

**IPA in Conversation with ...
Latoya West-Blackwood
Chairman, Book Industry Association of Jamaica**

**Caribbean publishing and the COVID-19 Pandemic
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Transcript**

Bodour Al Qasimi: Greetings everyone greetings everyone and welcome again to another episode of IPA in conversation with and today, I have a special guest with me, Latoya West-Blackwood is here with us today. Let me introduce myself first, my name is Bodour Al Qasimi, vice-president of IPA and I'm honored to be hosting another interview with a special guest. Latoya is the chairman of the Book Industry Association of Jamaica. Before I ask Latoya questions, I just want to welcome her. Welcome, Latoya.

Latoya West-Blackwood: Thank you.

Bodour Al Qasimi: It's wonderful to have you here with us.

Latoya West-Blackwood: It's wonderful to be speaking with you.

Bodour Al Qasimi: Latoya. I'm looking at your bio and I'm really impressed with what you're doing so I'm gonna read a little bit about your background so that our guests can learn a little bit about you. Latoya West-blackwood is the founder of I Publish consultancy and its imprint imagination books which focuses on works that promote cross-cultural understanding, gender equality, inclusion and social justice. She's the chairman of the book industry association of Jamaica, BIAJ, which bi-annually hosts the Kingston Book Festival. Under her leadership, the BIAJ has strengthened its work in the area of promoting reading and literacy as tools of personal development and national transformation, with a special focus in the areas of early grade reading and access to literature for all, particularly people living with disabilities. Latoya was a member of the national consultative committee of Latin America and Caribbean reads, a U.S. aid funded project implemented in Jamaica by EDU connect. LAC reads has significantly contributed to the efforts to fill the research and knowledge sharing gaps in teaching and culturally relevant content development in early grade reading.

She was recently recognized by the Yale school of management publishing course as the 2020 international recipient of its innovative leader award in book publishing. In addition to her passion for reading, literacy and general volunteerism, Latoya is a certified project management Mona school of business and management university of west indies mona

campus, a member of the inaugural class of Barack Obama's young leaders of Americas 2016, founding member of the UX exchanges alumni association, a British Council creative Scotland and Edinburgh festivals momentum alumna and the current chairman of Youth crime watch of Jamaica, a research-driven, youth-focused non-governmental organization working with communities across the island on issues of violence, prevention, sustainable livelihoods and integrity building.

Wow, Latoya, you're amazing.

[Laughter]

What an impressive bio! You have really a great great bio, tell me a little bit about what got you into all of this.

Latoya West-Blackwood: Well, I would go back to, I think, the age of five which was a defining period in my life, if I'm to remember those early days. And I say that it was defining because in terms of connecting the work I do now to back then, it's the period in my life I can remember, you know, falling in love with reading and books. Coming from a very humble background, working class family, I say that because books opened up a whole world for me that I didn't know existed. I didn't have the opportunity to travel at a very young age and I would travel through the pages of my books. And so I understood that books in a very real way, open doors for young people and the rest is really history from there. Just growing up in our family as well, where my mother, I saw her volunteering a lot, and I had a real understanding of how giving up your time and giving up your talents could help other people, right. So, charity begins at home. It's literal and it doesn't take for you to be extremely wealthy or, you know, you can start by just being passionate about something and seeing how you can share that passion with everybody else. So in terms of everything you have just read, it all goes back to having that understanding from a very early age about the the power of books and reading and the the power of one in terms of giving back and so my life's work of to now has really been influenced by that. And I'm very grateful to, you know, all my mentors and family and friends who have supported me on the journey, my colleagues, to this point.

Bodour Al Qasimi: That's amazing and, you know, I love that you're interested in gender issues as well and as a woman who's leading the the association in Jamaica, what was that like for you because? I know in a lot of these associations that, predominantly, we don't see many women. So, I just wanted to ask you about that. How did you rise to the challenge and get to where you are today? And did you feel there were any sort of roadblocks in your way?

Latoya West-Blackwood: Well, thanks for that question and you don't see a lot of women who look like me. I'm a black woman and I choose to wear my hair in locks, which is not – in my cultural context, you know, Rastafarians at one point in time were not necessarily desirable company or people because there's a lot of stigma in terms of how Rastafaris live. I'm not a practicing Rastafari, but I choose to hear my wear my hair like this because it currently defines my preference, but you know, it comes with a lot of things and I also believe that anything that I do, I understand that I am maybe an example or representation for a young girl who probably is like me, looks like me and I take that very seriously.

