2015/03/05/the-diversity-gap-in-childrens-publishing-2015/>.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

to Kathleen T. Horning, Director of the CCBC, large retailers (such as Indigo and Barnes & Noble) simply do not stock enough multicultural children's books for fear that these will not sell. In so doing, they fuel a self-fulfilling prophecy that publishers do not produce enough diverse books.<sup>4</sup> If buyers cannot see such books, then they will not know of their existence.

To find out where readers acquire diverse books, Jason Low (publisher of Lee & Low Books) interviewed publishing professionals to discover where their readers find diverse books. Speaking with authors, publishers, and professors, Low found that people would primarily seek out or recommend independent bookstores and independent publishers they know are consistent, trusted producers of children's books that guarantee diverse content by authors of different cultures. The CCBC's website states that over the past few years, there has been an overall increase in the production of multicultural literature for children in both Canada and the US by small, independent publishers.<sup>5</sup>

Even if statistics have seemingly flat-lined, and large publishers are not primarily selling multicultural children's books to retailers, it seems like the independents are leading the charge for more diverse children's books. Arsenal Pulp Press became one such independent upon the publication of *The Boy & The Bindi*, Vivek Shraya's picture book for children. But before I explore how *The Boy & The Bindi* was created, a brief history of Arsenal Pulp Press is needed to understand how the title fits their publishing mandate.

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4 Jason Low, "Why Hasn't the Number of Multicultural Books Increased In Eighteen Years?," *Lee & Low Blog*, June 17, 2013, accessed June 25, 2016, <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2013/06/17/why-hasnt-the-number-of-multicultural-books-increased-in-eighteen-years/>.

5 "Publishing Statistics on Children's Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators," *Children's Books by and About People of Color*, accessed June 26, 2016, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.

## 1.2 ONCE UPON A TIME AT ARSENAL PULP PRESS

Arsenal Pulp Press was founded as Pulp Press Book Publishers in 1971 by a group of university students. The press wished to showcase diverse and underrepresented voices with a mandate to publish “gritty urban literature typical of the Vancouver literary scene”<sup>6</sup> on topics that “they were personally invested in.”<sup>7</sup> Pulp Press also hoped to do this all without achieving mainstream success so readers wouldn’t think they were publishing popular culture material.<sup>8</sup> During the early stages of its publishing program, Pulp Press published titles from friends of the staff, and even set up a typesetting operation to subsidize all of its projects.<sup>9</sup>

### FROM THE PULP

However, after ten years of operation, Pulp Press’ national distributor went bankrupt, and the press was left with \$30,000 in unpaid receivables.<sup>10</sup> The press managed to stay in business for a while, but by 1987 many of the original staff decided to leave. It was at this time that Brian Lam (a former creative writing student from UVIC who had interned at Pulp Press) joined as publisher to lead the press into its next chapter.

Still recovering from the bankruptcy of their former distributor, the press decided to continue to publish. It renamed itself Arsenal Pulp Press.<sup>11</sup> Legally, the press could not be called Pulp Press again, so the word Arsenal was added. The word also harkens back to Pulp Press’ mail-order company called Arsenal Collaborative Library. What also compelled Arsenal to continue publishing was the social change happening in Vancouver at the time. In the late eighties and early nineties, Vancouver was transforming from a rural Canadian outpost to a bustling urban centre, and the artistic communities of the city began to reflect this dramatic

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6 “A Brief History,” Arsenal Pulp Press, accessed June 28, 2016, [http://www.arsenalpulp.com/titleimages/PDFs/Arsenal\\_Brief\\_History.pdf](http://www.arsenalpulp.com/titleimages/PDFs/Arsenal_Brief_History.pdf).

7 Brian Lam, personal communication, July 4, 2016.

8 Ibid.

9 “A Brief History.”

10 Brian Lam, personal communication, July 4, 2016.

11 Ibid.

societal change.<sup>12</sup> As society filled with more people of different ethnicities who came from different socio-economic backgrounds, there were more writers coming to the press with new stories.

The team at Arsenal felt it imperative to give these voices a platform. It continued as a literary press with a distinctly urban, diverse voice, but with the new name came a new impulse: gearing more towards non-fiction books around topics of culture, gender, and sexuality with writers from outside the status quo.<sup>13</sup> With this new aspect of its mandate—to give marginalized voices a platform—Arsenal began to publish books from writers of diverse backgrounds.

## GROWING RECOGNITION

Some of its most notable books published as part of its mandate for diversity were plays like *New Canadian Kid* (1982) by Dennis Foon, which was written for the younger generation about racism; regional titles like *Resistance and Renewal* (1988) by Celia Haig-Brown, a BC Book Prize-winning study of Native American Residential Schools in Kamloops; and the LGBTQ series *Quickies* (1998), for self-identified men and *Hot & Bothered* (1998), for self-identified women, which both focused on same-sex desires, appeared on bestseller lists across the US, and continue to do so today.<sup>14</sup> Jim Wong-Chu's *Chinatown Ghosts* (1986) was also “the first Asian-themed poetry book ever published in Canada.”<sup>15</sup>

Arsenal also published “the first book of gay male prose in Canada”: *Queeries*, edited by Dennis Denisoff in 1993.<sup>16</sup> Arsenal secured a blurb by esteemed American writer Dennis Cooper,<sup>17</sup> which paved the way for the press to increase

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12 DJ Fraser, “Arsenal Pulp Press: Surviving, Thriving, and Paying Attention to Queer Voices Beyond Pulp Fiction,” *Plenitude Magazine*, June 06, 2016, accessed June 28, 2016, <http://plenitudemagazine.ca/arsenal-pulp-press-surviving-thriving-and-paying-attention-to-queer-voices-beyond-pulp-fiction/>.

13 Ibid.

14 “A Brief History.”

15 Charlie Smith, “Arsenal Pulp Press publisher Brian Lam honoured at closing gala of literASIAN festival,” *The Georgia Straight Vancouver's News & Entertainment Weekly*, November 25, 2013, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.straight.com/life/536326/arsenal-pulp-press-publisher-brian-lam-honoured-closing-gala-literasian-festival>.

16 “A Brief History.”

17 Brian Lam, personal communication, July 4, 2016.

the visibility of its gay and lesbian publishing program in the US. The publication of *Queeries* also coincided with Arsenal's new American distribution deal in the early nineties with Consortium, which enabled their books to reach audiences beyond Canadian borders. To Lam, these successes proved that books the staff was personally passionate about could sell well, and that strategy informed Arsenal's publishing program thereafter.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, the press continued to publish more diverse texts—LGBTQ and multicultural literature, alternative cookbooks, crafts, and city guides—and Arsenal's identity as an independent publisher of diverse literature that shakes up the status quo took shape. Arsenal's list contained bona fide examples of diverse books authored by women writers, writers of colour, and LGBTQ writers on a plethora of subject matters.

"Today we are well known in Canada and internationally for our culturally diverse titles, especially by LGBTQ writers and writers of colour," said Lam.<sup>19</sup> In addition to being known for diverse books, Arsenal's sales prove that these titles are a trustworthy and consistent revenue source for them. As of 2016, sales in the United States comprise 55 percent of Arsenal's total sales, while United Kingdom and Australian sales account for another five. To keep these numbers climbing, Arsenal has made a considerable effort to publish a number of non-Canadian authors in order to reach bigger markets, such as translations from international authors.

Tapping into international markets also helps Arsenal stay afloat in the Canadian book market. "Non-Canadian sales are vital because the Canadian market is so small and so unreliable (with one major book chain, one major online chain, and a scattering of independent stores)," commented Lam. "As an example, [in March 2017] we received payment from our US distributor of \$45,000 USD; the payment from our Canadian distributor was \$3,000 CAD, as a result of \$25,000 in

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

returns received in February. As you can see, if we relied on Canadian sales alone, we wouldn't even be able to cover our rent this month.”<sup>20</sup>

By publishing lists of a variety of authors and content, Arsenal has proven it can make good books that “engage and challenge readers” and make them “ask probing questions about the world around us.”<sup>21</sup> Acquiring titles that fit this mandate to challenge readers or subvert status quos has helped build Arsenal's brand and reputation among booksellers, readers, librarians, and the media.

### 1.3 ACQUISITION PRACTICES

With a staff of only five people, it can be difficult finding diverse material as each individual has many duties outside of their specific departmental roles. Being a small independent press also means Arsenal is not in a financially viable position to create more roles solely dedicated to scouting titles. The majority of acquisitions happen through Lam and associate publisher Robert Ballantyne. As Thomas Woll states in *Publishing for Profit*, “a vast amount of material is available for every publisher if that publisher knows where to find it and how to acquire it.”<sup>22</sup> Keeping up with industry news, having an ear out for new authors, and attending book fairs, Lam and Ballantyne build Arsenal's repertoire of authors. Arsenal also relies on other methods to acquire titles, not only going through unsolicited manuscripts and communicating with authors they have already worked with.

### THE SLUSH PILE

At Arsenal, the slush pile of unsolicited manuscripts is only a rare source of publishable titles. According to Arsenal's editor, Susan Safyan, the press receives almost three hundred unsolicited manuscripts each year.<sup>23</sup> Safyan and interns (an average of two a year doing three- to four-month terms) go through the pile looking for gems that sparkle differently from the rest, and every now and then

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20 Brian Lam, personal communication, April 5, 2017.

