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The National Readathon of Namibia, 1988-2001

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Readathon in Namibia is a week-long reading and book festival held annually in schools, culminating in the National Readathon Day on the Friday. The aim is primarily to develop a love of reading among learners in an effort to nurture a book culture in the country, and secondarily to help schools raise funds to develop their school libraries. From small beginnings in 1988, Readathon has now developed into a national movement in which all primary and junior secondary schools participate. The article describes the development of Readathon over a 14-year period, the organization of Readathon by the Namibian Children's Book Forum, and the Readathon celebrations of September 2001.

Some Facts About Namibia

Namibia is a large country of more than 820,000 sq km, but with a population of fewer than 2 million inhabitants. It is situated on the west coast of Africa and bordered by Angola in the north, by Zambia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe in the northeast, and South Africa in the south. Namibia, previously called South West Africa, became independent on March 21, 1990 as Africa's last colony, after, first, 30 years of German rule and, thereafter, 70 years of South African rule. The new government has the tremendous task of developing the majority, who had suffered under deprivation and apartheid for many generations. Many nongovernmental organizations like the Namibian Children's Book Forum (NCBF), each in its own way, assist the government in its task of nation building.

What Is Readathon and Why Did the NCBF Launch this Project?

The word *Readathon* was not coined in Namibia. In some countries, Readathon is a kind of reading competition between the best readers in schools. In Namibia, Readathon is something else. It is a week-long reading and book festival held annually in schools, culminating in the National Readathon Day on the Friday, in an effort to nurture a book culture in the country. Schools do not compete against one another, and reading competitions among the learners of one school play a minor role or no role at all. The event should be fun, enable learners to experience the joy of reading, and at the same time enable schools to raise funds to buy books for their school libraries. The NCBF launched this project in 1988 because most learners in Namibia have illiterate parents, with the result that the first six years of their lives are spent entirely without books. Usually, the first book learners en-

counter, even today, is their first school reader. This first encounter can determine a child's attitude toward books for life. If the first experience with books is negative and related to the difficult reading process, strict teachers, no support at home to practice the reading skill, tests, exams, and even punishment, the child will develop a love-hate relationship with books. The child may drop out of school early or, when grown up, may use books for utilitarian purposes only and not read for pleasure and edification. A reading culture will never develop in a nation where this is the attitude of the majority toward books and reading. The Readathon project aims to enable learners to become book lovers, and also to give schools an opportunity to develop their school libraries, because they receive only a very limited number of new school library books from government per year.

The last week of September is Readathon Week, and Friday of that week is Readathon Day. From Monday to Thursday, a variety of book- and reading-related activities are organized by schools. Should schools wish to raise money for their school library, learners can go and read stories to the community and request donations. On Friday, all schools set aside a scheduled half-hour governed by the following rules: each learner will read some enjoyable stories; no school textbooks or school readers may be read; junior primary readers who find reading difficult may listen to an enjoyable story read by an adult; the teachers, school principal, and support staff must also sit and read a story during the half-hour. Family members may sponsor learners' reading for the scheduled half-hour.

How Readathon Is Organized

The activities mentioned under this heading developed over the years but by 1993 all of them took place every year.

1. The NCBF sends an information letter to schools at least 10 months before Readathon to enable them to plan ahead. This letter announces the date for Reading Festival Week, which is always the last week of September. The letter also informs schools about the general rules of Readathon and contains ideas on how to celebrate the event. The letter is prepared and signed by the NCBF, countersigned and stamped by the Minister of Education, Sport and Culture, and mailed to schools by the Educational Library Services of the Ministry. In this way, the close cooperation of an NGO with government is demonstrated.
2. A second and final information letter containing more ideas on how to organize Readathon in schools is sent to schools five months before Readathon.
3. Enjoyable stories are written in the official language, English, translated into 11 Namibian languages, illustrated, printed, and distributed to schools. The NCBF commissions one or two Namibian children's book writers per year to write the stories, and members of the NCBF contribute stories as well. The translations are done by the language

specialists of the National Institute for Education to ensure that the standard orthography for the local languages is used. The black-and-white illustrations are drawn by an accomplished Namibian artist. Each learner will receive at least one story in his or her mother tongue and one in English.

