

Romance novels take Black market by storm

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I've joined the romance club in June and got my first subscription last month. These stories are so amazing, once you have started reading them you can't let them go [...] What I like the most about your books - they are African and talking mostly about the things we experience in our daily lives.' (E-mail from a satisfied reader in Richards Bay)

And there are many more women who are singing the praises of an initiative by Leisure Books (the largest book club in South Africa) in collaboration with Kwela Books (since 1994), an imprint of NB Publishers, and Thought24, the publishers of *True Love, Move!* and *Real*. Sapphire Press is the result, a romance imprint with the slogan,

Where true love reigns.

So what is this all about? According to Riki Roos, (Manager: Business Development) Leisure Books wanted to celebrate their 30th anniversary in 2010 with a 12-month book club to unlock the joy of reading to more readers.

Leserskring was founded 30 years ago and the vision of the book club was to address the lack of Afrikaans reading material for the South African market. Demand was so strong that the English equivalent, Leisure Books, was established in 1982.



'Our vision has expanded to provide books for every household in South Africa. Millions of readers in South Africa do not have access to books, and more importantly, books the reader can connect with.' The real secret for the new product's success is in identification. Readers have to be able to identify with the characters and milieu, if not necessarily the language. For many years black women - probably the largest single demographic component of our population - have had to read the equivalent of Barbara Cartland if they needed a romance fix. Or Marian Keyes if they enjoy chick lit. Or Kathy Reichs if they liked suspense.

I remember my wife's grandmother, who used to creep up behind me and suddenly ask: 'WHAT are you reading?' Then I would answer... well, a variety of genres from comics to philosophy. And then she would say: 'I only read difficult books', followed by a long monologue regarding her poor youth and how her father refused to let her study, because a woman should stay at home. This sad reality prompted her to read as widely as possible. And the need for knowledge never abated. She made sure her children had the opportunity to study. Ironically, only one of her four children did.

At the 2010 Cape Town Book Fair the South African icon Desmond Tutu recounted his own humble childhood. He was proud to tell everybody that his father allowed him to read comic books. From there he went on to read 'difficult' books, and eventually became Archbishop. You have to start somewhere. To do that, you need access to reading material.

Most people, however, probably do not read all that much to begin with. Why? Because they fail to connect. To identify. Culture has to do with 'buying into' certain principles, specific values. The values you have known since childhood - as well as the environment and a certain way of life. Speech patterns, slang, historical reference, physical description - all these elements paint a definite picture. Readers recognise such elements, become interested, even engrossed. This is exactly what happens when black women read

these books. The writer therefore has to know what the readers are looking for. Even a man, a black man like Fezikile Cokile, who authored the fifth novel published by Sapphire Press, may succeed in this goal. It has to do with insight and intent - to really know the milieu of the reader and the heroines they wish they were.

This longing the reader has provides the gap for the author and the publisher: in other words, you have to know what you are doing. You need a formula. And, according to the readers' response, the above mentioned team has it.

So, what is this secret formula? It sounds something like this: **PPPPP.**

Starting with **Perspective**: romance is about suspension of disbelief. There should be no disillusionment either. Preferably, only one perspective, namely hers.

Secondly, **Pace** and **Plot**: these romances are quick-fire experiences; never longer than 30 000 words. Therefore there is little room for sub-plots - boy meets girl/girl meets boy. Challenges have to be overcome in order for their love to prosper. The girls usually have a support group, known as 'the sistas'. The male hero is normally introduced by the third chapter.

Thirdly **Position**, aka context: Local is lekker here - setting, language and ideological framework. Ideological framework refers to the happily-ever-after concept, as in the Mills & Boon formula. Differences are that the man will be more conservative than the woman (who longs for emancipation, but wants heterosexual love too) and

the girl often strives to improve society, embracing the hope introduced by the socio-political situation of post-1994 South Africa.

Lastly, **Perception**: Authors and editors should not underestimate the complexities of modern romance. The author has to create a situation where sexual tension will grip the reader, even though she knows that the girl will triumph in the end. The author can achieve this if she (or he) believes in the world she/he creates. Only then will the reader also believe in it. Romance needs to be alive in each story or the readers will detect disillusionment - which will ultimately become that of the reader. And then the reader may turn away from all these books, and everybody loses.

At the 2010 Franschhoek Literary Festival these romance novels were introduced by Nèlleke de Jager, publisher of Kwela Books: 'Publishing romance is the backbone of many an international publisher, ditto for NB Publishers and their huge market share of the Afrikaans romance market.' The project was launched in April 2010 in *True Love* magazine with two Sapphire Press romances offered for the price of one - only R49,95. Members of the book club receive a new novel every month. The first three Sapphire Press romances are titled **Kwaito love** by Lauri Kubuitsile, **Cherry marbles** by Shukie Nkosana and **The bridesmaid's lover** by Tsire Mushoma. Orders can be placed through *True Love* magazine.

The book club states that they get 'swamped with positive feedback'. If this means that thousands of new book lovers are drafted into the legions of bibliophilia, let true love reign ... or begin.