# Editor Talk: Rachel Kambury of HarperCollins [1]

December 7, 2022 TW Podcast [2]
Money [3]
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## Podcast Interview with Neva Talladen

### Shining a Light on Publishing Inequalities

Also available on Apple Podcasts [5], Spotify [6], iHeartRadio [7], and elsewhere [8].

***Episode Notes:*** It's important to know the events that led to the current HarperCollins strike, the biggest publishing workforce strike since 1977 (ironically, also a Harper & Row strike). The result of a breakdown of negotiations between the management and the employee union, the latest strike—which is ongoing to date—was the last resort for the union after more than a year of silence from leadership and a failure to renew employee contracts since April 2022.

For us at *Talking Writing*, it's equally important to pay attention to the personal stories of the people directly affected by the strike who are risking the most: the 250-strong workers behind the picket line.



This interview revolves around Rachel Kambury's experience from her time as a young writer to a publishing hopeful who pursued—and attained—an editorial position at one of the Big Five publishing houses as an assistant editor at HarperCollins. Her story, like those of so many of her fellow career editors, is a sobering testament of how years of hard work and determination in publishing often are not rewarded and remain

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barely compensated.

Rachel, who has worked in publishing for more than seven years, still earns below the livable wage for metro New York, where publishers hold office. She's able to live in the city by being a beneficiary of an affordable housing lottery. But financial compensation is just the tip of the iceberg for the publishing industry's systemic issues. Big publishing companies have been known to exploit the passion and enthusiasm of workers yet withhold merit-based rewards. Long-time editors, including BIPOC editors from publishing's diversity hiring initiative in 2016, have spoken out about how they've been denied promotions despite achieving career-defining and profit-generating milestones. Part of the reason for the recent wave of editorial resignations included a work culture hostile to proposals and attempts at groundbreaking work for which they were hired in the first place.

What makes this strike truly pivotal is that the workers' demands aren't just about the $50,000 entry-level salary and mandatory union membership for new nonmanagerial employees. The workers are also demanding that DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity) practices be a permanent part of the publishing infrastructure. Should management accept all these demands, HarperCollins will be the first of the Big Five to go beyond performative diversity initiatives such as establishing separate imprints for BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ and inclusive books or knee-jerk diversity hires.

Still, editors and publishing workers want to remain in the industry to champion authors and their stories. They believe it's worth the fight—and the potential professional stigma and belt-tightening that comes with it (workers on strike are neither entitled to their salaries nor paid by the union). Literary agents, booksellers, and authors have expressed support through signature brigades and open letters, going as far as withholding manuscript submissions to the publisher while the strike is ongoing. As of this writing, it's been 18 days since the strike started, and there is still no word from the HarperCollins leadership.

*Talking Writing* stands in solidarity with HarperCollins workers and the strike. For more information on how to donate and support the strike, please follow @hcpunion [9] on Instagram.

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**Episode Information**

- "Harper & Row Employees on Strike [10]" by Damon Stetson, *New York Times*, May 10, 1977.
- Gravel *[11]* by Rachel Kambury (self-published, Lulu.com, 2009).
- "Editorial Resignations at Big Houses Spark Reckoning [12]" by Erin Somers, *Publishers Marketplace*, March 14, 2022.
- PEN America Report on Race Equity and Book Publishing: "Reading Between the Lines: Race, Equity, and Book Publishing [13]."
- Economic Policy Institute budget calculator [14].
- Agents in Support of the HCP Union [15].

**Art Information**

- Mock book cover for strike © Catherine Lee; used by permission.

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[10] https://www.nytimes.com/1977/05/10/archives/harper-row-employees-on-strike.html
[11] https://www.amazon.com/Gravel-Paperback-Rachel-Kambury/dp/0557058996
[12] https://lunch.publishersmarketplace.com/2022/03/editorial-resignations-at-big-houses-spark-reckoning/
[13] https://pen.org/report/race-equity-and-book-publishing/
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