21 “A Brief History,” Arsenal Pulp Press, accessed June 28, 2016, [http://www.arsenalpulp.com/titleimages/PDFs/Arsenal\\_Brief\\_History.pdf](http://www.arsenalpulp.com/titleimages/PDFs/Arsenal_Brief_History.pdf).

22 Thomas Woll, “Editorial Acquisition.” In *Publishing for Profit: Successful Bottom-Line Management for Book Publishers* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press), 118.

23 Susan Safyan, personal communication, June 29, 2016.

there is something worth picking up. For example, Arsenal's 2015 plant-based Mexican / American cookbook *Decolonize Your Diet* was a classic—and rare—slush pile success story, getting impressive media coverage in the US where it was reviewed in the *L.A. Times*. Cases like this are why the slush pile is not ignored at Arsenal. However, not everything in the slush pile is worth picking up. “Sometimes [the manuscripts] are well written, but don’t fit our mandate,” said Safyan.<sup>24</sup>

Guidelines for what kind of books Arsenal will consider for publication are posted on their website. Manuscript submissions must be centred on: cultural studies, political / sociological studies, regional non-fiction (in particular, British Columbia), cookbooks, craft books, gay and lesbian fiction and non-fiction, visual art, multicultural fiction and non-fiction, literary fiction and non-fiction (no genre fiction, such as mysteries, thrillers, or romance), graphic novels, youth culture and young adult literature, or health. The press casts a wide net is done with the intention to show that diversity can be conveyed through many genres. At the end of this list, Arsenal states that they also require a brief synopsis of the work, a self-addressed stamped envelope, a marketing plan, and a CV of any previous work. Up until mid-2016, the submission guidelines made it clear that they “do not publish books for pre-adolescent children.”<sup>25</sup>

### RECOMMENDATIONS FROM TRUSTED SOURCES

Although the slush pile is a method used at Arsenal, a more relied-upon source for books that best speak to the mandate of diversity is that of existing authors with whom they have built co-operative relationships. In its early days, Arsenal's books were primarily “written by those who either worked at Pulp Press or were part of the Pulp Press community of writers, activists, and artists.”<sup>26</sup> But since the 1970s, this method has grown to include a community of writers that regularly publish with Arsenal. This, in turn, has generated an economy of favours:

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24 Ibid.

25 “Contact Info Page: Submission Guidelines,” Arsenal Pulp Press, accessed August 03, 2016, <http://www.arsenalpulp.com/contact.php>.

26 Brian Lam, personal communication, May 24, 2016.

previously published authors reach out to Arsenal requesting that the staff view the work of a friend or colleague. While bigger houses use acquisition editors and agents to scout new manuscripts, “a majority of Arsenal’s new authors come from recommendations of their existing authors.”<sup>27</sup>

“These recommendations are helpful because we trust our authors’ instincts,” said Lam.<sup>28</sup> The staff also regularly checks in with their authors to see if they are working on anything new, or if someone on the team stumbles across an author’s work at readings or in journals or magazines, inquiring about any of their current projects is also an option. When not liaising with their writers for material, Arsenal also receives recommendations from other publishers: “Because people understand us and what we publish, we sometimes get manuscript referrals from other publishing houses who say, ‘Hey, this is great but it doesn’t work with us; you should take a look at it,’” said Arsenal’s marketing manager Cynara Geissler.<sup>29</sup>

Having a trusted pool of authors—who know Arsenal’s publishing program very well—suggest new writers means that there is less apprehension when taking new work. This is because authors recommended by Arsenal’s existing stable of writers, who are familiar with the lists, are more likely to resonate with the press’ mandate. Handpicking authors also works well financially. Many agents sell manuscripts between \$1,500 and \$7,500, which is a tremendous amount for a small publisher.<sup>30</sup> Instead, money can be put into designing and marketing books. However, sometimes agents are used at Arsenal if the publisher feels that the manuscript is worth paying for.

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27 Susan Safyan, personal communication, June 29, 2016.

28 Brian Lam, personal communication, July 4, 2016.

29 Cynara Geissler, personal communication, March 13, 2017.

30 Woll, “Editorial Acquisition.”



## THE FALL 2016 LIST

The list released in the fall of 2016 was a fine example of how Arsenal is open to receiving books from different sources, such as agents (even though this is an uncommon practice among smaller publishing houses). Agented books for the fall were: *Niagara Motel* by Ashley Little, *The Dad Dialogues* by George Bowering and Charles Demers, and *Chowgirls: Killer Food Party* by Heidi Andermack and Amy Lynn Brown.

Having previously published Little's *Anatomy of a Girl Gang*, which won the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize, Arsenal was keen to work with her again when her agent pitched *Niagara Motel*. For *The Dad Dialogues* (a correspondence between Demers and Bowering on fatherhood and their daughters), Charles Demers casually mentioned he was working on the book to Arsenal and when his agent wrote to offer the completed manuscript, Arsenal was keen to review it.

The agent who pitched *Chowgirls: Killer Food Party* happened to be a sales manager for Arsenal's US distributor Consortium. "He was aware of our cookbook list, having sold it to Barnes & Noble (his biggest account), and liked our list," said Lam.<sup>31</sup> Another publisher bid on the book with a larger advance but the *Chowgirls'* agent and authors chose Arsenal based on their proposed marketing and sales plan, as well as their reputation for doing well-designed cookbooks that reflect the personality, philosophy, and style of the author / chef.

The three graphic novels on the fall 2016 list, *Such a Lovely Little War* by Marcelino Truong, *Becoming Unbecoming* by Una, and *The Case of Alan Turing* by Eric Leberge and Arnaud Delalande, were agented titles as well. Ballantyne noted that after the success of *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013), Arsenal has been on the radar of agents and publishers who do graphic novels, and now whenever they attend the Frankfurt Book Fair, he and Lam meet many graphic novel publishers and agents.<sup>32</sup> *Such a Lovely Little War* was acquired immediately after hearing

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31 Brian Lam, personal communication, July 7, 2016.

32 Robert Ballantyne, personal communication, July 8, 2016.

the pitch and seeing proofs from an agent who had represented very successful French graphic novels. *Becoming Unbecoming* stood out at meetings in Frankfurt with Myriad, “who have done some very interesting graphics, but none quite as compelling and right for [Arsenal] as Una’s.”<sup>33</sup> Resonating with the LGBTQ publishing program, *The Case of Alan Turing* was picked up from an agency in New York whom Arsenal had worked with before and holds a good, ongoing business relationship with. And after giving the manuscript a read-through Arsenal was willing to pay a little bit extra for United Kingdom rights.<sup>34</sup>

While those six books were agented, Arsenal also worked with its previous authors for new books. These were: *Tomboy Survival Guide* from Ivan Coyote; *The Remedy: Queer and Trans Voices on Health and Healthcare*, an anthology edited by Zena Sharman; and *The Last Gang in Town: The Epic Story of the Vancouver Police vs. the Clark Park Gang* by Aaron Chapman. Having worked with these authors in the past, Arsenal was quite confident in their abilities as writers and keen to take on new work from them.

*Tomboy Survival Guide* was discussed between Coyote and Arsenal quite a few years before it was written and evolved from a spin on a guidebook to a more personal non-fiction / memoir book.<sup>35</sup> In the case of *The Remedy*, the LGBTQ+ healthcare anthology, Sharman had similarly pitched the concept quite a few years before it was actually compiled. Arsenal confirmed interest and she handled the call of submissions and worked with Arsenal to create the book’s website before producing the manuscript. *The Last Gang in Town* is Arsenal’s third Vancouver history book with author Aaron Chapman. “Both of his previous books were award-winning, BC bestsellers, and Aaron is a great, personable promoter, so we had encouraged him for some time to send us a new project,” noted Lam.<sup>36</sup> Also on the fall 2016 list was first-time author Nick Comilla with his debut novel

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33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Brian Lam, personal communication, July 7, 2016.

36 Ibid.

*Candyass*. The title was a recommendation that came through Daniel Allen Cox, who happened to be both a previous Arsenal author and creative writing mentor to Comilla. The 2016 fall list was a split between authors Arsenal had already published, ones that were recommended, and one completely new writer in Comilla.

In the case of *The Boy & The Bindi*, the author, Vivek Shraya had worked with Arsenal in the past. In an extremely detailed proposal accompanied by extensive research on the target audience, she proposed the picture book to Arsenal. It was to be the first book picture book for children ages 4–8 that Arsenal published. The book spoke to Arsenal’s mandate and, more importantly, responded to readers asking for more diverse children’s books. For example, the staff at Arsenal were aware of the hashtag movement #WeNeedDiverseBooks that people were speaking with across social media.

