

EDITORIAL

Editorial - Last few days!

The public call to host events and exhibit at the JBF ends on 18 June. Let your voice and your ideas be heard; choose the JBF theme or your own choice.

In this edition of *My Class* we return to the theme, 'Literature and Working People' in relation to the 'working class', literature, who writes and who reads it? Related to this, other articles provide insight into the history and origins of writing, storytelling and the struggles of working people to read and write, to record history and to be present and visible in society.

Enjoy,
Maria

Questions From a Worker Who Reads by Bertolt Brecht, 1935

Who built Thebes of the 7 gates?
In the books you will read the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?

And Babylon, many times demolished,
Who raised it up so many times?

In what houses of gold glittering Lima did its builders live?
Where, the evening that the Great Wall of China was finished, did the masons go?

Great Rome is full of triumphal arches.
Who erected them?

Over whom did the Caesars triumph?
Had Byzantium, much praised in song, only palaces for its inhabitants?

Even in fabled Atlantis, the night that the ocean engulfed it,
The drowning still cried out for their slaves.

The young Alexander conquered India.
Was he alone?

Caesar defeated the Gauls.
Did he not even have a cook with him?

Philip of Spain wept when his armada went down.
Was he the only one to weep?

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

- Last days to Host Events & Exhibit at 10th JBF! Deadline: 18 June 2018.
- FREE! Writing & Reading Skills Workshops: see dates inside
- Affordable Printing at JoziPrintShop. Free quotes.
- Save theDate: 10th JBF, 30 August – 2 September, Mary Fitzgerald Square
- Contact JBF: 011-3369190/ 0843773003
jozibookfair@khanyacollege.org.za /
www.jozibookfair.org.za

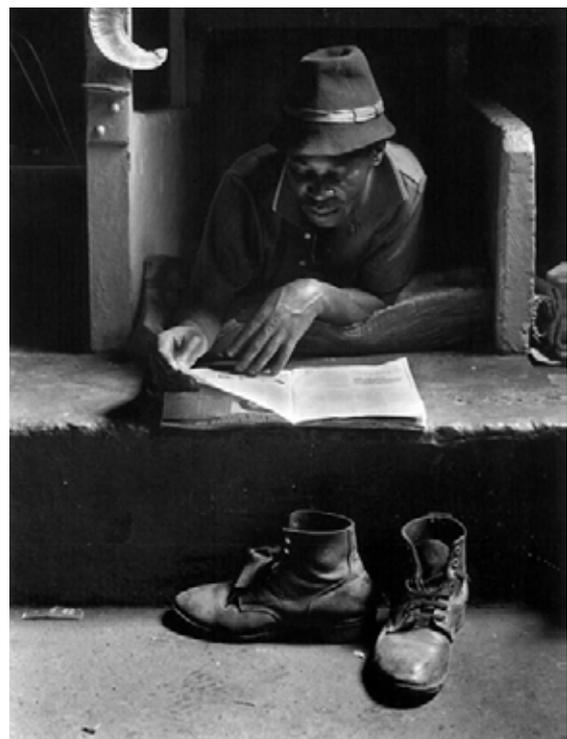
Frederick the 2nd won the 7 Years War.
Who else won it?

Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for the victors?

Every 10 years a great man.
Who paid the bill?

So many reports.

So many questions.



Compound Johannesburg 1980 Ben MacLennan - The Cordoned Heart will be exhibited at the JBF in September. Compound Johannesburg 1980 Ben MacLennan - The Cordoned Heart will be exhibited at the JBF in September.