4. A newspaper publicity campaign is launched. Depending on funding, this can be nine full-page newspaper advertisements published at intervals, or only one or two half-page newspaper advertisements. The newspaper advertisement just before Readathon will contain messages of goodwill for Readathon from very important persons, including the patron of the NCBF, First Lady Kovambo Nujoma, cabinet ministers, donor agencies, educational leaders, publishing houses, and sports heroes.
5. Press releases and publicity through the radio and television are organized.
6. The media are invited to a Readathon launch attended by the patron, the donors, and some schools.
7. After the Readathon, parcels of storybooks are sent to schools that send in Readathon reports on how they celebrated the event.

The reasons for sending some schools book parcels after Readathon are to encourage and reward schools who celebrated Readathon, to support schools who participated in Readathon as a way of developing their school libraries, and to get feedback from schools on how they celebrated Readathon. This information is essential to the NCBF for final reports to sponsors, for further fundraising, and to discover if there are problems that need to be solved.

History of the Readathon in Namibia

The first Readathon in Namibia took place on October 12, 1988, organized by the Namibian Children's Book Forum (NCBF) established that same year, in collaboration with the Southern African Children's Book Forum (SACBF). In Namibia 13,000 learners took part. One school class on an educational tour in Damaraland, stopped their bus and sat down in the veld at 10:00 a.m. on October 12, 1988 to read with millions of other children in Southern Africa.

The second Readathon took place on September 13, 1989, again in collaboration with the SACBF. The NCBF packed and dispatched information sheets, stickers, sponsorship forms, collation forms for teachers, and a poster for each school. Readathon was taken over from the SACBF by the organization READ AND DEVELOP (READ). Owing to logistical problems, Readathon could not be celebrated in Namibia in 1990 and 1991. The third Namibian Readathon was celebrated on October 9, 1992 in collaboration with READ. The NCBF distributed 500 Readathon kits to 500 deprived and/or enthusiastic schools.

In 1993, the Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD) agreed to fund the production of enjoyable stories in the mother tongues of learners and a publicity campaign. The fourth Readathon took place on October 1, 1993. Nine full-page advertisements in three newspapers were published at intervals. Forty thousand story sheets in seven languages were distributed. For the first time, schools that sent in reports to the NCBF on how they celebrated Readathon received book parcels sponsored by Standard Bank. Ten million children in southern Africa took part in Readathon 1993. The fifth Namibian Readathon was celebrated on September 23, 1994, again sponsored by NORAD. Sixty thousand illustrated story booklets and sheets in nine Namibian languages were packed and distributed in the regions. NORAD Readathon prizes and book parcels were won by nine schools.

The sixth Readathon took place on September 22, 1995. Readathon was launched that year in State House by the First Lady, Mrs Kovambo Nujoma, Patron of the NCBF, together with her grandchildren, on May 15, 1995. On July 17, 1995, the NCBF received a certificate of Honourable Mention for the National Readathon of Namibia from the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) at its Biennial Conference held in Worcester, England. The seventh Readathon was held on September 20, 1996. The NCBF produced 125,000 copies of illustrated story booklets and sheets in 11 Namibian languages. Schools celebrated a week-long festival of reading. Mr Louis van Zyl, principal of the Urban Primary School in Windhoek, sat on a chair on the roof of the school for one hour, while the learners down in the courtyard watched him read! The year 1997 was the last year of NORAD sponsorship for Readathon because the Norwegian Embassy was closing down in Namibia. The eighth Readathon was scheduled for September 26, 1997. This time, 94,000 stapled story booklets and 30,000 story sheets in 11 languages were printed.

Now without donor funding for the ninth Readathon scheduled for September 25, 1998, the NCBF encouraged schools to use old stories and to be creative when planning their Readathon week. There was no money to produce new stories, but a surplus of stories left over from a five-year period of NORAD sponsorship could be distributed. It was very encouraging for the NCBF to see that schools were being innovative and celebrated Readathon nevertheless. School reports told of exciting week-long book- and reading-related programs and fundraising activities.

