

<https://www.anfasa.org.za>

Contents

Escape from Lubumbashi: The Author's Journey Estelle Neethling	1
Seeds of Thought - From PhD to Published Book Carol Leff	6
Forging Forward With Faith: A Journalist's Journey to Academia Andile Dube	8
Tireless Editor and Champion for Authors: Tributes to Monica Seeber WITS University Press, Hetta Pieterse, Dudu Zwane	9
Letters to the Editor Alex Holt	11
What is Grassroots Writing?: Here's a Definition and an Argument for its Importance David Robbins	12

The opinions of the authors are their own and do not represent the views of ANFASA or the editorial team

EDITORIAL TEAM

Keyan G. Tomaselli (Co-Editor)
keyant@uj.ac.za
 Duduzile Zwane (Co-Editor)
 Hetta Pieterse
 Jonathan Sabbatha
 Lee-Ann Tong

CONTRIBUTORS

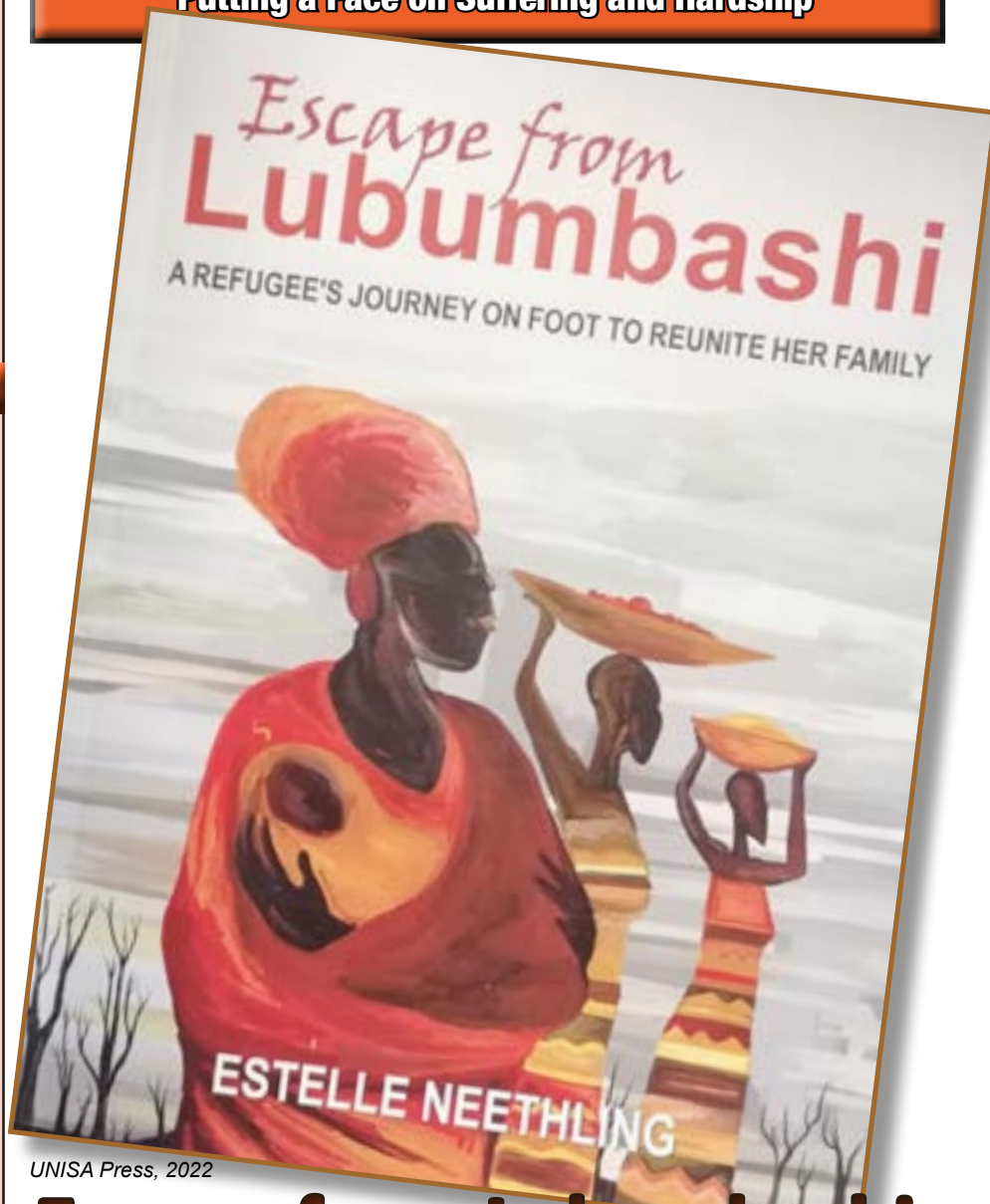
Estelle Neethling
 Carol Leff
 Andile Dube
 Roshan Cader
 Hetta Pieterse
 Dudu Zwane
 Alex Holt
 David Robbins

DESIGN, LAYOUT & PRODUCTION

Mike Maxwell mik_max2@hotmail.co.uk

Copyright in all the articles in this magazine is held by the individual authors. If you wish to reproduce any article, or any substantial part of any article, kindly contact ANFASA for permission.

Putting a Face on Suffering and Hardship



UNISA Press, 2022

Escape from Lubumbashi: The Author's Journey

Estelle Neethling*

I was at a major crossroad in my life when my ten year long tenure as South Africa's national tracing coordinator for the international Red Cross ended. The South African Red Cross Society (SARCS) relocated their head office from Cape Town to Pretoria at the end of 2009. The impact of my experience of working with mainly traumatised displaced men, women and children – primarily from the Democratic Republic of the

continued on page 2:

* Estelle Neethling is a South African author and ANFASA, Grant Scheme Award winner with extensive experience of refugees in South Africa. Her book, 'Escape from Lubumbashi: A refugee's journey on foot to reunite her family' was published by Unisa Press and has been longlisted for the Sunday Times Non-fiction Award.

"...working in the refugee sector had cast a compelling light on a world of suffering entirely beyond my previous view of the world"

Putting a Face on Suffering and Hardship

continued from page 1:

Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia and Zimbabwe – had been profound. I am a South African born and bred in a rural Free State town on the border of Lesotho. Working in the refugee sector had cast a compelling light on a world of suffering entirely beyond my previous view of the world. Despite intensive training from the international Red Cross, my first week in my office at SARCS in the year 2000 left me reeling from the devastating effects of families torn apart by displacement.