In terms of gender, our association was actually founded in 1989 by a very strong woman, so we had an awesome start. Her name is Shirley Carby and she's actually the founder of one of

the Caribbean's largest educational publishers, Carlong publishers, and she did a lot of work setting up the foundations of the association. Back then we were, you know, just kind of transitioning from our relationship with the big UK publishers, Longman and so on, who are very active in this space and our founder Shirley Carby, actually along with others, like you know, I don't want to go into names because I don't meet anyone, but the fact of the matter is they did a lot of work setting up an indigenous publishing culture and laying the foundations for publishers, booksellers, etc. to shape their own identity according to our cultural space, both in Jamaica and in the wider Caribbean. So, you would find coming out of that period a lot of national publishing houses and businesses to where we are today, which you know is seeing us on the cusp of another kind of transition in terms of business and a lot of things. So, in our space, I would say that women are generally well represented, but like so many other places in the world there is still a lot to be done in terms of things like equal work, equal pay. There is the whole matter of having women a lot of women in middle management, but in terms of the very top positions, still, you know, working towards having women have a fair chance at playing those leadership roles as well.

Bodour Al Qasimi: Interesting, and you touched a little bit about the indigenous publishing because it's quite interesting, the transition you took from, you know, UK-based publishers to having your own local publishing industry, that is reflective of your culture and the people there. So tell me a little bit about that and I'm sure you know that's made a huge difference in terms of the economy, cultural identity and many other things.

Latoya West-Blackwood: Well, the truth is we are nowhere near where we want to be, especially on the economic front. We still have a lot of work to do in terms of developing the kind of ecosystem that we see existing in other places where there's a lot more structure. So, you know, when a book comes to life in the form of an idea or it actually is published, you know, the support systems that go around that we're traditionally, we're a very big textbook market. Though we have produced some of the world's best writers, but what we've had is a lot of those writers have reaped the success, moving outside of this space, and it has its pro's and con's because it's easier to tell stories about home sometimes when you're outside of the space and looking back at it. But then there is the business side of it, where we are now actively looking to develop the industry beyond where we're at now to enable an author or a writer or a publisher or the other players in the market to stay right here in Jamaica or right here in the Caribbean and to reap not only the the recognition but the economic success in terms of what comes with a book that sells thousands of copies or is marketed well, you know, in that respect. But I would say that we have done significant work in terms of developing materials that are culturally relevant. I'm very passionate about young people and children so I tend to bring the discussions back there, but in that regard, you know, we now have publications where young people are able to look in the books and see themselves both in terms of the stories that are told and literally, literally in terms of the representation with things like illustrations, just how the environment is portrayed, it's something that they can identify with. And so I think that's where we have done a lot of work and achieved a lot in terms of creating that balance, so now it is the whole matter of the economic side of things, building all the industry in that way, that we can have more successful stories at home. Not just in terms of the recognition, but in terms of the business.

Bodour Al Qasimi: Okay, so Latoya, tell us a little bit about the situation in Jamaica. We're all easing out right now of lockdown and quarantine and we've all been under a lot of difficulties in our publishing industry. We'd love to know what it was like in Jamaica for yourself and for the publishing industry in general.

Latoya West-Blackwood: Well, it was, I think, the very first point to start with is that a pandemic, I don't think most of us who are alive at this time would have experienced a pandemic before. And so, just starting there in terms of the shared human experience, it was, you know, something that came with a lot of anxiety, a lot of uncertainty. And from the health side we have a big diaspora in places like the US and the UK, so you had people being impacted on a personal level in terms of family members and not necessarily being well and you know the emotional and mental health issues that come with that. So beyond that though, Jamaica though punching above its weight in the world in terms of our name and all of that, we're a very small island. So, when things like this happen, the scale of the impact tends to be greater in some sense than maybe in other spaces. And so what we found is that in the beginning, we definitely, from the economic side, we had things to contend with like almost a sudden halt to our tourism sector, which impacts every aspect of life. It's one of the main contributors to our GDP. Then looking at our industry, as in the book industry, what we found right away, we were very early in terms of our government, it's directives where there were concerns closing down businesses. So I think we had our first case of coronavirus in Jamaica on March 10 and shortly after, we had a directive from the government in terms of business operations. So quite a few places, including bookstores etc. would have been impacted right away by that. We also had schools closing very early, we were very early to close our schools, because certainly we wouldn't want our children to be impacted negatively. What we've found since then, I mean, we never went on total lockdown, so what a lot of businesses did was pivot in terms of focusing on digital, and that's one of the positives that has come out of the whole situation, in that there has been a lot of innovation in terms of connecting with clients, customers, serving the industry still, in spite of you know the limitations based on the public health guidance. We have one member in particular who has been working with our local ministry of education, well several of our members have been, but in terms of providing digital access to educational materials, we've had one of our members work very closely with the ministry of education to ensure that children, well outside of our capital city, were able to access what they needed for learning. We as an industry also sought to, you know, work with our members to support communities and particularly children and young people. So we worked with a non-profit called [Fight for Peace](#), which does violence prevention work, and we partnered with them to deliver bibliotherapy to over 60 children across three very vulnerable communities via a virtual book club. And all that, the virtual book club, was very successful to the point where we're now continuing into the summer. We had you know celebrity reading, so we had Cedella Marley read to the children, we had a bookstore owner giving a virtual tour, we had authors coming on and, you know, telling them what it's like to be an author and we had an illustration and digital storytelling workshop where children were able to create stories and have them illustrated, and then we're going to be publishing those, talking about their communities and themselves in terms of their whole experience, being at school during this time.

