

# 'SOMETIMES READING CAN BE YOUR FRIEND': BLACK PROFESSIONAL SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN READERS

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Black people don't read books, and I am not talking here about the poorest people such as squatters. I refer to the very black intelligentsia who last paged through a book when they were still at varsity – a prescribed book. (Sefale, 1996)

This view, expressed by Zakes Mda in a popular Sunday newspaper, captures much of the tone in which debates on a reading culture in South Africa are conducted. Replete with generalisation and based on unexamined assumption, debates on this topic are often dominated by common-sense wisdom.

Rather than simply taking this position at face value, this article seeks to move in a different direction. Rather than assuming that hardly anybody reads, it locates a group of passionate readers and attempts to delineate their views. The group concerned is a small cluster of black professional women, and this article strives to give nuanced and detailed insight into their reading worlds.

This concern with actual readers is also prompted by a tendency, when thinking about reading and reception, to substitute real readers with abstract ciphers like the 'narratee' and the 'imagined audience' (Fish, 1980; Iser, 1978; Tompkins, 1981). Against this tendency, it is useful to be reminded of what and how a few actual readers read.

This study is based on five in-depth interviews. It builds on the very small base of existing research into readership trends amongst black women in South Africa. Thus far, the major work in this area has been by Nuttall (1994) drawing in turn on Radway's (1987) celebrated study of women romance readers. The study presented here, while building on Nuttall, did not confront the same cross-racial and linguistic constraints.

The first interview took place in Tickeyline near Tzaneen in the Northern Province, with Wilhemina Makwela, commonly known as Welly. A Geography lecturer at Naphuno College of Education in Tickeyline, she is thirty years of age, single with an eight-year-old son. The second interview with RENEILWE RAMASHIA was conducted at Shell Court in Rosebank. She is thirty-five, married with a daughter of ten and a son aged four. RENEILWE holds the degrees of Administration and Management from the Universities of the North and South Africa. She works for Shell South Africa. The youngest

interviewee at twenty-three is Josephine Malala, a first year B.A. student at the University of the Witwatersrand. Motlagomang Masebe was interviewed at her home in Mabopane, in the North West Province. She is a lecturer at Hebron College of Education next to Pretoria, and teaches Setswana literature to prospective teachers in both the primary and secondary school streams. The last interview took place at my home in Nkowankowa, Tzaneen, with Caroline Maponya who holds a teachers diploma and teaches junior primary children. The interviews were conducted in English, but three of the interviewees did code-switch into their own first languages at one point or another, in which case I have translated into English.

For all the women, reading was central to their lives. All of them would go to considerable lengths to make time and space for it. Neither busy schedules, nor lack of money, nor inaccessibility of books, serve as a deterrent to the women's reading. According to Reneilwe, this reading against all odds is because 'there is so much worth in reading'. Reneilwe feels so strongly about this that she actually creates time for reading and looks forward to periods when she can concentrate more on her reading. Welly says that whoever buys papers on Sunday at home must hide them because if they are within her reach, she neglects her cooking and concentrates on them. Motlagomang sacrifices her time of resting for reading, to the chagrin of her family.

Motlagomang has circumvented the problem of money by subscribing to a book club: I do not actually go out to a bookshop to buy books, or sometimes I go into a bookshop, I like a book, but I do not have cash at the time. So the book club forces me to read even if at that point I do not have money to pay for the books, because we have to buy at least four books a year.

She says that if she had enough money, 'this whole room would be full of books because I like to have as many books as I can.'

Caroline and Welly also do not regard buying books as wasting money. Welly and Reneilwe actually 'feel it's worthwhile investment', to use Reneilwe's words. To Welly 'good books are really worth it'. Josephine is the only interviewee who is not earning a salary. She feels that 'if I was working...I would budget something like R100 for books, every month at least.'

Josephine reads magazines off the rack in supermarket queues. Alternatively she uses the library or borrows books from her friends. She says borrowing from friends is so common that at one stage a text passed between four people. Like Josephine, Reneilwe and Caroline do not have any qualms about exchanging books. Motlagomang and Welly however guard theirs jealously. Welly says she actually hides them behind jerseys in her wardrobe. Motlagomang names only two trusted friends – who have since left her neighbourhood – as the only people to whom she would lend books. Even if she loves to keep her books to herself, Motlagomang is only too happy to

bandy the 'lessons' from these books around. She quotes a book whose name and author she cannot remember but whose expressions are still vivid in her memory even years after reading it:

For instance we once read a book, I don't remember the title or the author but there was this part where the university registrar or whoever had called a student to his office so he was saying 'between you and me and this table' this and that and then he went on so we liked that part 'between you and me and this table'... so we usually used that when we talked and we would say 'no, this is between you and me and this table...'