I had been writing profiles about well-known South Africans for many years as a freelance writer. My first book was published in 2010 whilst in the employ of the Red Cross. After my term ended a new chapter was beckoning in my life. I felt the urge to put a ‘face’ to the suffering and hardship I had witnessed working in the refugee sector. My specific focus was on the ones who had been forced to flee their homes due to conflict, persecution, as well as political circumstances beyond their control. Adolphine Misekaba’s pensive, somewhat grave, mien sprang to mind.

The first time I saw her she was sitting on the ground in a container, a make-shift classroom for the refugee children. This was at Bonne Esperance, a non-profit organisation for displaced people, at the time run by the Catholic Welfare Department. This was during 2003 when asylum seekers were flocking to South Africa. Our progressive Refugee Act, promulgated in 1998, allowed them to live and work in this country.

On that day at Bonne Esperance in Philippi I was part of a group of Red Cross employees and an international Red Cross delegate. Adolphine looked up at us briefly with intense interest, I had to resist the urge to break away from the group to talk to this woman exuding such calm dignity, but it was impossible as we were there to hand out T-shirts to the refugee children.

I encountered Adolphine on a number of occasions during the following years when she was often called upon to speak of her experiences in fleeing to South Africa. She spoke movingly and earnestly

about her experiences as a 22-year old woman with a 16-month old baby and a five-year old brother at other NGOs. She had lost all her family during the First Congo War.

There were many meetings and conferences during the 2000s. All the refugee organisations had rallied together as one during the deplorable violence against so-called foreigners in 2008. My office was a place of human calamity at the time, with countless telephone calls and tracing requests emanating. This was not only from countries in other parts of the world, but even South Africa itself, as scores of refugees had become refugees within their country of refuge.

Despite knowing only the bare outlines of her story, I sensed the pain of a story possibly unbearable to tell. On a subliminal level I sensed that Adolphine’s story embodied the outreach I wished to make to society at large. This would promote better understanding of the challenges faced by the genuine refugee and how displacement had increasingly become the theme of our time.

When I asked Adolphine whether she would be prepared to embark on such a journey with me she agreed without hesitation. As she and I progressed along an arduous way, it became clear to me that her story belonged in the public domain. I was fully aware of the fact that it would be difficult to find a publisher for a story of this nature. I also became increasingly aware that the task I had undertaken was even more daunting than I had anticipated. But insight brought about during therapy about my own human frailty provided

continued on page 3:



Working with South African Red Cross in 2004

“On a subliminal level I sensed that Adolphine’s story embodied the outreach I wished to make to society at large in order to help promote better understanding of the challenges faced by the genuine refugee and how displacement had increasingly become the theme of our time.”

Putting a Face on Suffering and Hardship

continued from page 2:

a measure of courage. I had also been strengthened by the experience I'd gained witnessing and dealing with traumatised human beings during my time as tracing coordinator. I was ever-mindful of the responsibility of avoiding re-traumatisation. Even gentle questioning elicited such sorrow in Adolphine that, from time to time, I felt we should take time to 'regroup' – for her sake, and to a much lesser degree, for mine.

As I became immersed and preoccupied by her story of courage and fortitude, I realised that my meagre income as a freelance writer could not sustain what I had come to regard as a task which begged completion, whatever and however long it took.

In 2012 I was fortunate enough to become one of ANFASA's Grant Scheme Award winners. This award enabled me to reimburse Adolphine for time away from work and the substantial cost of transport from her home in a township to my home where we spent many hours in deep conversation. I felt that she regarded my home as a safe place where she could unburden her life story. This required immense emotional energy of her. Of course the financial assistance helped to sustain me during the time spent on writing, rewriting and essential research.

As we progressed, I realised that without the political context of the time in which she grew up and from which she had to escape from her home country in December 1996, the impact of her story would be lost. I set about to research documented information about the First Congo War, spearheaded by the megalomaniac dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko. Hers was the account of an innocent person having grown up in a secure, happy home, only to become a refugee in her own country and a person "... wandering from one place to another..." as she succinctly states in the book.

As members of the Kasai ethnic group, generations on both sides of Adolphine's family, as well as that of her husband Sepano, had suffered persecution before they themselves became targets. I did research about the history of the DRC,

in many ways a formidable task due to the convoluted history of the region. Much of the information I had found – particularly of Mobutu Sese Seko's cruelty and his abhorrent excesses – dovetailed with information from Adolphine. She spoke of the mesmerising influence his charisma had on people; some even believed he could make them blind. As he stripped his country of its ample mineral and other resources it came to the point where the co-operation minister of the French government at the time, Bernard Kouchner, once described Sese Seko as a walking bank vault in a leopard-skin cap. Mobutu Sese Seko's support of the West during the Cold War increased his power as a political leader in Africa.

Patrice Lumumba, the fiery Congolese politician and independence leader, served as the first prime minister of the DRC from June until September 1960 when the DRC achieved independence. The reign of King Leopold II of Belgian Congo had lasted from 1908 until 1960. Once my book was published, a reviewer encouraged readers to engage in further scrutiny and awareness of the atrocities committed during King Leopold's bloody rule in the Belgian colonisation of the Congo.

Lumumba's ideals had inspired Adolphine's father, Nkudimba Mpidewu (man of peace). He was born 15 years before Lumumba's execution by firing squad on 17 January 1961 under a moonlit tree in an unidentified part of Katanga, less than a year after he became the first democratically elected prime minister of the Congo. Adolphine was the apple of



Estelle Neethling: "I realised that without the political context of the time in which she grew up and from which she had to escape from her home country in December 1996, the impact of her story would be lost."

"Lumumba's ideals had inspired Adolphine's father, Nkudimba Mpidewu (man of peace), who was born 15 years before Lumumba's execution by firing squad"

continued on page 4:

Putting a Face on Suffering and Hardship

“Most South Africans shy away from the realities which confront foreigners. We know there’s immense pain there, so we’d prefer not to open that particular Pandora’s Box. This essay will hopefully evoke empathy for the plight of foreigners who are just trying to build a life for themselves and their families.”
Dudu Zwane.

continued from page 3:

Nkudimba’s eye and she adored hearing about her father’s ideals and aspirations. He was a trained medical doctor and a political leader, affiliated to Etienne Tshisekedi’s Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS).

Because Adolphine’s father often travelled overseas as an internationally recognised artist he would tell her about the greater world outside of her home town and taught her and her siblings English at a young age. He was also at odds with his own culture in his anti-chauvinistic attitude; for him the belief that a woman’s place was only in the kitchen was a fallacy. His offspring were encouraged to study to find a place in society.

