

16. A young black writer's perspective on the publishing landscape

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One of the most heralded and revered literary works in the publishing history of South Africa is *Long Walk to Freedom*, an autobiography of the life of the country's first democratically elected President Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. The story of this elder statesman was one of the first to be published in a democratic South Africa in 1994. Even among those who have read the book multiple times, it might not be commonly known that the publisher was Back Bay Books that was established in 1993. Arguably, it was the most famous book that they released, and they had to have it republished in 1995.

“though challenges persist with publishing, there is great reason for optimism”

Renowned Nigerian author Chinua Achebe famously said during an interview with the Paris Review, “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” The quote alluded to the narrative of Nigeria and, by extension, African society in the post-colonial context. That said, storytelling has been the most powerful driver of narrative in human society for centuries. Civilisations will always tell stories, including those of the people they vanquished. Numantia was an ancient province of the Roman empire, which was in what is Spain today. This city decided to rebel against its rulers from the city on seven hills. Their rebellion was ultimately crushed, but is remembered with romantic nostalgia. However, the plays, writings and narratives that are available from that point in history come from the Romans. South Africa has gone through great deal of social change in the past quarter of a century, and nobody has documented this as accurately and as dutifully than our nation's own storytellers.

While some of the greatest literary bodies of work in South Africa's history got their time in the sun by publishing at the advent of democracy, the country's literary golden age was already at hand during the nation's darkest years. While Steve Biko's acclaimed book *I Write What I Like* contains essays written by the black consciousness intellectual dating back to 1969, United States-based publisher Heinemann published

the essays as a complete book in 1987. South African readers' appetites point heavily in the direction of non-fiction and contemporary issues affecting the country. In the current literary landscape, social commentary and politics have become more prominent in terms of the subject matter of South African bestsellers. Books, including *The President's Keepers* by veteran journalist Jacques Pauw, *Blessed by Bosasa* by Adriaan Basson, *The Enforcers* by investigative journalist Caryn Dolley, and *Balance of Power* by political journalist Qaanitah Hunter, show South Africans' visceral interest in matters political. Over the past few decades, books of a political and autobiographical nature have been well received by readers. First-hand perspectives of South African life have also been welcomed in recent years. Books such as Biko's seminal work, comedian Trevor Noah's autobiography *Born a Crime*, Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu have been landmark bestsellers, celebrated in South Africa and around the world.

The publishing industry in South Africa has transformed considerably over the past 25 years. One phenomenon that has been particularly pronounced in the current landscape of book publishing has been the democratisation of authorship, and the way it has become more accessible over the years. However, despite its rich history, revered titles, and celebrated authors, business has been tough in the country's retail book industry. Despite these challenging times, the indication is that the academic and education book publishing sectors have managed to sustain income. This is borne out by the *Annual Book Publishing Survey 2016*, compiled by the Publishers Association of South Africa, and released in 2018 through the University of Pretoria's School of Information and Technology. The research, compiled by Elizabeth le Roux and Laetitia Cassells, shows that the income of the total publishing industry in South Africa moved up from R2.7 billion in the 2015/16 financial year to R3.2 billion in 2016/17. In this period, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training book publishing sub-sector enjoyed a 46% year-on-year growth in income, from R194 million in 2015/16 to R234 million in 2016/17. General educational books also showed a strong increase in income from R1.3 billion to R1.9 billion year-on-year. However, the Adult Basic Education and Training sub-sector showed a sharp decrease in this period of 74%, from R3.2 billion to R2.7 billion year-on-year.

Researchers have expressed grave concern on the lack of a “reading culture” in South Africa. This, compounded by the low-reading levels among school children, has considerable implications for publishing in the country, and literacy in

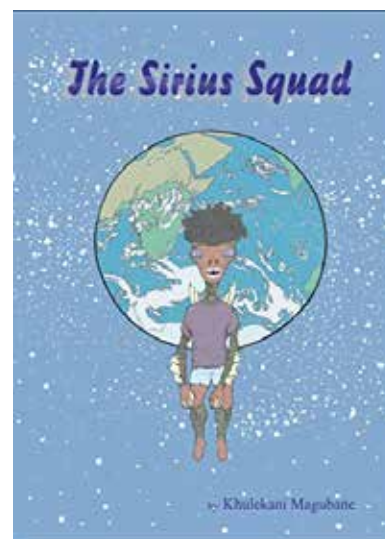
general. According to the 2016 *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study*, 78% of schoolchildren in grade four could not pass the lowest benchmark in reading for comprehension. Statistics South Africa raises more alarming figures. A 2017 general household survey points to as much as 44.7% of South African children from the ages of one to four who have never had a parent or legal guardian read with them or to them. The challenges of child literacy do not only affect publishing, but also the further development of school children and the prospects of their economic activity in the future.

