

Self-publishing and pretty teapots

by Shazia Salie

I cannot write this piece and not credit the atmosphere created, so here is my experience of both The Open Book Festival and the Self-Publishing session held on the 7th September 2017 at the District Six Homecoming Centre (HCC).



As I stepped into the HCC, my first remark subconsciously was, “I’m home”.

The tables of books enveloped me, and the little beverage counter welcomed me with a range of teas that made me thankful for the rainy day. I was so entranced by the ambiance that I almost forgot about the self-publishing session. However, with the help of some very hands-on security, I bid farewell to the

tea and found my way up the creaking wooden floors to the workshop where a range of spectators were laughing and listening to the conversational tone of the panel.

It was this very tone and sense of comfort experienced when watching Paige Nick, Blaq Pearl and Mervyn Sloman, a panel chaired by Andrew Salomon, enthusiastically express their thoughts about their self-publishing. I entered the session with no knowledge of publishing aside from the gratitude I have towards those companies for distributing the books I love. However, being

a literary student and automatically an obsessive reader, I wanted to know everything about literature. I was keen on knowing both the creative process as well as the strategies behind publishing. The panel, who spoke primarily about self-publishing, gave insights into this world which increased my knowledge, however, the descriptions of their individual self-publishing journeys is what depicted just how challenging, yet rewarding, the process is.

I unfortunately missed Mervyn Sloman's personal experience of self-publishing, but I was intrigued by the similar, yet distinctive approaches taken by Blaq Pearl and Paige Nick. Blaq Pearl, performer and writer, spoke of how she published her book, *Karadaaa!*, after the birth of her child and thoughtfully said, "my book was born after my child was born". She says it was this personal experience that granted her the determination and drive one needs in order to self-publish. By the time she began the process, Blaq Pearl had already compiled files of research on publishing and states the significance of doing so to educate oneself about the market. She then found herself a designer and an editor who was familiar with the "Afrikaaps" language used in her book. She also assigned a proof-reader and printed the book in Gatesville, a Cape Flats area synonymous with Cape Malay girls like myself who spent Saturdays there buying samoosas (and now kicking myself for not using the opportunity to print my own books.) Self-publishing entails that one needs to market one's own books and Blaq Pearl did so by using all forms of social media as advertising platforms as well as attending events not only with a partner but with her books, stored in both her boot and handbag.

Paige Nick, who published a range of books, chose to self-publish *Unpresidented* and *Death by Carbs*. She partnered with self-publishing company, Bookstorm which allowed for her to profit more than she would of have made by a publishing company as well as granting her the freedom to do her own sales and marketing. Her colourful book covers raised the question of cover design and the significant role it plays in publication. As a very visual person myself (and someone who

chooses the pink books because it looks happier) I found this topic quite interesting as I still fall victim to 'judging a book by its cover'. Paige shared this interest regarding the impact of visuals and acknowledged her career in advertising for her choice of bold colour and graphics on her covers whereas Blaq Pearl said her minimalistic approach to her design is a reflection of her simple yet direct personality. Mervyn Sloman, however, raised an interesting point about the design which is that one should aim to create covers which represent the content, an idea which is both logical and supportive of us who read the pictures before the words.

As the writers spoke of their personal experiences with self-publishing, they also offered insight into what they called "the dark side of publishing" which are the negative realities one may encounter. Sloman gave a few tips when considering publishing:

- You need to be suspicious when publishers are making extravagant promises.
- You need to address them professionally and ask for publication companies to give you the contacts of people who worked successfully with them.
- You also need to have conversations with people experienced in book selling as ways in which to gain exposure and knowledge of retailing books.

The hour-long session was extremely informative in describing the world of publishing and more specifically in educating people about the concept of self-publishing. The business aspect makes one almost forget about the creativity evident in the books which fuelled this process. However, the commitment, sacrifice and passion involved in each writer's self-publishing experience makes one disregard it as a process but rather consider it as a journey on which they wholeheartedly embarked. This personal journey reflects the individual creativity of a writer and it appears as almost an ode to their vision.

It was at this point that I realised that the homely atmosphere of the Homecoming Centre only emphasised the

personal journeys of the writers. As I sat there, in a room full of intellectuals and walls dressed in black and white wallpaper, filled with conversation and laughter, I once again experienced the feeling of being home because of the community created in this session. When I walked in, I knew no one and had very little knowledge of the topic but by the end, the panel suddenly became familiar.

As I stepped outside, down the wooden floors and walked by the group of people gathered around the tea stand and book laden tables, I realised that The Open Book Festival does not merely educate but it brings about community in gathering people who just want a hot beverage and a good book.