Reneilwe and Caroline also like the idea of throwing around interesting expressions they come across in the books they read. Caroline maintains that the use of such expressions adds to her sense of humour and makes her 'a good speaker of English'. Reneilwe and Caroline seem to have been drawn to English books precisely because they wanted to learn to speak it beautifully. Both admit that in the past and even now they used to admire proficient speakers of the language.

Sometimes it is not lack of money or time that militates against the women's reading but, firstly inaccessibility of books and secondly the presence of other media such as television. Caroline says because she can't find Mamphela Ramphele's *Uprooting Poverty* anywhere in the Tzaneen bookshops, she thinks of going to Pietersburg, more than 80 kilometres from where she stays, just to look for the book. Without anything to read, she is by her own admission, 'pulling hard'. Motlagomang says 'If I do not have a book to read I feel very lost', and that 'I can't just sit and stare into space'.

Reneilwe admits that TV 'is not my cup of tea' and only watches it for her work related projects. In Welly's well-furnished bedroom-cum-living-room a television set is conspicuous by its absence. She feels soap operas impose a regimen of routine on viewers so she avoids them completely. She however likes late night movies and comedy and actually sets time aside for comedies on Sunday evenings.

Motlagomang makes an effort to get away from TV because she wants to read more. But this, she admits, is becoming increasingly difficult now that she has little children whose TV viewing she has to supervise. Josephine on the contrary, does not resist TV. She feels it is helpful because it repeats what she has read in newspapers and magazines, and also because it explores books in a programme called 'Rise Up and Read'. She comments:

If I am not going to benefit from the programme, I simply go to the bedroom and read, because normally when I take the book and tell myself that I am going to read this book, I eh, it's when I see that this book, there's nothing which can stop me from reading it and I'm going to finish it.

Even if a book is boring, finishing it is a must for Caroline. Failing to finish is tantamount to washing money down the drain. So she keeps reading with the

hope that 'maybe in the end I'll get what I want, I think maybe the back pages have some more explanations'. Welly too does not put a book down simply because it is 'predictable' – her idea of a boring book. Nor does the size of a book put her off. 'Normally you find that if I start with...a novel of something like 600 pages it takes me only a day and a half because of I am eager', she says raising her voice in emphasis. Before buying a book, she generally looks at the end to ascertain that it is happy. And the knowledge that a happy ending awaits her sustains her as she ploughs through a long or boring novel. Motlagomang does not even bother about the end. The first chapter is the deciding factor. If it is straightforward, without any suspense, then she decides this is not the book for her and simply puts it aside. Reneilwe would not give a boring book priority. She will however finish it because she 'wants to know'.

The women's apparent obsession with reading does not, however, let them, to use Reneilwe's words, 'close [other people] out of [their] world'. She, Motlagomang and Caroline maintain that if they are reading and someone wants to talk to them, they put their books aside. Motlagomang and Reneilwe first make sure that their children are comfortable either in bed or busy on their own, before they start reading. Reneilwe admits though, that this sensitivity does not come naturally. She remembers a time when she would read when they were driving to church with her family until her husband asked her where it left all of them. She also talks of a time when she was with other women in a rally and:

I wanted to read that time, but, as soon as I took that book, you know there are like subtle comments that you realise that it's not welcome, so I just took it kindly that OK, I can't read because, and I also realised that maybe I'm a little bit insensitive ... so I just packed it in the bag and forgot about it because I realised it was not the best thing to read.

Motlagomang's reference to a wide range of genres throughout the interview is testimony to the fact that 'I am not choosy about what I read I just wanted to read something'. Though she asserts that fiction is her only no-go-area, Reneilwe shows a strong leaning towards books which 'explain what happens between interactions of people, stress, interpersonal relationships, em, character analysis, traits all those things that will illuminate my life'.

Caroline likes true life dramas, hence her predisposition towards autobiographies because:

They are talking about real people and what they've done, and when I'll meet challenges I'll feel if those people have done this they are people with flesh and blood so who am I to say I've failed – I cannot continue so they strengthen me.

Welly is clear about why she likes her kind of novels. They are fictional but practical, a 'sort of true life story'. Reneilwe says if she does write, she would

want to do translations into South African languages in order to make the existing books accessible to a lot more people. She would also write books on her pet subject,

Life ... I don't know how you would categorise them but about stress, about interpersonal relationships, about people's understanding of issues. I think it will be more on the human mind and just people ...[and about] little things like how to run effective meetings.