Literature and Working People

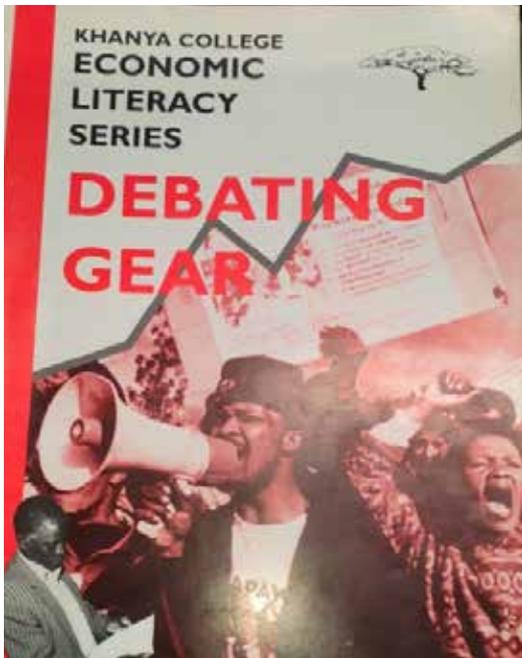
Every year the JBF chooses a theme to advance our orientation and mobilise constituencies to deepen the culture of reading and writing. This year's theme, Literature and Working People, includes opportunities for working people to read, write and enjoy literature written for, by and about working people; and to reflect on working people's contribution to South African society historically and internationally.

Who is the working class?

The term 'working people' includes the working class, i.e. everyone who does not own anything such as factories, farms, land etc. - and has to work daily for wages to reproduce themselves and their families. Colonialism and apartheid capitalism has shaped the colour of class in South Africa, where black (generic) people are working class and whites own the means of production, also called the bourgeoisie.

Neoliberalism, Work & Poverty

The ANC government's Growth Economic and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy (1996) used neoliberal policies to restructure society, consistent with international governments: the state's role was reduced in favour of the private sector; basic services were privatised; trade liberalisation promoted the free flow of imports and exports, and workplaces were restructured to increase production and lower costs (wages).



Besides destroying local industries and increasing unemployment, neoliberalism also deepened historical patterns of social inequality and changed the nature of work. Precarious forms of work - casualisation, piece-work, temporary contracts, part-time and 'volunteer' work - have increasingly replaced permanent jobs with benefits. Low wages and poor conditions are generalised and to prevent complete starvation, the state provides 16 million people and their families with a social grant. Many are homeless and experience hunger.

The black middle classes have not been immune to neoliberalism and due to this country's history they are especially vulnerable: they do not have access to generational wealth; the burden of 'black tax' and caring for working class families and 'democracy' has provided few alternatives to access property, land, and financial support. While the black middle classes are also highly indebted, restructuring in middle class-related jobs (nursing, teaching, banks, insurance companies, information technology, journalism etc.) has also increased unemployment. High interest rates and unemployment has led to repossessions of homes, cars and other assets, and many have returned to live in townships. The black middle classes are also dependent on wages for survival, and are 'one pay cheque away from the working class and poverty'. The black middle classes are constantly drifting in and out of the working class.



Neoliberalism in South Africa (and internationally), is constantly reconfiguring society into two main social classes: a (black) majority increasingly dependent on wages and a (white) elite who own the means of production. Hence the JBF's thematic focus on 'working people' (and not working class); to capture the fluid and generally downward movement of people as neoliberalism impacts on all spheres of social classes and all aspects of social life. The condition of precariousness is increasingly generalised as neoliberalism increases poverty and social inequality.



karibu!

forward to solidarity!

Karibu! - Dec 2017/Jan 2018

EDITORIAL

The victory of Cyril Ramaphosa in the ANC presidential election in December 2017 has opened the road to restoring the influence of big capital in the ANC and in government. While there has been much talk in the press about a stalemate in the election, the Ramaphosa presidential victory represents a significant