The bond of trust between me and Adolphine grew stronger as her story unfolded slowly, carefully and at times

haltingly; I, as the ‘facilitator’ – often faltering in remaining capable of dealing with the impact her story had on my own emotions – had to tread carefully around her story of sorrow and the loss of almost her entire family; her father had disappeared three times. The third time he did not return.

Amiraculous confluence of circumstances led to her reunification with her husband Sepano. This happened after two years of unrelenting search for approximately 1500 kilometres, mainly on foot and relieved at times by lifts from truck drivers. This joyful event in Cape Town occurred almost a year after Mobutu Sese Seko was unseated in a coup d’etat in May 1997. South Africa’s role in the mediation process between the victorious Laurent Kabila and Mobutu Sese Seko before the latter’s death is also described in the book. Sese Seko’s devastating role in Adolphine’s life is important to her story. She was a young woman from a happy home, married to a good man, Sepano, the father of her son Ilunga, the baby who had to flee with her from her homeland after her husband had fled the then Zaire.

Reunited with Sepano in Cape Town, in search of a home, having experienced so much loss, all she wished for was to find peace and security for her, Ilunga, her young brother Joseph and the children that were born to her in South Africa. But cruel, deeply entrenched xenophobia followed her everywhere. Yet Adolphine remained mainly undaunted, always describing herself as a survivor. She made her voice heard against all odds.

My research covered some of the atrocities committed against ‘foreigners’. The experience gained through my work in the refugee sector at the Red Cross concerning South Africa’s Refugee Act and our Department of Home

continued on page 5:



Adolphine
with her baby Ilunga and his
brother Joseph at Meheba Camp in Zambia

“She described the frustration and anguish caused by long queues shared by refugees and migrants and the ongoing dreaded corruption that formed part of desperate refugees’ overarching quest to acquire formal status.”

Putting a Face on Suffering and Hardship

continued from page 4:

Affairs' ineptitude dealing with ever growing refugee/migration issues proved invaluable.

Adolphine described the frustration and anguish caused by long queues shared by refugees and migrants and the ongoing dreaded corruption that formed part of desperate refugees' overarching quest to acquire formal status. Granted, the Department's employees were overwhelmed by the number of individuals seeking the necessary permits in the late nineties and the ensuing years. The process of determining whether an applicant is or isn't a true refugee is decidedly complicated.

Adolphine's experiences as an *amakwerekwere*, the denigrating word for a 'foreigner' and scornful words "when are you going back" followed her everywhere in local buses and in trains. She experienced three attacks by thugs after her arrival in Cape Town early in 1998.

When she arrived home after escaping the third attack, relatively unharmed, Sepano said: "I don't know this world; I don't know where we can hide". Yet, when she and her family were given the chance of returning to the DRC or repatriation to another country, she opted for her and her family to become permanent residents in South Africa in 2014. Such was her resolve to make this country her home. She describes the members of her family as representing "the lost ones".

One of the reviewers of this book described it, in a way, as an African love story. For me, it certainly was a new way of looking at Adolphine's story. Upon reflection, she endured immense hardship in her quest to be reunited with her beloved husband.

There were some intermissions during the four years of our collaboration during which I, in a way, helped Adolphine to "voice out her life" as she put it. She stated as her reason for remaining in South Africa: "I haven't come all this way only to quit".

These words during the long journey towards publication sustained me and became my mantra.

If I have any advice for would-be writers – especially of nonfiction – be encouraged



A painting by Nkudimba (Adolphine's father) with his wife seated in front of it and their two young daughters. Young Adolphine is on the left next to her sister.

that, more than ever, the autobiographical, biographical and the memoir genres are gaining traction.

Granted, to find the right publisher is a huge challenge, especially when writing about a person who is neither well-known nor a celebrity. But if you have passion for a story to be 'out there' and you are prepared to persevere, look no further than the Association of Academic and Nonfiction Association of South Africa (ANFASA) for excellent advice and possible support. The Association is dedicated to the rights and aspirations of serious writers.

Without ANFASA, I doubt that *Escape from Lubumbashi*, would ever have seen the light of day.

"If I have any advice for would-be writers – especially of nonfiction – be encouraged that, more than ever, the autobiographical, biographical and the memoir genres are gaining traction"

The Transition to Becoming a Published Author

Seeds of thought – from PhD to published book

Carol Leff

Writing has always been a passion of mine, perhaps even an obsession, ever since I penned my first short stories at age nine which I then sold to my classmates for 10c a copy. Handwritten, there were four stories, which I wrote directly onto Roneo paper that left a purple ink on my hands afterwards. While I cannot recall the stories themselves, I can still remember the intoxicating smell of the paper and the warmth on my hands that exuded from a freshly printed sheet. I remember the excitement I felt being able to share my words with others. Little did I know then that the experience would herald a lifelong love of words, an insatiable craving to read books, and a desire to write stories like those I read.

The first book I had published was a collection of poetry in 2009, titled *flashes*, which provided written snapshots of different places I have lived. Now in 2022, my monograph titled *The Afropolitan Flâneur in Literature* has just been released by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. This time, my fascination with place is seen via literary analyses of selected city texts that feature a *flâneur* figure – an aimless wanderer of the city – who is not only found in Paris and London, but also in cities of Africa and the diaspora.

This book came about *recto verso* – in a manner of speaking – as I wanted to write a book, I knew what it would be about, but I lacked the discipline and rigour required to start what seemed to me, at the time, a very daunting writing project. I believed that if I registered for a PhD on the subject first, it would afford me the opportunity to do the research so that I would eventually have a draft manuscript (the final PhD) with which to work (towards the book).

Although I obtained my PhD late in life, I do not have a great

continues on page 7:

¹ Dr Carol Leff works at the Institute for the Study of the Englishes of Africa (ISEA) at Rhodes University. Her new book *The Afropolitan Flâneur in Literature* is now available from Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Amazon, and elsewhere.



Carol Leff: "Writing is difficult. For most of us, penning something that will make sense and be read by others is not a simple task."

"I remember the excitement I felt being able to share my words with others. Little did I know then that the experience would herald a lifelong love of words..."