## CHAPTER TWO: CREATING *THE BOY & THE BINDI*



### 2.1 VIVEK SHRAYA'S MANUSCRIPT PROPOSAL

A Toronto-based, transgender, South Asian artist, Shraya is no stranger to Arsenal. Arsenal authors Ivan Coyote and Amber Dawn both encouraged her to reach out to Lam to reprint her first, self-published, book *God Loves Hair* (2014), an illustrated YA title. Typically, Arsenal does not acquire new editions of previously published books because they do not qualify for full funding from granting agencies like the Canada Council for the Arts and BC Arts Council. However, Lam was impressed with the quality and ambition of *God Loves Hair*,<sup>1</sup> and after signing Shraya, the reprint received a lot of media attention including starred reviews in *Quill & Quire*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Booklist*, as well as extensive praise and support from library communities. One of the greatest successes of the book, Lam noted, was how it introduced Arsenal to audiences in schools and libraries.<sup>2</sup>

### A MATTER OF GOOD TIMING

With the positive reception from diverse audiences, Lam felt they were on to something. Speaking about what Shraya's books have done for Arsenal, he brought up his and Ballantyne's past trips to the American Library Association: "We noticed that librarians were paying more attention to Arsenal's LGBTQ titles, mentioning how they wanted to see more books for children."<sup>3</sup> Lam saw a good opportunity because people already knew Arsenal for their LGBTQ and diverse titles for adults, so it was not too huge a leap to do a children's book on the topic. Aware that readers were asking for more diverse titles, signing *The Boy & The*

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1 Brian Lam, personal communication, July 4, 2016.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

*Bindi* just felt right for Lam.<sup>4</sup> While the publishing industry in general was not providing readers with enough of what they were asking for, Arsenal took the bold move to do so. (The book was signed one year in advance of publication. Major bookselling chains such as Indigo has just started to require publishers to give at least nine months' worth of lead time prior to a title's publication date.)

Shraya submitted a proposal for *The Boy & The Bindi* on May 29, 2015. Lam acknowledged that if Shraya had approached Arsenal only a couple of years earlier, they would have likely turned her away. However, by the time she approached, Arsenal was “starting to enter the young-adult genre with YA books by Ivan Coyote and David H.T. Wong, so it was a matter of good timing.”<sup>5</sup>

## THE PITCH

Although Shraya had worked with Arsenal before, the email pitch for *The Boy & The Bindi* was written as a professional pitch (not a casual email). She re-introduced herself in the e-mail and noted her credentials as a Toronto-based artist and award-winning author. Safyan expressed how it was all, in fact, unnecessary, given their work history.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the exchange only further solidified the foundation for another worthwhile book. Shraya also presented the supporting facts that further encouraged Arsenal to take on the picture book.

In her “Author Questionnaire” (a formal document Arsenal sends to all authors to obtain a sense of who they are and why they are writing), Shraya was asked what the motivation was for the book, to which she presented information that was incredibly in line with what Arsenal had been aware of concerning the lack of diversity in children's book publishing. She noted that in 2014, “of the 3,500 children's books received by Cooperative Children's Book Center, only 112 were about Asian Pacific Americans (just under 4%).”<sup>7</sup> As both author and publisher were aware of industry discourse on diversity, moving forward with a book that

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4 Susan Safyan, personal communication, June 29, 2016.

5 Brian Lam, personal communication, July 4, 2016.

6 Susan Safyan, personal communication, June 29, 2016.

7 Vivek Shraya, Author Questionnaire.

offered such representation was both important and timely. The impetus for the book was personal as well. In her day job, Shraya is a Positive Space Coordinator and Human Rights Advisor at George Brown College, and her work allowed her to sit on a panel concerning the diversity of children's books. What Shraya discovered was that if diversity was ever touched upon, it was "often through shapes or vegetables," inaccurate and demeaning representations of an important issue.<sup>8</sup> Disheartened, Shraya came up with the idea to write a story of her own, one with real people of colour. Excerpted below is a portion of her pitch to Arsenal:

Set in 21st century North America, *The Boy & The Bindi* is a story about a five-year-old Indian boy whose curiosity about his mother's bindi results in an exploration of his culture and a celebration of his difference. What distinguishes *The Boy & The Bindi* is that the protagonist is brown, and his gender expression is not shaped by conventional Western expectations of boys' interests and behaviours.<sup>9</sup>

Shraya summarized the story and in doing so, exemplified how it speaks to Arsenal's mandate for publishing diverse stories. She was serious about the book and her proposal, and she handed in the manuscript in a fairly polished state of completion. However, great attention had to be paid to the prose in editorial, as the book's readership was an audience Arsenal had never tapped into before: children aged 4–8. The process was as smooth as Safyan expected it to be given her history with Shraya, but more importantly it made Arsenal more aware of the types of books they are willing to publish.

## 2.2 EDITING

**A**s a former librarian, Safyan has first-hand experience in what children have at their disposal to read, but more importantly, what kind of books they do not regularly encounter. She stated that the Canadian literary landscape is sparse when it comes to diverse children's literature. Because this literature is already so limited, "once you separate it into little niches, you're talking about a very small

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8 Vivek Shraya, personal communication, May 10, 2016.

9 Vivek Shraya, e-mail message to Susan Safyan, May 29, 2015.

portion of the literature [that is diverse books for children].”<sup>10</sup> But as mentioned earlier, the CCBC states that there has been an increase in small, independently owned publishers contributing to multicultural literature for young children.<sup>11</sup> The following section will detail the process of editing Shraya’s manuscript. Arsenal had already published titles for young adults, but this was their first for young children.

## NO SEMICOLONS IN A BOOK FOR CHILDREN

According to Editor-in-Chief of Dial Books for Young Readers Phyllis J. Fogelman, “good literature ... can and should expand the imagination as well as foster knowledge and children’s understanding of the world and the people in it.”<sup>12</sup> For Arsenal, this was exactly the goal of *The Boy & The Bindi*. Hence, when Safyan received the manuscript for *The Boy & The Bindi*, she kept at the forefront of her mind that the intended audience was to be children aged 4 to 8. The book had to include language that would convey themes of diversity, self-acceptance, self-exploration, and self-love to this young audience. While adults were going to buy the book, the language had to be understandable to young children.

Questions were raised regarding how to talk about the themes of accepting oneself and self-confidence to children. Safyan commented that if “books are written only in simple, small words [children] feel talked down to. Children like to be challenged every now and again by ‘big words,’ but of course, the vocabulary should be mostly age-appropriate.”<sup>13</sup> Hence, she and Shraya had to pick the right vocabulary for children to understand, but “still have enough literary merit.”<sup>14</sup> Elements such as using rhyming couplets throughout were a simple, yet literary, technique that told the story in a straightforward manner that children would be

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10 Susan Safyan, personal communication, June 29, 2016.

11 “Publishing Statistics on Children’s Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators,” *Children’s Books by and About People of Color*, accessed June 26, 2016, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.

12 Phyllis J. Fogelman, “Editing Children’s Books,” in *Editors on Editing: What Writers Need to Know About What Editors do*, ed. Gerald Gross (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 306.

13 Susan Safyan, personal communication, June 29, 2016.

14 Ibid.

interested in and remember, e.g., “Well, my bindi is like a third eye / Watching over me all the time, / Making sure I don’t hide / Everything I am inside”.<sup>15</sup>

Another factor that had to be considered was word count. Safyan noted that the industry-standard word count for a picture book is to never exceed 1,000 words.<sup>16</sup> Going back and forth with Shraya, suggesting substitutions for certain words, took up a large portion of the editing process. In the end, short sentences with simple rhyme were settled upon. The pages of the book ended up with a minimum of two lines and a maximum of seven on each page so as not to overwhelm children.

While editing the words was a straightforward task, Safyan did recall one thing Shraya insisted in doing: removing semicolons. It was one element of writing that Shraya insisted in not having in the book as she believed it was too advanced for the young audience. The exclusion of such punctuation may have also worked in Arsenal’s favour when pitching the book and showing it to librarians and elementary school teachers. Young children don’t often use or encounter advanced punctuation. Using simple sentence structures in the book would be appealing to adults who are teaching children to read, which is part of the goal of picture books (learning to recognize words and sentences and read along).

Once the text was more or less finalized, there was a bit of work required when it came time to pairing it with the illustrations. Shraya herself sought out artist Rajni Perera to work with and in her words, “[Rajni’s] work is incredibly imaginative and next level, so when she said yes, I felt confident about the aesthetic of the book.”<sup>17</sup> Shraya and Safyan “tried to find a balance between minimalism and detail. Some pages are just illustration. Some pages have a little text and illustration”<sup>18</sup> making for a gorgeously illustrated children’s picture book. There was special attention given to this part of the editorial process, as Arsenal

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15     *The Boy & The Bindi*, 2016. np.

16     Susan Safyan, personal communication, December 20, 2016.

17     Vivek Shraya, personal communication, July 18, 2016.

18     Susan Safyan, personal communication, June 29, 2016.



and Shraya had to be careful not to say too much in words if it can instead be conveyed through an illustration. “For instance, it’s redundant to say that someone is shocked, when the picture can dramatise their expression,” say Meg Rosoff and Linda Newberry in *The Guardian*.<sup>19</sup> With this in mind, Safyan edited in respect to what Perera had illustrated, and in the end found a balance in creating spreads that showed the story through imagery as much as it was articulated through rhyme. The spread from the picture book below is an example of how Rajni’s vivid and expressive illustrations work in tandem with Shraya’s writing.

