



Remembering Glenn Thompson

Born in Harlem and raised in Brooklyn, Glenn Thompson left the U. S. as a young man and travelled extensively throughout India, Europe and Israel before settling in England. There, he identified immediately with the struggles of poor and working-class people to overcome poverty and illiteracy. He became a leading activist for socioeconomic and political causes, founding Centerprise, a non-profit British organization that remains devoted to community improvement and social uplift. He also began a publishing career, starting out at Penguin Education, then at the cutting edge of radical educational publishing. He later established, with others, the Writers and Readers

Publishing Cooperative (WRPC) he was joined in this idealistic publish venture by leading writers of the day. Under Thompson's leadership, WRPC published a number of international bestsellers including the For Beginners cartoon documentary series. This series began with Castro for Beginners, illustrated by the noted Mexican artist Ruiz. Thompson later expanded the series to include over one hundred Beginners titles on topics ranging from Karl Marx, DNA, and JFK to Black women and Malcolm X.

Internal strains led to the break up of the WRPC, but Thompson retained control of its publishing program and moved back to New York in the early 80's to establish Writers and Readers, Inc. as a U.S. company. He also reorganized WRPC into a for-profit company in England: Writers and Readers Ltd. Adding new titles and republishing the successful Beginners books in the U.S., Thompson built an impressive list of titles. Influenced by the Black book



publishing movement then at its height, he further expanded his list by publishing now-popular authors Iyanla Vanzant and Kevin Powell for the first time. He also published noted authors Eloise Greenfield, Mari Evans, and author/illustrator Tom Feelings. Additionally, he established two imprints that focus specifically on Black-interest titles in diverse genres: Harlem River Press and Black Butterfly children's books. Along with Haki Madhubuti of Third World Press, the oldest Black publishing house in the U.S., Thompson helped to organize the National Association of Book Publishers to promote literacy and Black book publishing. Through his efforts, he became close friends with other Black publishers including Wade Hudson at Just Us Books, Kassahun Checole of African World Press and Paul Coates of Black Classic Press.



Glenn Thompson was an exemplary Black publisher. He viewed books as weapons of liberation and saw his task as that of a soldier, arming the people to free themselves. He chose to publish great books about people of African descent that helped to define the reality of the Black experience. He also chose to publish outstanding books that redefined the White experience from the perspectives of those who were

oppressed and dispossessed by it--and he did so in subtle, subversive, but often comical ways.

His last years were difficult ones. Numerous court battles and financial challenges associated with his trailblazing publishing ventures drained his resources and his health. Thompson's earthly transition on September 7, 2001, in the peaceful stillness of a quiet hospice, was made possible by the support of his three children, Shoshannah, Ben, and Elisha; his brother Dennis; other family members; and friends, all of whom lost a brilliant and caring comrade and confidante. His memory endures through the many significant works he brought to fruition.

W. Paul Coates with the assistance of Kamili Anderson 9/19/2001

Glenn Thompson
An appreciation by Ken Worpole

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. Glenn Thompson, the black American founder of Centerprise, died on 7 September 2001. He was one of the great pioneering spirits of Hackney's multi-cultural politics, and it is amazing that his original achievement still survives after thirty years, at its present address in Kingsland High Street, where its promotion of new writing and black literature also still flourishes - one of the great survivors of the London's 1960s culture, though the project didn't properly open until 1971 in Dalston Lane, after Glenn's original choice of a double shopfront in Stoke Newington High Street fell through.

Glenn arrived in the borough at the end of the 1960s as a youth worker in Hoxton. He had been brought up in Brooklyn, in tough circumstances, with his mother dying when he was 11 and his father later spending time in prison. A late reader himself, he became almost obsessed with the power of literacy to change people's lives, and in many ways the rest of his life was spent promoting this belief - in Hackney, back in New York, then as an international publisher, as well as someone who worked in Africa setting up workshops to promote indigenous publishing.

He was a sharp and convincing entrepreneur. Quickly realising how the financial and cultural establishment in Britain operated, he opened Centerprise's bank account at Coutts, the elite bank, just to confuse people. He managed to persuade the Inner London Education Authority to fund a bookshop and coffee bar in Hackney as a bona fide youth project, when the dominant image of youth provision was a church hall with a table-tennis table, a Dansette record player, two Cliff Richard LPs and a tea urn.

