

Introduction

Do the books that a child is exposed to influence their ability to read, learn and succeed?

This was a question that the author considered when she was working in Ethiopia between 2004 and 2006 as a voluntary teacher advisor¹ in the Ministry of Education in Addis Ababa.² In many of the schools the selection of books available was minimal and sometimes made up of rejected books from the west with no relevance to the children, their lives and their cultures. Book shops were also rare, even in the capital city, and most had only a small stock of children's materials.

The author returned to work as a volunteer in Ethiopia on a publishing project in 2008 and, this time, saw more evidence of children's publishing in schools, libraries and bookshops but the market in children's literature was still small and restricted. The bookshop market appeared to be predominantly geared towards the more affluent families in Addis Ababa or children of foreign workers. During the next two years she researched the background to this development, talking to authors, illustrators, publishers and readers of children's literature as well as studying articles and books on this subject.³ In addition to being involved as an advisor in the Ministry of Education, Addis Ababa, she became involved in writing and illustrating for the anthologies for Ethiopian children created by the Writers for Ethiopian Children's Group.

She also illustrated a storybook, *Tewodros II of Abyssinia*, for Hirit Belai,⁴ editor of Ha Hu's *Bukaya* magazine⁵ and completed *Amen at Home*,⁶ a picture book aimed at Ethiopian children living with adopted families in the Diaspora for Fitsame Teferra, an Ethiopian writer and publisher.⁷ This exposure and experience provided vital evidence of

the current situation and past history relating to illustrated literature for Ethiopian children.

The thesis combines creative writing with a critical analysis of the work and the focus of this study: illustrated literature for Ethiopian children. There are chapters on methodology, the history of illustrated literature for Ethiopian children, oral storytelling, context, influences on illustrators and illustrations and the background to the picture book *Ten Donkeys*. There are also commentaries following the two stories written for children in the Diaspora which include sample illustrations produced by the author. Further examples of supporting material are included in the appendices.

The next chapter, covering the methodology of research, writing and evaluation, focuses on issues such as post-colonial discourse, oral history, interviewing and ethnography which have influenced this work. It also notes the need for reflexivity in terms of constantly reviewing and questioning opinions and ideas as well as facts both within the creative artefacts and the critical commentaries.

While there may be some comparisons and, with modern communications and technology, parallel developments in this industry compared to the developed nations, observations indicated that children's access to relevant material is severely limited in Ethiopia. However, in the Diaspora, there is an increasing source of appropriate literature for all age groups. One chapter in this study focuses on the history of illustrated Ethiopian children's literature and its impact on children over the last hundred years. Changes in the sources and language of children's literature were identified, sometimes associated with the different political regimes. The current government has been in power for about twenty years and primary education for all children is a goal that it

strives to reach, but universal secondary education and adult literacy appear unlikely to be achieved.⁸ Poverty impacts on education as well as economy. In spite of this gloomy prediction there are signs that children's books are becoming more widely available, and not just to the affluent section of the population in Ethiopia. One indication was the increase in bookshops opening in Addis Ababa including three within walking distance of the author's home in a residential and business area populated largely by Ethiopians. Each bookshop had a section for children's books including those published in local languages.⁹ Literature produced specifically for children in Ethiopia or for Ethiopian children in the Diaspora is, however, still limited. In choosing to write for this audience, the author had to consider which market to write for. Despite there being a large population of Ethiopians living in Britain¹⁰ and vast numbers living in the United States of America,¹¹ the availability of multi-cultural literature which they could relate to appears to be restricted, even in schools, as Yenika-Agbaw and Napoli noted in their research: 'Domestic and International Multiculturalism: Children's Literature about Africans and African-Americans'. One of their concerns was the lack of books that: '...reflect our diverse cultures.'¹² Similar issues had been raised in an earlier article by Atkins which reflected her experiences in publishing where 'white privilege' exists and as a consequence: '...it is difficult for people to know what drives editorial and marketing decisions.'¹³

