

## **Chapter 10**

### **Conclusion**

Should anyone write or illustrate for Ethiopian children if they are not Ethiopian? On a broader scale, can a writer, whether an author or journalist, write about a society that they do not belong to and have their work accepted by members of that culture? Having researched the literature available for Ethiopian children,<sup>1</sup> in particular those living in Ethiopia; having also considered the issues of context in illustrating and writing for different ethnic groups<sup>2</sup> and produced creative materials for these markets, the author believes it is not only possible but may be important, in view of the dearth of books currently available, yet such literature must be of good quality, a high standard and fit for purpose.

Historically speaking, the problem of meeting the needs of this growing market, that is children living in Ethiopia and those of Ethiopian descent living in the Diaspora, seems to be slowly disappearing but the barriers remain immense. The dimensions of the country,<sup>3</sup> cultural differences in terms of language alone,<sup>4</sup> the size of the population, lack of education and poor reading skills particularly among adults,<sup>5</sup> poverty, and minimum access for many to a range of reading materials, all have an impact. In such a climate it is difficult to imagine how this country can ever produce suitable and adequate resources for all ages. At a meeting with the managing director of Shama Books<sup>6</sup> the author learned that there was an aspiration to produce a large number of English supplementary readers<sup>7</sup> for all school grades and a desire to develop a reading culture by producing low cost books which more families would be able to afford. The market is there but the number of Ethiopian writers and illustrators with skills, experience and resources is still

relatively small.<sup>8</sup> Although not lucrative, the opportunity to increase the range of materials for this audience and at the same time improve standards in publications does exist. Whether non Ethiopians are willing and able to take on this challenge is debatable; it largely depends on whether they are willing to give their time and expertise for a smaller financial reward than would be expected in the developed world. Those who currently produce work for Ethiopian children<sup>9</sup> tend to be those with close personal links to the country (many having lived and worked there) and their work is either subsidized (voluntary or project based and funded from outside) or sold for profit to a wider market through international publishers. The criteria for such material being accepted for publication include the need to get the context right.

Children in Ethiopia have relatively little choice in literature compared to children in the developed world yet their interests still need to be considered if they are to gain the same enjoyment and benefits from reading. The perspective and environment of any story have to be accurate and the characters credible and pertinent to the audience. School libraries and some bookshops do provide books produced for different audiences in the developed world and, while they may provide some quality reading material and are better than nothing, Ethiopian children deserve books that they can relate to.<sup>10</sup>

The author acknowledges that her early writing did not take full account of the places and people she was writing about and for; she recognized the need for broad and deep research, reflection and editing based on feedback from Ethiopians as well as those familiar with children's literacy, and a better understanding of the market helped by living among the different cultures. She still recognizes the many weaknesses in her work and continues to seek help through workshops, critique groups and sharing work with

Ethiopian friends and experts. The question of how and why to write or illustrate for children of another culture is one which has not been fully answered through this thesis and prompts further research. In both stories (*Back in Time* and *The Storyteller*) the discerning reader may find evidence of post-colonial discourse and a white middle-class viewpoint despite attempts to avoid such a situation by writing for an Ethiopian audience living in the Diaspora and undertaking extensive research.

One area of investigation which influenced the author's writing was the study of those myths and tales which are familiar to Ethiopians.<sup>11</sup> Storytelling was and is a way of life for many Ethiopians and published examples are a small part of such literature. While these written examples do not replace the performed works in the language of the listeners they can, with illustrations, spread such tales across the whole of the country and the world, providing entertainment and possibly moral training and education. The art of storytelling needs further consideration and can provide opportunities for publishing literature electronically as well as in books (the author's story *Back in Time* emerged from an idea for an electronic game and was self-published in 2011 as a kindle book on Amazon.com).<sup>12</sup> Such media will also provide the opportunity for visual display in the form of illustrations and video including user-participation and interaction.<sup>13</sup>

The author has a background training in illustration for children's publishing and a desire to create books with pictures that can tell stories without words, or incorporate drawings and art work to help readers better understand the text and enhance the appearance of a book. Although there are relatively few illustrators of children's books in Ethiopia,<sup>14</sup> the increasing quality and quantity of their work and improvements in publishing are promising. However, it seems apparent that there is still a market for

books illustrated by local artists who are not trained but whose work is vibrant and contextually accurate as well as trained illustrators of other nationalities whose professionalism advances the quality of literature for children in Ethiopia and the Diaspora.<sup>15</sup>

Self-analysis of the work, both creative and critical, was an important process which has helped the author to develop and refine her writing skills and illustration techniques and explore, through research, children's illustrated literature in an Ethiopian context. It is an ongoing process, hopefully leading to positive results in terms of publication but also laying the foundations for future academic and creative writing.

