



## **African-American Publishing in the Digital Era**

*By Felicia Pride  
Dec 13, 2010*

Many publishers are still trying to understand what impact the rapid growth of digital technology will have on the industry and their businesses. Publishers of titles aimed at the African-American market are no different, and the digital strategies—from making e-books readable on every kind of device to using online marketing and social media—are very much the same. PW talked with a variety of publishers—from small independents to the large New York trade book houses—about how they are using digital publishing and the new technologies to reach readers in the African-American book market.

**[For a listing of current and forthcoming African-American titles for adults and for children click [here](#)]**

The promise of digital publishing prompted Karen Hunter—publisher of the Simon & Schuster imprint Karen Hunter Publishing, a line of mostly nonfiction works aimed at the African-American market—to align with a new and separate digital publishing venture. She's heading a digital publishing house that will launch in January and is owned by Mgmt one, a business advisory firm headquartered in Cincinnati. First One Digital Publishing plans to publish 10 e-books and will determine whether to publish print editions on a case-by-case basis.

Hunter believes that traditional publishing has been reactive, scrambling to respond to the Sony reader and later the Amazon Kindle. "The digital era wasn't ushered in by publishing, but by a device," Hunter says, emphasizing that it should be publishers not devices that drive the market. Mgmt one chairman Jimmy Gould said First One Digital Publishing represents a broad-based digital publishing effort that will include digital promotional campaigns, enhanced digital storytelling with embedded video and photos, as well as a literacy campaign and e-commerce partnership with online retailer Market-America.com.

While First One is an African-American majority-owned firm, Hunter said that wasn't by design. The First One list is not focused exclusively on African-American-oriented titles, and Hunter emphasized that First One will publish both nonfiction and fiction in a range of categories including spiritual, inspiration, fantasy, and mystery. The first release is a nonfiction title, *Good Cop, Bad Money* by Glen Morisano, a retired NYPD inspector who made several high-profile busts. In February, First One will republish the classic autobiography, *Nigger*, by black comedian, political activist, and 1968 write-in presidential candidate Dick Gregory; originally published in 1963, the new edition will have a new introduction. First One's staff of about 20 are located in Los Angeles, New York, Cincinnati, and Houston, and Hunter says the staff includes entertainment veterans from the likes of MTV. First One's e-books will be

available for all digital devices and offered at an average of \$9.99; the publisher says it will offer "triple the royalty of the industry standard."

First One plans to launch a digital app that will allow reading clubs and reader groups to join its First One Book Club. The app will provide sneak peeks at upcoming titles; announce book events and signings in users' area; invite readers to visit online to share book reviews, chat with authors, and connect with other readers; and offer promotions including monthly giveaways of e-readers. The publisher also plans to place video book trailers in malls and movie theaters.

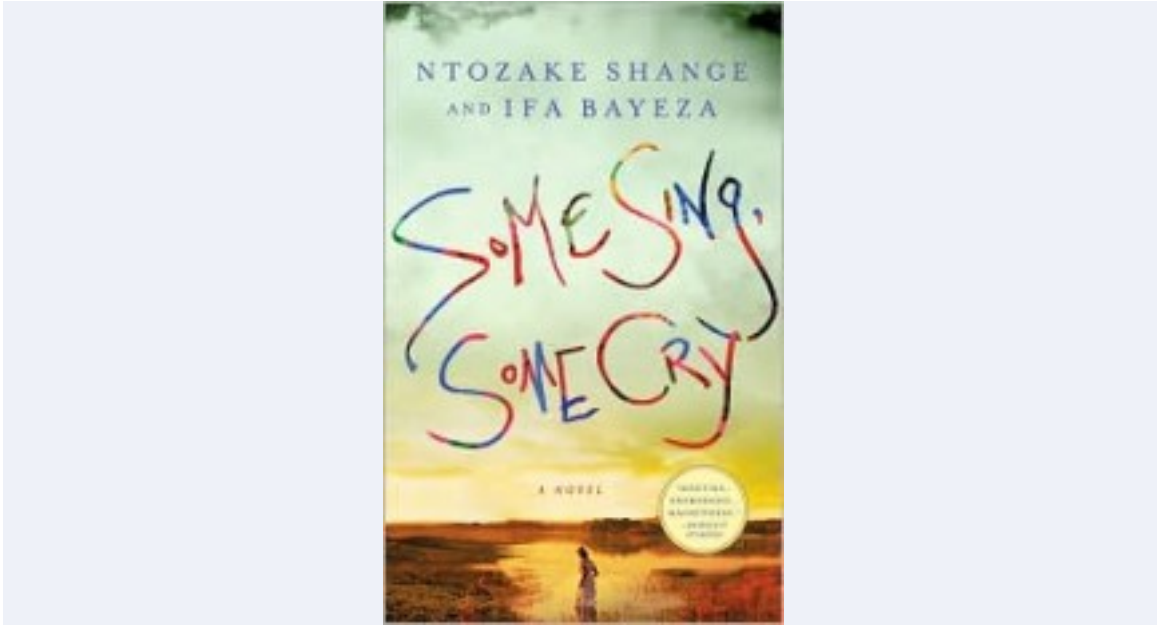
"Our publishing house and business model will focus on creating partnerships with people who tell great stories," Hunters says, "people who are great stories, and put the power back in the hands of those who produce the content—the writers."