The first story in this thesis, *Back in Time*, was aimed at children in the developed world and tries to provide a deeper awareness of Ethiopia's history and current situation. It also tried to fit a niche in the market for children of eight to twelve, including those among the Ethiopian Diaspora in Britain, who want adventure, fantasy and characters

they can relate to. This story attempts to raise awareness of the links between Ethiopia and Britain since the 19th Century. Illustrations were intended to enhance the text and provide contextual details for readers unfamiliar with the settings without resorting to long descriptions. The idea for the story came years earlier when the author was studying illustration,¹⁴ working on the theme of ‘flying’ to produce an interactive computer game with a corresponding book aimed at older children learning about Ethiopia. This idea was developed into a novel with illustrations. To extend awareness of Ethiopian history and culture among English speaking children, she also intended to produce a factual book to complement this story, based on the project that the main character was working on and supplementing the existing non-fiction material in a different format. This was eventually resolved in the latest draft where the illustrations appear in a blog depicted as a student’s project activity.

Within the story, *Back in Time*, there is a reference to oral storytelling and one example is given. This is the focus of the next chapter in the critical commentary. The chapter on oral storytelling describes how this activity still continues in Ethiopia, particularly among the less developed groups where the adult population have not accessed education but whose culture ensures that tales and proverbs are still passed on. Language, history, traditions and beliefs play a part in this phenomenon which barely exists in the developed world where publications and other media have replaced the storyteller. In writing this chapter the author began to identify the stories that were written down and published in books as well as some which were related to her by adults. Sources of tales from other parts of Africa and Asia provided some evidence of links and common themes making it difficult to accurately source many tales which are now in

print. The function of storytelling appears to be more than simply entertainment. Hamer identified the links between folktales and the local economy in the Sidama culture of Ethiopia¹⁵ while the storytellers, or griots, in western Africa were expected to give advice on different issues.¹⁶ Elsewhere in Africa: '[w]hether it is folktale, myth or fable, one is discussing strategies of remembering and recuperating viable values from the past in order to forge new relations between people in the present. Orality as a form of cultural memory is critical in restoring a sense of collective identity.'¹⁷

The Storyteller was written to provide a channel through which to share some of the tales from Ethiopia in a story for older children based in a western city such as London. It is set at a memorial service and employs the main characters to each tell their own stories and for each one to incorporate tales told to them by the character in the title. Although he is not present, his teachings and examples are intended to demonstrate the values of storytelling which appear to have been lost in the developed world.¹⁸ The illustrations in this book are intended to separate the stories of the narrators from the tales they had been told. As the book is also aimed at readers over the age of ten, some might say that these illustrations are superfluous and could get in the way of a reader's imagination. However, it is also said that good illustration can: 'add to the reader's understanding, appreciation and enjoyment.'¹⁹ This story is aimed at older children in the developed world including struggling young adult readers and those who have links with the Horn of Africa where part of the book is set. The issues it raises include gender and religion as well as trust and understanding people from different backgrounds. In both this story and *Back in Time*, getting the context right was vital since they include settings, issues and characters which the author did not experience from childhood.

Writing for children usually requires authors to create individuals whose lives differ from their own. Trying to recreate and remember life as it was at the age of the subjects is difficult enough when they live in a world that one is familiar with. When their characters live in, or visit, another period or country with alternative cultures and lifestyles, then that task is more complex. However, if the story is to be realistic and relevant to the lives of its readers, the author must be accurate in every respect. Melrose warned that: '[w]riting for children requires 'more' skill than writing for anyone else! & Master the craft of writing for children and you will write for anyone!'²⁰ Kroll also recognised the difficulties stating: '[c]hildren's and young adult literature is like an undeclared war zone.'²¹ She cites the issues of literacy, technology, censorship and the gatekeepers who impact on writing for this market but accuracy is a paramount concern as it is for Michael Daniel Ambatchew who wrote:

Globalisation is leading to the hegemony of the North over the South in various spheres of life. In literature, writers from the North depict the South through their own norms and values without a thorough knowledge of the complex reality. This therefore, portrays Northerners' reality as the only reality in the world.²²

In an effort to avoid such mistakes, the author requested regular support and criticism from Michael Daniel Ambatchew and others living in the country or familiar with the environment. Contextual issues include not only historical facts, but also gender awareness and cultural specifics. However there are some facts that are difficult to prove, such as identifying which specific oral tales emerged from different regions of Ethiopia. Also, with so many different cultures and different perspectives on history and religion, no one person could provide a definitive answer to some questions.

