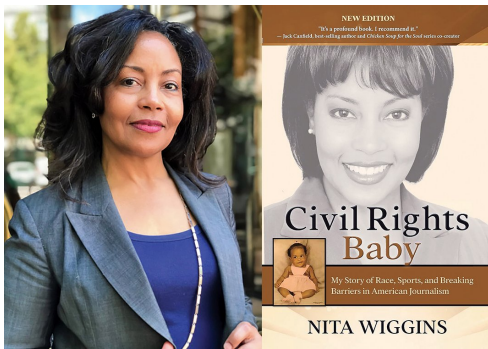


The Savvy Self-Publisher: Nita Wiggins

Nita Wiggins knew when she was eight years old that she wanted to be a reporter covering the Dallas Cowboys. Her interest in sports originated from spending time with her father, who coached her younger brother's basketball and baseball teams in Augusta, Georgia, where she grew up in the 1970s and '80s; on Sundays during football season she would sit with her father and watch games on TV for hours. After graduating from Augusta College with a degree in communications in 1986, Wiggins went on to work as a television reporter at several stations before getting her dream job in 1999 at KDFW TV-Fox 4 in Dallas, interviewing high-profile figures such as Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, Rosa Parks, and President Jimmy Carter. Wiggins shared a regional Emmy for Special Events Coverage in 2001 for her work on Fox 4's Cotton Bowl pregame show. After more than twenty years of on-air reporting, however, she grew disillusioned with the business and in 2009 moved to Paris, where she teaches journalism and regularly appears on French television.



Nita Wiggins, author of *Civil Rights Baby: My Story of Race, Sports, and Breaking Barriers in American Journalism*. (Credit: Lucie Cervantes)

I spoke with Wiggins about her book, *Civil Rights Baby: My Story of Race, Sports, and Breaking Barriers in American Journalism*, which was initially published by Casa Express Editions in 2019, and why she chose to self-publish the revised edition, which she released in 2021. For perspectives on the challenges of self-publishing, I turned to Sha-Shana Crichton, a literary agent in Washington, D.C., and Dawn Michelle Hardy, owner of the Literary Lobbyist, a publicity firm and literary agency in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The Author's Approach

I had no idea I would write a book about myself, but after I moved to France I kept getting the same questions from my journalism students, and I realized they could learn from my experiences. I loved my career in Dallas; I was doing exactly what I had envisioned as a child. Many of the star players welcomed me into their homes because of the empathy and respect I showed during the interviews. But as a high-profile female sports reporter, I often felt that I had to prove myself in a way my male peers did not. I was on television for more than twenty years, but for the last decade or so I was in a battle for job survival. I constantly felt the burden of fighting for acceptance. I knew I had to look for the next challenge.

I've always been a person who runs toward, not away from, a challenge. I traveled to France in January 2001, and although I didn't speak French, I was embraced and accepted, so I was determined to spend more time there. I moved there in 2009 and began teaching graduate courses in journalism. Five years later, in August 2014, I was visiting my parents when Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson,

Missouri. When I returned to France shortly thereafter, the way American media had inflamed the Brown case stayed with me. I felt disappointed in my industry because of the lack of checking for veracity before broadcasting a story. Additionally, I felt emotionally battered to see another Black teenager dead on the street. In September 2014 I attended a lecture by Doria Dee Johnson, an African American doctoral student in history from the University of Wisconsin in Madison. She discussed the lynching of her great-great-grandfather in 1916. Her powerful talk gave me an entry point to get my ideas in order for *Civil Rights Baby*. The literal lynching of her ancestor had happened ninety-eight years earlier, but Johnson said her family's persistent pain made it "feel like yesterday." Her words inspired me because I felt I had survived an "economic lynching of my career," a term I coined to explain the intentional choking off of a person's advancement by a decision-maker and the people enlisted to join in.

Before I started writing my book, I read more than a dozen biographies and memoirs of people with similar backgrounds. Particularly important were books about three barrier-breaking journalists: Belva Davis, Ethel Payne, and Alice Allison Dunnigan. Dunnigan was the first African American woman to cover the White House and it was during the Truman administration. Payne asked so many questions about racial unrest that then-President Eisenhower stopped calling on her. And Davis interviewed activist Bobby Seale and James Brown long before other journalists. Like these trailblazing women, I took a different approach in my interviews. Rather than focusing on their athletic achievements, I tried to get people to reveal more intimate emotions. For example, when I interviewed former Dallas Cowboys receiver Michael Irvin, I asked him who he would acknowledge first when he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Tears welled up when Irvin said he would thank his father, who had to work several jobs to support his family. I began to understand that there is a balance between revealing yourself but also maintaining a level of privacy. Once I figured out what boundary I would set for discussing my personal life, I listed ten emotionally pivotal episodes and started writing about them.