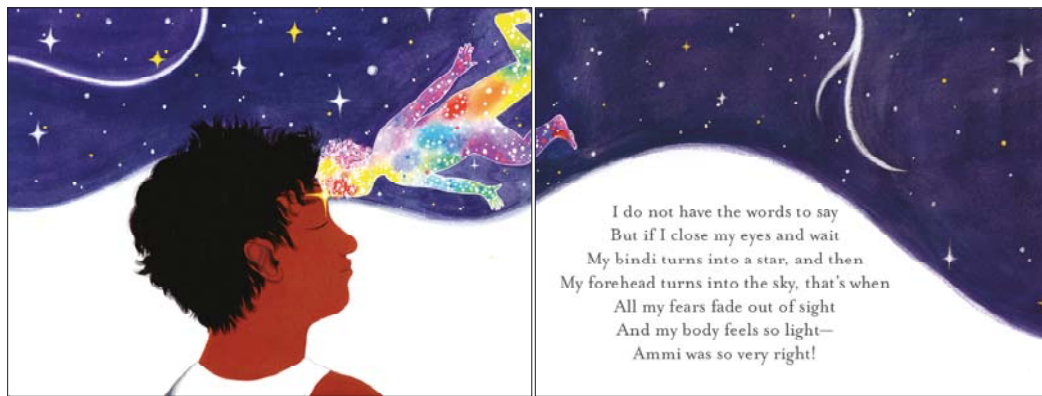


Figure 1. A full spread from *The Boy & The Bindi*, balancing text and illustrations.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUTHOR AND EDITOR

Editing *The Boy & The Bindi* was an overall smooth process as Shraya was very involved in every step of the process and was responsive to feedback. It was also a reassuring process as Shraya is known to send in work that is always “fully cooked in the middle,”<sup>20</sup> handing in manuscripts that require only light editing. Having worked with her before, Safyan was familiar with Shraya’s workflow and thinking; thus, the two were able to easily come to agreement concerning the text.

Allowing an author to have such a hands-on role in the production of a book after the manuscript is handed in is not unheard of in book publishing,

<sup>19</sup> Meg Rosoff and Linda Newberry, “How to write books for children: Writer Linda Newbury on the variety of genres in children’s books,” *The Guardian*, September 26, 2008, accessed December 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/sep/26/booksforchildrenandteenagers1>.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Safyan, personal communication, June 29, 2016.

but it is not a common occurrence, said Lam. And while many publishers do not afford authors a substantial amount of input from editorial to cover design to marketing, Arsenal is proud to collaborate with their authors through most aspects of the publishing process. For example, authors are asked for any cover ideas they may have, allowing Arsenal to provide options for them to choose from. This is different from other houses where authors may give one or two options, or just assign a cover without much input from authors. “We want to ensure that authors are happy with how their book looks inside and out,” noted marketing manager Cynara Geissler.<sup>21</sup>

Authors appreciate the amount of input Arsenal welcomes<sup>22</sup> and in turn it makes for better editorial, production, and marketing processes to create books that speak to both the author’s and publisher’s vision. Since this technique has worked so well for Arsenal in the past, it was natural to use it for their first-ever picture book.

## EDITORIAL IMPACT

As a result of working on *The Boy & The Bindi*, Safyan felt that Arsenal had entered a new phase of their publishing program: one that would see the acceptance of children’s book manuscripts. Safyan recalled that *The Boy & The Bindi*’s “unique spiritual tone is something you don’t find very often [in children’s books],”<sup>23</sup> and that it goes to show how profound storytelling in the genre can be. After seeing how well *Bindi* met Arsenal’s editorial standards and mandate she proposed to Lam that Arsenal’s submission guidelines be changed to accept children’s books. As of June 27, 2016 manuscripts for children’s books are accepted at Arsenal, as seen on the following page.

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21 Cynara Geissler, personal communication, March 13, 2017.

22 Brian Lam, personal communication, July 7, 2016.

23 Susan Safyan, personal communication, June 29, 2016.

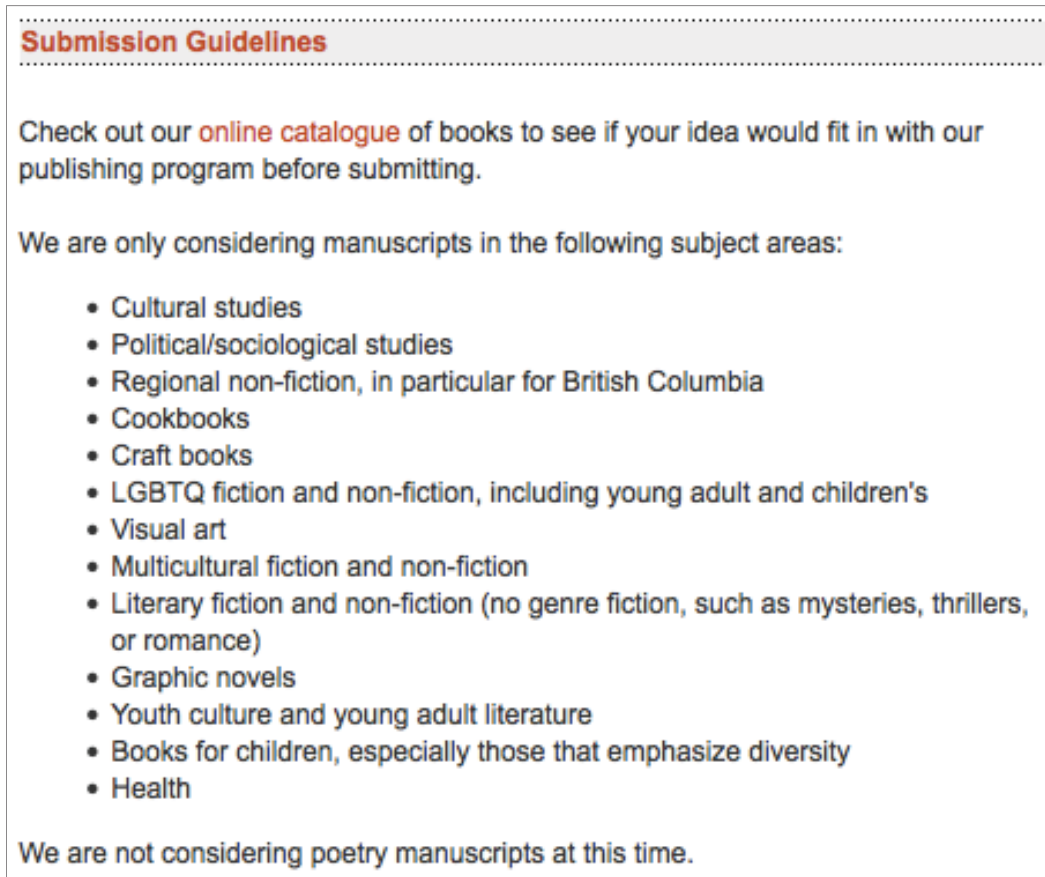


Figure 2. A screenshot of Arsenal's submission guidelines on their website as of summer 2016.

By now accepting “books for children, especially those that emphasize diversity,” Safyan anticipates that what will come through the slush pile will dramatically change in the coming years for Arsenal. She noted that “[a] lot of new writers like to do children’s books,”<sup>24</sup> which might mean a larger slush pile in the future. However, because the press expects to see more children’s book manuscripts in the slush pile, Safyan acknowledges that the press' high standards for acceptance of manuscripts through the slush pile must be maintained.<sup>25</sup>

Going back to Arsenal’s reputation for producing books with literary merit, expanding into a new genre means carrying over the same standards seen in all the other genres in which they publish. Only now, the poetic merits must also stimulate a child’s imagination to show that there is more than one way

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24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

to be in the world.<sup>26</sup> The story must also resonate with adults (as they will be the buyers of books for children) with important themes such as social justice, environmentalism, or LGBTQ issues.

Quintessentially, Arsenal seeks the same high literary content for children's books as it would for any of its other titles. But accepting manuscripts geared towards young children must alter other modes of production such as design. For Arsenal's production manager, Oliver McPartlin, working on *The Boy & The Bindi*, was an eye-opening experience for him and the other Arsenal staff on what would and would not work to produce a picture book.

### 2.3 DESIGNING

Much like the editorial process of the book, Shraya was given a lot of control over the design process of *The Boy & The Bindi*. She and illustrator Perera were given liberty to do what they wished within parameters suitable for print. Typically, a publisher pairs an author with an illustrator and the two might not meet or interact much,<sup>27</sup> but Arsenal believes in allowing their authors have more say in the creative process so that they are happy with not just the contents but the cover of their book.

In order to find a suitable canvas for the artwork, McPartlin and Shraya had to debate what page size would be best to design on. After some discussion, they chose an 8 x 11-inch landscape orientation; a full spread being 8 x 22-inches (the industry standard for children's picture books). The size, though typical of most children's picture books, was new for Arsenal. Standard picture book size was the correct choice, not just because it matched industry norms, but also because Shraya strongly felt that 8 x 22-inch spreads would be the best means to showcase Perera's artwork. Once the size and specs were decided, McPartlin relayed the information to Shraya and Perera so they could illustrate and design the pages however they wished.

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26 Ibid.

27 Cynara Geissler, personal communication, March 13, 2017.

The main goal for the look of the picture book was to convey a spiritual and meditative ethos through a playful colour palette with vivid illustrations. Shraya and McPartlin exchanged drafts of images, double-spread illustrations, and colour choices, and the process ended up being extremely collaborative. Shraya noted, “I am grateful for how open [Oliver was] to my ideas. He also has a great aesthetic sensibility and I think this really shows throughout the book, especially in the small details, like his reimagining of the Arsenal logo as a bindi.”<sup>28</sup>



Figure 3. The Arsenal logo's re-designed appearance in *The Boy & The Bindi*.

## COVER BOY

As Arsenal's first-ever picture book, the cover played an even more important role than it would in a typical book from the press. It needed to do two things: justly convey the writer's and publisher's design vision and announce Arsenal as a children's book publisher in an eye-catching way.

