

Why?

no Xhosa books?

Compiled by GRIZÉLL AZAR-LUXTON

Xhosa books, or should one say, the shortage of Xhosa books, has been a much discussed issue during the past few years.

A few months ago an article appeared in the *Mail & Guardian* in which renowned writer Sindiwe Magona, author of 21 books which include *The best meal ever*, posed the question why African writers do not write in their mother tongue.

According to Magona one hears various comments: from a bookseller - 'No one buys them'; from a reader - 'Can't even find them'; from a publisher - 'No market for books in isiXhosa except prescribed works'. Magona expressed the opinion that 'some publishers would not even look at manuscripts in Xhosa unless these are accompanied by a translation'.

She says that for a children's book the writer must translate the book page by page for the illustrator. Alternatively, the author provides 'the art brief' - for example '...mother; about 35, kindling fire on ground between huts and sheep kraal'. This should explain why one often finds pictures of people who do not quite look the part. Imagine illustrating a life about which you have no knowledge. When she challenged an editor about this practice, the answer was illustrative: there are no Xhosa-speaking illustrators! Magona asks how can it be that more than 12 years after the death of apartheid, there is still an absolute absence of illustrators who can read isiXhosa?

Many other issues were raised in the article, amongst others a message to the publishing industry - which, in her opinion, needs to urgently create internship opportunities for young people. She concludes: 'The less said about the proliferation of poor-quality books - unimaginative books, standardised books, uniform books, not fun or funny books - the better! All I can say is, if we are not careful, we will raise a whole generation of book haters.'

In response to this article Savyra Meyer who describes herself as 'an illustrator on the pale end of the scale', and who speaks only one African language, offered some hope. With her permission we publish some

extracts of her published response in the *Mail & Guardian*.

'The complaint about the lack of African language departments is not true of all publishers. In my own experience of working with a well-known publisher in Pietermaritzburg, there seems to be no lack of capacity to produce children's books in several African languages. I have illustrated three of their Zulu 'readers' and lots of educational textbooks in various languages.'

She mentioned that there are several other publishers who are known to publish books in all or most of the local African languages.

She suggests adding subtitles in English at the bottom of all African language pages similar to our local television screens translating the soapies line by line. It helps readers who speak another language, whether English or Venda, to learn a new language and makes the books accessible to all children who speak the main official language. The learning can happen in two directions too...from the indigenous language to English.

'I agree - it is ideal for your illustrator to understand Xhosa and ideally to know your background, if you are a Xhosa author, whether they are drawing the landscape, clothes, or cooking utensils. But the fact is there are many other African languages as well. During April and May I worked on books for pupils speaking Pedi, Zulu, Xhosa, Venda, Tswana and Tsonga among others. No illustrator will speak all these languages, so translations will always be part of the process in this multilingual country. And intensive research is important before each project, so you do not put Zulu beehive huts in Venda for instance.'

She suggests that if something does not ring true, that it is the author's prerogative to point out the anomaly: 'That skirt is too short for a married woman,' for example.

'Eventually perhaps, there will be (insert language of your choice) people all over the country who have realised that being an illustrator could be seen as a valid career option. In the advertising industry salaries are good (after one has paid one's dues for a few years) the work is stable, great fun, even if the hours are long, and offers massive scope for artistically-talented and trained youngsters. Being a designer or

CONTENTS

Why no Xhosa books?

A discourse on a controversial issue
compiled by Grizéll Azar-Luxton 19

Waking up the gods - the unusual world of Neil Gaiman

He grows exotic pumpkins and collects cats and computers. Van der Poll discusses this 'master of urban fantasy' 20

Die Uitgespoeldes

'n Diepte-bespreking van hierdie treffer 22

Writers for and of Africa

A showcase of African writing by
Book Selector Johanna de Beer 23

illustrator is still not seen as a real job amongst young Africans, let alone their parents, who usually, in common with many of their paler counterparts, would prefer to see them doing something else...for instance, marketing, if they absolutely have to work in advertising.

'The publishing industry has far less money at its disposal than the advertising industry. But most publishers are only too happy to look at new illustrators' portfolios and are more than open to giving young artists a chance to get a foot in the door, especially in educational publishing. This brings me to the efforts made at PRAESA, at UCT, where Dr Neville Alexander and Carole Bloch have run at least two workshops for previously-disadvantaged writers and illustrators over the past four or five years.

'They have brought over successful professionals, author Leen van den Berg and illustrator Jan de Kinder from Belgium to bring about a change in the current setup, where, to quote Ms Bloch, "Most illustrators are middle-aged white females." Hence the reason for the workshops.

'It is in the hands of people like Pallo Jordan himself, who declared his dismay at the lack of African language books, to provide funds to make more workshops like this possible, and even perhaps to provide bursaries for talented kids to take their passion further. When we see animations on local television with local backgrounds that do not feature American barns and picket fences, but scenes from "ekasi" as only an inhabitant of long standing can draw them...then maybe we can say South African illustration and animation has found a unique identity that is not only culturally on the button but well drawn and funky with it. There are encouraging signs that it is well on its way, but in the meantime - my sympathies to those who are tired of their lives being drawn by outsiders who never draw the rubbish on the streets, and inadvertently sanitise the way things are till they no longer ring true.'

For more information, see www.savyra.com.

Source

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