

## **Yesterday into tomorrow**

**The exciting progress of South African literature for young readers**

**Jay Heale**

Bookchat, Cape Town, South Africa



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### **Abstract:**

*An overview of the growth of South African children's literature (in English) from apartheid days, into democracy in 1994, and the excitements and problems of the present and future situation. Specific titles are given as examples.*

**Keywords:** South African children's books progress

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## **YESTERDAY INTO TOMORROW**

### **The exciting progress of South African literature for young readers**

One of the most famous and successful children's books in South Africa has been *Fly, Eagle, Fly!* by Christopher Gregorowski, illustrated by Niki Daly. It tells the story of a baby eagle rescued by a farmer who puts it with his chickens. The eagle grows up thinking it is a chicken, until it is persuaded to spread its great wings and fly.

I'm going to use this story to illustrate the way our youth literature has grown. For quite a long time, we were content to be chickens, unwilling to fly. Most locally produced books were in Afrikaans, as it was reckoned that enough books in English were available from overseas. Gradually, we realised that stories about the "Famous Five" in middle-class England or the "Hardy Boys" in adventurous America did not allow South African children to see themselves portrayed in books. One could also say that most of the local books, in this rugby-playing nation, were about white-skinned boys. Regardless of the fact that girls read more books than boys, and rugby-playing boys don't read books at all.

Let me try to give you examples of our progress through pictures. The first edition of *Fly, Eagle, Fly!* in 1982 could afford only black and one colour in its printing. The popularity of this adapted African folktale was such that in 2000 Tafelberg commissioned a new set of full colour illustrations from Niki Daly, and Biblionef ensured that in 2012 the book was translated and made available in all eleven South African official languages.

Thirty years of progress towards books for *all* the children of South Africa.  
Give us books. Give us wings!

## WHERE WERE WE YESTERDAY?

The situation when I arrived here at the end of 1968 was state education at its most unimaginative. Novels were ‘prescribed’ for study in high school – the choice often dependent on the wholesale price. So South African students found themselves having to read and study such works as *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens and *Ivanhoe* by Walter Scott. The reason: cheap editions were available from overseas.

The miracle was that one or two locally-written books began to find their way on to the prescribed list. Good books, both with strong social comment. Books like *The Strollers* by Lesley Beake – a story of the street-children of Cape Town which has remained in print ever since and is now beyond its 20<sup>th</sup> reprinting. *Love, David* by Dianne Case – a moving tale of the tough life in the Cape Flats.

Because our bilingual state insisted that equal money be spent on Afrikaans and English education, those were also the days of hugely successful Afrikaans novelists: Freda Linde, Maretha Maartens, Barrie Hough, Elsabe Steenberg, Pieter Pieterse. The opportunity, too, for such illustrators as Katrine Harries, Cora Coetzee, Alida Bothma.

Our children’s literature had already started tackling two important features:

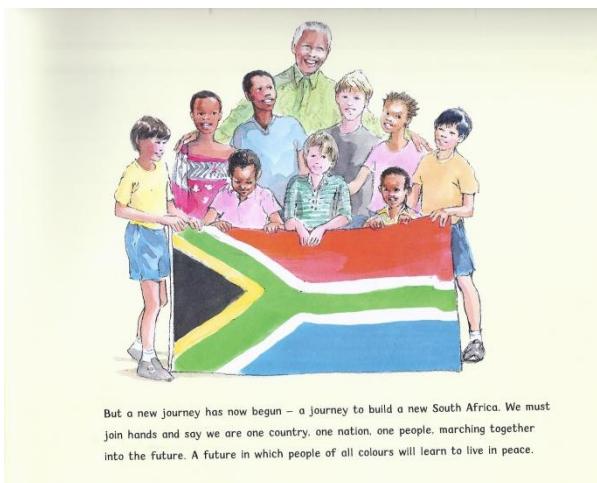
- To introduce the children of South Africa to each other – because apartheid was carefully keeping them apart
- To explain to the outside world that South Africa was not one vast wild animal park with lions strolling around Cape Town

Children could meet each other in books. *Sidwell’s Seeds* by Maretha Maartens, first published in Afrikaans as ‘n Pakkie mieliepitte, was probably our first book about the underprivileged people who live in ‘informal settlements’ on the Cape Flats. Sidwell is a boy scared of the rubbish-dump people, and the green growing of his mealie seeds is a symbol of hope for the future.