In *Book Design*, Andrew Haslam states “a book cover is a promise made by a publisher on behalf of an author to a reader.”<sup>29</sup> Arsenal had to assure readers that what they first see on the cover of the *The Boy & The Bindi* is an accurate representation of Shraya and Perera's artistic vision. “What Rajni and I presented was perhaps a bit risky as it is a moody, meditative illustration, as opposed to something perhaps more cheesy and obvious,” added Shraya.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the cover conveys a more mystical tone, one that is not so common for children's books, but

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28 Vivek Shraya, personal communication, July 18, 2016.

29 Andrew Haslam, “Covers and Jackets,” in *Book Design* (New York: Abrams Studio, 2006), 160.

30 Vivek Shraya, personal communication, July 18, 2016.

Safyan did note that the story of *The Boy & The Bindi* is intrinsically spiritual. With such an abstract idea (at least, in the minds of young children), it was a challenge to design a cover to reflect the tone and content of the book. But the final iteration with swirling purple hues creating a galaxy-esque background brilliantly captures the book's spiritual quality while still being geared towards young children.

Aside from conveying that this was to be a diverse children's picture book with a spiritual message, the cover also had to establish that Arsenal was serious about entering the world of children's book publishing. To demonstrate that this was not a one-off book, but the beginning of a new chapter in Arsenal's publishing program, the book was bound in hardcover with a dust jacket, signaling to readers, media, and book buyers that this is a book Arsenal believed in. This strategic decision demonstrated that Arsenal understands and upholds traditional children's picture book aesthetics.

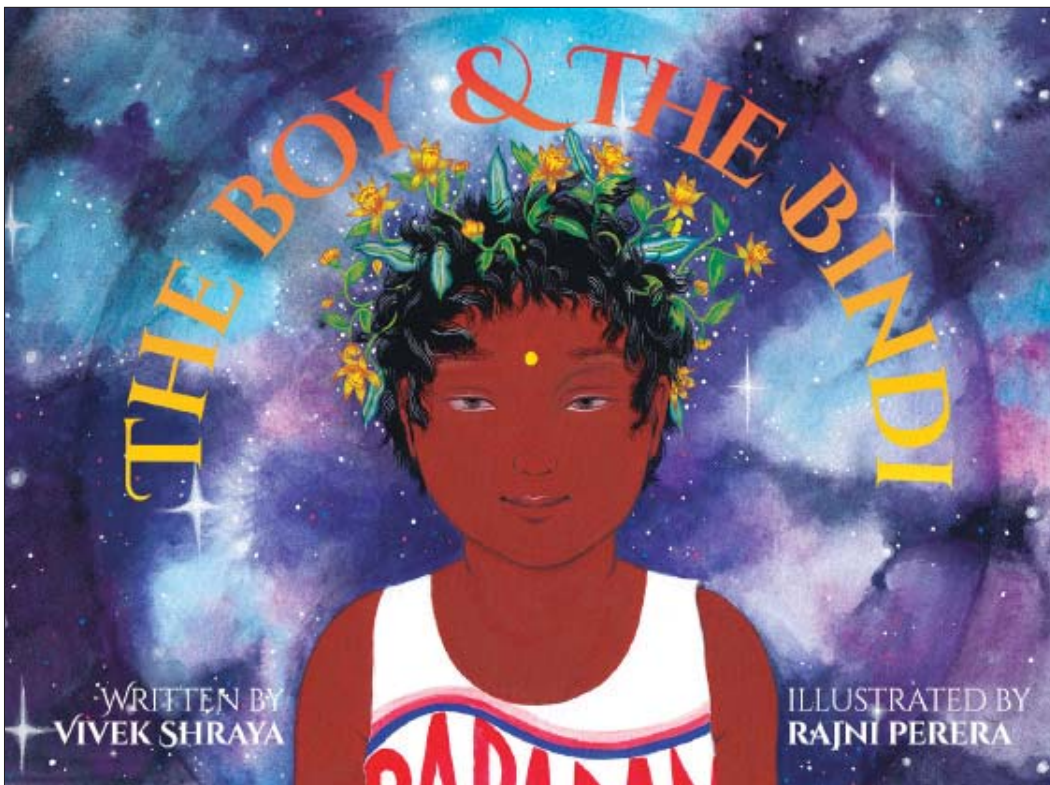


Figure 4. Cover of *The Boy & The Bindi*.



## PRODUCTION PROCESS AND CHALLENGES

While most of the production process was smooth, Arsenal encountered a hiccup when it came to print the book. Arsenal originally planned to print Shraya's book at Victoria-based printer, Island Blue, but when Arsenal requested a quote the printer wrote back that the picture book's size was larger than their equipment could handle.<sup>31</sup> The issue was resolved when Island Blue recommended FotoPrint, another Victoria-based printer, as they could print the book to Arsenal's specifications. Switching printers was not a great hindrance, as Arsenal prints its titles with printers all over Canada.

Once the printer was finalized and the design approved, the first task was to print press material for *The Boy & The Bindi*. For Arsenal's first picture book, the approach to creating press material was slightly different from what they usually do for other books. Instead of the usual process of having bound galleys (ARCs) made and sent out to reviewers, *The Boy & The Bindi* required full-colour fold and gathers (F&Gs), spreads of a book printed to scale with exact colours that resemble that of an unstapled brochure. Arsenal printed 100 F&Gs at FotoPrint, at a cost of about \$13.00 each.

Typically, press material is mailed out four months in advance of a book's release; however, with children's books, they must be mailed out earlier for reviews (ideally six months ahead of the publication date). Not only did Arsenal have to work with different material for marketing purposes, the press also had to work under a greater time constraint to ensure the campaign would be successful. Despite these challenges, Arsenal was able to smoothly sort them out and have the F&Gs sent to their office in time for mailing out to media. Now aware of the special requirements to print picture books, suffice to say that Arsenal is prepared for future printings.

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31 Oliver McPartlin, personal communication, July 19, 2016.

## CHAPTER THREE: MARKETING FOR STORYTIME



### 3.1 THE MENTORSHIP

“There are basically no guarantees when it comes to marketing/publicity,” said Arsenal’s marketing manager Cynara Geissler. “But access to good tools are one way that you can help set up a campaign for success.”<sup>1</sup> To understand how marketing children’s books worked, Geissler gathered information from contacts Arsenal had previously worked with. One such person was Jennifer Abel Kovitz, who had been a sales representative for some of Arsenal’s titles in the past, along with children’s books from other publishers.

In 2012, Geissler was co-pitching Arsenal’s young adult titles with Kovitz to *The New York Times* and *School Library Journal*, where she also sat in on meetings while Kovitz pitched children’s books. “That experience helped me get a sense of just how different the campaign and approach for pitching and marketing a picture book is. The timelines are more challenging (six month lead instead of four) and the early review materials are different (full-colour fold and gathers instead of bound galleys),” Geissler noted.<sup>2</sup>

When Arsenal took on *The Boy & The Bindi*, she knew she had to reach out to obtain more information from children’s book marketing professionals before embarking on a campaign. This resulted in a mentorship from Andrew Wooldridge, publisher of Orca Books Publisher, which was funded through the Association of Canadian Book Publishers. Since Orca and Arsenal are longstanding members of the ACBP, the meeting was a simple approval through the association’s mentorship program.

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<sup>1</sup> Cynara Geissler, personal communication, December 7, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



## THE LIBRARY MARKET

Through the Orca mentorship, Wooldridge revealed to Arsenal that that for publishers of children's books, "the majority of sales (as much as 75% in Canada and 90% in the US) are to the school / library market. (The rest is to the trade, therefore 25% in Canada and 10% in the US)."<sup>3</sup> To begin selling a children's book Arsenal needed to consider a more direct outreach strategy to build relations with schools and libraries. The press took the advice of Orca to purchase contact lists that included librarians and teachers as a way to supplement the outreach of their sales forces in Canada and the USA. Purchasing contact lists is something Orca does regularly and it has proven fruitful in placing picture books into the hands of adults who can pass them on to children. With these lists, Arsenal did outreach to schools and libraries about their diverse children's books in early 2017.

With the number of books librarians browse through each day, *The Boy & The Bindi* had to be marketed with the appropriate metadata in order to be discovered by librarians searching for diverse titles on specific themes. Arsenal attached three BISAC codes to the book: JUV060000 JUVENILE FICTION / LGBT, JUV011020 JUVENILE FICTION / People & Places / United States / Asian American, and JUV039140 JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Self-Esteem & Self-Reliance. This was the first instance in Arsenal history where it used Juvenile Fiction BISAC codes. The three specific codes show that the book revolves around three main topics: gender (ergo the LGBT code), the cultural background (Asian American), and the overall theme of self-esteem. Even though an Indo-Canadian author created the book, there were no "Asian-Canadian" or "Indo-Canadian" codes to use. Lam felt it would have been more appropriate to have these instead of the "Asian-American" code, but Arsenal has no control over such restrictions.<sup>4</sup> The lack of BISAC codes pertaining to more diverse Canadian literature goes to show how much more work needs to be done in book categorizing systems in order to be

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3 Ibid.

4 Brian Lam, personal communication, December 13, 2016.

more inclusive to diverse authors and content. Though the chosen BISACS worked well for US retailers, the landscape of diverse publishing stretches farther than the North American / English Language market and universal BISAC codes need to reflect this.