Many books written about Ethiopia and Ethiopians for the western audience, including the Ethiopian Diaspora, are produced by authors and illustrators whose experience of living in Ethiopia or even visiting the country appears to be short term. The chapter on the influences of illustration and the illustrators of Ethiopian children's literature focuses on the books that have been written for children living in Ethiopia with some reference to illustrators whose works are reproduced in books aimed at the Diaspora and western society. It goes back to the late 19th Century, when the earliest picture book²³ appeared through the missionary societies, and identifies later examples of illustrations in Ethiopian children's books, including work by contemporary illustrators.

To complement this chapter, the final piece of creative work is a picture book, *Ten Donkeys*,²⁴ aimed at the young Ethiopian audience. Recognising the gaps in the market and taking account of the culture and needs of pre-school children, the author has attempted to produce one book specifically for this group. It was important to avoid use of language and even numbers.²⁵ This was to ensure that it could be used in any part of the country, regardless of which of the eighty or more languages were spoken.²⁶

One aim of this thesis was to identify and evaluate material that meets the needs of the diverse population of Ethiopian children living in Ethiopia or in the Diaspora. It explores the restrictions, particularly in terms of historical development and the present economy of the country, and identifies issues relating to context and the needs of Ethiopian children wherever they live, which determine what is appropriate illustrated literature for this diverse group.

To support this research, and display her potential creative writing skills and ability to produce illustrations, the author has produced three stories aimed at different

age groups and markets including children living in Ethiopia. Overcoming the language and other cultural issues was a consideration which the author faced and this factor determined which works would be suitable for the Diaspora, or a wider western audience, and what would be suitable for children born and living in Ethiopia to Ethiopian parents. A primary objective was to raise awareness of what part western authors and illustrators could play in the illustrated literature for Ethiopian children.

¹ The author had worked in education since 1977, initially as a school teacher but later in adult and further education. She taught basic skills and other subjects including FE teacher training and eventually moved into quality assurance and became Chief Officer of the North Wales Open College Network. A year before going to Ethiopia she took a one year project management contract raising aspirations of young people who could attain higher education on the Reaching Higher Reaching Wider project.

² The author spent two years initially working as a VSO volunteer with the Ministry of Education in Addis Ababa from September 2004. During those years she was an advisor on the Continual Professional Development of teachers but also worked with the English Language Improvement Program, the Higher Education Strategy Center (American spelling is used in many titles and terms in this thesis) and the Civics and Ethical Education Department. She returned to work as a volunteer in this Civics and Ethical Education Department from June 2008 for one year helping to prepare for publication all the textbooks for students and teachers in Years 5 to 12. During the time she spent in Ethiopia she travelled across all the regions except Gambella to support the monitoring of teacher training and also visited many places for personal pleasure including the main tourist areas. She continues to visit the country and has maintained links with many of the work colleagues, people in the publishing industry and friends who she met there.

³ See examples of notes and emails received in relation to this research in appendix 1.

⁴ Ethiopian names comprise the given name followed by the father's name and sometimes the grandfather's name. This format will be used throughout the thesis and in the bibliography.

⁵ See http://www.hahubooks.co.uk/bukaya_E.html 'HaHu Books' main project to date has been Bukaya, a magazine in Amharic for children and families.' It is produced in London by Hirit Belai and others to meet the needs of Ethiopian children in the Diaspora. Downloaded 5/11/2010

⁶ See chapter 6.

⁷ See <http://www.habtebooks.com/en/> Fitsame Teferra set up this publishing company and is an author of picture books.

⁸ 2010 chart indicates that sub Saharan African countries do not show the progress to achieve universal primary education if prevailing trends exist. The Report also shows that gender disparity still exists in this part of the world. Source: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2010/MDG_Report_2010_Progress_Chart_En.pdf & <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG%20Report%202010%20En%20r15%20-low%20res%2020100615%20-.pdf> downloaded 1/11/2010

⁹ From 2006 – 2011 Bookworld, a Shama Publishing subsidiary, had a large children's section with some Ethiopian books though the majority were imported. <http://shamaethiopia.com/bookaboutus.asp>. The other

two shops which opened later each had a small section of children's books in local languages: Tigrinyan and Afan Oroma as well as Amharic.