The Transition to Becoming a Published Author

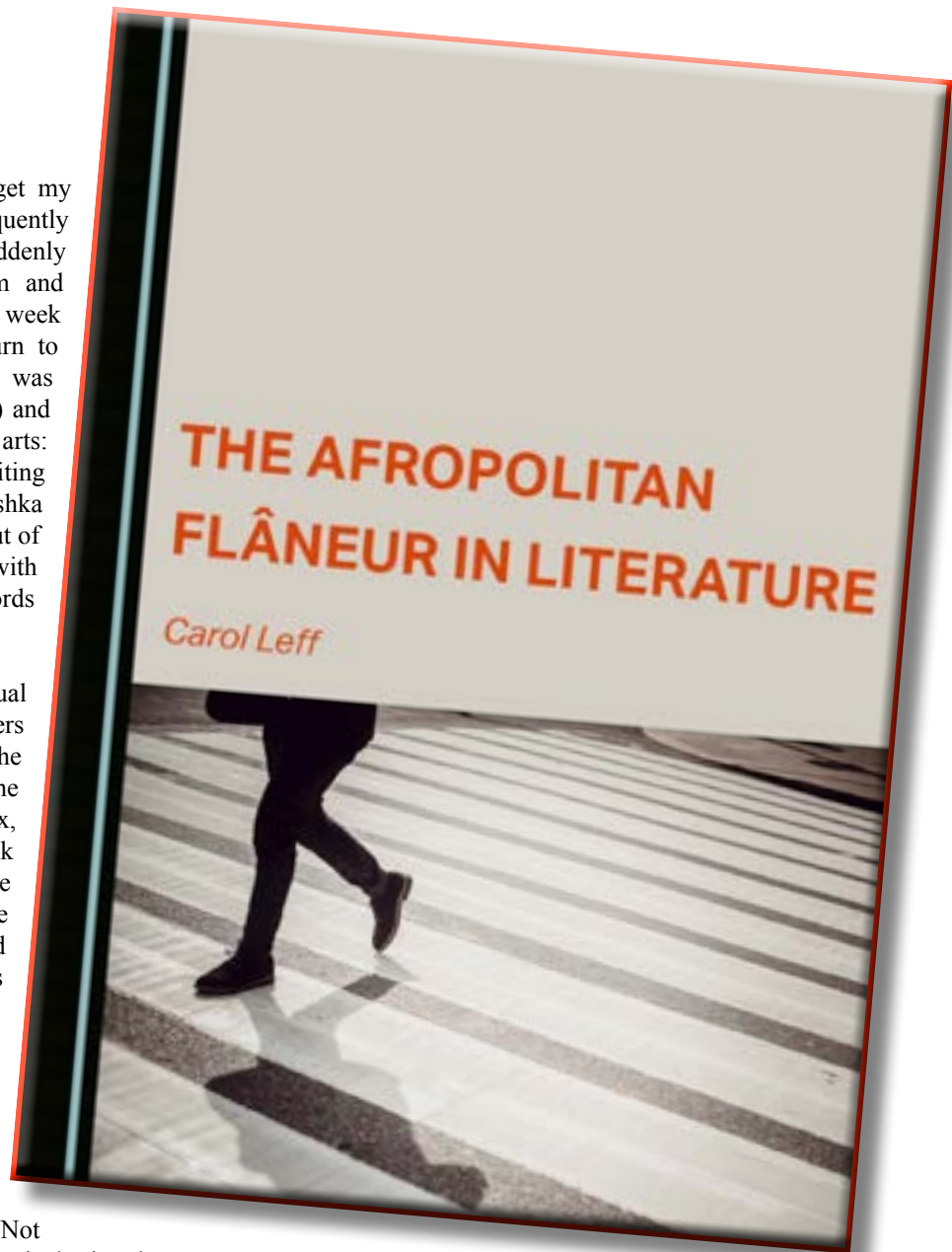
continued from page 6:

academic record. It took me five years to get my BA degree in the early 1980s. When I subsequently trained as a high school teacher, I was suddenly hospitalized with a mystery health problem and simply dropped out of my PGdipEd only a week before the final exams. I did not even return to write the supplementary exams later. That was farewell to academia for me (or so I thought) and I shifted my attention back to the creative arts: drawing, sculpting, making jewellery, and writing poetry. I started up a small craft business – Ishka Preposterous Paperworks – and made paper out of plants, designed calendars, and greeting cards with quirky messages. Always a connection with words and symbols.

The acts of writing and reading are sensual experiences: writers, layout artists, publishers and others know the thrill that accompanies the opening of a box of new books. There is the smell of the packaging, the weight of the box, the waft of ink and paper, the texture of the book cover, the redolence of the flipped pages and the whishing sound they make when turned. There is the delight of sight when you see the printed cover in reality, often far better than what is seen on a computer screen. These are but a few of the tangible end results of hours, weeks, months, and even years of good, hard labour.

Writing is difficult. For most of us, penning something that will make sense and be read by others is not a simple task. From a lengthy academic text involving complex theory to a three-line haiku, the act of writing takes time. Not only does writing involve constant brainwork, but it also involves all the senses and something more, something indefinable.

Ever since I penned those four short stories in primary school, I have also kept a journal. My first was a book I still treasure, its cover a padded olive-green with a neat border of embossed gold. It had a clasp lock that required a key to open it up, so I was free to write without fear, knowing my words were safe. The lettering in Portuguese read *Meu Diário*, inside the covers of which I wrote both in English and Brazilian Portuguese. Since that first diary, many others have followed, of different sizes, colours, and papers. The contents of my many journals overflow with a mixture of day-to-day life as well as the beginnings of poems or stories, or thoughts towards some future writing project. Parts of those journals have served as launch pads for stories that were later published, or rough plans of MA and PhD thesis chapters. I return often to my journals now that I am putting together a memoir that will focus on the 1980s in South Africa. The working title of this memoir is “I cannot remember but I wrote it down somewhere”.



“The acts of writing and reading are sensual experiences: writers, layout artists, publishers and others know the thrill that accompanies the opening of a box of new books.”

Developing an Academic Mindset of Quality Over Quantity

Forging Forward with Faith: A Journalist's Journey to Academia

Andile Dube*

I had always thought I would be a broadcast journalist but somehow became a print media reporter. During my last year at university, I majored in broadcasting and fell in love with the world of television making. I have always been a TV fanatic. In childhood, my days consisted of watching soap operas such as *Days of Our Lives*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *All My Children*, *As The World Turns* and so forth. I was also captivated by talk shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Ricki Lake* and *The Felicia Mabuza Show*. This is where my love for television stems from. However, my path after graduating didn't lead me into television. Instead, I ended up as a print media journalist.

My writing journey began in 2012 when I was hired as an intern for *The Mercury* newspaper. At the time I really didn't have an inkling of what I was doing. I was just happy to get the job and earn a salary- well a stipend- of about R3 000. I was with *The Mercury* newspaper for a year and when my internship ended, I moved to Johannesburg to seek better opportunities. I then had a short stint with *Heat* magazine before securing a learnership with the Gupta owned *New Age* newspaper. While there, I began to understand the impact of my writing and found my niche with Lifestyle and Entertainment reporting. This "beat" as we refer to in the journalism lingo, gave me the opportunity to flourish in my career. I was able to interview major South African and international celebrities like Brian Temba, David Tlale, Khabonina Qubeka, Lupita Nyong'o, Gugu Mbatha-Raw- to name a few.