Beverley Naidoo wrote *Journey to Jo’burg*, about a thirteen-year-old girl who goes with her younger brother to Johannesburg to find their working mother. They get caught up in a protest march and the violent reaction of the police. Published in Britain where it won awards, the book was banned in South Africa. Unpopular governments don’t like criticism.

Lawrence Bransby wrote a novel called *Homeward Bound*, an incredibly brave piece of publishing by Tafelberg, since it imagined the reception of the first ever black boy at an all-white school. The boy did not find life easy. That situation would happen, but nobody (at that time) dared to guess when. (I don’t have a picture of that book because it’s out-of-print and unobtainable – a fate which happens to so many of our children’s books.)

To contradict the idea of wild animals everywhere, Ingrid Mennen and Niki Daly created the text of *Ashraf of Africa*. This boy lives in Cape Town and the only place he has seen lions and giraffes is inside books. So Ashraf walks through the city to the library to renew his favourite book – about wild animals! Bright, bold pictures by Nicolaas Maritz show the creatures in his mind accompanying him through the streets.



Twenty-one years ago – April 1994 – **South Africa became a democratic country**. So the drive was on to create real books about real South Africa.

Books were no longer ‘prescribed’ by the authorities. Schools could choose their own books – if they knew anything about books. With funds in short supply, many teachers went on using whatever was in stock. But writers didn’t stop writing. We have youth novels about the original San in the Cape mountains (*The Joining* by Peter Slingsby), a modern San girl in drought-stricken Namibia (*Song of Be* by Lesley Beake), about HIV-Aids and murder in Botswana (*Praise Song* by Jenny Robson), about a sulky teenager spending time with his grand-father in a retirement home (*Pops and the Nearly Dead* by Edyth Bulbring) and a recent prize-winner about a sexually-abused teenager who has the courage to give evidence in court (*Alive Again* by Andre Eva Bosch).

Our picture books include the whales at Hermanus helping the grief over a grandfather’s death (*Ben and the Whales* by Ingrid Mennen, illustrated by Irene Berg), the varied adventures of an African hare who represents every South African small girl (*Just Sisi and Sisi Goes to School* by Wendy Hartmann, illustrated by Joan Rankin), a modern pop group in the shape of lion, leopard, cheetah and hyena (*Noko and the Kool Kats* by Fiona Moodie) and the tale of an Eastern Cape herd boy whose future dreams echo those of Nelson Mandela (*The Herd Boy* by Niki Daly).

May I draw your attention to the 29 essays on leading authors and illustrators of South African children’s literature recently published as *Creating Books for the Young in the New South Africa*. The coverage of this deeply researched book is from 2003 to 2014. Not only is South Africa the leading publisher of youth literature in sub-Saharan Africa, but our books are also studied as **a literature at tertiary level**.

## WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

We have a children’s literature that is truly South African, that is of international quality, that is relevant to South African readers. We have, at last, emerging black writers describing what is right and wrong in the New South Africa. Thanks to research published by Biblionef, we know that we have well over 200 children’s books available in at least four of our local languages, and nearly 40% of them available in all eleven mother-tongue languages. That is progress indeed!

One exciting discovery has been to find that there are **information books other than school textbooks**. South African non-fiction for young readers is well supplied with exciting titles covering wildlife, places, the environment.

Just as important has been the careful writing – sometimes requiring rewriting – about the **people and history of our country**. One author has been in the lead. Chris van Wyk created three boxed sets under the “Freedom Fighters” headline. Thirty-one books in all. But his greatest achievement was his retelling of Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. Illustrated evocatively by Paddy Bouma, this book is a picture book, a story book, and a lesson in history all in one.

Our books offer **coverage of southern Africa**, not merely South Africa. Jenny Robson, based in Botswana, writes deeply poignant novels set in that region. Lesley Beake has written often of the San/Bushmen in Namibia. Reviva Schermbrucker has created the *Children of Southern Africa* series, a whole set of photographic picture books involving real children from Mozambique and Great Zimbabwe to Swaziland and South Africa.