In 1999, a new printing concept was used. For the 10th Readathon, 200,000 illustrated story booklets, 16 pages long, were produced in Oshikwanyama and Oshindonga on newsprint to the weight of four tons. The sponsor, GAME Stores, transported the four tons of booklets in their large trucks to Ondangwa, a distance of 700 km. The NCBF had little funding for the 11th Readathon arranged for September 29, 2000. A few timely local donations enabled the NCBF to produce 33,000 story sheets in 11 Namibian languages. The Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) spon-

sored the 12th Readathon, held on September 28, 2001. Their contribution, the largest the Readathon had ever received, paid for 295,000 illustrated Readathon booklets, 16 pages long, in 11 languages, printed on newsprint. The seven tons of stories were supplied to more than 90% of all deprived school learners in Namibia.

Celebrating Readathon 2001

Many schools organized a week-long program comprising a variety of book-related activities. School reports, many with beautiful photos, told of the following.

1. *Reading related activities:* reading of stories to illiterate and elderly members of rural communities; elders from the community reading stories to learners "to show that parents can read"; reading of short stories and poems written by learners and teachers; read-a-poem and story-reading competitions; older learners reading to young learners during break times; week-long reading in classes with the best readers reading to the whole school on the Friday; newspaper reading; a reading awareness campaign in the community; awarding of prizes to the learner reading the most books; a hostel mother reading stories to learners in the evenings for a week.
2. *Storytelling and other oral presentations:* storytelling by learners and teachers; elders from the community telling stories from oral sources; bedtime stories told in various languages; poetry recitals; tongue-twister competition (reciting tricky rhymes); jokes; promotions by learners of their favorite books; choral recitals with flash cards of the alphabet; quizzes; entertaining dialogues; visits from and talks by important personalities on various themes such as the compilation of newspapers, advertising, and so forth.
3. *Writing of stories, poetry, and dramas:* story, drama and poetry writing by teachers or by older learners for younger learners; writing competitions; writing texts to pictures.
4. *Drama performances:* dramatizations of Readathon stories and other stories; performances by learners of self-written and self-directed plays; pantomimes; comedians; guest artists performing; role-plays; puppet plays; puppet shows in the school, the public library, and the children's ward of the local hospital; miming.
5. *Arts and crafts:* drawing pictures of stories told with prizes; exhibitions Of paintings, drawings, and objects made by talented school members; the painting of murals and a book cover design competition; bookmark competitions; making one's own storybooks; making posters; making masks; demonstrations by elders of old skills.
6. *Singing, dancing, and marches:* choral and solo singing; composing and singing reading songs; a Readathon song competition; Readathon

- marches in the community with posters and singing songs about the benefits of reading; dances by various cultural groups.
7. *Parades*: book parades; storybook character and fancy dress parades; fashion parades; parades of costumes from the olden days; a wedding party; and so forth.
 8. *Library and literacy-related matters*: library exhibitions; guessing the number of books in the school library competition; word games; crossword puzzles; poster displays; displays of quotations; slogans and personal messages relating to the importance of reading; posters in public places; sale of second-hand books; book donations; dramatization of "The proper handling of books and the rules of the library"; one school adopted the slogan DEAR: "Drop Everything And Read!" for the reading festival week.
 9. *Fundraising*: learners reading for sponsorship in the community; coin-laying or book-laying ceremonies in the school courtyard; fundraising by charging entrance fees to the Readathon Day celebrations; charging entry fees for competitions; donations of money, prizes, or donations from local firms.
 10. *Publicity for Readathon*: letters of invitation to parents for Readathon celebrations; broadcasts of Readathon activities on the local radio station; announcements about and invitations to Readathon Day celebrations read out in the local churches.
 11. *Joint Readathon celebrations and community involvement*: combined Readathon celebrations of up to three schools together; in the north, special reading celebrations together with the parents under the marula tree; the Namibian Police of the Omahene Border Post provided a shelter tent for the Ontoko Primary School of the Onesi Circuit at Epalela with the permission of the Traditional Authority; they also provided forces to ensure security during the Readathon celebrations, which were attended by almost 75% of the community.