One question it has raised is that of learning how to write in other voices. Developing the skills of listening and observing is crucial, as is reading works by writers from the different cultures depicted in stories. In isolation the author knew that she could produce acceptable work that received compliments from family and friends, but for it to progress and be suitable for publication and distribution, she became aware of how much she needed the support and criticism of others, particularly those from other diverse cultures. One source was SCWBI, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, which has a British arm active in supporting writers and illustrators of children's books, offering local workshops, critique groups and other mechanisms to help writers. Another group in Manchester helps writers produce materials which focus on cultural diversity, encouraging black and Asian writers as well as white authors to include more non white protagonists in children's literature.<sup>16</sup>

When the author's book *Ten Donkeys* was accepted by a publishing company<sup>17</sup> she realized that she had found a niche market in Ethiopia by focusing on small

supplementary books and avoiding a specific Ethiopian language or use of English.

Another book illustrated by the author, *Amen at Home*,<sup>18</sup> has been published and distributed through the major bookstores of Ethiopia and Amazon.com for the international audience, including families adopting Ethiopian children in the Diaspora.

The question of whether she should continue to write and illustrate for this Ethiopian market also depends on how well the books are distributed, an evaluation of their success and how much is earned by this exercise will also inform future decisions. This raises another consideration. Should anyone write or illustrate for a specific market if it prevents others living in that country from benefitting from such work? Although the earnings from sales of books in Ethiopia are low compared to those expected elsewhere in the developed world, they still have some value to the writer or illustrator. The research identified publishers who are looking for new material that would appeal to Ethiopian children, and recent discussions with other writers and illustrators from Ethiopia provided evidence that there is room for both indigenous artists and outsiders. Thus a joint effort to stimulate a market and encourage the emerging educated population to recognize the significance of children's books might help create a reading culture and encourage greater demand. An evaluation of the impact and the value of developing such literature would appear to be of benefit to all involved. Also, to achieve better quality books for all children requires good quality training, preparation and practice in writing and illustrating for diverse cultures. This could be the focus of wider research.

This study has highlighted many opportunities for writing and illustrating publications for Ethiopian children both in their own country and in the Diaspora, as well as producing books to raise awareness of this country and its culture to a much wider

population. It has also raised issues including the dilemma of who should produce these books and whether they should expect to do it for profit or to generate resources and expand the relatively small market which shows some sign of expansion as efforts are made to develop a culture of reading among all Ethiopian children. The study has provided answers to some questions and raised awareness of the many problems which continue to restrict the expansion of illustrated literature for Ethiopian children.

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<sup>1</sup> Since first visiting Ethiopia in 2004 as a voluntary teacher advisor, the author has visited libraries, book shops and schools in that country as well as exploring the internet for literature available for the Diaspora.

<sup>2</sup> The author used a variety of methods including research of academic documents and creative materials and practice as research.

<sup>3</sup> Population: 85,237,338 note: estimates for this country explicitly take into account the effects of excess mortality due to AIDS; this can result in lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality, higher death rates, lower population growth rates, and changes in the distribution of population by age and sex than would otherwise be expected (July 2009 est.) source <http://www.economywatch.com/economic-statistics/country/Ethiopia/> (last updated 14/2/2011) Size of country 1,127,127 square km - source <http://www.ethioworld.com/CountryInformation/geography.htm> downloaded 23/2/2011

<sup>4</sup> Recent studies report that 99 languages are spoken in the country. Amharic and English are the de facto languages of the state, with greater emphasis being placed on other languages in the official media and the educational system. The working languages of the national/regional government may differ according to regions. The other major local languages are Guaragigna, Oromigna, Somali, and Tigrigna. Source <http://www.ethioworld.com/CountryInformation/geography.htm>

<sup>5</sup> The author observed such problems among primary teachers many of whom had weak English skills during monitoring exercises in 2004/6. Many parents are illiterate in their own language thus unable to support them at primary school. English is the medium of education for all students from Grade 8.

<sup>6</sup> Gassan Bagersh discussed the future aims of the company with the author in September 2010. *Ten Donkeys* which was partly designed for this market. More details of the company can be found on their website: <http://shamaethiopia.com>

<sup>7</sup> One of the issues identified in a paper by Michael Daniel Ambatchew was the need to ‘measure the effectiveness of the provision of supplementary readers to primary schools with the intent of improving students’ reading skills in English Ambatchew (2003) ‘The Effect of Primary English Readers on Reading Skills in Ethiopia’ (submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for degree of Doctor Litterarum in English in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria) This thesis examines if there is any tangible effect on the students’ reading skills by conducting a comparative study between two government schools that received a donation of primary readers through the Primary Readers Scheme of the British Council and two schools that did not.

