

# Books in Bytes

## reading the future!

LIANDA MARTIN

Projects Officer, Heritage Awareness and Information Literacy Programme, National Library of South Africa

This article deals with an exhibition presented by the National Library of South Africa at the 2005 Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) Annual Conference and on the Cape Town Campus during October and November 2005.

In the brief prepared for the designers the exhibition was described as a 'small mixed-media, interactive installation on eBooks'. The idea of looking at eBooks was born during the Bibliophilia Africana 8 Conference held at the Centre for the Book in May 2005. It became clear to the Heritage Awareness and Information Literacy staff at the National Library of South Africa during the deliberations that characterised the conference, that electronic media was the way to go. We also discovered while researching the topic, that most of the South African publishing community were not as convinced as we were, that this development represented a technological opportunity knocking at their doors. This was strikingly evident as we looked for on-line sources of South African or African literature. We were lucky enough to find two on-line publishers who were prepared to partner with us on the project. Byron Loker, author and owner of *iBhuku.com* allowed us to use his material without charge and he also did most of the sourcing of the rest of the material we used. Pegicorn Publishing is a hybrid of paper and e-publishing and also donated material for our use in the form of a collection of short stories by Yolanda Stopforth.

The eBooks working group finally settled on the following aim for the exhibition: *To unblock the take up of electronic media in support of experiencing literature for pleasure.*

### Rationale

We would like to promote the idea of 'reading' for pleasure and would like to present the various media through which this can happen. The aesthetic value of the traditional printed book, the immediacy of being able to download something from the www onto your PC while you have some time to kill, or the pleasure and time-saving elements of audio recordings, whilst travelling or walking or just lying about.

We soon realised that the 'small' exhibition was going to be an enormous amount of work and very expensive.

Apart from displaying printed copies of books, we presented literature for pleasure via cell phones, iPods, MP3 players, Palm Pilots or laptops. After purchasing the best equipment we could afford, we then had to purchase a fail-safe security system to make sure we secured said equipment at the exhibition!

With an eye on affordability for our potential readers for pleasure, we decided to use only public domain sources for the eBooks and the 'tolerable quality' of audio recordings that are also freely available on the World Wide Web.

Excellent design work from Chunky Tuna enabled us to place the exhibition against an 'evolutionary' backdrop. An explanatory pamphlet was available as well as a free CD of the entire content of the exhibition.

We had expected the exhibition to attract young people who we hoped would be tempted into the realms of Robert Frost, Mark Twain, Anton Chekov and Mary Shelley, leaving their Heavy Metal and Hip Hop behind. And generally, the young people who visited the

exhibition were interested and attracted to this more 'with-it' way of 'reading'. However, visitors who were completely entranced, were the older people...amazed at the incredible amount of material already freely available and astonished at the sound quality of even 'tolerable' audio on an iPod no bigger than a clothes peg. They welcomed the opportunity to experiment with the equipment in a pleasant and supportive environment and went off with a copy of the CD and instructions to get help from their grandchildren in downloading the required software - also freely available.

Trying to evaluate the effects of an exhibition is always difficult but we did look at the reactions and comments we received in the light of our stated aim. Younger people really did leave the exhibition understanding electronic options available to them beyond popular music - the 'take-up' is yet to be measured. Older people, usually committed readers anyway, were impressed with what they saw and heard and certainly left less prejudiced against this kind of delivery of world literature.



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It was an exciting exhibition to present and we were happy to be able to look ahead in what we hope, was perceived as a very positive attitude to the future of electronic publishing in South Africa. A number of copies of the CD and the accompanying pamphlet are available to anyone interested who are able to visit the library in Cape Town. We would also be prepared to post copies to other parts of the country at a cost of R30 per parcel. Please contact Lianda or Mandla at (021) 4246320 or <heritage@nlsa.ac.za>

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