

Maskew Miller Longman *always learning!*

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Correspondent

I am passionate about books and passionate about reading – it has been a lifelong love affair! says Steve Cilliers, Managing Director of Maskew Miller Longman (MML).

'I have always marvelled at the value of books and their ability to be both a source of learning and a source of entertainment, so working in the industry is a dream come true for me. I have always been associated with books and libraries in some shape or form – in fact, in standard four I was made librarian at my primary school and this was one of the best moments of my life; I was so proud!'

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This is not to say that Cilliers and other publishers do not suffer from curriculum fatigue! As he explains, 'We are on the fourth curriculum since 1998, so there is no time for our authors to write and no time for us to fix texts to our complete satisfaction; we are always in the testing stage. Usually, the textbook publishing cycle is 18 months; this year we had four months to produce the required material!'

Cilliers, Pretoria born and bred, spent many years as a teacher at Pretoria Boys High School before joining the textbook

publishing milieu in 2001, and so is fully aware of the responsibilities and demands in both disciplines.

He moved to MML at the beginning of 2010 and, as this meant relocating to Cape Town, he has spent a wonderful year exploring Cape Town and adjusting to life in a new province. When asked what particular aspect has required the most adaptation, Cilliers said that winter is much longer than he had anticipated but that this was an advantage, as he prefers cooler weather. He also added that the extended season

of cooler weather means being able to enjoy the wonderful red wines on offer for longer . . .

The company

MML belongs to the Pearson Group, an international educational publishing group employing about 35,000 people globally. MML, one of the oldest publishing houses in South Africa, was established in 1893 and is the biggest educational publisher in the country with a market share of between 20-35%.

Although the core focus is specifically textbooks, the development of a solid store of African language literature is fully supported by the publishing house.

'Libraries are some of our most important customers, and we recognise that the need for fiction in African languages is immense, so MML supports publishing in African languages – in fact, it is a priority,' says Cilliers.

An initiative of which MML is particularly proud is its annual literature competition, the Maskew Miller Longman Literature Award, which has produced 44 printed books to date. All submissions have to be aimed at children and young adults, and the intention of the award is to encourage the significant development of books in all the official South African languages and so is closely aligned to the priority status given to mother tongue literature by MML.

Initiatives

The Pearson Group is currently repositioning itself and MML as a provider and facilitator of educational solutions rather than as a publishing company. Their new slogan is, quite aptly, *Always learning!*

The ultimate vision of the group is to span education provision from traditional printed text books right through to actually owning the channels of delivery, for example, schools.

The essence of MML is education, so, with the introduction of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), came the mandate that all textbooks published will be for all subjects and in all official languages. Although the choice of language remains the school's prerogative, the Department of Basic Education is currently debating

whether English should become the official language of the South African education system.

'MML is not a trade publisher, although that being said, we do receive approximately 10-15 unsolicited manuscripts per month,' says Cilliers. 'Sadly, only one gem has emerged in my career; a superb collaboration

between author Mary Jo Amani and artist Lehla Eldridge entitled, **Excuse me, I'm trying to read!**

Interestingly, one never thinks it is possible that authors of school textbooks will earn more in royalties than all except the very top best-selling authors, but this is indeed the case because of the volume of textbooks printed. This is particularly true in the lower grades because subjects are limited to three, so the number of books per subject per grade is quite substantial.

Another Pearson initiative is the creation of MyLabs, a concept that provides personalised subject tutorials, particularly in the fields of

mathematics and physics for students in tertiary institutions. The MyLabs system enables learning, homework and tutorials to be customised to the pace of the individual student.

Impact of Kindle and I-Pad e-readers

New technologies such as the Kindle and I-Pad e-readers have an ever-increasing impact on the way textbooks are produced, I-Pad more so than Kindle because it provides a more advanced platform for images, graphics, links and tables.

The popularity of these technologies and its influence on the way textbooks are designed and offered in future will be driven by institutional acceptance; for example, in some Californian educational institutions, traditional textbooks have already been replaced by e-readers. Not only are the readers convenient, they also allow instant 'rich' media links, text viewing and even make updates possible, so enabling personalised learning. This of course is the perfect launch pad and support for systems like Pearson's MyLabs.

As Cilliers mused, 'We will probably see a revolution in the next couple of years – particularly in higher education – in how textbooks are used. Tertiary education will comprise the larger share of the initial uptake of e-readers, but will definitely not be the only or final one. Publishing, after all, is not about paper BUT intellectual property and we at MML concentrate on finding ways to enhance learning.'

He added, wryly, 'Aaah, the enhancement of learning inevitably leads to thoughts of the publisher's grail – the teacher-proof textbook! This is the answer to universal education woes!'

The production process

The process that MML follows in the production of a textbook is quite intense. It includes the research and development of materials, input

from focus groups followed by independent research into the efficacy and relevance of the material. This process is essential as more than half of the textbook authors are completely inexperienced; however, they are subject experts and/or experienced teachers which more than compensates for any deficiencies in textbook writing.

Very often, significant interaction between the author and MML takes place before the manuscript is handed over. Frequently, a degree of rewriting or sometimes even total over-writing of the material may be necessary.

Advice to aspirant writers

The advice Cilliers offers to aspirant writers is to provide the publisher with a synopsis and chapter samples of their work, accompanied by a detailed curriculum vitae. He suggests that they rather write of their own experiences and set the story in their own country or town, or at least one that is well-known to them – this is particularly relevant for South Africa because of the considerable need for African-specific and African-language literature.

Further advice is to choose an original theme and not to try a new Harry Potter or vampire series, to never submit an original manuscript (MML still receives handwritten originals), to spend time and then even more time editing, rewriting and polishing the manuscript before submission. Cilliers warns that 98% of unsolicited manuscripts are never published so it is a very difficult process but he emphasises that you should definitely take a chance if you believe that what you have written is worth the publisher's attention. He also suggests a visit to the Publishers Association of South Africa (PASA) web site, www.pasa.co.za

My favourite read?

When asked about his best read of 2010, Cilliers took some time to identify the favourite of his 2010 favourites as, like most book lovers, he is not really able to limit himself to only one category of preferred books, let alone an overall winning book! However, he eventually decided that if he were forced to choose only one book, his choice would have to be **The elegance of the hedgehog*** (Europa, 2008), by Muriel Barbery.

'I mostly catch up on my reading when I travel, as this is my quiet time, although since moving to Cape Town I find myself increasingly less enthused by travelling and would rather settle in at home or in a quiet refuge of natural beauty in the mountains and read – Cape Town definitely has that effect on me,' he said with a smile.

Note: * *In stock*

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