My journey as a published author began in 2004 when I was fortunate enough to meet Felicity Keats through my mother, who was a teacher at the time, and had met her on a youth literacy retreat. Felicity started UmSinsi Press, which champions the Dancing Pencils initiative. It guides the establishment of writing clubs across the country, mostly of young school children, and assists by getting their books published. Felicity has been an advocate and pioneer for a creative writing technique known as “right-brained” writing. This is a special writing technique that she taught to children, teachers and anyone looking to improve the way they write. This technique is about the brain’s cognitive functions being divided into two hemispheres: the left brain, which governs logic, rules and information, and the right brain, which governs feelings, intuition and creativity. When writing creatively, the left brain can be a hinderance to the process, because it is incapable of suspending its disbelief and commitment to learnt rules and conventions. By performing breathing exercises and creating a tranquil environment, a writer can shut down the critical left brain, giving room to the more creative right brain to express itself freely during an exercise that involves non-stop writing for extended periods of time. The idea behind right-brained writing is that for a piece of creative writing to be allowed to reach its full potential, the left brain must be put to sleep, and the right brain must be allowed to create without the interference of rules and norms. After the creative process is complete, the critical aspects of writing can come into play: writing that follows the rules, edits spelling and grammar as well as divides a story into multiple parts and chapters.

At the time, I was still in high school and creative writing was a favourite hobby. However, after sending my material to publishers and magazines through registered mail, I struggled to get any of my writings published. When Felicity read my work, she committed to helping get my work published. Two short story books for children were published followed by a graphic novel in 2004. The next year, I released another three children’s books, along with a Christian teen novella, which was written with two of my Sunday school learners at Saint Matthew’s Anglican Parish, in my hometown of Estcourt, KwaZulu-Natal. *Angel’s Anointing* was the first in a trilogy of Christian short novels which tackled social issues confronting South African teenagers of all religious backgrounds, including drugs, peer pressure and abuse. The second title, *Angel’s Redemption*, was released in 2006 followed, a year later, by *Angel’s Salvation*. By then, I was already credited as an author of or contributor

to 15 published titles.

I enrolled for a National Diploma: Journalism at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in 2008. During the three years of study, I was afforded the latitude to pursue my passion for creative writing, and given resources to promote my fiction writing. A symbiotic relationship began to develop between my creative writing and journalism career. I am convinced that the opportunity to engage in creative writing, and have work published at an early age played a role in my choosing a career in journalism. Likewise, my journalism career has helped broaden my horizons as an author, and link me with networks and resources needed to continue writing creatively. Being a published author has afforded me opportunities to attend prestigious literary events, and represent South African literature internationally. It has allowed me to connect with journalists and academics from abroad with regard to my work.



I was invited to participate in the 2012 Cape Town Book Fair where I launched my 16th solo novella titled *Racers, Rats and Rubbish Bins*. The book was a short, modern fable which told the story of prejudice and rigid class structures in post-apartheid South African society. Nasiha Khan of the DUT-based Journalism *Iziko* called it “a fascinating allegory of ambition and prejudice”, while Quanta Henson of Dancing Pencils described it as “a shocking metaphor for life, one in which we, as human beings, both eat and are eaten”. In 2014, I was invited to take part in a panel discussion at the Time of the Writer festival. It was titled *From the Mouth of Babes*, and focused on the importance of fostering literacy among young children by creating literature that they can relate to and enjoy. I also made it to a panel discussion at the Storymoja literary festival in 2015 in Nairobi, Kenya. It raised the awareness of African publishers across the continent on African writing talent, especially among the youth. South African academic Alan Muller, who was studying in Germany, interviewed me in 2017 about my fiction book *The Sirius Squad: Earth’s Last Defence*. It was released the same year. The contents of Muller’s interview were included in an academic paper he wrote on African fiction.

In 2018, I was interviewed by the German academic magazine *Das Goethe* on the use of mother tongue literature to cultivate a culture of reading among the youth and improve literacy

outcomes in basic education. In the interview, I pointed out that children, in many instances, are more comfortable in conversing, reading and writing in their mother tongue, and that this should be taken into consideration when teaching them with a view to improving their literacy. Incorporating mother tongue literature in the classroom has great potential to improve outcomes for school children as many from disadvantaged backgrounds must first learn to converse in the language of instruction before they can read and write in that language. It was also the year in which I released a novel *This Love Thing: A New Age Love Story*. It's the story of three information technology final-year students who design an online dating app that is attuned to the algorithm of truth. I wanted to write a story which gave affirmative roles and positions to young, black (by broad definition) South African women characters. For generations, men have been represented as strong, intelligent, virtuous and resourceful protagonists in the tropes of mainstream literature, while the most common depiction of women was as damsels to be saved by the male protagonists, with little compelling narratives, world views or ideas of their own.

Though challenges persist with publishing, general education outcomes, and childhood literacy, there is great reason for optimism in South Africa. At the time of writing this chapter, I am working on the sequel to my 2017 *Sirius Squad* novel,

titled *The Sirius Squad 2: Between Enemy Lines*. I use the medium of science fiction to unpack current geopolitical challenges, such as the rise of nationalism in several countries around the world, and efforts by current leaders to curtail democracy.

The power of literature in reinforcing representation has made itself abundantly clear not only in my own writing, but also in the work of contemporaries in South Africa. The number of people participating in the formal publishing sector, throughout the value chain, has grown and diversified. Not only are there more black authors as well as women authors, the faces of book publishers in South Africa are also looking more diverse than ever. The outcome is that the stories told by authors in their literary work are more diverse and relevant to South Africans. This can be seen in the work of authors like Penelope Mashego, Niq Mhlongo, Sfiso Mzobe, Eskinako Ndabeni, Zak Mlaba and Sihle Mthembu. The more authors are given a platform to publish, the more represented South Africa's broader readership base will feel. The more represented readers feel, the more likely they'll participate to the overall benefit of South Africa's publishing terrain.

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