*Andile Dube is the Information and Communication Officer, Faculty of Arts and Design at the Durban University of Technology (DUT)

I was with the *New Age* newspaper for two years before leaving to join the Durban University of Technology (DUT), as Information and Communications Officer in the Faculty of Arts and Design. If someone had told me when I started in journalism that I would end up in Communications, I wouldn't have believed them. However, sometimes the universe takes you in a different direction than the one you had planned for yourself. I am grateful for a wonderful job, my family and health. I am a student of the universe and a believer in that everything happens for a reason. So I got this job for a reason.

In 2015 when I joined our faculty, my then Executive Dean Dr. Rene Smith and I launched a quarterly magazine called *Softcopy*, which highlights the work done by students and staff. Prior to this, I had often joked that had my journalism career worked out, I would have loved to be a magazine editor. So while *Softcopy* isn't a big publication, I thoroughly enjoy putting it together. When I write my Editor's Note, I always mention that I hope our readers are inspired or restored in some way.

Because I have found myself in Academia, I decided to pursue the Journalism Masters several years ago. I am happy to share that I have recently completed my thesis and will be submitting at the end of August. My research topic was: "*A Feminist Research Project: Exploring the perceptions of undergraduate media students on the representations of black gay men in South African telenovelas*". This journey hasn't been easy. It has been filled with ups and downs. However, I certainly do not regret embarking on it. So if you are thinking of pursuing something, DO IT!

Link to DUT's Magazine: www.issuu.com/softcopy.dut.fad




Andile Dube: "if you are thinking of pursuing something, DO IT!"

"I had often joked that had my journalism career worked out, I would have loved to be a magazine editor. So while *Softcopy* isn't a big publication, I thoroughly enjoy putting it together."

In Memoriam - Tributes to Monica Seeber

Tireless editor, champion for authors: Remembering Monica Seeber



On driving in line towards Monica Seeber's burial at West Park Cemetery, this was the surreally quiet view from my car window, as I waited to sift a handful of soil on her coffin. Friends shared flowers, we were asked to bring her favourites. Cold air from outside was drifting in, with the stark silence and an air of desolation. One's mute presence at such an event was to pay respects, to give recognition to someone who has left us. Much as this grey landscape seemed devoid of her presence, the impact on those who were close to her remains. ANFASA will miss Monica.

Hetta Pieterse, UNISA Press

Roshan Cader

Monica Seeber's editorial contribution was immense: Wits University Press had a very good and collegial relationship with her. She brought in a few successful books to the Press, notably *Who Built Jozi* on which Monica worked as editor with her friend, the social historian and writer Luli Callinicos. Then there was *The Backroom Boy*, a biography on the reserved and humble Rivonia treason trialist Andrew Mlangeni.

Monica loved what we in the business call 'developmental' editing. The kind of editing you can sink your teeth into. Here, editor and author work very closely; they debate and converse - getting into one another's heads: should chapters be moved around, paragraphs restructured, book and chapter titles changed, does a sentence or word make sense, is it appropriate in the context? - all in service to the greater argument, the bigger story and to the reader. Monica was always concerned about whether the manuscript was accessible and readable

to its community of readers. This kind of relationship with someone who pays such close attention to your writing, your voice and your vision is what all writers dream about.

She mentored many young and upcoming academic writers for Wits Press: the ones who had just finished their PhDs and had never written a book before, and were completely daunted by the task ahead. Bongani Nyoka, an Anfasa grant recipient, worked with her on his PhD-turned-book, *The Social and Political Thought of Archie Mafeje*. Monica wasn't too happy with our choice of main title. She found it 'not so great' in her words! She would have preferred 'Reformist or Revolutionary?'

What made Monica so great in her role as copy editor was that she truly cared about authors and their intellectual and creative labour, as her work at Anfasa, and her tireless lobbying against the Copyright Amendment Bill and its impact on author's livelihoods, testify.

She saw the potential in the new writers we asked her to work with. She

continues on page 10:

"Monica loved what we in the business call 'developmental' editing. The kind of editing you can sink your teeth into."

In Memoriam - Tributes to Monica Seeber

continued from page 9:

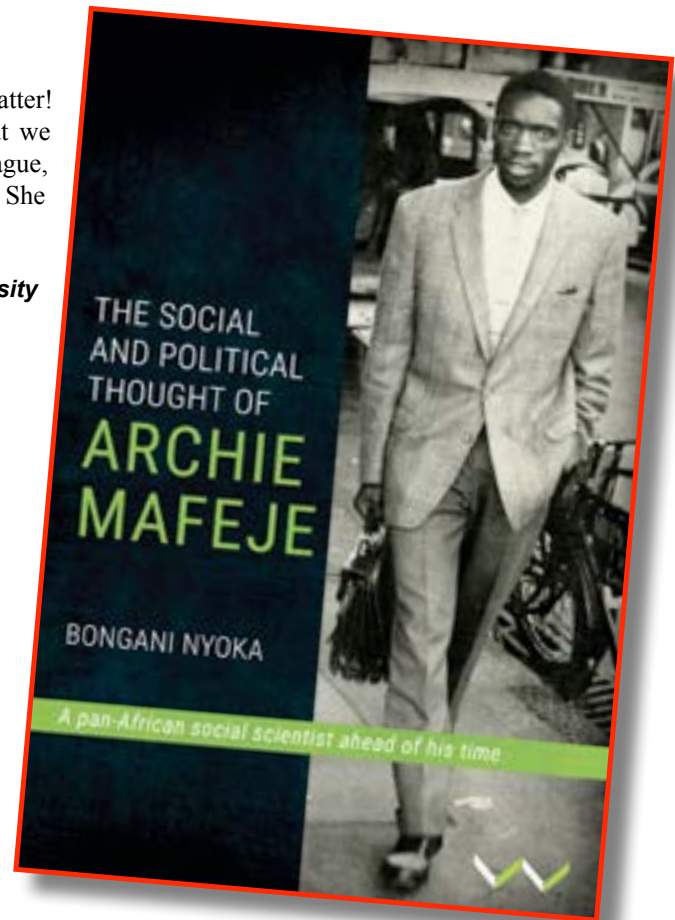
was honest and direct – sometimes to a fault – and would call out wooliness in argumentation and lack of clarity in expression. But, she was also the author's greatest champion. She mentored, nurtured, coached and coaxed the words and sentences out of them. Books she worked on were definitely improved by her expertise and editorial hand. We had a cohort of new academics working with her on revising their dissertations into books. There is no doubt that we will miss her expertise sorely.

