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Libraries in Dialogue for Transformation and Innovation

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Of authors and librarians: An important dialogue in promoting a culture of reading

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A culture of reading is enormously important to South Africa’s social, cultural and economic development. A person who is literate can be an active member of society whereas someone who is illiterate may be relegated to the fringes. Literacy opens the door to knowledge acquisition and understanding, which lead to a more competent workforce and thereby to economic benefit. The state of the economy, in turn, drives infrastructural development, which turns the wheels of library funding, which affects the availability of books.

Literacy is not merely the ability to make out the words on the page. It is the ability to understand their meaning. To be literate is to be able to read and understand, and therefore the culture of reading is a fundamental building block of a functioning society. It is also a fundamental aspect of personal growth; of self-identification; of social interaction; of understanding the world and one’s place in it.

Librarians and authors have much in common. Whereas librarians and publishers sometimes have a contentious relationship (owing to disputes over the limits of copyright protection), the relationship between librarians and authors is usually collaborative and constructive.

I have a good friend, himself a librarian, who often says, “If authors didn’t write and publishers didn’t publish, librarians would have nothing to put on their shelves.” That statement may have held true in the past, but in this digital age, with the number of content platforms increasing by the day, and self-publishing online a growing trend, the place of publishers in the traditional book value chain is far from solid, and many publishers are rethinking their models of providing content – so the library of the future may not even contain any shelves. Nonetheless, the positions in the book value chain of authors (who create the content) and librarians (who house the content and disseminate it to readers) show that there is a close, even a symbiotic, relationship between them.
Figure 1: The book value chain
Each link in the book value chain, which starts with the creator and ends with the consumer, represents an entity that adds value, and together they form a chain of economic activity. Each link in the chain depends on the link preceding it, and therefore it is a truism that libraries cannot exist without authors. Authors, of course, need libraries just as much – and not only to lend out their works to readers. Authors conduct research in libraries and rely on librarians’ bibliographic knowledge. Libraries are venues for gatherings such as award ceremonies, conferences, and seminars; they are places where authors’ books are displayed, and where authors give talks to groups of readers. Increasingly, as we know, libraries are expanding their horizons; no longer mere book repositories, they serve as community centres where learning, reading and entertainment activities take place, often in partnership with authors. Good examples of successful cooperative ventures between libraries and authors are the Chicago Public Library’s One Book One Chicago programme and the programme hosted by Smashwords and the Los Gatos public library in California – and, in South Africa, the University of Johannesburg One Book project in which the university library collaborates with authors and the university community to read and discuss books and meet their authors.

Librarians tend to be readers themselves, and admire authors. Many librarians are themselves authors. It would be fair to say that authors and librarians recognise that their fortunes are bound together, but there is still room to develop and to cement the relationship and grow it from friendly to powerful.

In this presentation I am going to focus on the promotion of reading as a starting point because all writers are readers before they put pen to paper or (more likely) finger to keyboard. It is around reading that authors and librarians can collaborate most closely to foster a love of the written word and to engender the reading habit.

We have heard it said, many times, that ‘there is no reading culture in South Africa’. Real readers (those who read for pleasure and entertainment as well as to learn) are few, and as for those who actually buy books, they are said to be less than 5 per cent of the population. But buying books, especially when unemployment and poverty are social crises, is not the same as reading them, and the desire to read is not as elusive, I believe, as people sometimes think.

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1 A simplified version of the chain, the diagram omits paper manufacturers, printers and distributors as well as the many activities associated with the publishing process such as editing, designing and illustrating.
it is. Professor Archie Dick of the University of Pretoria has written a fascinating account of South African hidden histories of book culture, and uncovered cultures of reading, for instance, among slaves at the Cape in the 18th century.²

Nonetheless, there is general recognition that the country as a whole has a very weak culture of reading, and Chapter 9 of the Libraries and Information Services Transformation Charter, in tackling this deficiency, stresses the importance of libraries:

As institutions of reading, libraries contribute significantly to a culture of reading.

Reading, in turn, has a profound influence on writing and learning.