It was found that there has been no significant increase in the students’ reading abilities because government schools lack the capacity to utilise supplementary readers. Most of the librarians are not

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qualified, while the teachers, though qualified, lack training in how to use supplementary readers and also tend to be demotivated. Moreover, the administration and running of most of the schools libraries limit the books' accessibility. It is also very likely that the country's socio-economic situation in general and the children's backgrounds do not encourage the habit of reading for pleasure. Consequently, modifications are necessary to maximise the benefits of extensive reading in the future, such as training teachers and librarians as well as encouraging supplementary reading amongst the students. It concludes that though extensive reading schemes produce impressive results in experimental situations, care should be taken in actual implementation of such schemes in real life.  
<http://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=9065068> Downloaded on 28/11/2010

<sup>8</sup> A full list of Ethiopian authors within Ethiopia does not exist but Michael Daniel Ambatchew identified *A Dozen Contemporary Ethiopian Children's Writers* in Addis Ababa in 2008 in which he observed, 'The lack of visibility of Ethiopian children's authors has led many to conclude that we do not exist at all. This invisibility has probably arisen from a multitude of factors including the Ethiopian value of modesty, the writers' preference for solitude, and a lack of publicity and awareness of the importance of children's literature... this booklet aims at beginning to fill this gap by providing some bibliographical information about a few contemporary Ethiopian authors.... Actually, Ethiopia has over 30 children's writers currently residing in the country and producing stories.' p5-6

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Laird, Jane Kurtz and Eric Robson are among the best known writers/illustrators from the west whose work has reached the Ethiopian audience as well as the Diaspora and a broader international market through publishers such as Macmillan, Oxford University Press and Simon & Schuster. Shama Books have published non Ethiopian writers such as Lara Deguefé (*Korkoro Boy and Other Stories* 2005) who lived in Ethiopia and married an Ethiopian then returned to Canada. This book, like many others published by Shama Books, has a wider market than just Ethiopia and most are available through on-line distributors such as Amazon.

<sup>10</sup> [www.ethiopiareads.org](http://www.ethiopiareads.org) has a mission '[t]o create a reading culture in Ethiopia by connecting children with books. By planting libraries for children, creating culturally appropriate reading materials and training educators to nurture a love of books, Ethiopia Reads brings hope and educational skills to this generation of Ethiopians.' Donations of books directly to the Ethiopian Reads libraries have reduced since 2008. At that time the author was guided on the type and quality of material they would accept from overseas sources. Now, with access to substantial financial contributions through the United States offices of Ethiopia Reads, the growing number of libraries it supports no longer rely on book gifts.

<sup>11</sup> This was covered in greater detail in the chapter on the importance of storytelling.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Back-in-Time-ebook/dp/B005ELNVEW>

<sup>13</sup> Children's I Pad Apps (applications) are emerging and this market appears likely to increase based on experience of Kindle sales to adults. An example is: <http://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/childrens-books/appyzoo/aesops-wheel-fables/> a different way of reading/exploring Aesop's Fables. 2010 sales of Kindle vastly exceeded expectations according to Amazon .com <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-12-23/amazon-com-kindle-sales-are-said-to-exceed-estimates.html> (both downloaded 11/2/2011)

<sup>14</sup> There is no organisation of children's book illustrators and writers/publishers use artists who have not been trained or a specific qualification in this discipline. In appendix 2 there are a number of illustrators of the folk tales published and the section on the influences on illustrators has further names. A comprehensive list has not been published but it appears that they are small in number and have other roles. This was confirmed by illustrators who the author met in Addis Ababa such as Yihenew, Andargachew and Abyalew.

<sup>15</sup> This followed discussions with publishers (Shama Books (2010, 2010), High Profile (2009, 2011) and Habte Books (2010, 2011).

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<sup>16</sup> 'Britain's cultural diversity is bringing about an ever-richer mix of creativity in all fields of the arts. The country's ethnic and religious make-up is already making a vivid mark on our literature, and The decibel Penguin Prize will help take this further by recognizing new talent. I am proud and delighted to be its patron' David Lammy MP Source  
<http://www.penguin catalogue.co.uk/hi/general/title.html?catalogueId=18&imprintId=108&titleId=2849>  
downloaded 23/2/2011 Commonword, Puffin Books and Rogers, Coleridge & White Literary Agency (RCW) are pleased to announce a partnership for the Commonword Children's Diversity Writing Prize, to be awarded annually from 2012. The prize will be the culmination of fortnightly Commonword writing workshops in Manchester and an annual Puffin and RCW-sponsored masterclass for budding writers who exhibit potential in children's fiction writing for 7+ to teenage. The winning writer must embrace ethnic diversity either through their own ethnicity and culture and/or within their writing. Source  
<http://www.cultureword.org.uk/partnership-and-prize-to-encourage-diversity-in-children%e2%80%99s-fiction>

<sup>17</sup> Gassan Bagersh, managing director of Shama Books, agreed to publish the work. An email from the MD on 13.2.2011 read, 'Thank you for your message. I love the illustrations and the concept behind "ten donkeys". I think we have a book that will ignite are collaboration. I would like to publish it ASAP. How long do you need to finalize it?'

<sup>18</sup> *Amen at Home* by Fitsame Teferra (2011) Addis Ababa: Habte Books ISBN 9789994485208 initial print run 1000 copies - retailing in Ethiopia for 52 Birr (15 Birr to £1) 'I buy your book from Book world. It is interesting. I like it. It is good to children to teach words with pictures. I hope you will make additional educational books in the next time. But, I am not sure about the price for Ethiopian children, it is 52 eth.birr. I think it is expensive for many Ethiopian.' (facebook message from Yihenew Worku 23/2/2011)