Once *The Boy & The Bindi* was coded and the F&Gs had arrived, the pre-press mailing could begin. This mailing happened in mid-summer because picture books need pre-press coverage. The F&Gs had to be received roughly six months in advance of the publication date to ensure they were considered for coverage in key trade publications such as *Kirkus* and *School Library Journal*. These publications are often used by librarians and teachers looking to order books and plan their curriculums. Each F&G was mailed to a key contact that specialized in reviewing children's or picture books as well (for example, reviewers from *The Huffington Post*, *Buzzfeed*, etc.). These contacts were gathered through typical media research that Geissler and interns perform, as well as from contacts shared through the mentorship with Wooldridge. On the mailing list were also contacts that Arsenal already had from previous marketing campaigns for its young adult titles, so bookstores in the US and Canada were also sent F&Gs. Geissler noted that pre-press reviews are very important for library sales.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the more reviewers Arsenal could pitch to, the more chance the book stood to be reviewed by a network of librarians who blog and generate buzz about new books.

The mailings of *The Boy & The Bindi* F&Gs also included a special letter from the publisher personally signed by Brian Lam. "The letter acknowledges that Arsenal was publishing our first picture book in 40 years (a big deal) and how much we believed in Vivek and her book," said Geissler. "We wanted to make sure reviewers and bookstores knew how serious we are about publishing high quality children's books."<sup>6</sup> The inclusion of the letter played a vital role in selling "directly" to the market as it bridged Arsenal with its audience in a more personal way.

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5 Cynara Geissler, personal communication, December 7, 2016.

6 Ibid.

### 3.2 THE TEACHER'S GUIDE

Shraya's book not only made Arsenal responsible for bringing the story to life, but it also meant they were charged with properly educating readers on the importance of diversity; a responsibility they took seriously. To this end, they developed a teacher's guide for the book. Typically, a "small or even medium-sized press might not normally have the resources for [a teacher's guide], as it is construed as a marketing cost and thus taken out of the marketing budget," said Lam.<sup>7</sup> However, the guide was not an Arsenal-initiated project. It was Shraya who spearheaded its creation, even seeking input from teachers. She worked with teachers from Guy Weadick School (K–6) in Calgary, and piloted the lessons with a group of grade two students, which proved very successful. Lessons covered in the guide are: exploring the concepts of identity and culture, challenging dominant expectations of gender expression, and exploring non-conventional gender expression.

Shraya worked with teachers to formulate discussion questions and activities for students to engage with the themes and text of *The Boy & The Bindi*. For example, an exercise is used to explore emotion: in small groups, students act out a scene depicting the line of text, "But when I'm outside, people stare." Each student is then tapped on the shoulder by their teacher and shares what they are feeling while doing the staring or being stared at. Other activities are discussion questions to get children to think about constructs of gender and how some people don't necessarily have to conform to being labelled "boy" or "girl."

The existence of a teacher's guide also encourages libraries and schools to buy the book<sup>8</sup> as a way for children to learn ways to develop self-esteem, respect for others, and an understanding of social skills through the text and themes—essentially, develop social-emotional skills. This supplementary material also resonates to a growing trend in the industry where publishers are creating more

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7 Brian Lam, personal communication, December 7, 2016.

8 Cynara Geissler, personal communication, December 7, 2016.

and more “focused materials to aid educators in imparting important lessons.”<sup>9</sup>

In 2015, *Publishers Weekly* published an article about the findings from a 20-year study done by the *American Journal of Public Health*. The research was conducted on two groups of children in kindergarten: one received social-emotional skills training and one did not. The groups were then re-evaluated when the individuals turned 25, and results showed that children who received social-emotional education at an early age were more likely to graduate from high school, go to college, and obtain full-time employment. Students who received social-emotional education also learned and honed skills such as cooperating with others, helpfulness, and the ability to resolve conflicts. Those who did not gain such an education were not as likely to pursue post-secondary education, and had higher instances of drug abuse and time spent in juvenile detention centres.<sup>10</sup>

This data reinforces what teachers have seen happen in the classroom for decades: that children who receive less social-emotional learning are less likely to succeed. The publishing industry is even catching on to what teachers are asking for to increase the likelihood of students succeeding. In 2010, Charlesbridge Publishing launched in 2010 a series of books for pre-kindergarten children, “each spotlighting one of four key areas: emotional skills, social skills, health and safety skills, and cognitive skills” through simple story visuals.<sup>11</sup> Lee & Low Books also releases teaching guides created by in-house literary specialists, while Listening Library and Penguin Young Readers joined forces with Read Proud Listen Proud, a campaign that shines a spotlight on LGBTQ titles. (Readers can visit the campaign’s website to access discussion guides to open a discourse between students and teachers about inclusivity.)

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9 Shannon Maughan, “Publishers Tracking Trends In the Educational Space,” *Publishers Weekly*, August 28, 2015, accessed December 14, 2016, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/67926-publishers-tracking-trends-in-the-educational-space.html>.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

Since *The Boy & The Bindi* was Arsenal's first children's book, supplementary content worked to show the industry how serious the press was about children's picture book publishing. The guide was a means of encouraging and furthering the discussion of diversity presented in the book, not only in publishing, but also in the world of the young readers. Shraya, a singer-songwriter, did an audio recording of her reading the story, available for free on Soundcloud. Produced with soothing music underlying her voice, the "audiobook" (accessed online) makes for a truly immersive experience of the text. Having such a hands-on author is always beneficial for marketing a book, and Shraya's large following played an important part in campaigning *The Boy & The Bindi*.

### 3.3 THE INFLUENCE OF AN AUTHOR

Arsenal expects their authors to have a hand in promoting their book(s)<sup>12</sup> as the marketing department is only comprised of Geissler (with some help from volunteer interns and paid freelancers on some books). When an author has an established following and is pro-active in both promoting themselves and their book, a marketing campaign can run quite successfully. To begin, Shraya sent Arsenal a list of contacts that should be approached for possible reviews.

### TOURING

The tour for Shraya's book (which she organized largely on her own) began with a launch in Toronto at the Shopify headquarters, which had tremendous turnout and was very successful. Shraya's initiative did not come to Arsenal as a surprise as they've worked with her before and are familiar with her dedicated work ethic. However, Arsenal was surprised by an unexpected publicity opportunity that arose out of Shraya's prolific cross-genre body of work. Geissler noted, "a really cool/ extremely unusual thing that happened was that Vivek Shraya and *The Boy & The Bindi* were featured on two giant digital billboards in Toronto (on Yonge St and in Chinatown) every few minutes for at least a month."<sup>13</sup>

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12 Cynara Geissler, personal communication, December 7, 2016.

13 Ibid.

The billboard was not purchased by Arsenal, but was the result of Shraya being a finalist for the Toronto Arts Foundation award, which had partnered with a digital billboard company. Through Shraya's hard work and the good fortune of her being a finalist for this award, Arsenal received some fantastic free publicity. Vivek's relationships with a variety of art scenes and communities played an even greater role in the marketing campaign when the *The Boy & The Bindi* hit shelves in fall 2016. Shraya and her brother Shamik are part of a pop duo called Too Attached. Too Attached was invited to open for indie pop duo Tegan and Sara on the Canadian leg of their *Love You To Death* album tour. The book was featured as part of the merchandise table at the concerts across Canada and Tegan and Sara regularly mentioned Vivek and her work onstage.<sup>14</sup> The tour with Tegan and Sara was not the only performance-based publicity Shraya did. She also developed and toured a stage show with extremely popular Arsenal author Ivan E. Coyote called *Pretty Good*.

It also helped that Shraya was receiving media attention prior to the book's release. She was the 2016 Grand Marshal of the Toronto Pride Parade, and *TRISHA* (a photo essay where she recreated photos of her mother) received a lot of high-profile media coverage. Shraya was in the media for a variety of reasons while promoting *The Boy & The Bindi*. Her first poetry collection, *even this page is white*, had been published by Arsenal Pulp Press in spring 2016 and was still being reviewed by the time *Bindi* was released; many of the reviews made mention of *Bindi* as well. With the pre-press material Geissler sent out six months prior, and Shraya's extensive touring and public profile, *The Boy & The Bindi* ended up receiving a significant amount of media coverage.

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14 Ibid.

### 3.4 FIRST REVIEWS

“The book got a nice preview announcement in *Quill & Quire*,” said Geissler,<sup>15</sup> but the first two reviews that came in were mixed. For example, *Kirkus* was first to be critical of the book’s verse: “Shraya uses rhyme, sometimes a bit awkwardly, to tell her tale.”<sup>16</sup> The reviews had a rocky start, yet for any publisher “[i]t is much worse when a book isn’t reviewed,” continued Geissler, “but it can be detrimental to review momentum (as well as to an author’s frame of mind and self esteem and energy to push the book) when the book isn’t initially well-received in the media.”<sup>17</sup>

Further, since there is limited space in regional and national publications for reviews (a danger threatening all publishers, no matter their size), there is risk in one negative review having too much weight. In the past, when daily newspapers and weeklies had larger book review sections, books might be reviewed in a variety of outlets that offered a variety of perspectives. One negative review was just one opinion, a drop in the bucket of a broader discourse.

Luckily, the subsequent reviews for *The Boy & The Bindi* were not so harsh. Much praise was given for the illustrations and many outlets, such as *Kirkus*, commented positively on the book’s introduction to one aspect of Hindu culture. The *Kirkus* review closes by saying, “The mostly easy rhyming and vivid colors make this an unforgettable look into Hindu culture.”<sup>18</sup> However, when Arsenal contacted Shraya with this particular review, she expressed concerns about the book being understood as specifically Hindu. Shraya did not want the picture book to be a primer on the culture, nor did she want the bindi itself be tied to Hindu women (not only Hindus wear bindis).<sup>19</sup> She wanted the book to be known just as much for its approach to queerness and spirituality.