### Indie Digital Publishing

Akashic Books, based in Brooklyn, has long featured African-American, African, and Caribbean authors as well as titles on black music; its authors include such novelists as Elizabeth Nunez, Amiri Baraka, Melvin Van Peebles, and Colin Channer. Publisher Johnny Temple said he was pleasantly surprised by the e-book sales of the novel *Glorious* by Bernice L. McFadden, published simultaneously in trade paperback and in e-book format in May 2010. The print novel is now at the end of its second printing and has become the top-selling e-book in Akashic's entire catalogue. Temple said he thinks reading clubs played a big role in spurring the e-book's success. "[McFadden] initiated several book club and blog contests," he says. "It suggests that the clubs are reading e-books," a possibility he hadn't seriously considered previously.

*Glorious* also received a positive New York Times review, a trend that Temple was able to connect to other e-books by black authors that sell well for the house, including *Jesus Boy* by Preston L. Allen and John Crow's *Devil* by Marlon James. James's book was originally released as a hardcover in 2005. Akashic hadn't yet released the book as a paperback, so when the house was out of stock of the hardcover, the e-book provided a bridge, the only edition available until the paperback was printed.

Temple admits that Akashic doesn't do anything specific to promote its e-books, although he's looking to change that in 2011. The house started its digital publishing program in 2009 and scrambled to make its books available for as many digital readers as possible. "It takes a lot of people power to negotiate those different contracts and deal with all these different e-book vendors," says Temple. "I wouldn't say that our e-book program is particularly sophisticated. We had to first make the books available [as e-books]. In the coming year, we will begin e-book promotional initiatives."



Even with the work required, Temple notes that e-books started selling immediately and estimates that e-books account for about 8% of his total book sales.

This January, Akashic is adding another installment to its popular Noir series. Haitian author Edwidge Danticat is the editor of Haiti Noir; the anthology's release date coincides with the first anniversary of the earthquake that devastated the country. Temple notes that overall the Noir series has done well as e-books and believes Haiti Noir will follow that trend.

It's been two years since Chicago indie Agate started publishing e-books simultaneously with print editions, which are sold through its distributor, PGW, and directly on its Web site. "E-books aren't a big part of our business to this point," says publisher Doug Seibold, who isn't sure why that's the case. "There's just not a lot of pickup with the types of things that we publish." Like Akashic, the house hasn't done anything unique or distinctive to make its e-books stand out.

But Seibold recognizes one of the major benefits of e-books: low production cost. He says he's exploring the idea of producing inexpensive limited edition e-book versions of titles that he wants to make available to a wider readership. "Are e-books something that will be promotional to make more people aware of a book and get it into their hands which could help sales?" Seibold wonders. "Or is it going to be a version that a lot of people want?" He says that Agate has yet to figure that out, although he's committed to making e-books available if that's what readers demand.