He set up the first outlet for the Open University course books in London at Centerprise, imported black literature from small publishers around the world, and contacted local teachers, including me, to talk about setting up literacy projects for young people who fell through the net. He was convinced - as he had the right to be -

of his mission in life, though he was happy for others to fill in the details. His winning smile, can-do attitude, and canny political skills, made him for a number of years one of the most able operators in Hackney's brittle political culture. He won every hand he played.

A couple of years ago, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Centerprise, Glenn returned to Hackney, along with the eminent writer and publisher, Margaret Busby, and Roger Mills, a writer from Stoke Newington who had been first published by Centerprise. In the conversation about writing and publishing, Glenn talked enthusiastically about the workshops he had run in Africa, and the new possibilities which desktop publishing offered against the deadening hand of mass publishing. Always the optimist, he left everyone feeling good at the end of the evening, as he talked about the many projects he felt that he still had to complete.

He was buried in Highgate Cemetery - he loved Hampstead because of its liberal, émigré culture - on Tuesday, 18th September, 2001. At his funeral service a poem by Vivian Usherwood, a young black Stoke Newington writer (who died tragically young) was read. Vivian's poems became the first book that Glenn and Centerprise ever published.

Glenn Thompson

A pioneering black publisher, he saw books as a window for opening the minds of the oppressed

John Berger and Margaret Busby
Wednesday September 12, 2001
[The Guardian](#)

It is difficult to write about a hero, because a hero is defined not only by his qualities but by his actions. And whereas qualities can be enumerated in an obituary, actions, if they are made to be clear, demand another kind of undying space. Glenn Thompson, a pioneering publisher who has died aged 60, was for me - and many others - a hero.

He was born in Brooklyn, to George and Clara Thompson, but his mother died when he was 11 and, shortly afterwards, his father was sent to prison. Glenn, and his younger brother Denis, spent their time on the streets of Harlem, and were later placed in institutions. His gratitude to an unknown teacher who taught him to read and write was to polarise the rest of his life.

Books became the centre of it because they opened this world, the one he had known on the streets. He was a man of action, and the act of his life was that of offering literacy, in all its forms, because with this gift comes the chance of entering history and making choices.

Glenn had the slender brown hands of a trumpeter. A recent personal memory, when he was already seriously ill, is of him listening, transported, to a CD of Johnny Hartman singing with John Coltrane.

He left New York for Europe in his early 20s, and hitch-hiked to India and Nepal, where he had a rendezvous with a woman with whom he had fallen in love. He fell in love many times - in defiance of the indifference and basic hostility that often reside in "reasonable" behaviour.

Leaving Asia, he worked for two years on a kibbutz in Israel. It was there, I imagine, that he first encountered the experience of a working collective. Books for him were inseparable not only from action, but from the principle of sharing. Hence his life-long intransigence to everything elitist. After Israel, he returned to New York to set up a reading clinic for illiterate Puerto Ricans.

Glenn's heroes were the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Friere (*The Pedagogy Of The Oppressed*), the subversive philosopher Van Illich (*After Deschooling What?*) and, more recently, the Indian storyteller Arundhati Roy, who wrote *The God Of Small Things* about a deity who supports the peasants of Kerala in their fight to keep their land, threatened today by the construction of merely money-serving dams. For Glenn, literacy was more than the capacity to read, it was the capacity to lay claim to a legitimate inheritance.

In the late 1960s, he came to London with his first wife, Margaret Goseley, and set up the bookshop and cultural meeting point Centerprise, in Dalston. Against establishment predictions - polite variants on the theme "pearls before swine" - the project worked, and still flourishes. In 1972, Centerprise printed its first book of poems by the black poet Vivian Usherwood. Glenn believed that one reason for publishing books was to allow existing voices to converse with world literature. Prophetically, he imagined books as websites.

In 1974, with his second wife, Sian Williams, and others, he started fullscale publishing with the Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, most notably producing the first *Beginners* books, which explained to readers - not in an arduous, condescending manner, but with a certain streetwise insolence - the theoretical heritage of Marx, Einstein, Castro, Darwin, etc. It also published fiction by, among others, Neil Jordan and myself.