Scholarly books require editors with enormous proficiency that develops over time. Monica truly cared for this profession and all who worked in it. She loved editing books in politics, international relations and history. She cared tremendously – down to the last comma; she was always concerned that a proofreader, or another set of eyes looking at the edited manuscript after her, would change something that for her was purposeful and intentional. It matters, she would say. Yes it

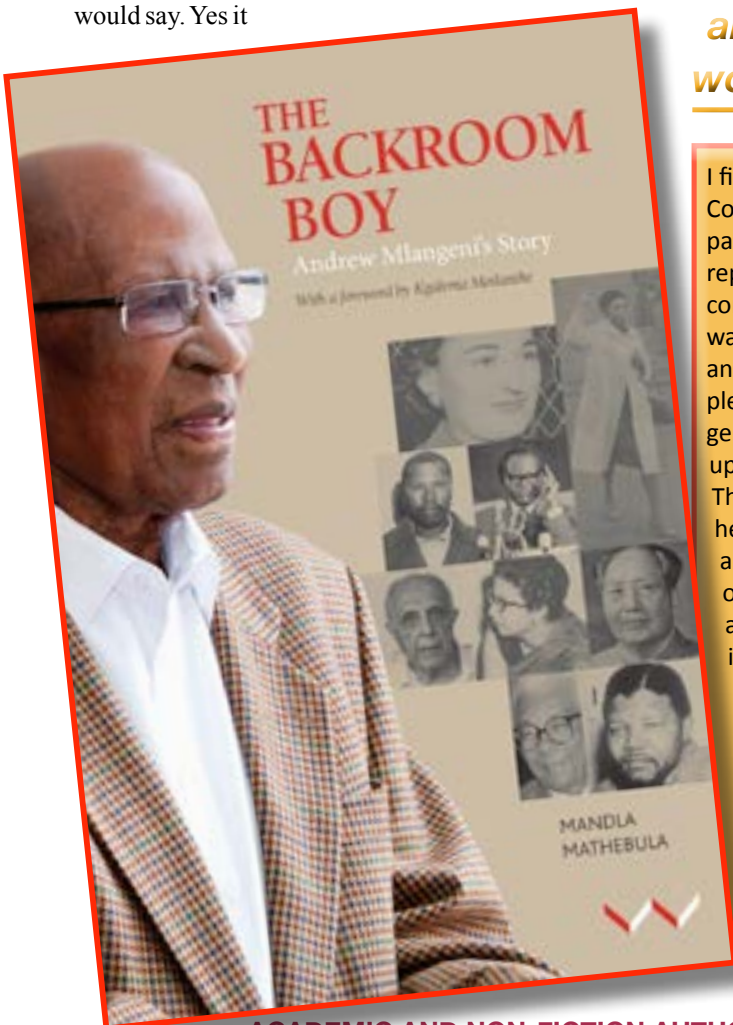
does. And Monica made it matter! It is with a heavy heart that we say farewell to our colleague, comrade and editor in arms. She mattered!

Roshan Cader, Wits University Press

“Scholarly books require editors with enormous proficiency that develops over time. Monica truly cared for this profession and all who worked in it.”



These books represent a small fraction of Monica Seeber's meticulous editing work and form a part of her literary legacy.



I first met Monica Seeber at ANFASA's Power of Authors Conference, which was held virtually in 2021. I knew that she was part of the organisation's managerial structure. Furthermore, her reputation as a meticulous editor who was devoted to the literary community preceded her. Editors tend to be stoic introverts. So I was terrified at the prospect of meeting someone so renowned and bungling the moment. As the conference progressed, I was pleasantly surprised by the exceptionally friendly lady, who generously shared constructive commentary when delegates called upon her. I was in awe of her warmth throughout the proceedings. These qualities defined her character in all my interactions with her. Monica was a visionary. Her goals of empowering authors and securing a better financial future for them, is the foundation on which ANFASA stands. I admired how she could fearlessly articulate important authorship issues while remaining every inch a lady. She anchored us in these noble but often challenging causes without complaint. Her untimely passing is a massive loss for the country's authors as there will never be such a stalwart advocate for their rights. Her contributions to our community will never be forgotten. Nor will her beautiful spirit. We will treasure the memories we made with her forever. May she rest peacefully.

Dudu Zwane, ANFASA Board Member

A Vehicle for Ethnographic Testimonies to the Value of Academic Endeavour

Dear Editor,

I have to compliment you on the outstanding quality of the last issue of ANFASA (Vol.6-1). I have very much enjoyed reading this issue. The article by David Robbins, on changes that have taken place in the publishing field further informed one of my newer areas of interest. And so did the article on indexing for books, by Christopher Merrett. About a year ago I had suddenly found myself thinking and conceptualising ideas about this matter of 'indexing' – Merrett's paper touches on some of the issues I was thinking about.

Articles of post-graduate students who have completed their degrees and are relating their experiences are also important. These are ethnographic testimonies to the value of the academic endeavour and give optimism and hope for the future in these difficult times.

Regards,

* Alex Holt, PhD Graduate, UKZN



ANFASA Volume 6, issue 1

* Dr Alex Holt is a PhD Graduate from the Centre for Culture, Media and Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

Elitism is the Weapon of Choice for Cultural Suicide

What is Grassroots Writing?

Here's a Definition and an Argument for its Importance



The Porcupine Press stand at the Jozi Book Fair 2010

David Robbins*

The state of the world does seem a bit contrary these days. I'm not about to attempt an analysis of international affairs, but it does strike me as significant that just as the world slips into its new role as a global village with all the ICT wizardry to support it, so the same world is gripped with another storm of nationalism and the attendant fear-

induced intolerance of outsiders barging in and upsetting the cultural-political applecart.

These tendencies and their implications always lead me to my pet hobby horse: grassroots writing. To find a reasonable definition for this vigorous phenomenon, we need to look at the broader writing and publishing picture to see where 'grassroots writing' fits in – if at all. So here goes.

