



TECHNOLOGY

The future of books

Have e-books displaced their printed peers yet and to what extent has Covid-19 affected the book industry?

I love books. My mother was a librarian, my father a teacher, and I was fortunate to grow up in a house of books. But the book is threatened – or so some say. Only a decade ago, the end of the book was predicted to be imminent, threatened by the arrival of the Kindle and other e-readers. Yet here we are, in the third decade of the 21st century, still mostly consuming books very much like those that Johannes Gutenberg first printed more than five centuries ago.

Why, I ask Jeremy Boraine, publishing director of Jonathan Ball Publishers, has e-books not displaced printed ones yet? And is that likely to change in the next decade or two?

"I guess there are two reasons why books have not disappeared. **Readers still like to own books. On display, books tell a story of who we are. And because we spend hours each day on our screens, it is a relief to take a break from them with a paperback.**

I should mention, however, that when it comes to popular fiction, certainly in the UK and US, the e-book has captured up to 50% of sales."

Commonwealth Writers' Prize-winning author Tsitsi

Dangarembga agrees that books are unlikely to disappear from our lives. In fact, just the opposite. "Stories are enduring. We consume stories in many different forms and these forms endure, even if the technology changes.

"I think that as the Fourth Industrial Revolution brings more forced leisure, or rather lack of meaningful activity – lack of meaningful activity itself not being a good thing – people will compensate by consuming more narrative, including reading more books. This will be to fill in time and to find meaning in a world where the meaning given to life by life-supporting work decreases."

Life has certainly taken on new meaning during a pandemic. I ask Boraine to what extent Covid-19 has affected the book industry, both in the supply of new manuscripts, publication of new books, and the demand for books from the consumer. Has there been a shift in the preferences of both authors and consumers, for example?

"2020 was a tough year for publishers in South Africa, but not cataclysmic. Reading is a solitary pursuit, and readers continued to buy books. The publication of some titles was delayed to this year, but I think for the most part publishers stuck to their schedules. Naturally, the lack of book launches and festivals hampered efforts to raise awareness of new books, but this will come right in time.

"The response of authors was mixed: some got stuck in during lockdown and worked miracles, others found it more difficult. In terms of consumers, there has been a swing to lighter fare, escapism, armchair travel. The demand for books on the depressing state of our politics has dropped, although *Man's Search for Meaning* by

Viktor Frankl has been doing a brisk trade as we experience a shared existential crisis."

"Crisis" is certainly a word frequently whispered in SA publishing houses. I put Boraine on the spot: Do books still make money? There has been some consolidation in the publishing industry in the last few years in SA. Is that a sign that profits are shrinking, or that there are enormous economies of scale that fewer but larger publishers can exploit?

"Books still make money, but it isn't easy in a market like SA which has always been small and has seen little growth in the economy. Book publishing is a very old industry of course, and consolidation has taken place, but the model still allows for new entrants who are able to spot a trend or an author."

I ask Dangarembga, whose latest book, *This Mournable Body*, was shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize, whether she is optimistic that, as several African economies return to high rates of economic growth, lifting incomes, more Africans will be eager to consume books.

"Yes, with more purchasing power on the continent, there are more purchases of books. But by and large, the African book market is still small. Money is made in the textbook market. From that point of view, it will take a structural shift to make the African book market viable without extra-continental sales of local authors."

Boraine sees green shoots emerging: "What is encouraging is the growth in demand for local black authors over the past five to ten years, and this will continue. Our very own Lazy Makoti has replaced the likes of Jamie Oliver. The bestseller list will contain an even larger number of local black authors. But it is also true that as the

world shrinks, global bestsellers will continue to shine."

Innovation is likely to come not only from local authors but also, increasingly, from start-ups. Exciting local publishers, like Hlomu Publishing, may be able to tap into new markets that established publishers find difficult to enter. And new products like the Remarkable 2, a tablet that feels like exactly like paper and allows one to make notes,

may soon become a major threat for the textbook market.

But books are more than just collections of information. They become part of our identity.

Just as libraries define societies, so the books in our homes define who we are – and what we aspire to. That is why the book is unlikely to disappear. Instead, it is likely to become more accessible, more personal, and more meaningful in future, creating new opportunities for authors, publishers and innovators alike. ■

editorial@finweek.co.za

Johan Fourie is professor of economics at Stellenbosch University and author of *Our Long Walk to Economic Freedom* (Tafelberg, 2021).



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