

Linking our children to their neighbours

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Plugging holes is what I like to do. All my life, I seem to be shining a torch into dark corners, ferreting out the missing elements or straddling the divides of many disciplines, seeking out that which has been overlooked, rejected or ignored.

Children's books should present the whole of life to children and yet, to me, there are glaring omissions. Authenticity has often been sacrificed for what is construed as marketability. Shielding children from reality is seen as more important than exposing children to the world. Imagination is presented in a tight, safe set of parameters rather than broadened so that it is made visible in all places and in every single child's life, wherever they fit on the socio-economic continuum, wherever they live.

For years I have worked within the publishing establishment and NGOs to create books (often with photographs as illustrations)

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that have presented stories and lives that have largely gone under the radar. I have used the entire toolkit available to a children's author to make these books, not as exercises in political correctness, but as full-blooded, child-friendly experiences containing humour, emotion, quirkiness, sensitivity and a whole lot more.

I have now decided to explore a new avenue. I'm still passionate about creating reading material for young people but who says it has to be on paper between two cardboard covers? Making e-books means having control of the process from start to finish. It means not having to compromise on your particular vision. It means you can reach people everywhere.

When my husband and I planned a three-month camping trip to Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Mozambique, I immediately decided that I would make photographic books in those countries that would highlight the similarities and differences of children's lives in the contrasting environments in which they live. The opportunity to plug those gaping holes was too tempting.

My thinking ran along these lines: Where are children's books on the Great Zimbabwe Ruins? Where are the books on children in African out-of-the-way cities and towns? Where are the books which show the genuine and current life styles of African children on the continent? Where are the small details that take the generic, arm's length, 'this-is how-they-live' representations to a new level?

Making the books that comprise the collection *Children of Southern Africa* Volume I (**Mauro and Adelaide, their life in Quelimane, Mozambique; Kero and Beeby, their life in Great Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe; Lindeka and Vuyane, their life in Malkerns, Swaziland**) has proved to be a life-changing experience.

First came the privilege of stepping out of the role of tourist and really immersing ourselves in the lives of these families. I was supremely aware that it was important that the entire operation be done in an ethical manner. Once the families were identified (a story in itself!), they were made fully aware of what my intentions were and they signed model release forms. They were also paid a modelling fee. The families played a creative role in the content of the books with suggestions and information. They were also given the opportunity to give their feedback and make corrections to the final work.

I discovered that the children's lives were a fascinating and vibrant hybrid of traditional and 21st century, a unique fit with their culture, environment, and circumstances. Following the children in their daily life and exploring their surroundings brought those moments which I could never have imagined or gleaned from research alone: when Mauro unscrewed the single light bulb in his home in Quelimane in order to light up another room; when Kero introduced her friends to me and their names were Regina, More Blessing and Vicious; when her younger brother, Beeby, mimicked my actions with a camera using a small plastic toggle; when Vuyane's grandmother urged me to ask Vuyane what game he endlessly plays outside on his own using only two piles of stones. The juxtapositions were telling. The selfsame Vuyane is the second best chess player at his school. Kero

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texts her friends in the closest town from the midst of the Great Zimbabwe Ruins. Who could think these up sitting at their computers at home?

On returning to Cape Town with my notes and a cache of photographs, a new challenge awaited me. I was determined to put these books together on my own, and that required learning how to use Photoshop and Indesign. Deep-etching photographs is a time-consuming, fiddly process but I knew that intricately shaped images on a white background make for a more interesting layout in which the text can be satisfactorily integrated on the page. This

was preferable to plopping down awkward, blocky rectangles and using the left-over space for text. I wanted these books to be a visual treat with an imaginative design complementing the best of the photographs.

The texts had to honour the children and their spirit and not stray from who they were. They had to take the reader through their lives smoothly, creating links and transitions that made sense. I had to edit and juggle and tweak. I had to order and re-order until I felt each 'story' stood on its own, each unique, each with very much its own flavour.

The overall message for teachers and parents is that linking their children to their neighbours is not just a noble sentiment. It is a wonderful opportunity to expand our children's horizons, to make them turn away (momentarily?) from the media and culture flooding us from the UK and the USA, and take their place on the continent of Africa. It is all about being inclusive.

The books take cognisance of the large numbers of Mozambican, Swazi and Zimbabwean children that are in South African classrooms and whose cultures and backgrounds need affirming. The books are National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) compliant with many links to the intermediate phase especially in the social sciences and language but also in life skills.

I am continuing the *Children of Southern Africa* series. Volume 2 will be an all South African collection, and Volume 3 will explore children living in Botswana, Namibia and Lesotho.

A postscript: I so enjoyed the sense of ownership and control making the above, that as soon as I could, I began another project. **An African Suitcase** is a CD packed with my stories, poems, picture books and information books for children of all ages.

To find out more about both *Children of Southern Africa* Vol 1 and **An African Suitcase** visit www.revivaschermbrucker.co.za Buy E-Books.