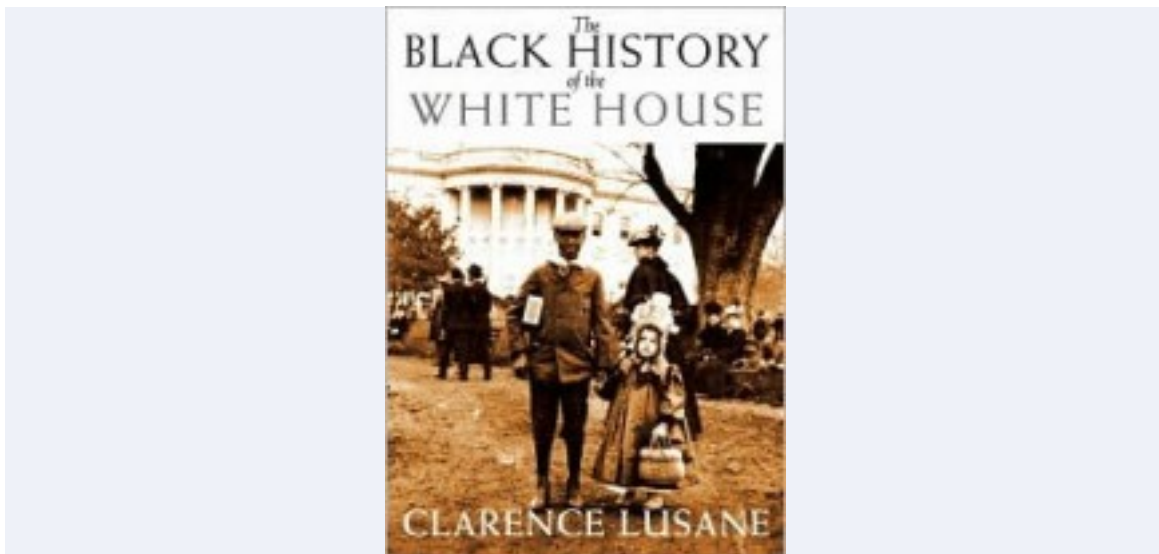
### E-books, Social Media, and Digital Promotions

Akashic's e-books sales of 8% was echoed by William Shinker, president and publisher of Gotham Books, for Penguin's e-book sales, a number he says that continues to grow fast. But while the digital revolution has provided new ways of publishing, it's also ushered in new ways of connecting with readers. More often than not, promoting e-books is part of the larger promotional plan for the print version. Publishers generally agree about the usefulness of digital technology in spreading the word about important books. "The Internet has become one of the most powerful tools that we have for publicizing and promoting our books," says Shinker, "and it is very easy to target the African-American audience in this way."

Gotham Books has been strategic in working with authors who already have strong digital and online presences. In January, Gotham is publishing a new book by hip-hop mogul Russell

Simmons titled *Super Rich: A Guide to Having It All*. In February the house will publish *I Beat the Odds: From Homelessness to the Blind Side and Beyond* by NFL player Michael Oher, the formerly homeless young football player whose uplifting life story was featured in Michael Lewis's nonfiction work *The Blind Side* and the hit film starring Sandra Bullock based on the book. Both books will publish simultaneously in hardcover, e-book, and audio.

Russell Simmons has more than 62,000 Facebook fans and about 553,000 Twitter followers, where he's begun mentioning the book. He is also the CEO of Global Grind, a hip-hop Web site that gets 1.5 million viewers per day. Gotham is planning a series of short taped interviews with Simmons conversing with people featured in the book. The videos will be posted on his Facebook page and announced through Twitter. Similarly, Oher has 159,000 Facebook fans and 22,000 followers on Twitter and will promote his book to both networks.



At Dafina, an African-American imprint of Kensington, nearly all fiction titles release simultaneously in both print and electronic formats. Key titles are promoted each month at the large e-book retailers, such as Amazon Kindle, Apple, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and Sony.

"Our digital publishing program is in a constant state of evolution," marketing director Lesleigh Irish-Underwood explains. "We are always testing and evaluating new ways to grow it so we can offer consumers the titles they love in the largest variety of formats possible."