During 2014, I received a total of **66 South African children's books**, written in English, published in this country during that year. 53 were fiction; 13 non-fiction. Of the fiction titles, 13 were picture books and 8 were board books. So we are placing the focus on books for those vital early years. My own analysis indicates more stories with a girl as the central character than a boy (22 to 15); and slightly more stories featuring black African children rather than white (15 to 12). There were 6 young adult books.

## WHERE MAY WE BE TOMORROW?

One of our ongoing problems has been **Getting children's books to our children**. Here I offer thanks and praise to some of the organizations working in this field.

One of the great success stories in local publishing has been the activity of **FunDza**. They grabbed the reality that every teenager has a cell phone and FunDza started providing one chapter a day of the kind of local stories that teenagers want to read. Huge reactions! They have produced printed books as well. One gained special mention on my own Bookchat Awards list. The Cover2Cover team headed by Rosamund Haden paired up experienced authors with new enthusiasts. They sparked ideas off each other, resulting in a fascinating set of highly relevant teenage stories called *It Takes Two!* South African teenagers enjoy both reading and writing – especially if you come up with some new ideas.



Since its foundation in South Africa in 1998, **Biblionef SA** donated over a million books by 2012. What is more, they provide books in all the eleven official languages of South Africa and they have the best stock of mother-tongue books in the country. **Nal'ibali** has a fabulous website for stories and storytellers, and distributes stories via local community newspapers. They are backed by **Praesa**, the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (at the University of Cape Town) which won the IBBY-Asahi Reading Promotion Award last year – the third time that an organisation from South Africa has done so – and is the latest winner of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. The

**Children's Book Network** has an ever-expanding programme of storytelling workshops, bringing books alive for primary and high school children. And I think I'm allowed to mention my own contribution **Bookchat**, which was a magazine with news and reviews of children's literature for twenty-one years, then transformed into a website – and has recently ceased publication after 208 issues.

### Educational correctness

When I wrote my first children's adventure story (way back in the days of apartheid) I was warned: "If you want this to be accepted for use in schools – no mention of God or religion or politics or sex or violence, no smoking or alcohol, no disrespect of authority. And all dialogue must be in complete sentences." "But people don't talk like that," I said. "Any book that is used in an educational setting must have correct grammar. And no swear words, of course." The editor ticked me off for describing a Cape mountain stream as 'beer-brown'. "Do you think of nothing but alcohol?" she asked. My book (called *The devil of Bain's Kloof*) was not accepted for use in schools.

Did I hope that such restrictions were out-of-date and forgotten? Yes, until I read Robin Malan's recent account of a play written for young people.

"I published a wonderful play by Omphile Molusi called *Itsoseng*. It was bought by Oxford University Press, who wanted to produce an educational edition for schools. And I had to sit with Omphile and a text, and edit out or tone down all the language that was raw and real: I still have that copy on my shelf. It's marked: 'Itsoseng: the Sanitised Version'." He added, "It may get on to the 'approved' list of the State school system. But it won't if it's got 'words' in it." [Robin Malan Junkets Publisher]

In South Africa, there are two types of children's books.

- The books selected for use in state schools, which have to conform to the specifications of the Education Department. These are limited in scope and they make a lot of money.
- The books sold as 'trade books' to the general public, to libraries and independent schools. These are unlimited in their content, imaginative quality, design and physical appearance. They don't make much money.

Unless adopted for school use, the books I have been telling you about are 'trade' books. Our Education Department is moving towards greater centralisation on the editing, printing and publishing of books. In other words, greater state control. We can only hope that the brave authors, illustrators and publishers who continue to create our excellent South African uncontrolled books stay alive.

I believe that the growth and transformation of South African children's literature is summed up perfectly in the final sentence of that famous picture book, *Fly, Eagle, Fly!*

"And then, without really moving, feeling the updraught of a wind more powerful than any man or bird, the great eagle leaned forward and was swept upward, higher and higher, lost to sight in the brightness of the rising sun, never again to live among the chickens."

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