Bodour Al Qasimi: That is wonderful, that sounds amazing, and I think, you know, when you're put in a situation and you're limited with what you can do, people get creative, right, they start to think outside the box and they start to come up with some new innovative ideas. How has your government responded, Latoya? Has the Jamaican government provided any sort of support for the publishing industry?

Latoya West-Blackwood: Well, at this point in time, the answer to that, in a direct way, it's no, right, and I will qualify that by saying that the publishing industry falls under the creative industries umbrella and in that regard, we have had discussions with our government through our ministry of culture which has been very supportive in terms of, you know, facilitating discussions with us as members of the creative industries. And you know, members were encouraged. Our government has rolled out a national plan, through a platform called *We Care*, where it's targeting you know different sectors of society. They had a big package for tourism, because clearly that's one of our major earners and a lot of people were displaced. Then they had different subcategories and some of our members have benefited under that line of assistance, in terms of applying as individuals who are registered as as you know a part of the creative registry and recognized as individuals operating in the sector.

We have continued to work with our ministry of education. However, in terms of a specific line of assistance to publishing, we have not had that and that's why my answer is no. What we are now positioning ourselves to do, is we're doing wide consultations with our members. So we had a meeting with our ministry of education recently and coming out of that meeting, they have said: these are specific programs that we are in the process of working through the details that we would either like you to help us as content providers or, you know, so it's that kind of assistance in terms of ensuring that for members who might have been disrupted at different levels, because we have bigger players we have smaller members of the sector, you know, trying to see how we can work together to still have business going. But we are now in the process of formulating specific asks from the government in terms of things that we are now sure we will need, to support us coming out of this crisis. And the thing is, we understand our context, the resources are very limited in our setting. And as I said, now the government is facing a major fallout in terms of the economy, because tourism, we have been so dependent on tourism, that the need for diversity has always been there but it's now squarely on the table. And I believe that industries like ours will play a major role, and we have already started in supporting the economic recovery, but we're going to need assistance. So one of the things I can think of right now is that we have a lot of members who will need retooling in order to meet the new digital demands that exist. There are some companies who might have been better prepared for it, but I know that some of our members definitely will need some strategic support in that area. It's also very difficult to access lines of finance or access to finance for women-owned businesses and also for people who are entrepreneurs, especially in non-traditional areas. So in terms of, you know, financial support, we will need a lot of the red tape that exists to be revisited, so we can try to to really help people in the way that they need. We look at spaces like the UK, where there are all these grants, you know, and so on, coming up, but we know that that funding comes out of a particular context which we don't have.

Bodour Al Qasimi: I know a lot of countries are struggling with that and it's difficult to find funding for the publishing industry specifically when everything else is also falling apart. Have any events been cancelled? So, I know you have the Kingston book fair annually, has that been cancelled this year?

Latoya West-Blackwood: So, we have regionally, what has been the trend is that we have had quite a few festivals and major public events cancelled. As an industry, we believe that it was very important to set a proper example in terms of balancing out the, you know, need for profits and engagement and our general plan with public health advice and the well-being of people. And we have monitored the space, both regionally and internationally and we took the decision that we are definitely not going to be moving ahead with an in-person staging of the Kingston book festival, which is a major event where thousands of people attend the different events, especially the book fair. We just didn't think it would be safe, even with the you know the measures about masks and social distancing. I don't think you have been to Jamaica, but I hope to change that in the future when it's safe. But we definitely have challenges with heat and it just makes everything very complicated and so we just didn't think that it would be a good idea. But what we are exploring, certainly like many other festivals, is to see how we can still keep the engagement in terms of some virtual edition and we'll be making an announcement on that by summer. The festival was planned for November, as a part of the Kingston international Festival, which would be multi-disciplinary, so we would be the literary arm. And so we are we're looking at, you know, a program that will keep everyone safe but also keep the focus on the work that we're doing as an industry and just supporting people in terms of having some fun and, you know, mental relief.