Zuma capitulates and appoints State Capture Commission



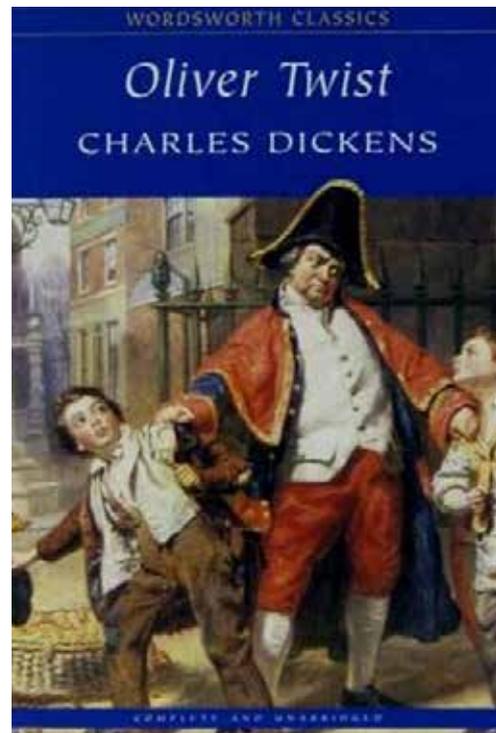
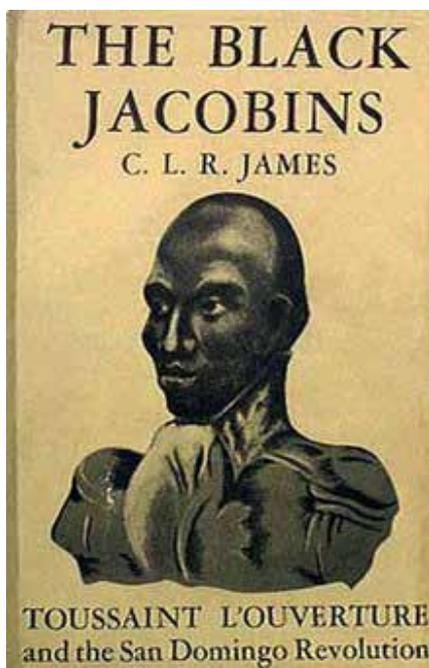
State - could not participate in the elective conference.

Not only was the President under pressure from the courts and losing many battles, but his base in the ANC was now also under threat. The recent victory of Cyril Ramaphosa in the presidential battle in the ANC consolidated the offensive of Zuma's opponents. ANC President

Does working class literature exist?

While literature often reflects the dominant social relationships in society, it can be a means to contest class rule and social inequality. Literature can therefore mobilise and shape society. In South Africa, the literature of working people exists, but is often submerged and dominated by bourgeois rule.

While the struggle for capitalism and bourgeois rule did not happen overnight, the French Revolution (1789) overthrew the monarchy, the nobility and the church and consolidated bourgeois rule in France and Europe under the call: *liberty, equality and fraternity for all*. *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789* of France's Constituent Assembly influenced the first successful slave revolt and the independence of Haiti from France on 1 January 1804. [See CLR James' *Black Jacobins* on the struggle in Haiti] Similarly, the rights of individuals were encouraged, and individual love was celebrated and promoted in literature.

