

PUBLISHING FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S LITERARY REVOLUTION

Presented at the ANFASA Annual General Meeting, 6 August 2025

Gail reads:

1: INTRODUCTION.

David and I are the co-owners of Porcupine Press, a small but very active publishing company which I manage. Since 2022, David has been developing Cross-Border Books, which is now a registered not-for-profit Developmental Publisher. We'll talk about both these entities this morning. First, though, we need to say that it is a privilege to be here, and a special honour to have been invited to talk at ANFASA's 2025 AGM.

ANFASA is an important organisation for us. David started writing for the ANFASA magazine in 2022, and he has already appeared in the first issue for 2025. Before his ANFASA connection, he wrote extensively for a number of publications about universities and the changing shape of academia after 1994. But of course that's only half the ANFASA story. The other half is made up of ordinary writers who write for ordinary readers. We call them 'grassroots writers' and there are thousands of them in South Africa, including David himself. Porcupine Press is in its 16th year of operation and we have personally worked with many hundreds of these grassroots writers who represent a groundswell of something of great national importance. That is why we have been using the word 'revolution' since 2015, and it reappears in the title of our talk today. We believe there is a 'reshaping' going on, a changing of the expectations in response to the changing cultural and literary landscapes in which we all live and work.

This is why we are so pleased to be speaking directly to ANFASA. Your deliberate mix of academic and ordinary writers will become the catalyst that drives the revolution forward. David says that intellectuals and the proletariat are always the revolutionary trouble makers, and sometimes they become like dynamite when they team up.

2: THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

South Africa is embroiled in two distinct yet closely related cultural and literary crises. The first is the high reading-for-meaning failure rates among grade 4 learners. Recent international research pegs our rate at 81%, by far the worst among the nearly 60 developed and developing countries involved. The second is access to books. The Equal Education Law Centre says that more than 16 500

schools (that's 75% of the total) are operating without libraries. We are surrounded by these sorts of disturbing changes in education generally, higher education included. But the points we wish to make revolve around the grassroots response. This response is gathering momentum, but it is largely unseen and is largely ignored.

After nearly two years of working closely with book activists in urban settings, it has become obvious to Cross-Border Books (CBB) that great changes are afoot. DIY libraries are springing up in townships in greater Johannesburg, and elsewhere. These libraries are generating links with neighbourhood schools where literacy training by youth volunteers is frequently welcomed by hard-pressed teachers and school principals. People are beginning to talk about books, about reading them, and about writing them. Book clubs are emerging, township publishing is taking place, and regular events at DIY libraries attract growing audiences. In response, CBB has developed a quartet of these activities into fundraising proposals. Listen to this advertising flyer:

For CBB and its grassroots partners, literature is like an energy drink that gives you wings. But books and publishing will die without readers. So, 'developmental publishing' means a composite approach across four key literary activities:

- (i) DIY community libraries development*
- (ii) literacy and reading for joy, knowledge, and power*
- (iii) training for writers, publishers, readers, and books activists*
- (iv) community-based publishing, distribution, and sales*

All four activities are interdependent, and yet they fall naturally into two main groups: (i) and (ii) dealing with access to and use of books, and (iv) dealing with book production. Training activities (iii) serve access to and use of books, as well as to the making of books.

3: THE PUBLISHING FOCUS

This focus must now claim our undivided attention.

Mainstream commercial publishing is increasingly attracted by the lure of 'global' markets, with the result that 'local' opportunities have diminished. This means that self-publishing has become the main funding source for the production of 'local' writing. But self-publishing can be expensive and not infrequently leads to under-edited text and sloppy book design.

Should we be troubled by these trends? We think the answer needs to be a resounding YES, because 'local' writing remains the most fertile seedbed of literature. This home-brewed literature then becomes a dynamo for community and national consciousness, as well as for the broadening view of humanity that literacy and literature tends to encourage.

For these reasons, CBB has designed a financial publishing model that couples book production costs to author royalties, and rests on a publishing fund to ensure that talented writers with limited resources can also be considered for publication.