What was it that made Glenn so persuasive? He encouraged, he exaggerated, he was obstinate, when necessary he oversimplified. He was protective, not of himself but of others. He was secretive, he was headstrong, he had the talent of a guerrilla commander in the sense that he was already within himself a demonstration, a visible proof, of the dreamt-of victory being struggled for.

Yet, finally, what made him persuasive, despite his misjudgments, was that all his excesses were so evidently the result of a gigantic desire to give. As often happens in action, people followed him closely because he was so vulnerable in taking them to where they would otherwise not go.

After a decade, the London Cooperative went bankrupt, and Glenn returned to Harlem, where he published black writers and, particularly, poets such as Asha Bandele, Safiya Henderson-Holmes and Mari Evans. If poetry was the literary form he responded to most naturally, it was perhaps because poetry draws windows everywhere - and Glenn loved windows as much as he hated shut doors.

A few years ago in Zimbabwe, he ran a series of workshops, teaching local would-be publishers how to produce independent books. He returned to Britain last year, to be with his family and continue publishing with his partner, Vastiana Belfon.

Condemned by cancer, Glenn oversaw his own death like a general. He had his own special way of walking down streets and through crowds. He was both confident and wary. He knew where he was going and nobody was going to stop him, but if they were there, he spotted them. The last time I saw him walking like this was on a crowded platform at the Gare du Nord in Paris in July.

He leaves three children, Shoshannah, Benjamin and Elisha, and two grandchildren, Nathaniel and Robin.

As his epitaph, I would quote from a poem by Asha Bandele in her book *Absence In The Palms Of My Hand*, which Glenn published five years ago in New York:

And if we don't start it up move it along

make some noise

then

those of us who know

will never convince

those of us

who don't know.

Margaret Busby writes: Never once was Glenn Thompson deterred from his mission to make a difference through publishing. "It isn't so much how you do it, it's that you do it" was a precept he espoused to make available books with the potential to change people's lives, and he was dismayed that current trends in the industry threaten that sort of publishing. His belief in knowledge being accessible, and in giving voice to those denied the opportunity to be heard - whether Palestinian or African-American - was connected with his own route to reading and the written word.

Though his schooldays were over by the age of 14, his education had just begun, taking off from the Beat cafes of Greenwich Village: "Everytime I heard someone mention a book, I read it. I began to dream of getting out of New York." Reading Camus made him want to go to North Africa, so he took a freighter to Tangiers. Over the next 4 years, he crossed the desert in Iran, travelled overland from Germany to Kathmandu and back, to India, Turkey, France, Greece, Holland, Nepal, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Israel. Ultimately, he pitched up in London in 1968.

Taking a job as a youth worker in Hackney, he wondered why the area had a quarter of a million people but no bookshop, and was told that working-class people don't read. So, in 1970, he started Centerprise, out of which developed a local publishing project, initially producing poetry by East End schoolchildren. The Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative was a logical extension of that maverick instinct.

Glenn's commitment to community and to black issues never wavered - and his was a global conception of black, encompassing all people of colour. Had time permitted, he would have expanded his children's books programme to include an Indian perspective. A title he was inordinately proud to have published was Toni Morrison For Beginners, in Shona, produced in Zimbabwe in 2 weeks; that he could pass on his knowledge and enable people with no previous publishing experience mattered immensely. He was generous to a fault with the time he gave to anyone who sought information from him; whoever didn't know, he wanted to tell.

Education was key to his publishing philosophy, and his mission to address areas of political importance, however sensitive, brooked no argument. While the innovatory Beginners series reached readers from all backgrounds, and those meeting Glenn for the first time were often surprised to realise he was black, his dedication to communicating different aspects of the black experience is evident in his other imprints from the 1980s, Harlem River Press and Black Butterfly Children's Books.

He published young performance poets before they were fashionable, and gave a start to many authors later taken up by major mainstream publishing houses, including Iyanla Vanzant.

Concerned that those sensitive to the needs of black children should write and illustrate books intended for them, he published bestselling works by Eloise Greenfield and Jan Spivey Gilchrist. Among other significant titles was the collection In Defence Of Mumia, which won the Firecracker Award.

