

## Reading cultures in a divided past revealed

**Archie L. Dick, *The Hidden History of South Africa's Book and Reading Cultures***

University of KwaZulu Natal Press, Scottsville, 2013

196 pp

ISBN 978 1 86914 247 6

R215.00

Archie L. Dick's book entitled, *The Hidden History of South Africa's Book and Reading Cultures* is an important study on the development of book and reading cultures in South Africa over the past 300 years. That the book manages to carry the reader along on this contested and often conflicted history of South Africa in an engaging style is a credit to the author. While the text follows historical chronology,

it is organised around eight themes; the opening chapter discusses the period between 1658 and 1800, and the final chapter explores a significant contemporary theme entitled, "Combating Censorship and Making Space for Books".

This reviewer found the author's use of illustrative materials such as the photographs of primary sources and sketches most valuable. Among these illustrative materials is the notebook of Johannes Smiesing, a slave and schoolmaster who spent most of his life in the slave lodge in Cape Town (p 16). The selection of such illustrations allows the reader to "read" much more than is made available in the author's text. In addition to the photographs and sketches mentioned above, the "Early Muslim Prayer Book" and "Letters of the Alphabet and Morning Hymn" in Smiesing's notebook are more than just illustrations. The reader can appreciate Smiesing's own handwriting, and perhaps ponder on the choice of words he used in the notebook. One also wonders how keeping a diary shaped his inner self. Did Smiesing consider the activity an escape or a hobby that allowed him to record his daily activities on paper; words on paper that were so much part of his life and identity as a slave and schoolmaster?

The first two chapters of the book allow the reader to become aware of the challenges and rewards of writing about books and reading in a slave society, where writing, and more so reading, always held the potential to undermine the entire slave system and its vertical social relations. The author succeeds in unearthing materials that would have otherwise escaped an untrained eye. The book introduces the reader to the unequal world of the Cape where slave masters sought not only to control the labour of their slaves, which they legally owned, but also to determine the type of knowledge slaves could acquire. While slave owners allowed slaves to learn how to read, they channelled their curiosity to reading materials that would justify the hierarchy that characterised master slave relations at the Cape. This being so, Christian moral books were preferred over the more political writings stemming from Europe, especially France. It is revealing that this type of "censorship", or what the author calls "a simplistic causal analysis of the effects of reading material on the likely reader", influenced South African authorities from early times at the Cape to the more recent political system of apartheid. Although the author does not quite make that link, it is safe to say that what one sees during apartheid was a more aggressive destruction of ideas in the name of defending an unsustainable ideology.

Dick's book weaves together femininity and masculinity in refreshing ways. In the initial chapters, one meets women teaching reading to those who would otherwise not have had the opportunity to acquire the skills of reading and writing. From the late nineteenth century to the Second World War, women organisations were at work, building what they termed "nations of readers". While their labours ignored provincial boundaries, their focus excluded blacks. In chapter 4 the reader finds women at the forefront of the battle of ideas, so to say. The Second World War saw white women through organised formations such as the Victoria League, the Guild of Loyal Women of South Africa, the Transvaal Women's Educational Union, the Afrikaans Christian Women's Society, the South African Women's Federation and the South African Home Reading Union, taking a leading role in distributing books to soldiers in the trenches and to the injured lying in hospital beds. Not surprisingly, segregationist and race based views that influenced the political landscape in South Africa leading up to 1948 shaped the decisions these organisations made. There was no attempt to broaden their work beyond white readers. Whenever the opportunity arose, the organisations' work reflected the

thinking of segregationist politicians. Indeed, readers would do well to appreciate what not to do when one has the means to broaden access to books and reading to society at large.

Read together, chapters 4 and 5 open an interesting debate about the roles of English progressive librarians during apartheid. These professionals seemed to have acquiesced, if not accepted, to orders from apartheid ministers in Pretoria. Like the women's organisations who vetted literature destined for black soldiers, English speaking librarians did not raise a voice against what the author calls a "holocaust of literature" (p 93). If voices were indeed raised, they were not loud enough to disturb the mass incarnation of books, if not ideas. Leading apartheid librarians' ideas on South African society lacked what Arjun Appadurai has referred to as a "shelf life".<sup>5</sup> Of course, this was partly due to the fact that they tried to defend a system that has been roundly regarded as a crime against humanity. So, in their desperate attempts to make their views look or sound scientific, they committed what Dick calls "intellectual fraud". Such was the career of P.C. Coetzee, a leading apartheid librarian who "laundered" an American educator, Jesse Shera's concept of "social epistemology" to suit his segregationist and race based concept of "culturology of readership".

Through interviews and conversations with anti apartheid political activists in the Cape, Dick provides new insights into how users of libraries and readers of books interpreted their actions. While in a more conventional sense, a library houses books and provides a space for reading, anti apartheid activists such as Christian Ziervogel extended or re defined the meaning of libraries. For these activists, the small libraries that they had in coloured and black townships served as spaces for discussions for both those who knew how to read and for those who were illiterate. Not only was the library culture transformed, the very practice of reading took on a new form. Faced with constant harassment for reading or being found in possession of banned literature such as for example communist literature, activists like Vincent Kolbe developed new ways of reading. This involved using books that were available, but focusing on quotations that meant something to their conditions. In a sense they put into practice what Steve Biko had said in the early 1970s when he wrote, *I Write what I Like*. In this case, the activists read what they liked.

Chapter 6 provides a rare analytical insight into South Africa's book and reading cultures. Dick gives details of what the Group Areas Act did to "library physical space and book supply to black and coloured townships". Dick shows that "the standards for physical space were race sensitive", and unfair (p 103). He writes further:

Library bosses claimed that branch libraries serving 30,000 to 50,000 people should have a standard floor area of 700m<sup>2</sup> to 900m<sup>2</sup>. However, for the white Sea Point branch library with a projected population of 33,430 it was 1,022m<sup>2</sup>, or 30.6m<sup>2</sup> per 1,000, and for the white Camps Bay branch library with a projected population of 6,500 it was 372m<sup>2</sup>, or 57.3m<sup>2</sup> per 1,000. But for the working-class coloured Hanover Park branch library with a projected population of 60,000 it was 840m<sup>2</sup>, or 14.0m<sup>2</sup> per 1,000, and for Bonteheuwel branch library with a projected population of 45,000 it was 361m<sup>2</sup>, or 8.0 m<sup>2</sup> per 1000.

---

5. A. Appadurai, "The Research Ethic and the Spirit of Internationalism", *Items*, Social Science Research Council, 51, 4, 1997.

## Book Reviews Boekresensies

These figures illustrate the extent to which apartheid authorities sought to manipulate and stifle book and reading cultures in South Africa. It seems that one of the reasons for this was that the government did not want coloured readers to feel comfort at public libraries or enjoy the experience of reading in a public space. In addition to the limitations on physical space, government censored, or banned, books were used as evidence against political prisoners in court, such as was the case during the Treason Trials.

While all these draconian measures were put in place inside South Africa, outside the country South Africans in exile had access to a wide and varied range of literature. Libraries such as the one at Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFCO) in Tanzania provided readers with Afrikaans, English and African language literature of diverse ideologies.

*The Hidden History of South Africa's Book and Reading Cultures* is an absorbing text. In a sense, it invites more work on reading cultures in South Africa. If that could be achieved, one can look forward to a more comprehensive history of the book in South Africa in the not too distant future.

*Vukile Khumalo*  
*University of KwaZulu Natal*