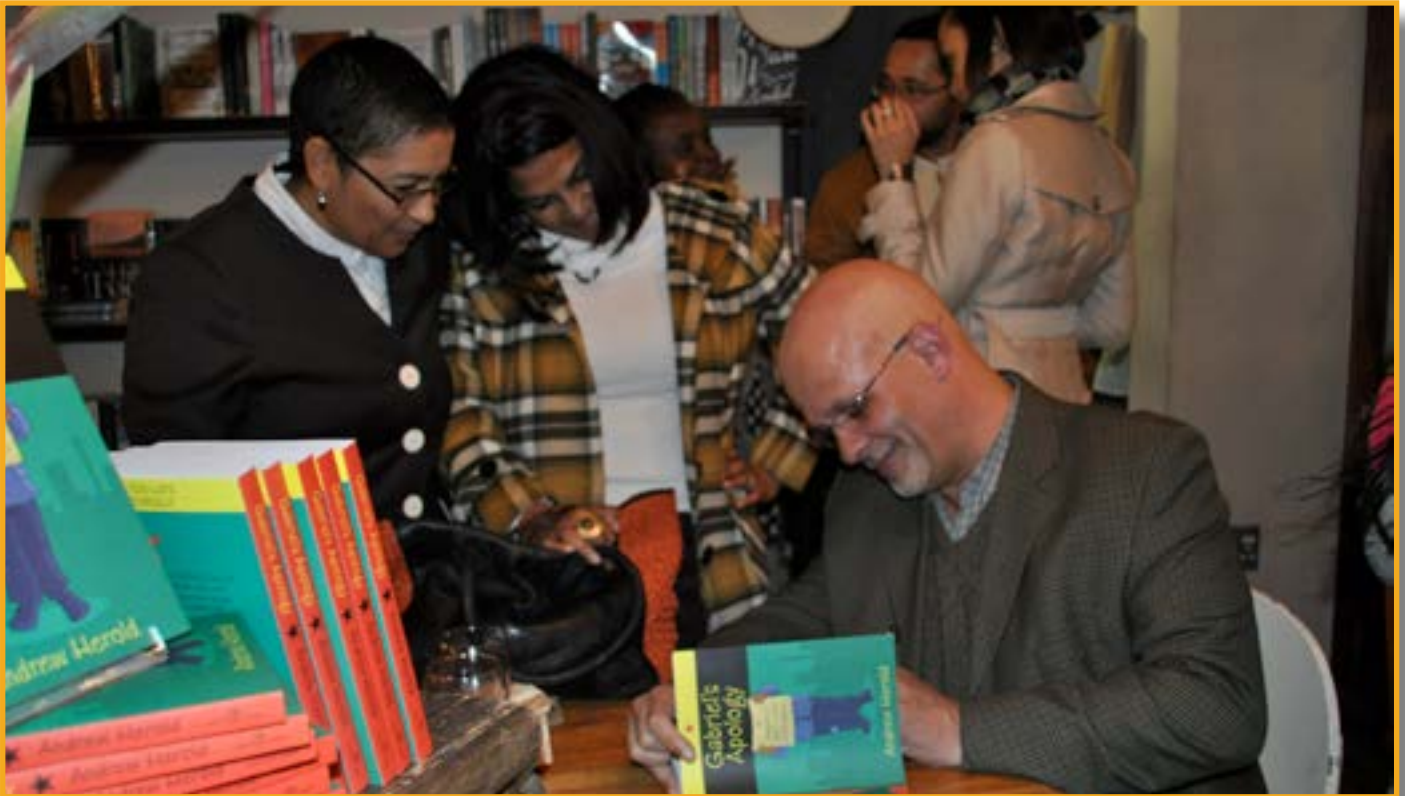
I've heard that within the next decade or two there'll be only four main publishing conglomerates around to service the entire English-speaking world. Economies of scale might be good for business, but it will

"I've heard that within the next decade or two there'll be only four main publishing conglomerates around to service the entire English-speaking world. Economies of scale might be good for business, but it will probably be very bad for literature, which is already showing signs of neglect."

*** David Robbins is co-owner of Porcupine Press and would welcome any comments on the Cross-Border Books idea.**

continues on page 13:

Elitism is the Weapon of Choice for Cultural Suicide



Book signing of Gabriel's Apology by the author, Andrew Herold, at the Porcupine Press book launch

continued from page 12:

probably be very bad for literature, which is already showing signs of neglect. This year's Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction, Joshua Cohen, sheds light on the situation by telling us that he tried for several years to sell his unusual and inventive novel, *The Netanyahu's*, but that it was turned down by many big US publishers before it found a home. Cohen said: 'I can only hope that American publishers will once again start taking the risk on literature that the Pulitzers just took.'

'Risk' is the operative word here, because it is one that has largely disappeared from publishing jargon – and not only in the United States. It's no secret that publishers have been subjected to sustained pressure in recent decades thanks to rapid technological advances and the attendant avalanche of e-books and audiobooks, and of course self-publishing. These changes have tempted most mainstream publishers to abandon their traditional role as guardians and nurturers of literature and to pay much stricter attention to financial survival, and of course to profit.

The result has been a rift in the writing and publishing worlds. To put it bluntly, there are those who drone on about the established definitions of literature on one

side of the rift and the self-published hoi polloi clamouring on the other.

Listen to Edouard Louis, the young working-class French author who a few years back won France's major literary award (the Goncourt). Talking about his upbringing, he revealed: 'There wasn't a single book in our house. For us, a book was a kind of assault: it represented a life we would never have, the life of people who pursue education, who have time to read, who have gone to university and had an easier time of it than us.'

And again: 'The National Front (Marine Le Pen's party) got more than 50 percent of the vote in the village where I was born, and that vote was above all, beyond racism, beyond anything else, a desperate attempt to exist, to be noticed by others. So long as a large proportion of books are addressed only to the privileged elite, as long as literature continues to assault people (like my family), literature can die. I will watch its death with indifference.'

Elitism does seem to be the weapon of choice for people who wish to commit cultural suicide. Visitors to the local art gallery in Kimberley (the William Humphreys) are greeted by two large banners claiming that 'art is FOR everyone' (because) 'art is IN everyone'.

continues on page 14:

"I can only hope that American publishers will once again start taking the risk on literature that the Pulitzers just took."

Elitism is the Weapon of Choice for Cultural Suicide



Photo: Courtesy of Hetta Pieterse, UNISA Press

continued from page 13:

That egalitarian approach to culture should be adopted by everyone connected with writers and publishing in South Africa. Books can be bought by the metre; container loads are often imported from the developed world by philanthropic organisations for free distribution to the ‘underprivileged’. Valuable as these contributions might be, they miss the essential need.

The essential need/demand is for books that somehow address that ‘desperate need to exist’ and to have that existence – and that need – acknowledged in a permanent record. This is what literature is made of, this articulation of individual and collective existence, this description of a specific people by the people and for the people.

All this brings us much closer to a definition of grassroots writing. I like the term ‘grassroots’ because it evokes an image of something springing up organically. More specifically, grassroots writers are what Doris Lessing called ‘the small quiet voices’ who ignore the trends and fashions and write from the heart; they write what they know. They might not be university graduates, although often they are. They are also often ‘ordinary’ men and women who are simply in the

frontline of living their lives.

