

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 3 No. 2, August 2019

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-3-issue-2-august-2019/>

RA Reviews' Editorial Voice: Reflection on Book Fairs

1. International Book Fairs

Book Fairs, which may also be described as literary festivals, have become established intellectual platforms around the globe. In many countries, these festivals have developed into important scholarly venues. From among all the fairs that have so far taken place, the Frankfurter Buchmesse (FBM) – organized by a subsidiary company of the *German Publishers and Booksellers Association* - has been identified as the world's largest book fair and the first to replace more than 500 years ago; during 1454.

During these occasions very many prominent publishing companies, which have a global reach, exhibit their latest publications as well as their best sellers. At the mentioned book fair that takes place in Frankfurt-am-Mein, it annually draws as many as 7,000 exhibitors and more than a quarter million visitors from within Germany and from different part of the world. At these significant events, the major and minor publishers display their fiction and non-fiction writings; they do so to promote their book sales and to enter into various types of book deals.

For these festivals these publishing houses frequently bring along some of their noteworthy authors and editors. They do so for two basic reasons: the first is to stimulate robust intellectual debates among their established (best-selling) authors and the audience, and the second is to encourage emerging writers, who have proven their worth through texts (such as novellas and essays), to reflect upon their fresh experiences as promising authors. The question that arises: is there a similar event in Africa that brings together publishers and writers?

2. African Country Book Fairs

Though the response to this question is in the affirmative, book fairs in African countries have been on a much smaller scale. There is, in fact, no comparison between Germany's Frankfurt Book Fair and similar ones that occur in Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa. One can, however, make a comparison among those that take place in different African countries and the conclusion is that the Cairo International Book Fair is the largest on the continent; it, moreover, caters not only for African publishing institutions but especially those who come from the Arab world.

In each of these countries, the book festivals are usually coordinated and organized by the national book associations. In Nairobi, for example, it is prepared by the Kenya Publishers Association and in Lagos it is arranged by the Nigerian Book Fair Trust that represents critical stakeholders in Nigeria's book industry. In South Africa, it is the South African Book Development Council (SABDC) that assumes this organizing role and that has each year held this fair.

3. South African Book Fairs & National Book Week

Since this editorial does not intend to reflect in detail on each of these associations and trusts, it gives brief attention to the book fairs in South Africa and this is for two reasons: while there are annual national book fairs, certain cities such as Johannesburg and Cape Town have also organized their fairs independently from that of those that have been and are organized by the SABDC.

3.1 The National Book Week

As this editorial was being written, two events had been planned months in advance. These, structured events were prearranged by two different organizations with by and large similar objectives, will occur by the time this issue is circulated at the start and at the end of South Africa's National Book Week (NBW). The latter, which was initiated during 2010 by South Africa's – then known as – Ministry of Arts and Culture, begins on the 2 September and it ends on the 8 September and is regarded as South Africa's official 'reading awareness week'.

This particular NBW celebration was initiated by the mentioned Council in conjunction with the Ministry of Arts and Culture. It was, however, done with the intention of stressing the value of reading as a pivotal activity; one that should be both fun and pleasurable as the reader reads her texts as she accumulates knowledge; whether she reads a novel or a poem or a non-fiction text. The NBW, according to the Council, is to "showcase how reading can easily be incorporated into one's daily lifestyle."

Interestingly, the final day of the National Book Week coincides with International Literacy Day. And the purpose for having introduced the NBW on an annual basis was to mitigate earlier research findings that revealed that out of the more than 58 million South Africans only a meager 14% read books and that over 58% do not own a single leisure reading book. These are indeed damning statistics and one wonders whether the same statistics apply to other African countries.

Nonetheless, according to the Council's website (<https://www.sabookcouncil.co.za/national-book-week/>), "(t)his annual campaign is aimed at uncovering the thrill and magic of sharing #OURSTORIES by increasing access to books and changing perceptions around reading." It also stated that during this particular week people, organizations, companies, schools, libraries and religious groups direct their energies towards in promoting all sorts of books and in, more importantly, reading different types of books that stimulate the mind and give rise to related activities.

The Council members, as a matter of fact, move around from one location to the other across the country to engage with visitors/audiences who come from all walks of life. At these places, one meets, among others, Grade R to Grade 12 learners, the youth, adults and elders who participate in numerous program activities. Here again one would like to pose the question and ask: have similar initiatives taken place in other African countries?

And the answer to this is both in the negative and the affirmative; in very poor countries such as the Central African Republic celebrating such a week seems to be off the agenda and those countries that are in a better position make attempts to observe the International Literacy Day if not the NBW. Significant to note is the fact that even though Somalia may be categorized by European and American think tanks as a failed state, the section that has separated itself from the rest of that country and that called itself the Republic of Somaliland hosts the Hargesa International Book Fair that creates an opportunity for its local and those in the diaspora to showcase their works.

3.2 Jozi Book Fair

In the same way, this happens at the Jozi Book Fair and the South African Book Fair; the last-mentioned fair takes place at the end of the first week of September in Johannesburg at Constitution Hill and the Jozi Book Fair took place at Museum Africa venue In Johannesburg. Since the undersigned attended the Jozi Book Fair, one should state that the organizers, Khanya College and its Board of Trustees structured the fair in such a manner that there were activities for various stakeholders ranging from school children to adults; and one of the highlights of this event, which was themed: ‘Literature and Newspapers’, was the recognition of the contributions of Wally Serote, South Africa’s poet laureate, and James Matthews, South Africa’s notable dissident poet.

In Conclusion: It should be stressed that events such as book fairs or festivals are important activities to organize so that all and sundry can be stimulated by the reading material that have been published. It should also be viewed as an opportunity to encourage and stimulate the nation to inculcate a reading culture that would lead to transformation at all levels in the society; these festivals should, in turn, be complemented by a National Book Week, if such an initiative is non-existent in an African country or a region.

Bearing in mind these initiatives and activities, let’s look at what this issue has in store for the readers.

Acknowledgment

The Editor-in-Chief once again wishes to express his appreciation to each and every RART member for their inputs at different stages of the process. He wants to register his heartfelt gratitude and thanks to RA's team that includes the assistance of Duke University’s Madison Cullinan, Wallace Peaslee, Zhuri Bryant and RA team members who assisted in editing and finalizing this particular issue. And RART also wishes to record its thanks to the African Books Collective for its unrestricted collaboration with RAR reviewers.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2019 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA’s Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990