¹⁰ http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2005/05/27/ethiopian_london_feature.shtml In 2005 the BBC reported 'Today there are around 20,000 Ethiopian people living in the UK, with roughly 84% based in London' Downloaded 5/11/2010

¹¹ <http://www.enset.org/2006/10/what-is-size-of-ethiopian-population.html> 'According to the last US census in 2000, the estimated number of people in the US who were born in Ethiopia was 69,530. This figure does not include those persons who were born in the US.' Downloaded 5/11/2010

¹² Yenika-Agbaw, V. & Napoli, M. 'Domestic and International Multiculturalism: Children's Literature about Africans and African Americans' (2010) *Write 4 Children Vol 2 Issue 1*, <http://www.winchester.ac.uk/academicdepartments/EnglishCreativeWritingandAmericanStudies/publications/write4children/Documents/Dom%20and%20InterPrint.doc> Downloaded 4/11/2010

¹³ Atkins, L. 'White Privilege and Children's Publishing : a Web 2.0 Case Study' (2009) *Write 4 Children Vol 1 Issue 2*, <http://www.winchester.ac.uk/academicdepartments/EnglishCreativeWritingandAmericanStudies/publications/write4children/Documents/White%20Privilege%20and%20Children's%20Publishing%20-%20Laura%20Atkins.doc> Downloaded 4/11/2010

¹⁴ This undergraduate programme is delivered by Glyndwr University, in Wrexham. The author was a full-time student between 2006 and 2008 and obtained a diploma in 'Illustration for Children's Publishing.

¹⁵ Hamer, J. 'Folktales as Ideology in the Production and Circulation of Wealth among the Sadama of Ethiopia' Bahru Zewde, Pankhurst, R. & Tadesse Beyere (eds) (1994) *Proceedings of the 11th Conference of Ethiopian Studies Volume II*, Addis Ababa: IES p 135

¹⁶ Hale, T.A. (2007) *Griots and Griottes*, Indiana: Indiana University Press p 18 & 317

¹⁷ Bambe M.T. (2004) *African Storytelling Tradition and the Zimbabwean Novel in English*, South Africa: UNISA p7

¹⁸ Benjamin, W. (1968 reprinted 2007) *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books In his paper entitled, 'The Storyteller', Benjamin, who died in 1940, identified how the 'art of storytelling is already coming to an end.' p83

¹⁹ Salisbury, M. (2004) *Illustrating Children's Books – Creating Pictures for Publication*, London: A & C Black Publishers p94

²⁰ Melrose, A. (2001) *Storykeeping*, Cumbria: Paternoster Press p13. In this book Melrose outlines the importance of getting the context exactly right if the story is to be believed.

²¹ Kroll, J. (2006) 'Writing for Children and Young Adults' in *Teaching Creative Writing*, (ed.) Harper, G. London: Continuum p47

²² Michael Daniel Ambatchew (2007) ‘Plausibility in Refugee Boy’ paper presented at the 19th Annual Conference Addis Ababa: The Institute of Language Studies: Addis Ababa University Michael was the winner of the II Chiostro di Toscana Fiction Writers’ Grant in 1996. He published over 30 stories in the Ethiopian Government’s high school English text books in the 1990’s and, while conducting his doctorate studies in the early 2000s, he identified a need for books at pre-school level.

As well as writing books for children he writes for different journals including Sankofa (Journal of African Children’s and Young Adult Literature) and was an advisor to Stories Across Africa Project. He has written a large number of books for children and has papers published in international journals. (Source Michael Daniel Ambatchew (2008) *A Dozen Contemporary Ethiopian Children’s Writers* Addis Ababa.

²³ The *Coloured Picture Bible for Abyssinian Children* was translated into Amharic by one of Emperor Theodros’s captives, the Reverend Martin Flad who had spent nearly sixty years living in Ethiopia. It was illustrated by Richard André (a pseudonym of English artist, William Roger Snow) and published by one of the missionary societies, The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, in 1886.

²⁴ *Ten Donkeys* is published by Shama Books. There is an explanation of the book in chapter 7.

²⁵ There are Amharic characters for numbers as well as text. Numbers were therefore left out to avoid confusion and also to allow the readers to first develop the concept of number before introducing either form of written number.

²⁶ There are over 85 languages spoken in Ethiopia. This information is widely available in student text books and relevant websites.