

On becoming a writer some practical advice



CONTENTS

On becoming a writer some practical advice
Advice and suggestions from Centre for the Book's Colleen Higgs 14

TO Honiball - 100 - doyen van Afrikaanse strokies
Kultuurhistorikus Francois Verster, deel van sy navorsing oor hierdie talentvolle kunstenaar 15

Vet, bekend en die lewe saam met Pa Ronél McKnight bespreek hierdie insiggewende boek deur Deirdre Barnard 17

Picture books in translation
Book Selector Johanna de Beer provides a list of picture books available in the three official languages of the Western Cape with an accompanying booklist 20

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At the Centre for the Book (CB), we receive many queries from writers about all kinds of issues, and most of the questions relate to publishing. Here are answers to many of the most frequently asked questions and some of our most useful suggestions.

Read, read, read

Reading widely and voraciously is the best training for a writer. Our first suggestion to writers therefore is to read widely, not only in the genre you are writing but also others.

- Apart from your own reading preferences, you should also read what other South African writers have written and are writing. You need to know where you fit into the ongoing conversation that is South African literature.
- Buy South African books and subscribe to local literary magazines.
- Read South African books from libraries.
- You may find books about writing useful too. (See the selected bibliography at the end of this article.)

Is my writing any good?

Of course this is a complex question, one that plagues writers, mostly because 'good' is not an objective reality. Writers need to request and cope with feedback, but also to trust their own judgement. Here are some ideas on how to elicit feedback.

- Send your work to literary magazines, both online and print. See the list at the back of **A rough guide to small-scale and self-publishing** or on the Writers' Network web site. If your writing is rejected this is feedback of a kind. But do not get discouraged and keep working at your writing.
- Join a writing group or start a writing group. (See the Writers' Network web site for some ideas.)

- If you live in Cape Town, attend *Out to Lunch* presented at the Centre for the Book on Wednesdays between 13:00 and 14:00. (See CB web site.)
- Readers will read your work for a fee and to provide you with feedback. Writers sometimes have a resistance to pay anyone for feedback. Remember, you are asking someone, very often a freelance person, to give up of their time.
- Enrol for a degree in creative writing or do a course on creative writing offered by the extra mural centres at many universities. (The CB web site has more information on universities that offer these courses.)
- Join a writing workshop. There are some excellent teachers around, see the CB web site for a list.
- Buy a copy of the pamphlet, **Self editing your own poetry** by Robert Berold from the ISEA at Rhodes University. E-mail Jenny King <j.king@ru.ac.za>.
- From this year the Centre for the Book will have a range of pamphlets available for writers on topics such as starting a writers' group, copyright and legal issues that concern writers, working towards getting published, publishing opportunities for writers and so on.



Research South Africa publishing

Writers often do not realise that they need to research publishing. There are many relatively easy ways of doing this.

- Go to a bookshop or a library and look at who is publishing what and whom? Publishers all have their own programmes and ideas about what they are doing. It is counterproductive to send a manuscript of a novel to a publisher that specialises in educational textbooks. You need to have a clear idea of the publishing list of the publisher that you are communicating with.
- Read the books pages of newspapers and magazines.
- Visit the web site of the Publishers' Association of South Africa (PASA) or buy a copy of the PASA directory from a bookshop near you - this is a quick and easy way of getting contact details of most local publishers and getting a sense of what they are interested in publishing.
- Most publishers have their own web sites with clear requirements on submissions. If their requirements are not indicated contact them by telephone.
- The Writers' Network web site features a useful article about some of the issues in publishing in South Africa today.

Consider self- or independent publishing

Sometimes you cannot get published straight away - independent or self-publishing might then be the answer. Get hold of a copy of **A**

rough guide to small-scale and self-publishing. It is available in bookshops and from the CB. It retails at R69.

- There is a range of publishing possibilities, from photocopying simple stapled chapbooks, to hand made books, to pamphlets, digital printing, online publishing and reading to others.
- Apply to the Community Publishing Project for a grant - deadlines: March and September each year (See the CB web site).
- If you really become interested in small scale publishing - write to Gary Cummiskey and ask to subscribe to his Dye Hard Press e-newsletter - e-mail: <dyehardpress@iafrica.com>.

Opportunities for writers

How do writers find out about all the different opportunities that are available? The Centre for the Book is a good starting place. Join the Books e-group to find out about most of the items listed below. E-mail <books@nlsa.ac.za> to subscribe. You will be added to a mailing list which will provide you with most of the information you need to proceed.

- Competitions and other calls for writers to submit to publications.
- Workshops (Indaba page of CB web site).
- University degrees and extra-mural courses, for example, at Rhodes University. (CB web site).
- Literary magazines (Writers' Network web site and CB web site).
- Online zines (sweet; litnet; donga).
- Writers' groups.
- National Arts Council grants to give you time to write (www.nac.org.za).
- Books e-group (information about workshops, events, conferences, competitions, opportunities for publications, readings, writers groups, et cetera).
- Indaba page on CB web site (online notice board for the book world).
- Out to Lunch (CB web site).
- Conferences, symposia, festivals (Books e-group/ Indaba page on CB web site).
- Mother City Book Fair (Beryl Eichenberger <hipzone@mweb.co.za>).
- Cape Town International Bookfair 2007: PASA web site.
- Turning the Page (Mark Espin at the Centre for the Book).
- WritEscapes (Mandy Lebides <mandy@busdialogues.com>).

- Off the Wall at A Touch of Madness in Observatory, Cape Town (Hugh Hodge <hodgie@easypages.com>).
- Subscribe to Gus Ferguson's mailing list, you can subscribe to Carapace and follow the links (you will receive invitations to launches, readings and other events).

Useful web sites

www.centreforthebook.org.za (Centre for the Book).
www.thewritersnetwork.org (The Writers' Network).
www.publishsa.co.za (Publishers' Association of South Africa).
www.nac.org.za (National Arts Council).
www.act.org.za (Arts and Culture Trust).

Literary Magazines

www.donga.co.za
www.sweet.co.za
www.litnet.co.za

Selected bibliography of books on writing

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- King, Stephen. (2000) **On writing: a memoir.** London: Hodder & Stoughton.
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- Reeves, Judy. (1999) **A writer's book of days - a spirited companion and lively muse for the writing life.** Novato, California: New World Library.