

## **The hidden history of South Africa's books and reading cultures**

Archie L Dick

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This book has a broad historical remit, ranging from the early colonial days of the Cape (1658) to the last decade of the 20th century. Its ambitious scope covers eight chapters, starting with early readers in the Cape and taking the chronology to 1992 (Chapter 7), with the final chapter exploring the theme of censorship. It concludes by “revealing the hidden books and hidden readers”, a deft touch which resonates neatly with the Introduction in which the author proposes the significance of the common reader in South Africa. Although some of the themes covered in the chapters have been published as papers in scholarly journals, the reader is not aware of any disjuncture in the flow or logic of the text as the author has carefully constructed a framing device which he presents in his Introduction, viz. the common reader.

Archie Dick uncovers for the readers of his work, many fascinating insights about the habits, practices and preferences of the ‘the common reader’ in South Africa. His careful research sheds light on an aspect of cultural history based on “new approaches to literacy studies”, finding evidence in an exhaustive array of sources, ranging from official records and slave wills to interviews with many librarians and activists. His (re)searches in some unlikely places have yielded information that he has woven into a mosaic of interesting vignettes and stories. He uses these instances to illustrate his thesis that in many circumstances reading was an act of subversion and contrary to the will or design of elites and authorities – including repressive governments and (painful as this coupling might be to many of the presumed readers of his book) libraries.

He shows how the cultural and social history he surfaces in his investigation, intersect with political history. The chapters which deal with this theme remind us how powerful repression (seen for example in the treatment of slaves and the oppression of successive apartheid governments) did not crush the thirst for knowledge and learning in the intended victims. Thus in Chapter 1 he recounts how slaves carried sacred texts with them as they attempted to escape. In Chapter 2 we learn how printers and librarians in the early and mid-19th century were disdainful of “common readers and writers”. This social exclusion did not, however, prevent them from engaging in literary activities; there are examples of popular reading clubs and shared newspaper reading.

In Chapter 3, Dick presents a persuasive and sophisticated analysis of the ideology underpinning books, reading and education for nation building, describing the efforts of various women’s organisations to foster patriotism in groups narrowly defined by their ‘race’. Their intention was to build a “white reading nation” associating themselves with official policy that too much reading and knowledge among black children was unfitting their station and purpose. Continuing the theme of the exclusion of black people from official channels of distribution of books, Chapter 4 describes how a book scheme for troops in World War II had the parallel effect of also introducing books and the joy of reading to black soldiers.

An arresting heading “H.J.de Vleeschauer: Book Thief” reminded this reader of the influence of Professor de Vleeschauer on South African students of LIS. He was a prolific author whose works found their way prominently into reading lists in library schools in the 1970s and 1980s. His reputation as a scholar was such that a paper he wrote was accepted as a contribution to a festschrift for the distinguished scholar Jesse Shera ( De Vleeschauer, 1973). His links with Nazism and participation in book theft in Europe are shocking, leading Dick to wonder at the uncritical acceptance of De Vleeschauer by academics and librarians during his tenure as a professor of philosophy and later of librarianship (in the 1950s and 1960s). The second figure in this chapter also had an intellectual link with Shera, but in this case based on deceit. Dick describes P C Coetzee’s attempt to appropriate Shera’s social epistemology to support apartheid policies as distorted and fraudulent. P C Coetzee also was an influential figure in education for LIS, particularly as his text on readership, masking his message of the ideology of apartheid, was widely prescribed.

The many librarians in Cape Town who resisted apartheid and its many repressive policies and practices in the 1980s restore faith in the LIS profession which during this period sometimes shows leadership in assisting those deprived of education in their struggle for education. Dick is concerned that these histories will disappear if they are not documented, a task he has undertaken through his rigorous research which includes interview with activist librarians of the times. Vincent Kolbe was one such source of activism, common sense and inspiration. He touched the lives of so many people in Cape Town, including many librarians and young students of LIS. I would invite him to address postgraduate diploma students on work in public libraries in the mid-1980s thinking that the students would be particularly interested in his work with communities on local oral history, or the link between the public library and museums. On one occasion we were treated to a brilliant lecture on innovative methods of the clandestine distribution of information and material for political formation, for example, to the UDF in Cape Town.

Dick’s description in Chapter 7 of the SOMAFCO and its library in Tanzania, established for the many young people who went into exile after Soweto, is a valuable addition to the history of libraries for South Africans. He describes the library as more than a reading space – it was a community space for groups to meet, converse and share information. He is able to draw a profile of reading interests of the youths by analysing the library issue figures, finding that their patterns

of borrowing reflected personal taste rather than educational topics. The theme of reading interest emerges again in the chapter on combating censorship, providing a fascinating glimpse into the books read by political prisoners. Thus we learn that Nelson Mandela favoured books on law, history, political science and religion, and enjoyed the novels of Nadine Gordimer, Steinbeck and Tolstoy. Dick concludes his impressive study by recommending the library as a repository of valuable data for the study of intellectual and cultural history in South Africa and "how ideas interact with society". His masterly history shows us how to do that in his pioneering study of an aspect of print and book culture in South Africa.

### **Reference**

De Vleeschauwer, H. 1973. Origins of the Mouseion of Alexandria. In: *Toward a theory of librarianship: papers in honour of Jesse Hawk Shera*, edited by C Rawlski. Metuchen: Scarecrow press.

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