

# Multicultural publisher holds its own

Lee & Low Books keeps growing, despite competition from giant rivals

BY MAGGIE OVERFELT

Spanning the conference-room shelves at Lee & Low Books in midtown Manhattan, the publisher's children's picture books are decorated with a rainbow of vibrant fine-art spreads and award-winning verse. But a closer look reveals many titles and subtexts tied to dreadful political events: the arduous flight of a group of Sudanese refugee children, the treatment of Japanese-American prisoners at internment camps during World War II and the story of a south Chicago preteen executed by his gang.

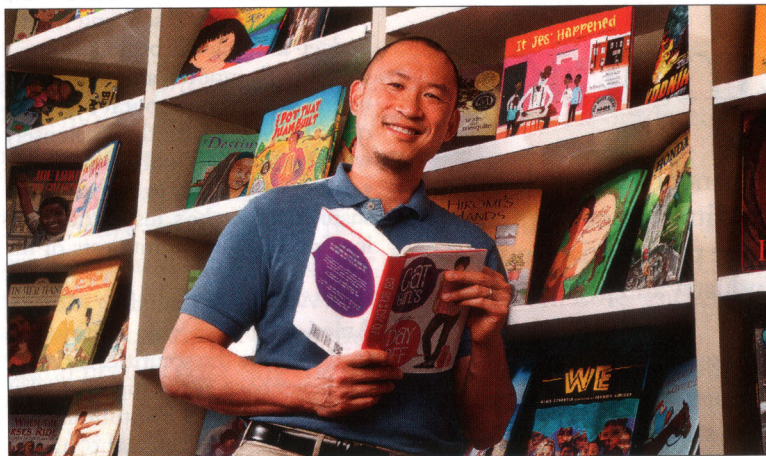
"I think that's what a lot of folks have counted on us for—to take on subjects that aren't easy to talk about," said Jason Low, Lee & Low's publisher and a second-generation owner.

Uncovering such stories and their authors has been vital to Lee & Low's success as an independent publishing house. The 21-year-old business is one of the few in New York—and the country—that concentrates solely on children's books written by and about minorities. Its best-known titles include *Baseball Saved Us* by Ken Mochizuki and *Yummy*, a graphic novel by G. Neri about gang life.

According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, about two dozen minority-focused publishers exist in North America, with most of them headquartered in the San Francisco and New York City areas. Public-school teachers and librarians drive this small market. The Cooperative notes that of the 5,000 kids' titles published in the U.S. last year, 219 were written by minority authors. The numbers haven't changed much since 1985, the year the Cooperative started tracking them.

## Teachers' input sparks new line

"Census statistics show an increasing population of Latinos, African-Americans and Asians, but



**DIVERSE APPROACH:** Jason Low targets minority readers at Lee & Low Books.

we're not seeing a comparable trend in the rise of books that reflect that population," said Kathleen Horning, the Cooperative's director.

To address the problem—and presumably tap the potential sales from a more diverse audience—editors from New York's largest publishing houses, most of which have their own multicultural imprints, recently launched a forum to discuss how to increase diversity in books. "Multicultural is the new mainstream," said Andrea Pinkney, vice president and

executive editor at Scholastic Trade Publishing, the world's largest children's book company.

Lee & Low can't compete with the giants' budgets—the 15-employee firm puts out 12 to 16 new titles a year, compared with Scholastic's 600—but Mr. Low said the profitable company does multimillion-dollar sales each year.

The lion's share of Lee & Low's sales—about 80%—comes from the educational market. A few years ago, after getting input from

teachers, Lee & Low launched Be-bop Books, a line aimed at schoolchildren just learning to read. "Then [the teachers] started asking, 'What else do you have?'" said Mr. Low. Sales ballooned as the company started peddling picture books to teachers.

Lee & Low has also been targeting schools outside New York City, its core market, which is facing educational budget cuts. The company's sales force has landed large orders in St. Louis and parts of Florida.

## Acquisition fuels growth

This year, the company is gradually reprinting the best-selling books from Children's Book Press, a five-employee San Francisco firm Lee & Low bought in January.

"We were really thrilled when we heard Lee & Low was buying CBP," said Amy Cheney, a librarian at the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center in Northern California, noting that her patrons often gravitate to multicultural titles. "It's very challenging to find books that are of interest to people of color across a wide range of literacy levels. Lee & Low does stuff a lot differently. They're not just in it to chase best-sellers." ■

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