I reached out to Marita Golden, an author and writing teacher whom I had heard speak. After I had written details around the ten important episodes and put them in chronological order, I sent the manuscript to Golden. She said she agreed to work with me because I was willing to show my vulnerability and she believed my book would be important. She gave me some pointers and I went back to develop the content. She read the revision and explained that, while she understood what built me and what broke me, there was something missing that I needed to think about. That was my eureka moment. I had buried the worst day of my childhood—the day in sixth grade when a white music teacher asked me to sing a "Negro spiritual"—which in fact is one of my signature stories when I'm asked to speak. Then I worked with Janet Marie Walker, a line editor. We have a lot in common, so I knew that if I didn't write something clearly enough, she would understand what I meant and would be able to offer valuable feedback.

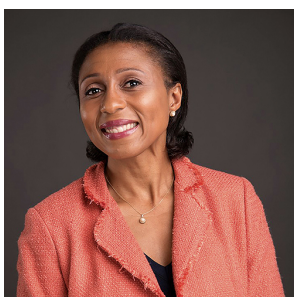
I didn't have to search for a publisher because my employer, a journalism school in Paris, agreed to publish the book. However, the book was printed in Morocco, and there was a trade blockade, making it difficult for books to be shipped to France. Given everything I had put into telling my story, I wasn't going to let distribution issues get in the way. Three years later, with the term of my book contract ending, I decided to publish a revised edition independently. After all, I had more to say about events that transpired since the initial publication, including the election of Kamala Harris as vice president, the continuing impact of the #MeToo movement, and the introduction of the College Athletes Bill of

Rights, which led to the NCAA's changing its rules so that college athletes can earn money off their name and likeness.

It was scary to be an independent publisher. I knew I had to assemble a good team. I relied on Janet Walker, my line editor, who has published several books of her own; she served as project manager, navigating tasks such as cover design, interior layout, back matter, and the finer points of production. I relied on her to get me up to speed before the time came to make the decisions with Martha Bullen, a publishing and marketing consultant.

For the cover I knew I wanted it to feature a photo of me as a baby. I showed a few designs to professionals who are friends to get their reactions. I worked with Christy Day of Constellation Book Services on both the cover and interior design. All in all, for the editing, cover design, interior design, and uploading of the finished files to Amazon and other online book retailers, I spent about \$5,500. I was much more attentive to the details as a self-published author than I was with the first edition. I know I will be able to use what I learned for future books. I'm now working on the French version of *Civil Rights Baby* and an illustrated book about the worst day of my adolescence.

Since I was busy teaching, I didn't pay attention to promotion or book sales, but I know that when I'm speaking or appear on TV, I sell books. When I'm not teaching I focus on getting media attention; I get traction because I know how to hack the news and get interviewed. For about a year now I have also been working with two writers to develop the book into a TV series.



An Agent's Take

Sha-Shana Crichton, a lawyer and literary agent, represents primarily African American, Caribbean, and Latin American authors writing on social justice and politics, as well as some novelists. Among her clients are Bruce Johnson, a longtime Washington, D.C., anchorperson, now deceased; former Maryland state senator Shirley Nathan-Pulliam; and former NFL player Bronson Hill.

I think *Civil Rights Baby* is a great read. Clearly there have been a number of traumatic events in the author's life, and writing the book was cathartic. Her pain comes through, particularly when she describes how she was treated in the workplace, and that will resonate with many readers.

Women, particularly women of color, who work in male-dominated professions, may hope for or expect a level playing field, but often that isn't the case, as Wiggins's memoir makes clear.

I suspect a traditional publisher would have wanted her to change much of the content. Perhaps she would have been advised to hold back on some of her descriptions of colleagues. By self-publishing she was able to put everything she felt and experienced in the book.

I think the cover could have been stronger. If you don't know Wiggins, I don't think it is as compelling as it could be. I would have preferred to see a photograph of her in a newsroom or holding a microphone. Also, since this is a memoir, I'm not sure the back-cover headline asking, "How would you fight to keep your dream alive?" is the strongest copy.

Wiggins's story should appeal to a wide audience, including but not limited to women of color. She is a professional woman of color but also a woman of a certain age in a system that favors younger people. To promote the book I think she could give a powerful TED Talk and speak at length about her work and life on podcasts. She could highlight some of the interviews she has done, particularly those with Rosa Parks and Muhammad Ali.

Race and gender played a big part in why Wiggins was unable to remain at her dream job. That's a sad commentary on today's workplace and deserves to be examined, which is a compelling pitch to potential media outlets. Wiggins can answer questions including: How are we training our students? Are we preparing them to meet these roadblocks? How can we increase the perception of these microaggressions and how can people deal with them?

Some authors just want to get their stories down on paper and then put the book away, but Wiggins is tenacious, and she is willing to share her personal and professional life. I suspect her mission in writing the book is to help prevent what happened to her from happening to other people, and that is a strong hook for potential readers.