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15 Ibid.

16 “*The Boy & The Bindi* by Vivek Shraya, Rajni Perera,” *Kirkus Reviews*, August 02, 2016, accessed December 19, 2016, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/vivek-shraya/the-boy-the-bindi/>.

17 Ibid.

18 “*The Boy & The Bindi* by Vivek Shraya, Rajni Perera,” *Kirkus Reviews*, August 02, 2016, accessed December 19, 2016, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/vivek-shraya/the-boy-the-bindi/>.

19 Vivek Shraya, personal communication, April 6, 2017.

She emailed Arsenal noting this, and after some edits to the press kit and book copy on the Arsenal website were made, more reviews were published that engaged with *Bindi*'s themes in the way that Arsenal and Shraya had hoped for.

### *THE BOY & THE BINDI* MAKES HEADLINES

In the fall, *The Boy & The Bindi* appeared on the *National Post*'s bestseller list for children's books. The list is curated by Type Books (in Toronto) and the high sales can certainly be linked to Shraya's many appearances (as well as the billboards) in Toronto. Not only did the book end up on the list, it was also in the story headline because a similarly titled book with LGBTQ themes called *A Boy Named Queen* had been released at the same time and was selling quite well. The headline read: "*The Boy & The Bindi* and *A Boy Named Queen* hang out on this week's National Post Bestseller List."<sup>20</sup> The book was also reviewed on *Booklist*, *Buzzfeed*, *Resource Links*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Book Riot*. Although there is not much room in newspapers, weekly papers, and magazines to print reviews these days, online reviews, which can be quickly and repeatedly shared, help to drown out the noise of any unfavourable print reviews.

For example, *Buzzfeed* ran a review with the headline, "This Trans Artist Wrote A Book About Breaking Gender Stereotypes By Wearing A Bindi."<sup>21</sup> This particular review of the book clearly focused more on the gender themes than the Hindu culture. Similarly, *The Huffington Post* ran coverage under the headline, "This Beautiful Children's Book Is Exploring Queer South Asian Themes."<sup>22</sup> Articles like these included interviews with Shraya in which she discussed the pleasure in producing a children's book with non-traditional content, which helped

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20 "The Boy & the Bindi and A Boy Named Queen hang out on this week's National Post Bestseller List," *National Post*, September 30, 2016, accessed December 20, 2016, <http://news.nationalpost.com/arts/books/the-boy-the-bindi-and-a-boy-named-queen-hang-out-on-this-weeks-national-post-bestseller-list>.

21 Sonia Mariam Thomas, "This Trans Artist Wrote A Book About Breaking Gender Stereotypes By Wearing A Bindi," *BuzzFeed*, November 18, 2016, accessed December 20, 2016, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/soniathomas/boy-and-the-bindi?utm\\_term=.pbgRo6y35R#.iulJPvwxBJ](https://www.buzzfeed.com/soniathomas/boy-and-the-bindi?utm_term=.pbgRo6y35R#.iulJPvwxBJ).

22 James Michael Nichols, "This Beautiful Children's Book Is Exploring Queer South Asian Themes," *The Huffington Post*, October 30, 2016, accessed December 20, 2016. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-boy-and-the-bindi\\_us\\_5810e2a4e4b08582f88d41eb](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-boy-and-the-bindi_us_5810e2a4e4b08582f88d41eb).



take the focus off Hindu culture. Though the book had a rocky start with mixed reviews, the end of 2016 saw it being lauded for its ability to represent queerness to a young audience, especially in reviews by children's librarians that were aimed at other librarians and teachers. In December, the book even made *CBC's* gift guide for art lovers, alongside other illustrated books.<sup>23</sup> All of this coverage in the media contributed to the impressive sales for Arsenal's first picture book.

### 3.5 SALES

More often than not, publishers of children's books will stress that without library reviews a book will not sell.<sup>24</sup> Thankfully, *The Boy & The Bindi* received some phenomenal reviews in online publications such as *School Library Journal*, which helped Shraya's presence grow in the US. In general, fall is the best trade season for Arsenal.<sup>25</sup> Since the picture book was released during that time, it was also optimal for assessment in schools and libraries that are looking to restock their shelves with new books for a new semester. Since Arsenal had not yet established a regular relationship with school librarians and teachers, they did not expect a high number of sales to occur in this sector out of the gate. However, about a month after the book's release, Robert Ballantyne, Arsenal's Associate Publisher, who is in charge of sales and distribution, generated a report showing how the book was doing in the US, and it appeared that libraries were buying it.

As the report was a very general overview, it was hard to say exactly how many of the total sales were made to libraries; however, one buyer (four locations), who is associated with the library market, bought 520 copies through wholesalers. Even without having bought library contact lists, it appeared the book had already been selling well, most likely due to word-of-mouth, online reviews such as in *School Library Journal*, and Shraya's own outreach through her social media and

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23 Leah Collins, "The CBC Arts gift guide for art lovers," *CBCnews*, December 12, 2016, accessed December 31, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/beta/arts/the-cbc-arts-gift-guide-for-art-lovers-2016-edition-1.3892955>.

24 Robert Ballantyne, personal communication, December 20, 2016.

25 Ibid.

touring. In Canada, the pattern was similar with most sales also going to schools and libraries through wholesalers. At least 300 copies were sold to the library market; another surprisingly successful start to a book without in-depth contacts to librarians.

Another contributing factor to strong early sales numbers was timeliness—*The Boy & The Bindi* was Arsenal's right book at the right time. "I grew up being exposed to only white, gender-normative children's books," said Shraya. "Why shouldn't children today be exposed to brown, gender-creative stories?"<sup>26</sup> Industry professionals have been querying this same issue concerning the need for more multicultural stories and writers, thus "there's a demand for diverse books doing what Vivek is doing," noted Ballantyne.<sup>27</sup> Shraya reached out to the people making these demands by going to schools, speaking to students, teachers, and librarians, in LGBTQ communities and, as mentioned earlier, sitting on panels concerning diversity in children's publishing at George Brown College.

Her willingness to take action and spearhead her own campaigns for diversity greatly impacted the sales of *The Boy & The Bindi*, and in Ballantyne's opinion this was not going to slow down. "A lot of books these days live only when they are front list but I don't think that will be the case with strong diverse kids books like this one," he said. Due to the currently high demand for diverse children's books "[*The Boy & The Bindi*] may have a longer run than most."<sup>28</sup>

The sales for the book were projected to also continue given Arsenal's connection to Shraya's following; an already established audience with her previous Arsenal titles, *She of The Mountains* and *even this page is white* (the latter just having been released the season prior to *The Boy & The Bindi*, with Shraya's name still being on people's radar as a result). Ballantyne stated that people who have been following her work (a large Canadian audience and growing American one) are looking for stories written by LGBTQ writers of colour.

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26 Vivek Shraya, personal communication, July 18, 2016

27 Robert Ballantyne, personal communication, December 20, 2016.

28 Ibid.

This audience has been buying Shraya's titles at book launches, bookstores, and online, and Arsenal is anticipating sales to continue for quite some time, especially with support from active marketing to libraries and schools planned for early 2017. By marketing to targeted school and library lists Arsenal will get news of the book to the inboxes of engaged and influential American librarians—gatekeepers to children's books. This marketing will not only benefit *Bindi* but extend to subsequent picture books published by Arsenal Pulp Press.

## CHAPTER FOUR: LOOKING AHEAD



### 4.1 THE SECOND PICTURE BOOK

Since Arsenal changed its submission guidelines to accept “children’s books with an emphasis on diversity,” the press is well on its way to establishing a line of books for young readers. During the publication and marketing of *The Boy & The Bindi*, Arsenal was already signing its second picture book: *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* authored by transgender Asian poet and performer Kai Cheng Thom, illustrated by Wai-Yant Li and Emily Yee Clare.

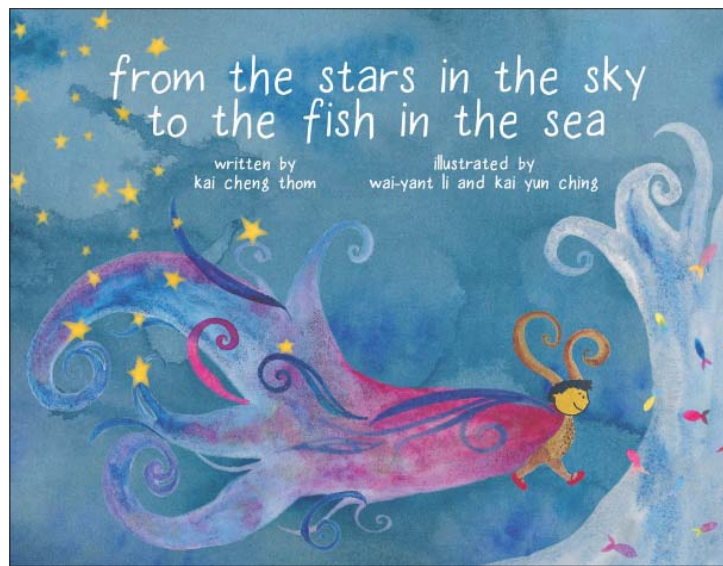


Figure 5. Cover of *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea*.