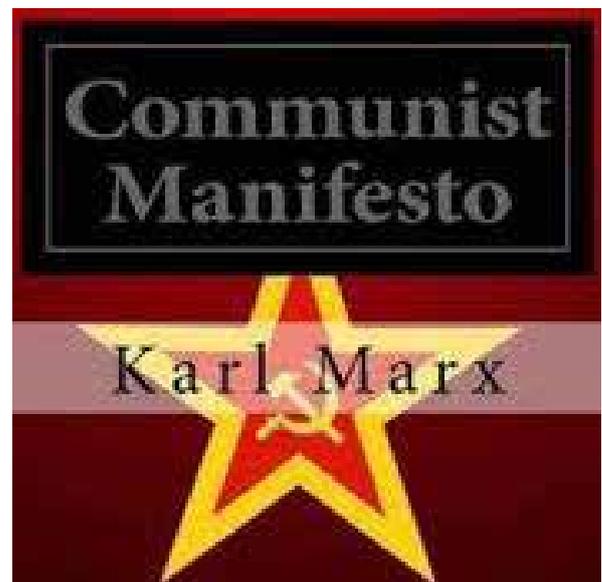


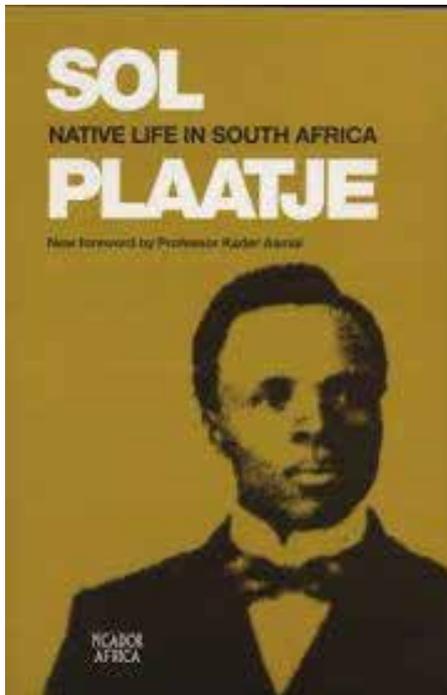
In South Africa, workers have written about this country's history and struggle. Since the late 19th century working people were dispossessed of land and Sol Plaatjie's *Mhudi* and *Native Life in South Africa* and Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* for example, discuss these social changes and struggles.

More recently, the Black Consciousness Movement and the trade union movements in the 1970s and 1980s gave rise to an explosion in literature – poetry, short stories, plays – and the visual arts (photography, lino drawings, paintings, posters etc.). The *Staffrider* magazines, *Speak, Learn and Teach*, *Learning Nation* (newspaper supplement to *New Nation*), *Critical Arts* (journal), and Ravan and Scottaville were local publications and publishers that developed in response to the rising working class and promoted worker literature.

Rise of Worker Literature

In the process of consolidating capitalism or bourgeois rule, besides dispossessing the king, nobility and the church, common people were also dispossessed of access to land, rivers, forests and hunting. Although they resisted, working people were forced into wage labour and this often violent process was expressed in the writing of amongst others, Charles Dickens (*A Tale of Two Cities* about the French Revolution and *Oliver Twist*, about an orphan growing up in England); Thomas Hardy (*Tess of the D'urbavilles*) and Philip Tresselt (*Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*). Similarly, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), written by Karl Marx, mobilised workers to overthrow capitalism as they 'have nothing to lose but their chains.' This is a famous example of literature written for working people internationally.



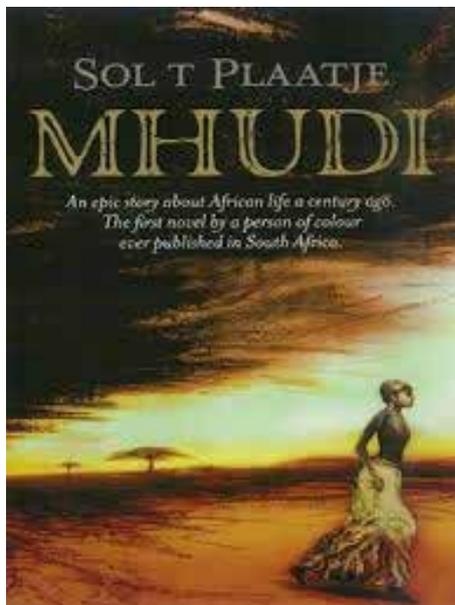


The major challenge for worker literature is that it is linked to the rise and fall of the workers' movements, the activism of workers and their organisations. When the working class is organised and there is an upsurge in worker struggles, worker literature tends to thrive; and conversely subsides and even disappears when the workers movement is in decline, defeat or retreat.