My advice for authors who are self-publishing:

- Know your target audience and how you will reach them. If you don't already have a built-in fan base or regular speaking gigs, what other avenues do you have to sell your book? Are there people in your personal or professional network who can help you?
- Accept that social media is important. Get comfortable using it, and if you're not, consider hiring someone to post for you. I often recommend a freelance publicist who works with self-published authors.
- Don't assume your final draft is ready to be published. It should be edited, and if you're writing a memoir, double-check your research. Consider hiring a freelance fact-checker. Readers may do some fact-checking of their own, and you certainly don't want them to find errors. Have your manuscript proofread. To find freelancers, check the classified ads at pw.org/classifieds or search sites like upwork.com, Editors for Hire at aceseditors.org, or the Editorial Freelancers Association (the-efa.org/hiring).
- Write the story you want to write because that's the one you will be able to talk about far into the future.



A Publicist's Perspective

Dawn Michelle Hardy is a book publicist and literary agent in Charlotte, North Carolina. Her agency, the Literary Lobbyist, represents a mix of fiction and nonfiction clients, including Jayne Allen, Clint Smith, and Tia Williams.

Previously, Hardy worked as a publicist for self-published authors and began agenting when her successful self-published authors sought traditional publishers.

Every book deserves attention, but the simple fact that a book has been released isn't the publicity hook. What's important to the media is how the author can contribute to an ongoing conversation. With a revised edition you must highlight the new content, especially if the book is topical. Everyone is aware of social justice issues, and those are the bread crumbs in *Civil Rights Baby* that will draw readers in.

Wiggins should target media in the United States since it will be particularly interested in the issues she discusses. She should focus on podcasts and talk radio because these formats allow you to “nerd out” on content. You can talk in depth for twenty to forty minutes about your research and your story.

I think there are opportunities for Wiggins to pitch media outlets with stories about her life and career track. She should reach out to digital press and connect with journalists on Twitter or LinkedIn. Since reporters and producers move around frequently, she can consult Muck Rack, a database of journalists, to find people who have written on topics like those covered in her book. She should position herself as wanting to join a conversation by saying, “I read your article titled X in *Time* and thought you would be interested in my views on...” Wiggins should lead with the fact that she is an experienced journalist. She is an expert in sports, social justice, and workplace discrimination and should tweak her pitch, depending on the topic or the journalist she is approaching. As a Black woman who has worked in sports, she could start in that world and then move to civil rights.

Although many authors are active on social media—and Wiggins is not—I don't see that as a problem. She has a strong background, and the topics she writes about are as timely today as they were a few years ago. Her book is ranked highly in the appropriate categories on Amazon, so she has done a good job of targeting readers.

My advice for other self-published authors:

- Focus on the cover artwork and your online book description. While it is a cliché, books are judged by their covers. Most book marketing and publicity outreach takes place online, where a thumbnail of your cover and the book description will be the main assets used in promoting the book. You must make sure both are perfect.
- Use Goodreads to do a digital giveaway when your book is first released.
- Use NetGalley to target readers by their interests. NetGalley is an effective way for authors to get reviews that can then be posted on your website, Amazon, and elsewhere. The standard rate is \$499 for a six-month listing, though a lower-priced three-month option is available to dues-paying members of the Independent Book Publishers Association.
- Remind readers to post reviews on Amazon. You don't want to harass them, but you will need to remind them to post reviews. With more reviews your Amazon author page looks more robust, and your book is also more likely to show up easily when buyers search on Amazon.
- Know your target readers and take the time to research their favorite media outlets. With what websites, magazines, and podcasts are those readers engaged? You want coverage in those outlets. That is how publicity helps readers discover new authors and books. An example is *My Beautiful Black Hair: 101 Natural Hair Stories From the Sisterhood* (Chronicle Books, 2021) by St. Clair Detrick-Jules, a photo book celebrating stories of Black women and their relationship with their hair. We knew the target readers were

women of color with an emphasis on Black and Latinx women between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, so we pitched platforms that those women read, including *Jezebel*, the *Root*, *Byrdie*, and *Allure*. Placement on these platforms will validate the book with its intended readers.

- Use social media (or have someone else handle your posts, especially if you've written fiction, a children's book, or a lifestyle topic). Social media is free and gets you global visibility 24/7. Strategically post details such as your final book jacket or any in-person events that have been scheduled. You want readers to feel as if they're part of your journey to publication.
- Start planning your book launch five to six months before the publication date. If you decide to work with a publicist, find someone who is willing to read your book and has experience working with self-published authors. If you're on a tight budget, try to negotiate so the publicist pitches specific media such as radio or will work on your book for sixty days, rather than three months.

Debra Englander is a consulting editor for Post Hill Press and a book coach who advises authors on the publishing industry, whether they're self-publishing or seeking a traditional publisher. She lives in New York City.