Of the five women, it is only Josephine and Reneilwe who made reference to the Bible. Josephine says that her reading stops her from doing bad things in the same way that the Bible stops some people from sinning. Reneilwe liked *Fit For Life* as much as the Bible. She thinks the Bible is as important as other reading material, and that practical examples can be gleaned from it to explain abstract terms such as commitment. But, she laments, 'if you are lazy to read I don't even think you will read the Bible'. It is only an insightful reading of the Bible that can pre-empt 'us from being so shallow and narrow about our understanding of life', she explains.

Just as Motlagomang would like to see more professionals reading, Reneilwe would also like to see the subject of reading 'aggressively sold' to churches, youth groups, young children and even the senior citizens. She suggests that those young children who can read should read to the old people in their old age homes. Churches can promote this culture by having special 'grannies' sessions where those who can read will relate stories from books to them. Reneilwe would also like to encourage women to read because 'I think also it will stop us from bitching about each other, we'll share worthwhile things'.

If reading can take place on a wider scale, it will then cease to be associated with studying, Reneilwe argues. This distinction between reading for study purposes and reading for pleasure is necessary if people are to start adopting a positive attitude towards reading: 'when you study to be tested it's a little bit uncomfortable, but when you just read it's nice.'

Even though the women have read many books and forgotten some of them there are some aspects about those forgotten books that still stand out in their memories. Reneilwe ascribes this to the fact that a book is bound to make its influence felt on a person's life, even if at the time of reading it made little or no sense at all. For Motlagomang such books are *The Grass is Singing*, *Houseboy* (both novels), *It Takes Two to Toyitoyi* (a collection of humorous sketches). Reneilwe favours books that give advice like *Phases of Marriage*, *Fit for Life*, *Prioritising Your Life*, *Stop Worrying and Start Living*. Josephine likes works of African Literature including *Houseboy*, *Efuru*, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Hill of Fools*. Welly liked a novel *Deeds* most.

The women picked these books out because they address the issues that appeal to them in one way or another. Motlagomang liked *The Grass is Singing*

and *Houseboy* 'not because I enjoyed it, but because I sympathised with the characters'. Welly also sympathised with her heroine in *Deeds*, although there were times when she was impatient with her because she felt that the heroine was taking the blows lying down, unnecessarily so. Josephine liked *Hill of Fools* because it offered her much needed advice on love issues. Welly also liked her earlier novels because they offered her a model on which to run her own relationships as she grew up.

Motlagomang loved *It Takes Two to Toyitoyi* for its humour, so much that she reads it out loud to people. She shared it with a friend and 'we would just open any page, and I would read out loudly, and laugh about it and even quote some of the sections later'.

Sometimes it is not the title but the author that attracts the women to their texts. Motlagomang likes Thomas Hardy so much that she went out and read three more books by him. She also mentions D.H. Lawrence and Nelson Mandela as authors she could not resist. She felt drawn to *It Takes Two to Toyitoyi*, precisely because its author is someone 'who used to write articles for *Sunday Times* and I used to read his articles ... because he was always this kind of tongue-in-cheek author'.

Welly's favourites are Janet Daley and Robert Schuller, Caroline's are Bessie Head and Mamphela Ramphele, the former because she is 'a victor, successful, pursuing a career and the struggle', and because she is black. Caroline hastens to add that 'I'm not a racist, but I'm happy when Black people are achieving so I know even myself it's possible'.

In Rencilwe's reading, it is not so much authors as subjects that stand out. Those subjects are about 'life related issues, like stop worrying and start living, like phases of marriage, knowing yourself, personality traits.'

The authors of the Mills and Boons series were also her favourites when she was still an ardent fiction reader (she subsequently became a Baptist). Her religion now provides a point of focus and she says she would buy:

Christian authors, those that are renowned and I know that you always never go wrong I would if I see their books even if I don't have the time to go through I would buy it because I know that this person writes something of substance.

The things that Josephine dislikes in a book are the glorifying of woman's oppression and tribalism. She does not like foreign concepts, especially prevalent in 'White' magazines and books because they alienate her both by their subjects and advertisement.

So I think I cannot on my part enjoy a book that alienates me, at least if it's a magazine I'll find some parts of that magazines that I will enjoy reading, and then where it alienates me I will pass.

Even though she regards *Tale of Two Cities* as one of those 'White novels', she makes an exception where it is concerned because it 'is so famous'.