My experience of grassroots writing is that it is sometimes harrowing, often clothed in a brutal honesty, sometimes penned in a stream without much regard for grammar or punctuation, and frequently painfully unstructured and even oblivious.

But these small voices (some are anything but quiet) face an interesting array of difficulties. Even the best of them, because of their ‘localness’, slide beneath the attention of the risk-averse publishers whose gazes are increasingly fixed on the glitter of those bigger international prizes. The result is that the grassroots writers have turned to self-publishing to get their voices heard – and self-publishing can be a difficult pathway through a quagmire of expensive unprofessionalism to a disappointing result. The literary gatekeepers do seem content to leave the grassroots writers to tinker with self-publishing (which after all is just a slightly more sophisticated form of vanity publishing) as a rather expensive hobby. I’ve heard they also apparently concur that no self-published work should get anywhere near the competitions for the big literary awards.

My contention is that grassroots writing,

continues on page 15

“My experience of grassroots writing is that it is sometimes harrowing, often clothed in a brutal honesty, sometimes penned in a stream without much regard for grammar or punctuation, and frequently painfully unstructured and even oblivious.”

Elitism is the Weapon of Choice for Cultural Suicide

continued from page 14:

whether self-published or not, is of fundamental importance to literature, especially in developing countries. In South Africa, I think a new literature is already forcing its way through the city pavements and dusty streets of informal settlements. This is not literature being thrust upon the semi-literate among us as some kind of educational refinement. This is homemade literature and it's articulating a new consciousness which seems at times (in South Africa at any rate) to be a strange mixture of long-view optimism built on the idea of freedom and the shorter-term immediacy of tough times. The stories, the memoirs, the ruminations on how to cope with life and how to succeed, the reportage on gender abuse and xenophobia, all this and more is bursting out with the unavoidable vigour of a blaze of Namaqualand daisies in September.

The bedrock of a new or at least a reshaped national literature is in this way being laid down. It is provincial in the best sense of the word, growing out of our specific earth, much of it holding that precious sense of humanity that prepares it for the international stage. But the impediments loom large. Two we have already discussed – the current risk-averse and profit driven trends in mainline publishing, and the elitism that seeks to divide the publishing apple between the juicy mainline half, and the inferior self-publishing side.

But there are two more impediments that we must now address. The first is the cost of the standard self-publishing model; the second is the distribution and marketing of self-published books.

Porcupine Press has published well over 200 new titles in the 12 years since its launch in 2009. Although not all these titles can be categorised as grassroots writing, at least half can, and they have all been financed by grassroots writers, the clear majority of whom are black (used as a generic for all those people who are not bright white). Porcupine Press has often conjectured on what might happen if the primary criterion for publication was quality and relevance, rather than ready cash or the promise of rich rewards for the risk-averse commercial publishers.



Photo: Courtesy of Hetta Pieterse, UNISA Press

In a country where poverty is on the rise and is reaching dangerous proportions at the grassroots level, it seems foolhardy to impede grassroots writing with fences of indifference and the high price of book production.

Porcupine's belief in the importance of grassroots writing is reinforced by our business model, by the way we deal with our authors (we assist rather than simply reject), and our emphasis on making high quality books AND selling them. But now we see that what we've done so far is only a first step in making inroads into the four impediments to the burgeoning of South Africa's grassroots books revolution.

Take a look at our thinking so far. At the most general socio-political level, we recognise there is a need to counteract the exclusivist nationalism that is currently galloping through the world, setting fire to personal freedoms as the idea of dictatorships and high fences takes hold. Literature is a powerful antidote to this trend, and grassroots literature, because of its ability to articulate that desperate need to exist and to be acknowledged, has a definite broadening and inclusionary role to play.

This belief has led Porcupine to imagine a new kind of vehicle through which grassroots writers can make their voices

continues on page 16:

“At the most general socio-political level, we recognise there is a need to counteract the exclusivist nationalism that is currently galloping through the world, setting fire to personal freedoms as the idea of dictatorships and high fences takes hold.”

Elitism is the Weapon of Choice for Cultural Suicide

continued from page 15:

heard. Here is a skeleton of what we have imagined:

- ❑ A new imprint will be created: Cross-Border Books (CBB) is the current suggestion.
- ❑ CBB will be housed within and administered by a registered not-for-profit company.
- ❑ This will enable fundraising activities that will be exposed in externally audited accounts.
- ❑ The selection of titles will be on merit and with relevance to the goal of promoting grassroots writing.
- ❑ Limitations on the length of manuscripts will be imposed initially to contain production costs and recommended retail title prices.
- ❑ A financial model will be used that is based on a sliding scale that relates cost of production to return on sales. This means that selected writers could pay nothing up front, while receiving standard returns on sales. Writers who wish to pay part or all production costs will receive proportionately higher returns.
- ❑ CBB titles will be for sale on a central website and e-commerce facility under the banner of 'grassroots writing goes global' or something similar.

Grassroots self-publishers and independent authors from anywhere in the world will use this facility where all books are shown to customers and all sales are referred to the originating self-publisher for distribution.

The development of an international network of self-publishers and authors will in this way be encouraged and supported by vigorous marketing.

To mix local grassroots writing from different parts of the world will highlight what is common between them – their humanity.

To conclude, it is interesting to read that in Australia there is an emerging phenomenon called literary 'prosumption'. This means that production and consumption is being done by the same people – a bit like a group of friends baking a cake and then eating it themselves.



Photo: Courtesy of Hetta Pieterse, UNISA Press

Writing in the May 2016 edition of the Australian Humanities Review, Emmett Stinson examines debates around the decline of Australian literary production, and then, after conducting his own survey, finds that literary publishing 'is now principally undertaken by small and independent publishers'. This means that these works circulate among a smaller readership which usually has some stake in the writing, production, and distribution of 'literary' books. Stinson points out that 'although this mode of literary prosumption may appear insular' it does 'bring together a network of agents who might otherwise remain unconnected'.

It does seem clear that academia, at least where publishing is concerned, is being steadily marginalised. This means that much of the important work being done in the universities never reaches a wider audience. In that sense, they find themselves in the same boat as the grassroots writers and their self-publishers. To seriously acknowledge this might lead to an attempt to join the two halves of the apple together, but not without first dropping a few seeds into our distressed 21st century orchard. Doesn't that suggest a rather interesting harvest of new possibilities?

But that's a story for another time.

"It does seem clear that academia, at least where publishing is concerned, is being steadily marginalised. This means that much of the important work being done in the universities never reaches a wider audience."