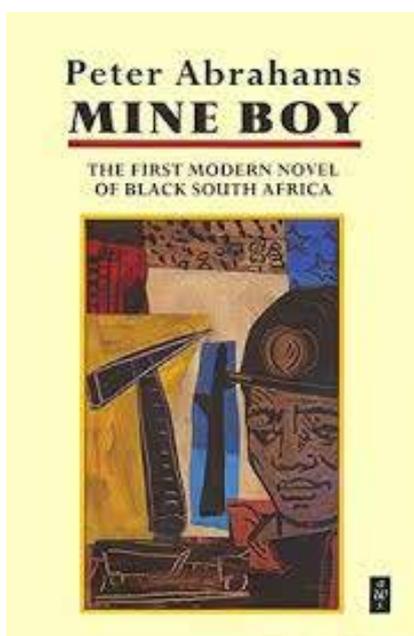
Who writes & reads working class literature?

In democratic South Africa, working people are still excluded from education, literature and the arts. There is a constant struggle to deepen the culture of reading and writing, and make affordable and accessible books (in indigenous languages and English), as there are few libraries and bookshops in township.

The publishing industry is dominated by multinational publishers and geared to an elite (white) niche market. Most writers are middle class, and few opportunities exist for working people to write and to publish. Besides the prohibitive price of books, the content of books is determined by an editorial staff of predominantly white middle class women (and men), gate-keepers, who don't believe worker literature is 'sexy enough' to boost sales to middle class readers. In SA, class and colour prejudices against working people prevail and therefore what is published is often Eurocentric, appeals to (white) middle class tastes, and does not include worker literature or the diversity of people and experiences in this country.



The various elite literary festivals supported by the publishing industry does not promote worker literature; and bussing in township schools to 'attend' festival events does not create readers or deepen a reading culture. Similarly, many government-supported events tend to promote high profile, costly and celebrity-based events, largely ignoring the development of worker literature.



Based on class prejudices, the elite has often dismissed the JBF as a 'community festival'. This reflects the JBF's work since its first book fair festival in 2009, creating readers and writers throughout the year in townships, amongst people of all ages, and publishing worker literature. The Festival reflects the country's demography, and promotes and includes worker literature.



Diverse Worker Literature

In SA working people have historically been divided into a multiplicity of experiences, languages, cultures, colour, differentiated access to survival; and systematically excluded from literature and the arts. Working people's diversity includes sexual orientation, gender, beliefs, tradition and culture; and belonging to different organisations - religions, stokvels and unions.

Yet, despite successive violent (white) regimes, working people resisted and retained indigenous languages and beliefs. Notwithstanding this, Khoi-San languages are in danger of becoming extinct. English, although dominant, is the first language of a few black (and white) people. The case of Afrikaans is interesting, as a first language for more black people (than whites), and a slave language expropriated by a white elite as a unifier and later imposed on black people as a language of learning. Afrikaans needs to be reclaimed, repositioned and developed together with other indigenous languages.

While all working people have experienced the general features of apartheid capitalism, there are differences based on history, and geography. In addition, the nature of working people's lives and conditions is constantly being shaped and reshaped as they resist and struggle for a better society. Despite many differences, working people are united by a common history of struggle and the continued dependence on wage labour to survive.

There is therefore a need to mobilise working people broadly, in all their diversity and languages, to deepen reading and writing skills and participation in the Festival. Similarly, the content of worker literature will therefore need to be varied and diverse, to reflect the diversity of working people.

Reading is freedom

Working people have waged struggles internationally for their right to read and write. This is still an important struggle in South Africa after more than 20 years of democracy. Related to this, the majority is still not taught in their mother tongue and this impacts on their general cognitive development, life chances, and the development of literature in indigenous languages.

What is literature?

Literature includes all written forms of writing: poetry, letters, stories, plays and novels, among others. Often understood as 'the word', literature influences the creation of other art forms (film, music, dance and visual arts) and is also similarly influenced. In Africa, for example oral tradition or stories passed down from one generation to another, often contain music, sound, song, movement and dance.