The imprint has compiled e-book bundles for Dafina authors. Carl Weber's newest release, *Torn Between Two Lovers*, which published this September, was digitally bundled with other books in his Big Girls Book Club series—*Something on the Side* and *Big Girls Do Cry*.

Harlequin's leadership in digital publishing—thanks to the powerful role of romance fiction and women's fiction generally in driving the growth of e-book sales—has long been acknowledged. So it's no surprise that digital publishing and digital promotions are key elements in the publishing program at Kimani Press, Harlequin's African-American romance publishing division. In early November, Harlequin hosted a weeklong event entitled "So You Think You Can Write," which utilized new media tools such as blogs, webinars, podcasts, community chats, and Twitter. Editors at Kimani Press hosted a live chat on the particulars of writing multicultural romance and women's fiction.

For *Manifest* by Artist Arthur, the first paranormal young adult title published by Kimani, the imprint promoted the title on teen sites like *Twistmagazine.com*, executed a social networking campaign, and developed a contest. The campaign

resulted in more than one million ad views, or impressions.

There's also the need to partner with e-retailers. Irish-Underwood says that Kensington works with retail and online accounts to create digital promotions. "We regularly provide early chapters or book excerpts for download; have developed apps that are exclusive to an individual account for a limited amount of time; have arranged for online contests, chats, giveaways; and are in the midst of executing our first virtual tour."

In addition, Kensington recently developed several digital campaigns for Dafina authors. In one campaign, the house produced five video webisodes, which were distributed over a period of two weeks through online outlets before the book's publication. In another campaign, a countdown app was created and placed on the author's site, on Kensington's site, and on Facebook. During the countdown, bits of the cover image were exposed, and at the on-sale date the full cover was revealed.

Of course, publishers have realized that strategies such as simultaneous e-book and print publication, online promotions, and the use of social media are key to publishing all kinds of books, not just those by or about African-Americans. And as digital publishing becomes a more significant part of small press and even self-publishing efforts and as publishers learn the best ways to utilize digital media, African-American-oriented titles and African-American authors are sure to benefit.

The recent launch of Google eBooks looks to open a new era in digital publishing, allowing readers to buy e-books, store them online, and read them on any device they own at any time.

While the digital revolution has created new opportunities for publishers in the African-American market, we're just at the beginning of the new digital era, Seibold told PW. "There's a lot of evolution yet to happen," he says. □

[Felicia Pride is a frequent PW contributor and the founder of TheBackList.net.](#)

## **The Hip-Hop Life**

[Decoded by Jay-Z \(Random/Spiegel & Grau\)](#)

The hardcover edition has more than 300,000 copies in print, but digital promotion and interactivity also surround Decoded, hip-hop master artist Jay-Z's autobiographical narrative, in which he explains the lyrics for 36 of his songs. Leading into the November publication date, there was the "Decode Jay-Z with Bing" marketing campaign, where fans used Microsoft's search engine, Bing, to help them find all 320 pages of the book in various locations throughout the country. The e-book includes exclusive audio and video. And next up is the Decoded iPhone and iPad app (whose approval was pending as of press time), which will include exclusive video plus customizable content. □—Diane Patrick