Glenn could be bone headed about what he considered matters of principle, misguided pride sometimes clouded his better judgment, and, over the years, he was embroiled in fallings out (and back in) with colleagues, friends and family. But, equally, he inspired unstinting loyalty and affection, whether from co-director Deborah Dyson, who continues to run the New York office of Writers and Readers Inc, or from close associates such as Paul Coates of

Black Classic Press, and Kassahun Checole of Africa World Press, who both flew to London to be with Glenn on the day he died.

His passion and single-minded vision are unforgettable: "Publishing is about communication. To communicate from one group to another, to take something very parochial and make it international, that's what it's all about."

- Glenn Thompson, publisher, born September 24 1940; died September 7 2001

Early Years (Centerprise)

The unique concept that Centerprise represents was originated by Glenn Thompson, an African American from New York City, along with colleagues Anthony Kendall and Erika Stern. With the support of trustees like Nancy Amphoux, Christopher Cornford, Robert Peacock, Margaret Gosley, Hyla Holden and Bernard Simons, they initially set up the Hoxton Café Project in the 1950s. It was an experimental café catering for groups of young people whose needs the existing youth clubs, of the time, did not meet.

The Hoxton Project closed in 1969, and found a more sophisticated re-incarnation in a community organisation with a commercial base, presenting a conventional shop front to the local community.

Centerprise therefore had its roots and its justification in a context where historically, social deprivation and an absence of real political intervention in the well-being of the population, threw up a number of urgent social problems that had to be dealt with by the community itself.

It is correct to say that Centerprise, if it were to stay true to its definition of itself as a community organisation that sought to engage with “needs, demands and possibilities that were not included in the programmes of parliamentary politics, or not directly allied to industrial struggles” the project had no choice but to be involved with these issues from the very start.

Added to the services provided by Centerprise, the enabling role of the organisation should not be underestimated. Centerprise is more than the sum of physical parts. We have often played a crucial role in the establishment of the social infrastructure of Hackney. A number of important groups and organisations have had connections and indeed their origins in Centerprise.

The early Kwame Nkrumah School and Hackney Play Mobile had their beginnings in Centerprise. So too had our Summer Play Schemes which led to the formation of the Ever Green Adventure Playground in 1973.

The Play on the Estates Scheme, Hackney Under Fives were all based in Centerprise until 1992. Hackney Play Association has had very strong connections with Centerprise. Lenthall Road Workshop – an arts project which did some excellent work in the 1970s was set up by Centerprise staff. A number of Tenants Associations came out of the work of our Advice Centre.

More recently, our Literature Development Project, through extensive collaborations, has been continuing this trend.

We are proud to remain one of the few organisations which, have evolved within our community, is still deeply rooted in it – a fact which cannot be understated since in times of crisis and in circumstances where many other organisations may have gone under, it has been this connection with our community that has ensured our survival.

Indeed when we are asked to list our achievements over the more than three decades of our existence, we never fail to include this organisation's survival as one of them.

Glenn Thompson, the black American founder of Centerprise, was one of the great pioneering spirits of Hackney. Glenn arrived in Hackney at the end of the 1960s as a youth worker in Hoxton. He had been brought up in Brooklyn (New York City) in tough circumstances, with his mother dying when he was 11. A late reader himself, he became convinced of literacy's power to change people's lives, and in many ways the rest of his life was spent promoting this belief; in Hackney, back in New York, then as an international publisher, as well as someone who worked to promote African indigenous publishings.

At a time when the dominant image of youth provision was a ping-pong table in a church hall, he managed to persuade the Inner London Education Authority to fund a bookshop and a coffee-bar in Hackney as a youth project, so Centerprise was born. He realised straight away how the financial and cultural establishment in Britain operated. Just to confuse people he opened Centerprise's bank account at Coutts, “the bank” of the time.

He imported black literature from small publishers from all over the world and contacted local teachers to talk about setting up literacy projects for young people who fell through the net. At Centerprise, he set up the first outlet for the Open University course books in London.

Centerprise's promotion of new writing and black literature still flourishes - one of the great survivors of the London's 1960s culture, though the project didn't properly open until 1971 in Dalston Lane.

Sadly, he died on 7 September 2001. He is buried in Highgate Cemetery.