Now we are getting to the nitty-gritty of CBB's plan regarding 'Publishing for South Africa's Literary Revolution'. As long ago as mid-2022, the basic ingredients of the plan had been assembled. Here is an updated summary of the tools required.

- **Basic Training.** Writer training has already been developed, and a publishing training module has been tested. More publishing-related training programmes are in the pipeline.
- **Publishing Fund.** This needs to be launched as soon as possible so that publishing services can be offered to writers of ability and originality, regardless of whether they be academic or grassroots writers.
- **Book Distribution & Sales.** Community-based networks are being established as part of the very necessary monetising of DIY libraries. The libraries will offer for sale a regular supply of newly published books, as well as operating a book exchange, but leaving intact the library's core collection.
- **Book News Update.** A regular bi-monthly magazine, launched in February 2025 to give 'a voice for southern Africa's grassroots literary revolution'. Issue 4 August 2025 is landing in readers' inboxes as we speak. Plans are now in place to offer printed copies of the magazine at all DIY Libraries
- **Interaction: Academia and the Grassroots.** The potential here is enormous. We mention only two current opportunities:
 - Grassroots books activists are already developing group 'reading aloud' sessions that introduce adults both young and old to books, to reading, and to the power of literature to bring excitement, knowledge, and to change lives. Now one of the DIY libraries wants to produce a manual to spread the idea. Could academic and/or student input into this endeavour be designed to be helpful both to the activists and the students?

- Grassroots children's book designers are preparing to tackle the rapidly worsening climate crisis. Their approach will be to stimulate awareness with a what-to-do-about-the-crisis series of books custom designed for various age groups. Student and/or academic support could be an invaluable motivating force for these township artists and writers. At the same time people from the universities would benefit from closer contact with ordinary working people who tend to be first in the firing line when our planet runs amok.

4: LAUNCHING THE PUBLISHING PLAN

Early in 2020, as we all remember, COVID 19 swooped in, leaving too many South Africans dead and an economy in tatters. From a purely book-industry point of view, over 20 bookshops that were closed in the lockdowns never reopened – and a bleaker 'new normal' entrenched itself.

But the arrival of our 21st century's third decade wasn't all bad news. By 2022, David had begun to write for the ANFASA magazine. His interest in ANFASA was kindled when he discovered he could apply for funding as a non-fiction author. But his interest soon expanded far beyond ANFASA's willingness to assist in two of his personal writing projects.

When it came to publishing, we found that CBB and ANFASA were speaking the same language. ANFASA talked about some sort of partnership. We listened intently. A more formal meeting was arranged between CBB and ANFASA's Professor Keyan Tomaselli and UNISA publisher Hetta Pieterse. We discussed the possibilities, even suggesting how a partnership might work.

So, here we are. CBB is addressing the full ANFASA Board. This audience represents an important opportunity. To conclude, therefore, I give way to David, who, as CBB's project manager, wishes to make a formal announcement.

5: DAVID'S ANNOUNCEMENT:

Before my announcement, I wish to offer one short paragraph on the difference between 'provision' and 'support' in the fields of social and cultural development. The first is 'top down', the second is 'bottom up'. We live in a democracy which is obviously a 'bottom up' political system. In terms of our literary revolution, the 'bottom up' energy at the grassroots must be respected and heeded by the providers, whether state or corporate. Otherwise, 'top down' provision will fail, or at best be partially wasted.

Now for my big announcement.

CBB will prepare and submit to the ANFASA Board for comment before the end of August 2025 the following documents:

- *A DRAFT AGREEMENT committing CBB and ANFASA to a publishing partnership, including joint fundraising, aimed at blending the unique potential of ANFASA's town-and-gown membership with CBB's on-the-ground experience of South Africa's grassroots literary revolution.*
- *A DRAFT PROPOSAL showing the plan of action and fully budgeted, to launch the publishing partnership between ANFASA and CBB as outlined in Part 3 of this document.*

That's all from me. Thanks to Gail for reading CBB's paper. Thanks to the ANFASA Board, and to our real and virtual audiences, for listening.

Are there any questions?