Thom’s picture book follows the same trajectory as Shraya’s, once again proving how recommendations help Arsenal highlight work that otherwise would be missed in the slush pile. Like Shraya, Thom was a recommendation from an Arsenal author (Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha). Once introductions were made, Arsenal agreed to view Kai Cheng Thom’s poetry manuscript and decided to publish it for spring 2017 (*a place called No Homeland*). “After signing the poetry

book and beginning preliminary work on it,” Lam explained, “Kai Cheng was aware that we were publishing Vivek’s *Bindi* book and asked if we would like to see her own children’s book proposal, which of course I did. We signed it a few months later.”<sup>1</sup> Just as *The Boy & The Bindi* published in the fall of 2016 (the season after Shraya’s poetry collection *even this page is white*), Thom’s *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* was published fall 2017, the season after her poetry collection.

### GOING IN WITH A PLAN

After working on *The Boy & The Bindi*, Safyan decided to do more research about editing children’s books. “It’s not at all like editing cookbooks, essay anthologies, local histories, memoirs, novels, or short stories!” she commented.<sup>2</sup> Originally, Safyan thought *The Boy & The Bindi* was a one-time occurrence for Arsenal as the acquisition policy at the time did not include children’s picture books. However, once she learned that this was going to be a regular occurrence for the press, Safyan brushed up on her skills for editing children’s picture books.

“There are courses taught at SFU, Ryerson, etc., and entire books written on this topic, so I have in no way become an overnight expert,” said Safyan, “but with some good resources I was able to find on the Internet, I have improved my knowledge and skill set, and I will continue to do so.”<sup>3</sup> For Thom’s book, she paid extra attention to word count, vocabulary, and concerns such as page count. An article from *The Guardian* called “Genre In Children’s Writing” (2008) by Linda Newbery and Meg Rosoff notes that a successful picture book contains minimal text, is illustrated in full colour, and roughly 32 pages. There is also attention paid to balancing illustrations with text. For example, it would be redundant to say someone is shocked when pictures are used to dramatize expression.

Similar to *The Boy & The Bindi*, Safyan had to look at word choice and word count; Thom’s book has more words to work with. The manuscript came in

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1 Brian Lam, personal communication, December 21, 2016.

2 Susan Safyan, personal communication, December 20, 2016.

3 Ibid., February 9, 2017.

with 1,681 words, which were cut down to 1,200 at the time this report was written (December 2016). It had to be further reduced since industry standards for word counts in children's books almost never exceed 1,000 words. Safyan had to look at word choice and rhythm and metre for Thom's forthcoming book. Reviews for *The Boy & The Bindi* criticized it for its poor rhyming and so extra care is being paid to *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* to ensure its poetic metre sounds good to the ear.

As for the placement of text and illustrations, Safyan created a template equivalent to a magazine's flat-plan to map out where everything was to go. To make the flat-plan, a simple table was formulated in Microsoft Word with each cell (40 of them) representing a page of the book. Within each cell was written what was to go on the corresponding page. For example, half-title and "Once upon" (the opening page), and illustrations to fill each blank cell. Arsenal can use this template for the editing and designing of future children's books.

Since marketing *The Boy & The Bindi* encouraged Arsenal to "to think about marketing more directly to schools and libraries for [its] children's titles as well as [its] young adult titles [and] adult titles that might appeal to a teen audience,"<sup>4</sup> this strategy will be used for future children's titles as well. One method that has been discussed to carry this out is penning letters to school principals, teachers, and librarians to show Arsenal as a press producing diversity and LGBTQ-focused books for young readers.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the contacts that were solicited from *The Boy & The Bindi* will also be used for the campaign of Thom's book, in hopes that it produces a similar (if not better) reception than met Shraya's book. As the industry, schools, and librarians continue to show an interest in teaching children about social-emotional skills through diverse books, Arsenal hopes to continue providing for them.

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4 Cynara Geissler, personal communication, December 7, 2016.

5 Robert Ballantyne, personal communication, December 20, 2016.

## 4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Given what was learned in this report about how *The Boy & The Bindi* was created and marketed, outlined herein are suggestions for how Arsenal (or other independent publishers) can proceed with the production and selling of children's books. By refining how Arsenal publishes children's books, they hope that more "authors and agents will think of Arsenal when sending out children's book proposals and manuscripts."<sup>6</sup>

One of the routes Arsenal is considering to take in building its children's list is acquiring of foreign titles. Doing so, however, comes with the challenges of working with titles in translation, which include diminishing a story's meaning: words, idioms, and the overall construction of the narrative could be diluted as certain nuances of a written language can never be fully adapted into another. It's a complicated task to translate titles, as "publishers do not want to take the risk of producing bad adaptations that result in low sales."<sup>7</sup> A way to address this problem would be to prioritize writers who are bilingual and conversant in English.

As Arsenal continues to take on more translations for their graphic novels list, they could also pursue translations of graphic novels for young children. While they have already done this for a young adult graphic novel (*Adrian and the Tree of Secrets*), expanding this to children's titles would be an interesting way to expose children to more ways of reading diverse stories. This way, Arsenal could also take on more artists and writers of colour, thus addressing the absence of such individuals in the industry.

Moreover, as learned from Arsenal's mentorship from Orca, hardcovers and dust jackets convey that a particular book is an A-list or big book for the publisher. If Arsenal, or any other publisher, chooses to embark on publishing children's picture books for the first time, a hardcover would be the best route to take (at least in its first printing). Not only does it indicate an awareness of standards in

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Lam, personal communication, December 19, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> "Translating Children Books: Difficulties and Reluctances," *The Artifice*, February 18, 2016, accessed December 23, 2016, <http://the-artifice.com/translating-children-books/>.

children's book publishing—the best books are in hardcover—but invites classroom and library use due to its sturdy format.

Once Arsenal acquires enough children's books, they could begin combining certain titles together under subject matter, target age groups, or even books done by the same author(s) or illustrator(s). Showing librarians and teachers such collections could further compel them to buy directly from Arsenal. To continue the dialogue with schools, Arsenal could encourage children's book authors to create teacher's guides (similar to what Shraya did, spearheading the creation herself so Arsenal would not have to find funds for it). The same goes for audio recordings, as the more supplementary material a children's book has, the more likely it will be bought by teachers as they will see it as more classroom-friendly; teachers are able to teach the books at length when planning is done for them already with guides and audio recordings.

To further improve marketing for future children's books, more awards can also be targeted. Although many of the high-profile awards for children's books are restricted to American publishers and authors who are US citizens, further research into Canadian awards would be of great benefit to build Arsenal's reputation as a reputable children's publisher. For *The Boy & The Bindi* Arsenal was already aware that the book could possibly gain recognition from the likes of Forest of Reading, Canadian Children's Book Centre, and the South Asian Book Award. Casting a broad net when it comes to awards submissions should be a strategy for all titles moving forward.

Since Arsenal encountered an issue in receiving reviews for *Bindi* that did not focus on the intended aspect of the book, moving forward, closer work should also be put towards ensuring copy is more focused for children's books. However, as Arsenal grows their collection, this will surely be achieved over time. No matter how Arsenal decides to go about its new children's book line, it will surely add to the ever-growing corpus of diverse children's books in North America.



## CONCLUSION



Despite being a small, independent publisher with limited resources, Arsenal smoothly executed its first-ever children's picture book and set it up for promising long-term success. From the beginning, *The Boy & The Bindi* was set up to succeed. This was largely due to the press and Shraya's timeliness in hearing and answering readers' call for more diverse children's books. Arsenal's YA list was beginning to grow and being lauded by librarians, which gave them incentive to seriously consider venturing into children's book publishing. And having worked with Shraya before also further compelled Arsenal to publish *The Boy & The Bindi*.

With both external (industry demand) and internal (Shraya's work history) factors at play, it is clear why Arsenal took on its first children's picture book. For a house of Arsenal's size, there must be a detailed survey of what is happening in the industry to estimate if a title is to take off. An assessment of industry buzz and an author's willingness to promote the book is vital. The latter is more crucial for Arsenal as its marketing department is so small; the work an author is willing to do is essential for the book's success.

For a first-time children's book, it was crucial to have an author who would be actively involved with promotion. Shraya worked extensively to promote her book—she toured widely and created supplementary materials in the form of a teacher's guide and an audio recording. Her achievements and active engagement in various art scenes before the picture book's release paved the way for great publicity. Her recognition as the Toronto Pride Parade's Grand Marshal, finalist for the Toronto Arts Foundation Award, and affiliation with Tegan and Sara's album tour, all worked in tandem to generate buzz around her work including her new picture book *The Boy & The Bindi*. Because Shraya is so accomplished and hard-working, Arsenal knew they could count on her support when it came

to marketing, which made the learning curve feel less steep than it would have otherwise seemed. Seeking help from knowledgeable professionals paid off as well. Setting up the mentorship with established children's book publisher Orca Books prepared Arsenal with useful information when organizing the book's marketing campaign and physical presentation. Having this insight was reassuring as it meant Arsenal was not walking into the project blind in terms of editing, design, and marketing.

As shown in this report, independent publishing houses like Arsenal putting forth a first children's book must pay attention to industry discourse, and have a good relationship with an author. The release of its children's picture book put Arsenal on the map for writers and agents who are looking to place diverse titles for young readers, and further built Shraya's platform as an artist. In the long run, *The Boy & The Bindi* profoundly changed Arsenal's editorial mandate: after forty years of not creating children's books, the press is now entering a new chapter of its publishing program by actively seeking to publish them.

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