Literature captures the lived experience of human beings, both fiction (stories) and non-fiction (real events); and reflects the social relationships in society between different social classes. But, not everything that is written is accepted and classified as 'literature'. Literature is

defined as more 'superior' or 'higher quality' writing compared to others. Who decides what is 'literature' and what is not, is a story related to our theme, *Literature and Working People*.

Gatekeepers & Inequality

There are 'gate-keepers' who decide what is 'literature', and they are usually from amongst the middle class elites, including academics based at universities, publishers, and literary associations. This is not a democratic decision based on everyone reading and the majority deciding what books or stories they like that are of interest to them. Instead, an elite group decides what is literature, and most often worker literature, written by or about working people, is excluded. This is a reflection of the social inequality that exists in society and explains why 'literature' is generally not accessible to working people; and why worker literature is not generally promoted by publishers, bookshops, universities, journalists and the media.

It is always relatively easier to dominate people when they cannot read and write about the society in which they live, about their own lives and their struggles. Hence the struggle for worker literature and for working people to read and write is important.

Struggles

The struggle to make literature - reading and writing - accessible to working people is part of the struggle of working people historically for a more equitable society internationally. For example, during the Atlantic Slave Trade millions of Africans were enslaved and transported to the United States and Latin America. The first slaves reached Virginia in 1619 and slavery was finally abolished in 1865. For more than 200 years slaves were beaten, hanged and abused, and forbidden upon death, to read and write. There are many books about slavery and the JBF has already discussed the work of ex-slave, Frederick Douglass, who discovered through his own struggle for freedom that "If you learn to read you will be forever free."



In South Africa, there has also been a long struggle for education, equity and national liberation. The rise of the Black Consciousness Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s was formed and in 1976 the Soweto Youth Uprising significantly challenged the apartheid system, for education and the end to cheap black labour. Together with the rising labour movement in the 1970s and especially the 1980s, these struggles gave rise to a cultural worker

movement and mobilised people in the struggle for liberation. What happened to that cultural movement and worker literature in the post democracy period? [pics cry rage, black women and fist

school youth; translated and published children's books into African languages; reprinted and sells books affordably (*Gold and Workers, Migritude*) and a special youth series of seven books, *#Pass on the Word* by SA's legends (Keorapetse Kgositsile, James Matthews, Ronnie Govender and Lindsey Collen). The JBF also ensures that all its publications are distributed to the 86 libraries in Johannesburg, and that our book clubs at schools and orphanages are regularly furnished with books. The JBF also assists small publishers and self-publishers to publish their work affordably and the JoziBookShop sells books very cheaply.



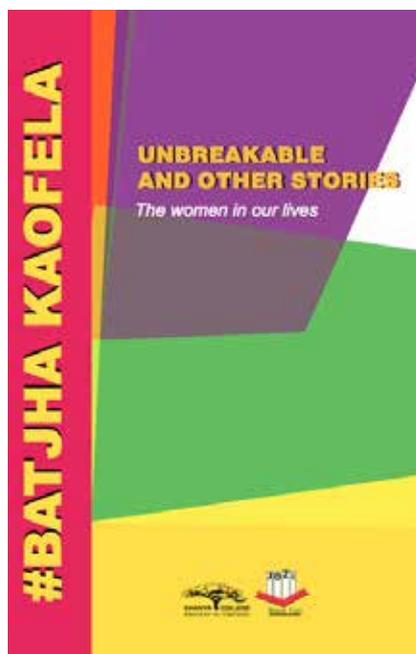
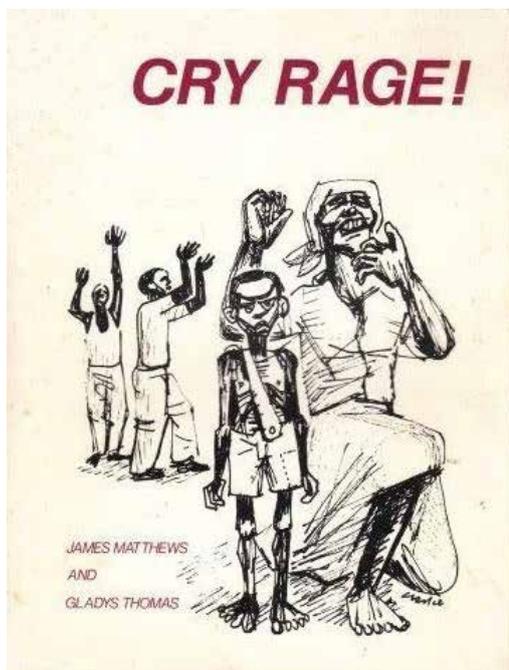
While the South African Constitution recognises 11 official languages, many children don't learn in their mother tongue and this seriously disadvantages the children of working people. Studies indicate that by Grade 3 or age 8, poor children are 3 years behind their wealthier peers in terms of language cognition. This affects all their subjects and the gap widens over the years. It is also difficult to compensate for poor education when libraries are few at schools and communities, and books are expensive. Many of these issues were raised during the #FeesMustFall struggles in 2015, highlighting the continued struggle of black working people for education and transformation.