Bodour Al Qasimi: Yeah, I think that's important and as much as I hear all of the cancellations and the postponements of the events, has anything positive come out of this for you personally or professionally?

Latoya West-Blackwood: I would say one of the, I would definitely say yes, I would say one of the highlights for me personally to date has been that project with the the children in west Kingston, because it demonstrated to me just the resilience of our spirit and when we come together to do good, you know, just the unintended or unexpected, positive benefits that come from it. And just to see that in spite of everything, children were still excited, you know. I know a lot of us have been worn out by the zoom calls for work and so on but they are genuinely excited to meet authors, to talk to publishers, to be read to, to just talk, you know, and that bibliotherapy just does work, that books still have that magic even if it's not in person. That was personally very gratifying for me.

I also think that, you know, as an industry, what this pandemic has done is it caused us to pause for a bit and to just really look back at how we do what we do and why we do it. And I think that was very important and maybe it's a pause that we wouldn't have had otherwise and coming out of it, I'm seeing where a lot of businesses are becoming stronger. Unfortunately, some businesses will you know be not as strong and perhaps have more negative consequences. But we are trying to see how best we can support those entities. We have our own limitations, but in any way, so we have a trade show coming up in a few that's normally an in-person event and the trade show is all about sharing best practices, talking

about things that are new and helping people to network. And we're hoping that that will, you know, also provide some support.

But I would say that overall, the positive for me is just to look at how we can deepen collaboration, how we overcome challenges in spite of, and, as I said, just the fact that books in any form or reading is still that spark of hope for us.

Bodour Al Qasimi: Interesting. It is definitely a spark of hope and Latoya, you were invited by the IPA last year to take part in a WIPO seminar in Santo Domingo. Can you tell us a little bit, what did you learn in that experience?

Latoya West-Blackwood: Well that experience was, it was definitely one that that we value. That I value. And thanks to the team. It was our first time attending a regional meeting as members of IPA, that was a landmark. And then the whole matter of copyright is one that has always been important but it is increasingly important in this space where we're now talking about the use of technology in publishing and different sectors of the industry and how we will have to, you know, as an industry ensure that we're aligned on what we want and how people should be operating. At that meeting, it was also important to understand the issues that were happening beyond our country and our region and so, you know, engaging with Latin American counterparts. We understood that we have shared issues but we also have very different realities. Jamaica has done quite a bit through JIPO, our intellectual property office locally, and other entities. We have done a lot in terms of our copyright legislative framework, which is quite strong and are an example in terms of the region. So it was just in terms of the the experience overall, it was good exposure, it was good to be able to have our voices represented at that international level, with you know several countries and organizations there. So I think that right away, I mean, we saw the benefit of becoming members of IPA in the very short term, just through that experience.

Bodour Al Qasimi: That's wonderful to hear. And I have one last question for you, I mean this interview is so interesting, I don't want it to end, but unfortunately, you know, we'll have to wrap it up soon. But in IPA, we value all our members and especially our new members who have just joined and we really want to show our support to new members, so please let us know how IPA can support Caribbean publishers in the future.

Latoya West-Blackwood: Well, I would say that, you know, I'm very interested in the whole matter of exploring partnerships, practical partnerships. So beyond seeing each other at meetings and, you know, having that kind of engagement and attending the very, you know, for example, we enjoyed the educational publishers forum held recently. That was very good experience, a lot of very good content coming out of that. But we would love to deepen our working relationship with other members. We're very open to things like audience building, finding new sources of funding, not funding in terms of us exploiting, but seeing how we can achieve shared goals, you know, in spite of where we are. So if there are people who are focusing on children, indigenous publishing, you know, different things, marketing, whatever. We definitely need to access new markets, especially coming out of this experience where we're going to have to help members to build up their economic resilience, new markets is something that we're very open to. But, you know, those are just some of the

practical ways. Beyond that, we currently value a lot in terms of just the knowledge that IPA shares, the work that they do in terms of surveys, research, sharing best practices. I think those are extremely valuable.

Bodour Al Qasimi: That's wonderful to hear, Latoya. Thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today. You're a trailblazer in the industry and we're so proud to have you, we're so proud to have you with us at IPA, it's really wonderful and I hope everybody enjoyed this interview. Stay tuned for more interviews coming up on the IPA website, IPA in conversation with, we've got lots of other speakers coming up, so please keep up to date with our latest videos. Thank you again for watching.