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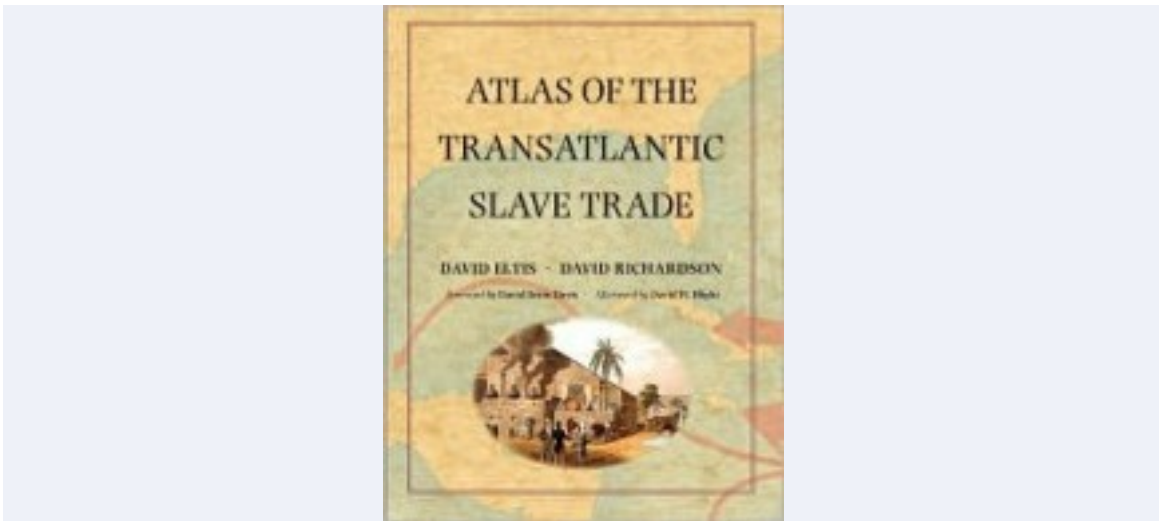
## **Blacks and the White House**

[The Black History of the White House by Clarence Lusane \(City Lights\)](#)

More than a few U.S. presidents were slaveholders, so it should come as no surprise the "White House" has always loomed as an ominous symbol to many African-Americans. Lusane has written a deeply researched and analytical historical survey—from the enslaved black carpenters who worked on the building through Booker T. Washington's controversial 1901 White House visit to the Obama presidency—of the long neglected legacy of the black presence at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. □—Calvin Reid

## Sisters Together

[Some Sing, Some Cry by Ntozake Shange and Ifa Bayeza \(St. Martin's\)](#)



Playwrights and literary award winners as well as sisters, Ntozake Shange and Ifa Bayeza collaborated to create *Some Sing, Some Cry*, a novel spanning 200 years of a family's history through the voices of seven generations of its women. It's Shange's first novel since 1994's *Liliane*, plus she gets more buzz from the Tyler Perry movie *For Colored Girls*, based on her 1977 choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Unfurled*. □—D.P.

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## Finding Peace

[Peace from Broken Pieces by Iyanla Vanzant \(Smiley Books\)](#)

Spiritual life coach Iyanla Vanzant has written 13 motivational/self-help titles, five of which were *New York Times* bestsellers. Yet, as she admitted to PBS's *Tavis Smiley* (who is also her publisher), she was not immune to the forces that made her own life fall apart: sexual abuse, cheating, divorce, foreclosure, the death of a daughter. Vanzant spotlights how she was able to heal from the events that have defined the past decade of her own life. □—D.P.

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## Fresh Fiction

[Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self by Danielle Evans \(Riverhead\)](#)

The lives of smart, talkative, contemporary African-American teen girls—among a beautifully rendered cast of multicultural characters of both genders—are deftly recounted in Evans's keenly observed short stories. □—C.R.

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## Picturing Slavery

[Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade by David Eltis and David Richardson \(Yale\)](#)

A phenomenal collection of 189 full-color maps created especially for this book chart every

aspect of the 350-year history of the brutal kidnapping and trafficking of African slaves to the New World. The detailed maps and illustrations are based on the online database Slavevoyages.org. □—C.R.

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### **Football Matters**

**Advancing the Ball: Race, Reformation and the Quest for Equal Coaching Opportunity in the NFL** by N. Jeremi Duru (Oxford)

A fascinating account of the unlikely team of celebrity attorney Johnnie Cochran, Iranian-American lawyer and devoted football fan Cyrus Mehri, and former Cleveland Browns lineman John Wooten, who along with others worked together to help enact the NFL's "Rooney Rule," which requires teams to interview at least one minority candidate when they search for a new head coach. □—C.R.

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### **Take the A Train**

**Harlem Is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America** by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts (Little, Brown)

Riffing on a Ralph Ellison essay on the meaning of "nowhere," Rhodes-Pitts chronicles the social reality and the metaphorical power of Harlem USA, chronicling its literary and political history as well as the larger cultural truths it represents. □—C.R.