JBF Strategy

Since 2014, the JBF works with strategic constituencies - children, youth and women - as catalysts to break existing poor patterns of reading and writing in family households.



Since then the JBF published three books of children's poems and drawings, called *Poetry for Friends*, two collections of short stories, called *Batjha Kaofela* by 20



“A room without books is like a body without a soul. “
Enheduanna.

From Storytelling to Literature

Storytelling is as old as humanity itself and long before writing was discovered early human beings engaged in storytelling, and the stories were passed down from one generation to another. This became known as the oral tradition. Storytelling was an important thread for memory and continuity, linking the past and future generations. Storytellers and poets were important in preserving tradition, culture and history. Through storytelling, our ancestors communicated their joys, life experiences and their ideas about nature and creation. Sometimes stories got lost or changed, yet oral tradition is still an important art form. Stories tell us about ourselves, our fantasies, desires, follies and tragedies. Many ancient stories survive and continue as myths, fables, folklore and legends across all cultures because people are always interested in people.

Rock art

Before the development of writing and recorded history, indigenous people and First Nations recorded their stories and their lives in rock art or paintings in caves. The rock paintings are the earliest form of public art, an accessible and effective form of communication with the public. Similarly, today artists paint their messages on walls, called graffiti. The JBF has used graffiti since 2009 to successfully communicate with the public, with readers and writers.

Rock art is another form of storytelling. The rock paintings tell us about the lives and experiences of early indigenous peoples, our ancestors, who were hunters and gatherers and lived in harmony with nature. Rock paintings can still be found in caves all over the world, including Southern Africa.

Most early societies that produced rock art were egalitarian, there was no hierarchy or system of ranking people. Everyone was equal, everyone needed to work and assist in the survival of everyone. There was no chief or headman, and men and women were treated equally. There is debate about who did the actual rock paintings, but it is unlikely given the context that there were 'artists' as such. Everyone was an artist and participated in making the rock paintings, leaving us clues and telling us stories.



Ancient civilisations

The historic archaeological sites of ancient civilisations tell the stories of past empires and are evidence of working people's contribution to humanity. Examples of these ancient civilisations in Africa are the pyramids in ancient Egypt, the ancient temples in Ethiopia and the Great Zimbabwe in Zimbabwe.



Many ancient civilisations had sophisticated ideas about life and death. For instance, the pyramids in Egypt were built as tombs for the dead king or pharaoh, and everything s/he needed for the afterlife or life after death. These ancient monuments tell us how people lived thousands of years ago, how societies were organised and who built these monuments. While kings and chiefs ruled, it was working people, probably slaves, who built these ancient civilisations. But often the role of working people in the development of human society is often hidden because historians and writers choose to ignore make working people 'invisible', hidden from history and the development of society.