It is recognised that reading is essential to writing and that libraries are essential to reading.³

But Chapter 9 then immediately acknowledges the ‘huge challenges in developing a culture of reading’. Recognising that the foundations of the reading habit are laid at school, the Department of Education’s National Reading Strategy of 2008 revealed what it called ‘shockingly low’ levels of reading ability. In 2001 and 2004, the Department of Education had conducted two national evaluations to establish literacy and numeracy levels in primary schools, and found out that ‘large numbers of our children simply do not read’.⁴ Far too many adults, too, are illiterate or functionally illiterate. The 1995 Household Survey and 1996 General Population Census showed that ‘of about 26 million adults in South Africa (people aged 15 and over), about 12 to 13 million have less than a full (Grade 9) general education; 7.4 to 8.5 million have less than Grade 7, and about 2.9 to 4.2 million have no schooling at all, and are illiterate … A quarter of the population (largely people in rural areas and older people) never read in their leisure time.’⁵

³ Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) and National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS) 2009, The Library and Information Services (LIS) Transformation Charter, Chapter 9.
⁴ Department of Education 2008, National Reading Strategy.
⁵ Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) and National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS) 2009, The Library and Information Services (LIS) Transformation Charter, Chapter 9.
The reasons are many. Many schools have no libraries. Many homes\(^6\) have no books. In far-flung rural areas libraries are few and far between. In townships the libraries that exist are under-resourced. Any concerted effort to promote the culture of reading must also take into consideration the social circumstances that restrict any form of leisure activity: unemployment and poverty, access to good lighting in the home (electricity) and adequate space.\(^7\) A transport infrastructure that is extensive and cheap enough to encourage social interaction lies at the heart of a culture of reading. A transport infrastructure enables a township resident to attend a poetry reading, a book club, a literary festival in another part of the city or country … \(^8\)

Literacy and reading campaigns have had varying levels of success. Among them have been the Department of Education’s Kha Ri Gude mass literacy campaign and National Book Week, a joint initiative between the South African Book Development Council and the Department of Arts and Culture. Several, such as the Fundza Literacy Trust (focusing on teenagers and young adults) and Nali’ibala (for children) have come from the private sector. Especially interesting is ReadSA, run by a group of authors and in partnership with the Centre for Creative Arts at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Time of the Writer Festival.

But despite such initiatives, the situation remains dire. As Chapter 9 of the LIS Transformation Charter says, ‘In spite of the work of literacy organisations and reading projects, librarians face significant challenges in helping to entrench a culture of reading.’ Appropriate legislation will not, on its own, provide the enabling environment, as the Transformation Charter admits: ‘Policy and infrastructural developments without the support required to embed them will hamper the growth of a reading culture.’\(^9\) In other words, policy

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\(^6\) Estimated in 1997 at half of the households in South Africa. Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) and National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS) 2009, op. cit.


\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) and National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS) 2009, op. cit.
provisions such as the Education Laws Amendment Act of 2007 which defines the existence of a library as the minimum norm in a school will have no effect without the political will to implement them – that is, to build the libraries and stock them with books.

So in this gloomy scenario and facing the reality that pumping millions into the library infrastructure is unlikely in the short-term, how can we (the librarians and authors who want to work together to conquer the mountains of problems) make our mark? The only effective way to approach a problem may be to tackle its root, but are we capable of interventions that will make a difference and, incrementally, help to build a reading culture?

One way in which both authors and librarians are searching for ways to reach out to readers is through the new media. Smashwords is the world's largest distributor of self-published ebooks. In a groundbreaking article, ‘Libraries to become community publishing portals’, 10 Jim Coker, the founder of Smashwords, has said:

Public libraries promote literacy and a culture of reading but with the rise of ebooks, public libraries are at a crossroads … In California, some libraries are developing community publishing initiatives in partnership with self-published e-book authors. They are helping local writers become publishers. By sponsoring educational seminars and events, libraries can bring local authors face-to-face with readers.

The programme, in partnership with the Los Gatos public library, created and delivered a series of seminars that explored e-books from the perspectives of readers, library staff and authors. Librarians and readers were introduced to e-books; and authors were shown how to prepare, create, self-publish and distribute an e-book. After the seminar programme the authors published their work through Smashwords, and several of them were bought by the library. The programme has strengthened the relationship between the authors and librarians of that community.

A powerful way for authors and librarians to combine in reaching out to young people is to piggyback on youth’s love affair with new media. An example of the drawing power of the smart phone as e-book reader is the Mbooks mobile book reader on Mxit, which sold 11 000 chapters of the first book loaded it loaded in a single month. The space for further book

10 http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2013/08/e-publishing-and-libraries-a-21st-century-partnership/
reading platforms, onto which authors can load their own writing, is limitless, and the potential readership is huge because the medium is of the twenty-first century *zeitgeist* and the new means of communication.

By considering these few examples – and many others that time and space have stopped me from mentioning – authors and librarians should be able to throw many possibilities into the melting pot and come up with workable strategies. The starting point is collaboration, and that is why an author-librarian dialogue is so important.