

Reader development in South Africa: my visit to the Cape Town Book Fair 2010

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My trip to Cape Town (kindly funded by the British Council) was a continuous emotional switchback - overwhelming, uplifting and a little disturbing! It's impossible to boil down my experiences to only one abiding memory, so I have decided to outline three things that will always stick with me.

One: Visiting and speaking at the hugely successful and most popular cultural event in Cape Town - the 5th Cape Town Book Fair. I felt hugely honoured and privileged to have been given the opportunity to talk about the value of reader development in United Kingdom libraries at the Fair's first trade day that was dedicated to exhibitors and trade visitors exclusively. The libraries seminar was co-facilitated by the wonderful Genevieve Hart, a senior lecturer and expert on

libraries in South Africa. Her talk was fascinating, inspiring and a little disturbing: it is a sad fact that 92% of public schools in South Africa do not have a library. Her talk was also inspiring because Genevieve and her industry colleagues are campaigning directly to the government for more investment in developing libraries' modern reading offer and book marketing campaigns to help build a reading culture in South Africa. She also highlighted Equal Education's

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public campaign urging people and 'book-hoarders' to donate books to help build school libraries.

The libraries seminar received a great response and the discussion that followed the two presentations was lively, highly engaging and a little controversial, with one delegate making the point that she 'doesn't like the idea of libraries becoming social, lively, interactive spaces'. Erm, but of course, libraries are the golden key to community cohesion; they bring people together to engage in social reading experiences and through this engagement, encourage people to read more.

Another first was the youth literature conference. Despite the poor attendance, it was good to see the Fair dedicate time to the question of digital publishing and the impact that e-books, e-readers and digital technology is having on society, and the role libraries play in bridging the digital divide. I was inspired to hear from dynamic young CEO Arthur Attwell of Electric Book Works. It was also fascinating to hear views from the audience that the 'born free' kids or the Facebook generation would be encouraged to read more e-books if they were made freely (or very cheaply) available.

What I really enjoyed about the Fair is that, unlike London's, it is open to the public, offering author readings, a wealth of titles for sale, and the unique atmosphere of book lovers. The Fair was a great platform for people to talk business and hear new information about the industry.

Two: Meeting some incredible people who are genuinely doing all they can to make a social difference, including Equal Education's campaign for school libraries. Of all the incredible people, I was most inspired by Africa's first Nobel Laureate for Literature, Wole Soyinka, and by Gillion Bosman, a young global changemaker, now employed by the British Council in South Africa. At the age of 23, Gillion set up an entirely youth-led grassroots organisation, training teenagers to have the skills, knowledge and the confidence to fight poverty and inequality. His extraordinary vision and intelligence makes Gillion a natural leader and activist for social change and equality.

Three: Getting a taster of the rich diversity of talent. Publishing in South Africa is currently an industry with potential for fast, creative and significant growth. Talking to publishers at the CTBF I learnt a

tremendous amount about the publishing scene in South Africa. Since the days of apartheid local publishing houses have developed and now sit alongside some of the largest players such as Jonathan Ball and Macmillan. When I asked publishers what they thought their main challenge was, they unanimously pointed at the lack of a reading culture, stemming from the lack of education and from poverty. Despite the regime change twenty years ago opening the door to more widespread education, there are still people on low wages, which means book ownership is out of reach for the masses.

How can publishers in South Africa expand the market for reading? Librarians and publishers, with the help of NGOs such as Equal Education, are trying to

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Creating a culture of literacy takes time. It has more barriers and less backing than, say, a culture of football. New technology, such as print-on-demand books and stories sent entirely via text message, brings

generate a reading culture by pressuring the government to establish more libraries and train more librarians, so as to enable free and democratic access to books and reading experiences to a larger and poorer section of the South African community.

the potential for free and democratic access to books a shift closer. The next decade could potentially see the animation of an exciting new vision for a modern library reading service that accounts for the implications of new media on traditional definitions of reading and distribution, harnesses community engagement and the impact of new co-production models, and realises the real potential of partnership working.

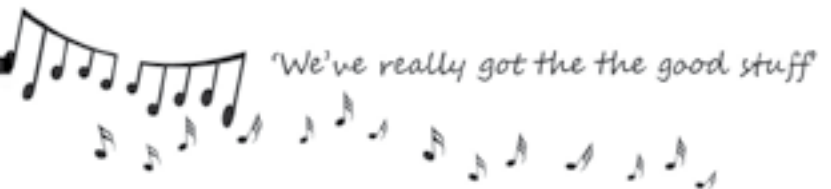
To turn this vision into reality, there needs to be continued and sustained investment and advocacy for libraries' work with reading. In this way, reading for pleasure will become the true art of the people, engaging everyone, including those currently excluded by social, geographical or educational barriers, in more reading.

To conclude, I have gained a wealth of new knowledge and made some valuable contacts. Perhaps The Reading Agency could offer reader development expertise, reading programmes and book promotions to progress the shift in reading culture and encourage more people in South Africa to read more.

If you want to hear more, or if you might be able to help and get involved, sign up to our mailing list or get in touch. <Sandeep.mahal@readingagency.org.uk>

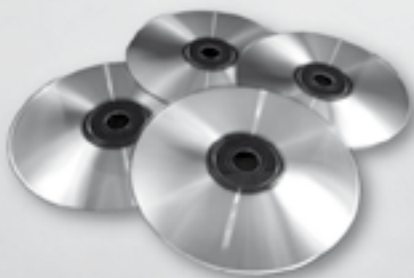
Note: Please note that the 2011 Cape Town Book Fair has been cancelled. It is now to be held bi-annually.

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