

# Mainstreaming African writing

**June Josephs-Langa**, is co-owner of Xarra Books in Newtown Johannesburg and a woman with a strong love of books and writers. **Makhosazana Xaba** asked her about her vision for the store and what makes it so different from other South African bookstores.

***How did the idea of starting a bookstore start?***

In my previous life I travelled a lot but I never had the time to explore any of the countries I visited. But, I always made sure that I visited the bookstores to get a sense of the pulse and the culture of each country.

I noticed a few things: firstly, I bought books by South African authors in foreign countries, books that were not available in my own country. Then I started asking, when people visit South Africa which bookstore would they go to, if they wanted to do the same.

Thirdly, I wondered what impression visitors have of South Africans when they go to bookstores in this country. I concluded that there was a problem. That was how the passion began. I started talking to friends about the idea and one thing led to another. I teamed up with Kays Mguni who is the co-owner, we wanted this to be a retail offering, not an NGO-type of venture but a real bookstore.

***So what makes Xarra Books different from other bookstores?***

Well when you walk in, you get a

sense of what the African continent is about. You recognise African dreams, not just on one shelf, the entire bookstore is about that - African content and African authors. The idea was to mainstream Africa writing, literature, art, film, music. In this bookstore you get a total African experience. At Xarra South African writers, our own writers, get affirmation.

***I have enjoyed the book launches that you organise on Thursday evenings.***

There are four pillars of this bookstore. The first one is engagement with authors. We host book launches and readings in order to allow readers to engage with authors. We facilitate an open discussion after the reading on the specific book and literature in general. This was one of the visions we had, to provide a safe space for authors to share their work and for readers to get to know the authors.

***Tell me about the other pillars.***

The second pillar is poetry readings. We felt that poetry readings appeal to a different audience and we wanted to afford this group some space. Young people often express themselves



Hannelie de Klerk

more using the spoken word format. Poetry readings take place on Saturdays, we often have a featured poet and everyone is invited.

The third pillar is kids story telling. We believe that nurturing the culture of reading needs to start at an early age. Children come in from orphanages in Soweto and other areas and we have someone reading and telling stories to them. This programme also takes place on a Saturday, we alternate between poetry and children's stories.

***I came to an inspiring event once, the birthday celebration for our icon, Baba Ezekiel Mphahlele, which pillar does that fall under?***

The other vision we had was that the bookstore should serve as a rendezvous for the literati, a place where we could commemorate

events in the lives of writers, a place where writers mingle and feel safe and in solidarity.

That is not necessarily a pillar but the kind of atmosphere we wanted to create – where writers, artists, filmmakers and musicians can just feel at home. We had an event for instance where we honoured Marcus Garvey and the Jamaican high commissioner came.

***What a fabulous idea! And, the fourth pillar?***

The forth pillar comprises exhibitions. We record the readings that take place in the bookstore, we take inter-active footage and we show it in places far and wide.

For instance, when there are cultural events or festivals we bring in the footage and people listen to and watch the reading and then we have discussion afterwards. We have been to East London, Kimberley, Grahamstown, Cape Town and we plan to reach many more areas of the country. We aim to build literary awareness – encourage the formation of book clubs, reading and writing groups, in the process we profile writers. Some events have themes like women, Bantu Steven Biko and black consciousness.

***I am curious about the response of chain bookstores.***

Some have immediately grown their African literature sections, they have more shelf space. Others have asked us to run joint events like book launches. There is a growing relationship and sharing.

***You spoke earlier of travelling, what work were you doing then?***

I worked in the Department of Foreign Affairs. I was posted to the UK. When I worked in the Department of Agriculture the emphasis of my job was trade.

***I imagine it was not easy to set up the bookstore.***

The application for funding alone, took three years! We had to be convincing about what would make Xarra a different kind of bookstore. It took a lot of hard and consistent work.

***Tell us a bit about your special shelves.***

Our showcase shelf is called African Gold it holds books from Africa's Top 100 books of the 20th century. It's

the pride of our bookstore.

***Congratulations are truly in order, so what are your dreams for the future of Xarra Books?***

Keep the nation reading! I would like to see a campaign, a movement, around reading, literature, and books and audio books. Imagine a situation where you can get into a taxi and the taxi driver has put in an audio book and passengers listen to a story while riding to work or back home.

LB

## Note on Africa's top 100 books

In 1998 during the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, Professor Ali Mazrui suggested that a list of 100 best books in Africa in the 20th century be compiled in order to inform the world about achievements from the continent. A committee was set up, chaired by our very own Professor Njabulo Ndebele.

Four years later, after a vigorous process, the project was completed. A list comprising two categories: Creative Writing and Academic Writing was compiled and the Award Ceremony took place in South Africa, Cape Town in 2002. Noticeably, 19% of the writers on this list are South African. Of the South Africans, 26% are women. Of the six academic writers one is a woman. Below are the South Africans on the list of Africa's best books. \* denotes non-fiction (academic) writing, the rest are fiction (creative).

### AUTHOR

AC Jordan  
Alan Paton  
André Brink  
Antjie Krog  
Athol Fugard  
Bessie Head  
BW Vilakazi  
Charles van Onselen  
Credo Mutwa  
Elsa Joubert  
Eugene Marais  
Ezekiel Mphahlele  
JM Coetzee  
Mongane Wally Serote  
Nadine Gordimer  
Nelson Mandela  
Sibusiso Nyembezi  
Sindiwe Magona  
Sol Plaatjie

### BOOK TITLE

Ingqumbo yeminyanya  
Cry the beloved country  
A dry white season  
Country of my skull \*  
The blood knot  
A question of power  
Ama' lezulu  
The seed is mine  
Indaba, my children  
Die swerdjare van Poppie Nongema  
Die siel van die mier \*  
Down second avenue  
Life and times of Michael Kay  
Third World Express  
Burgher's Daughter  
A long walk to freedom \*  
Inkinsela yaseMgungundlovu  
Living, loving and lying awake at night  
Native bills \*