The poem by Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), *Questions From a Worker who Reads?* highlights the role of working people through the questions that the poet asks. Brecht's poem is particularly relevant to the JBF theme. When we read about ancient and contemporary society, who did the work, who wrote and who read? Similarly, who built Jozi?

Writing and Literature

The history of writing is about how human beings began to express language in letters or symbols and communicate with others and exchange ideas. This led to people writing stories about all kinds of things and about their lives and this later became known as literature.

But first people had to develop language skills. It is unclear how long human beings took to develop language skills as evidence is unavailable. But, this was a complex process and developed over a long time, in prehistory, before writing developed.

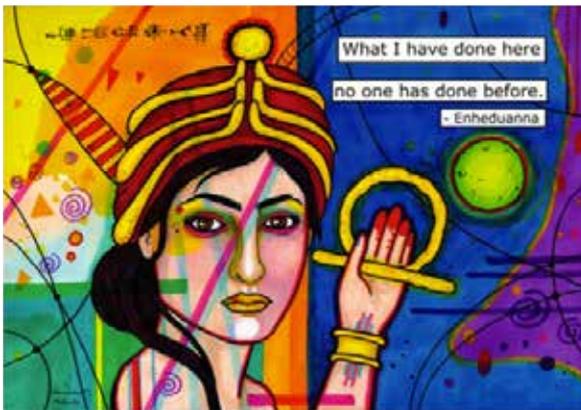
With writing, people had to develop a common understanding or system of letters and symbols that could be written, and read with a common understanding. The writing of numbers developed linked to trade and recording transactions. It is believed that writing developed

first in Sumer in Mesopotamia thousands of years ago. It was called Cuneiform, and was made using a reed-like instrument in wet clay.

Writing systems also developed in Egypt (3100BCE), India (2600BCE) and China (1200BCE), but it is unclear whether this development was independent or linked to cultural influences from Mesopotamia.



According to one story, to keep track of all his tasks for the king, a messenger, jotted down his tasks into notes, and this is how the first narrative writing started. However, the first writer in history known by name is a woman, the Mesopotamian priestess, Enheduanna (2285-2250BCE).



She wrote her hymns to the goddess Inanna and signed them with her name. As a priestess, this was an elite position and not available to everyone. Writing skills were also not available to everyone, but to an elite.

Once people discovered writing, they could record their stories. The Mesopotamians recorded their history, how they lived, buried their dead and their many gods and this was then passed on to future generations and exchanged with others. Writing was an important discovery for human beings as it meant that people could communicate their ideas to each other across time and space. An elite were privileged to learn these skills and they were called scribes. The majority of working people were excluded from writing and reading and this explains why the work of working people is often hidden and devalued, but more importantly, it helps to explain why history is always told from the point of view of those who have access to reading and writing.

Story tellers – the Griots of Mali

The griot tradition originated in the Malinke Empire in West Africa in about the 13th century, stretching from seven centuries after its beginnings during the Malinke Empire (which stretches from modern day Senegal to Timbuktu in Mali and the Ivory Coast). A griot is a hereditary art, linked to social caste, and passed from one generation to another. The griots preserved the memory of society, the history of kings and were in the service of the rich nobility. They also administered formal ceremonies, marriage and funerals. The griots lived off the patronage of the wealthy nobility.

The griots were advisors to court, storytellers, musicians and praise-singers drawn from five leading griot families. The griot was also advisors on family, neighbourhood and community problems.

The main instrument of the griot is the spoken word, often accompanied to music. Griots are both male and female and musical instruments include the kora (harp), balafon (xylophone), ngoni (lute) and the voice. Many musicians in West Africa are still linked to traditional griot castes like Mory Kanté (Guinea), Mansour Seck and Youssou N'Dour (Senegal), whereas Salif Keita (Mali) chose this cultural role.



Some Images in the newsletter were downloaded from Wikipedia

JBF creates readers & writers in all languages & promotes affordable publishing and books

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