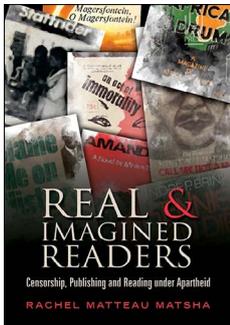




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Real and imagined readers:
Censorship, publishing and reading
under apartheid



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The power of books and their censorship in South Africa

When I was a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) during the late 1970s, De Jong’s Bookshop, easily accessible across Jan Smuts Avenue, became one of the clandestine centres that sold banned books in Johannesburg. ‘A new consignment is in’ was the rallying cry for the Left who immediately descended on the bookshop to obtain their purchases – handed over in brown paper bags. *Real & Imagined Readers* sketches this period most evocatively: it was a time of rampant censorship, book bannings and book burnings. But it was also the era of critical student newspapers, alternative publishers and of student and activist resistance to apartheid. For readers of my vintage, Matsha’s story was not an imagined experience. For us it was real.

The value of this book, comprising five chapters and a conclusion, is in the way that its author recreates a sense of ‘being there’, illustrating the experience, the period, the publishers, authors and readers. The contents deal with book and magazine censorship, censors versus publishers, librarians and booksellers, readers and their roles, and how readers were imagined under the various censorship regimes that spanned over a century.

The reference to ‘imagined’ relates to the ways in which the changing censorship apparatus constructed readers during different periods – from the impressionable and naïve, the average, the good reader, and from the likely to the probable reader. As fresh legislation was enacted, new literary influences informed concepts of censorship, although such influences waxed and waned according to the political climate.

What is also revealed in Matsha’s compelling narrative is the complexity, nuance and contradictions that characterised the 20th century. Censorship was never total, although one startling passage reveals how thousands of banned books were incinerated in a massive oven managed by the then-state-owned Iron and Steel Corporation (ISCOR). The scale of book banning was extraordinary, but so were the struggles against censorship that included many Afrikaans-language novelists, poets and academics, whose books were routinely banned. Alternative externally funded publishing houses were established, and innovative ways of distributing books were devised to counter censorship. We learn here of the inspector from the Publication Control Board who toured the country, infiltrating bookshops and examining shelves for ‘undesirable’ material.

Notwithstanding such close surveillance, alternative bookstores in the big cities, alternative groups of reading communities and other forms of clandestine distribution and discussion took place. Independent publishers found ways of distributing their ‘undesirable’ titles before the censors discovered them. Dissemination occurred no matter how many books were banned, burned and confiscated. Banned books migrated between individuals and reading groups, and books were found by activists and writers in old boxes in storerooms belonging to family members who had somehow appropriated them. The narrative on readers’ roles, examined in Chapter 4, aroused my many memories on how crucial reading was in cultural mobilisation; how reading-as-subversion was in the air; how reading beyond educational courses was a pre-requisite; and how literacy was a social practice as an indicator of oppositional identity formation. Matsha brings these remembered and lived relations to life. Clandestine networks overcame official censorship and these included authors, multiracial all, and courageous publishers who contested the repressive hegemony.

Real & Imagined Readers ends with a nuanced discussion of the changing censorship legislation in South Africa since 1892 (obscene materials), the *Customs Management Act of 1913*, the *Suppression of Communism Act (1950)*, the *Publication and Entertainment Act of 1963* and the *Publications Act of 1974*.

Matsha examines the philosophies and assumptions that shaped the censors’ decisions during these different periods and legislative regimes. After 1963, the reader of the material, rather than the producer, became increasingly important because sceptical Afrikaner intellectuals, who wanted to be flexible in retaining their right to social critique, became involved. The 1974 Act took no account of their literary expertise and moved from the more discriminatory ‘likely reader’ to the mundane, easily led-astray ‘average man’. This regressive political shift of category from assumed intelligent readers to susceptible readers split the Afrikaner intelligentsia, but the reintroduction of the imaginary ‘likely reader’ as a measure of literary reflection occurred nonetheless. This shift was especially evident in the establishment of a more open-minded Appeal Board that overturned many of the censors’ bannings.

What I also appreciated in this immensely readable book was its implicit conceptual framework that never intruded on the narrative, and the implication that when citizens do not read they cannot engage adequately in civic organisation or in the public sphere. Currently, in this age of social media, anything goes, fake news predominates, and logic and evidence are no longer valued by individuals who seek only scapegoats on whom to vent their rage. From *Real & Imagined Readers* we learn how much the anti-apartheid struggle owed to the literati of all ethnic groups and persuasions, including authors, discerning readers and political activists who analysed conditions through reading voraciously, circulating that reading and intelligently acting on it.

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