

# FLIPPING THROUGH AFRICAN PUBLISHING

Despite authors such as Nigeria's Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Kenya's Binyavanga Wainaina catapulting African stories abroad, publishing companies across the continent have had to weather various storms, including international rivals and reader preferences. By Pamela Hussein

Literature on our continent is as rich as the soil, with names such as Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer and Mariama Bâ producing unforgettable works. Today African fiction and non-fiction have never had a brighter spotlight or a larger audience. Not only Africans are reading books written in and about their backyard, but the world's taking notice too. However, African publishing companies battle to remain relevant and profitable with the advent of fast-moving technology, global competition and a comparatively small African readership market.

Bookstorm is one of many smaller publishing firms in SA that deal only with non-fiction, which Grantham explains is significantly more popular in this country than fiction.

Nevertheless, local and international fiction still has a local stronghold and authors such as Lauren Beukes, Zakes Mda and Nobel Prize Laureate JM Coetzee have been on best-selling lists locally and internationally.

"What we've got to work out is which books people want to read by South African writers, and which ones they'd prefer to read based on whoever the trending international author is," Grantham explains.

"It makes fiction publishing

but in another way, we do compete in terms of people choosing which books they're going to buy," Grantham adds.

"Consumers don't really look at whether a book's published by Penguin or Bookstorm. On an individual title level, we compete to attract authors to publish with us."

In SA, the sale of 1 000 copies is significantly high, as the industry's still largely underdeveloped compared with others outside the continent. Because of its relatively small size, publishing for a niche market can sometimes be the demise of a company, or add pressure to its bottom line.

"The biggest issue is the size of the market. There's a very small number of regular book-buyers, whereas a niche market in America can be tens of thousands of people. We've got to stay quite mainstream [here] to sell 3 000-4 000 books," says Grantham. As a result, she adds, some firms open their doors to trade publishing, particularly educational publishing, which is the mainstay of the industry.

Since school textbooks aren't imported and are sold in large quantities, offering them for purchase is a strategic means of staying afloat.

"As long as the government remains committed to buying school textbooks from local publishing companies, that will always be the biggest part of the industry," says Grantham.

## SAVED BY AMERICANAH

Similarly, Nigerian independent publishing house Kachifo Ltd has paired its primary priority of selling fiction with the sale of primary school textbooks. Kwani Trust, a Kenyan publishing firm and literary ▶

## "WHAT WE'VE GOT TO WORK OUT IS WHICH BOOKS READERS WANT BY SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS AND WHICH ONES THEY'D PREFER BY TRENDING INTERNATIONAL AUTHORS."

### THE NICHE vs THE GLOBE

According to Louise Grantham of Bookstorm, a boutique publishing company based in Johannesburg, the reader's always in metamorphosis.

"The kind of subjects people want to read about change and one of the biggest things is the effect of globalisation. Anybody in SA can now get any book from anywhere in the world within a week or 10 days," Grantham says.

"The market's changed in terms of what people are looking for. They've got a big pool, making some locally published books more relevant and able to compete with any book in the English-speaking world."

particularly hard in English, because if somebody wants to read a novel, they're not particularly looking for a South African work, but for a story that touches them at the moment – which is as likely to come from England, India or South America."

In regions such as the UK and Canada, authors considered best-sellers have usually sold 4 000-5 000 copies in a week. In the USA, the ability to remain on best-selling lists like that of the *New York Times* reinforces a writer's prestige.

"All the international publishing companies have been in SA for a very long time. In one way, we don't compete at all [because] we're so small,





training hub, will be doing the same this year.

The move, according to Eghosa Imasuen, COO of Kachifo, is the saving grace for many a struggling publishing firm. Kachifo was one of a few such companies that set up shop after a dark period in Nigeria's publishing industry, when international publishing houses pulled out of the country, after having been there since the Fifties and Sixties.

"It was a question of attitude: people didn't know what publishing was any more. It was a problem of perception. When Bakare published Chimamanda in Nigeria, people asked: 'Who is she? Is she Chinua Achebe or Wole Soyinka?' There was this idea of: 'Who is this new person? They have no right to write!' Those were the challenges we had," Imasuen says.

Today Nigeria's publishing industry is mostly buoyed by motivational and

pirates manage to break through the copyright protection and thereafter sell the titles at a cheaper price.

Imasuen adds that online shopping sites such as Amazon and its payment platform, PayPal, don't provide services in Nigeria, forcing readers to access literature through illegal means.

"Amazon doesn't think we're a viable market, so PayPal doesn't work here. So where do Nigerians go to get their ebooks? They go to torrent sites," says Imasuen.

To make up for the need to access ebooks illegally, non-profit organisations such as World Reader and online Nigerian platform Okadabooks are providing the necessary ebook platforms.

Kachifo's been running at a loss for the past few years, but, according to Imasuen, the publishing house has kept itself afloat by leveraging itself into a position of power within the industry.

"We're small, so small trade publishers are our competition. The big publishers aren't doing fiction – they don't need to," he explains.

"Last year, the company almost closed down. What stopped it was Adichie's *Americanah* release last year, so there was revenue. The prestige is there, but prestige without capital is sad." 🐦

## **TODAY NIGERIA'S PUBLISHING INDUSTRY IS MOSTLY BUOYED BY MOTIVATIONAL AND CHRISTIAN BOOKS, AS WELL AS SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS.**

"By 1980 they'd died out because of the structural adjustments, the conditionalities of the International Monetary Fund loans and the austerity measures. That destroyed everything," Imasuen explains.

Kachifo was founded in 2004 by former banker Muhtar Bakare. Thereafter, Imasuen describes the revival of the country's publishing industry as a new flowering.

When Bakare was the first to publish Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book) under the firm's imprint, Farafina Books, the world began to look beyond Nigeria's literary veterans.

Christian books, as well as school textbooks. The other side of the coin, however, is the fact that piracy and theft of intellectual property have come down hard on even the most prestigious publishing firms in the country.

"We're only selling 10 000 copies a year and all across West Africa, Chinese and West African pirates are selling a million a year because [the pirated book] was on the West African Examination Council list up until last year. The major challenge is that piracy isn't painful to do. A fake book is just cheaper," Imasuen explains.

The theft of intellectual property extends to ebooks, where online