The women's manner of reading depends on the type of book being read. Except in cases that have been mentioned, the women read silently, and mostly in private. Reneilwe does not, however, mind having people around when she is reading as long as they are going to read too. Her favourite place for reading is the plane because it is quiet and she does not feel obliged to talk to people as they are strangers. Motlagomang and Welly prefer to read alone in their bedrooms. Sometimes they read in public places like the staff room. Caroline also reads in public, especially on the bus on her way to and from work, at the hairdresser's or at work. Reneilwe admits that the reading that she does in public places like the doctor's rooms is designed to kill time only, and not to read seriously.

Motlagomang reads some books again and again either because they are touching or they are very funny. Welly reads her novels when she has nothing to read, and the text she turns to every time is *Deeds*. Caroline, like Reneilwe, refers back to her books when she wants to make notes or pick out interesting phrases. In cases where the women reread their texts, they agree that they understand better the second time around. Motlagomang feels this rereading is necessary because:

Sometimes when you read a book for the first time, you are anxious to get to the end, but when you know how the story ends you take it slowly and then you start to learn about other things that characters do that you did not take seriously in the first place.

Welly says rereading for her is the only way, especially for a novel like *Deeds* because it yields new questions for her every time she finishes reading it. Reneilwe skims through a book and reads to take notes, in which case she goes for key points and sometimes she reads a book three times, in different ways. Motlagomang also skims, especially short story anthologies. Caroline scans her books at the bookshop, reads the cover first and then if she decides it is interesting, takes it.

The demands of family and work in Motlagomang's and Reneilwe's lives slow their reading down. While they used to read and finish their books faster, now they find that they take longer. Josephine has also slowed down because she is now concentrating more on her school work. Even if she has an examination, Welly, unlike Josephine, still reads her novels and magazines, but especially newspapers because 'I must, yes I must'. She reads *The Sowetan* during the week and has a field day with *City Press* and *Sunday Times* on Sunday. She saves the *Business Times* because 'I prefer to read the *Business Times* from Monday ... each and every article'. Motlagomang quips that she 'was an ardent newspaper reader until I had three children.' Now she reads only:



those sections that I want to read about first so that if I do not have time to finish, at least I have already covered them. In the past ... I would not even choose where to read I would just read any article that I come across.

Her constraints notwithstanding, Motlagomang still feels that a newspaper is a 'must read' especially for professionals because they must be up-to-date with current affairs.

Newspapers do not feature predominantly in Caroline's reading but she admits to being 'much hooked on magazines'. She reads *True Love, Thandi, Bona* and her favourites are *You* and *Drum* which she reads every week, because she likes reading about famous people. Even though she does not share Caroline's enthusiasm for magazines, Reneilwe likes them for sewing patterns, advice on issues and cooking. Motlagomang chooses magazines that accord with what is happening in her life. When she was still single she liked magazines that talked about 'feminine things', but when she got married and was in the process of building a house she turned to those about house plans and furniture.

Welly reads *Essential* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines. She 'like[s] everything about *Cosmo*', especially careers, counselling, advice on what to eat, and money power. To Josephine magazines are necessary for introducing her to new books:

like in the magazine they sometimes advertise books, these are books which are in the market ... like this book of Van Onselen ... I want to read it because it was advertised in the magazine.

All the women were introduced to reading by someone, either an adult or an older sibling, and there were always books in their homes when they grew up. In the case of Reneilwe, Motlagomang and Josephine the family members served as role models. For Welly the motivation to read was born more out of the existence of books than a strong reading presence in the home. Even though her mother is also a reader, Caroline pinpoints someone else outside her home as her role model. She ascribes this to the fact that her mother was reading Afrikaans books. What she liked about her mother's reading though is the fact that 'she is so fluent in Afrikaans and I never failed Afrikaans because she would read my school books and then explain to me'.

The women all sensed that there was something different but admirable about their role models as a consequence of these people having been readers. This difference manifested itself in the manner in which their role models spoke English. This admiration for people who could speak English fluently explains why as soon as the readers learnt to read in English, they gravitated toward texts in that language.

As they became older and began reading books themselves, the women began to see changes in their own lives and gleaned benefits from their own reading



in terms of vocabulary and other attributes. They felt empowered as they began to know things and understand situations. They also acquired skills in cooking, sewing and communication. On an emotional level they concede that they felt fulfilled, satisfied, happy and carefree. Or as one of them put it, 'Sometimes reading can be your friend'.

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