Has Readathon Achieved Its Aim?

A sample of statements made by various schools in their reports on Readathon 2001 suggests that Readathon is a success.

Readathon was great fun but educative. Some teachers used the Readathon booklets for assessment purposes because they are easy for learners to understand We would like to congratulate you for the job well done. It's a great benefit for our learners and we teachers too. Keep on doing the same. Don't give up. (M.N. Sheehama, Library Teacher, Elundu Primary School, Oidimba, Eenhana, Ondangwa East)

We appreciate the NCBF's materials and hope to receive similar items in the future. They were especially useful for learners to read to families and the community. (A.N. Amutenya, Principal, Amwaanda Combined School, Onemnya, Ogandjera)

The Readathon booklets extended the vocabulary of both the learners and the teachers; we got pleasure from reading; it was enjoyable. (A.S. Kakuru, Principal, Mabushe Junior Primary School, Rundu)

This was really a great week to all of us.... Readathon day was a big day.... Our learners as well as fellow teachers are more motivated now to reading and to enjoyable storybooks. (Oikokola Combined School, Okalongo Circuit, Oshakati, Ondangwa West)

We are so glad to have such a week for reading. (A.L. Nawaseb, Principal, Kamwandi Primary School, Henties Bay)

Everybody was happy and wishes this Readathon Day to be continuing.... We take Readathon as a fun reading day, we wish we have a new storybook every month. (Saara Nehale, Teacher, Oshigambo High School, Ondangwa)

It gave our top readers the opportunity to display their reading ability and encouraged the other learners to want to become readers. (Almony Chandra, Teacher, Onayena Primary School, Ondangwa)

Readathon was a good time for learners to improve their reading skills.... They were very keen. It created a good attitude towards reading among learners and was also a good way of socialising.... I want to thank OSISA for providing us with booklets used. (Ongali Primary School, Circuit Outapi, Ondangwa)

It was our first time to celebrate Readathon. We really had fun that week of the 24-28 September.... Through Readathon we have realised that learners have improved a lot in reading skills as well as telling stories freely. (Rakkel Kamhulu, Teacher, Omuuni Primary School, Okongo Circuit, Ohangwena)

The Readathon booklets were very nice.... We are grateful that we had a whole week to celebrate. (Ohongo Primary School, Circuit Okalongo, Ondangwa West)

The Readathon was such an exciting event because fellow teachers showed so much interest. The preceding week was also wonderful because the community was so interested. (Sharon Musunga, Library Teacher, Tjihozu Senior Primary School, Ruacana)

At our school we celebrate every year. The Principal encouraged learners to tell the Readathon stories to their family at home. We enjoyed the stories and dramas very much; the stories were very exciting. (Onankolo Combined School, Outapi Circuit, Ondangwa)

I am enjoying and observing the positive changes in behaviour of learners which is a result of Readathon. The reading interest has been provoked to such an extent that I cannot cope with the reading demand since I do not have sufficient stock for 1,300 learners.... Please continue the good work, the fruits are visible. (Rina Kukuri-Da Cruz, School Librarian, Moses-Garoeb Primary School, Katutura, Windhoek)

Conclusion

Fourteen years of slow beginnings, many setbacks, hard work, and faith that the mission of Readathon is worth our continuing efforts have made Readathon a national movement and an event without which the country would feel deprived. Schools have come to own Readathon, each school celebrating the reading festival in its own unique way. The creativity and energy that have been released by Readathon continue to surprise and delight the NCBF every year; the year 2001 has been the most marvellous reading festival of all.

This achievement would never have come to pass if the Namibian Children's Book Forum, a small NGO with no paid staff members, consisting of a committee of only five volunteers, had been forced to do this enormous project, the largest of its kind in the history of Namibia, all on its own. The success story of the Namibian National Readathon is a prime example of cooperation among all the role players from the public and private sectors in Namibia, with help from some committed development agencies that have the creation of a book culture, literacy and the lifelong education of Namibian youth at heart.

Author Note

Andree-Jeanne Totemeyer is the founder and first chairperson of the Namibian Children's Book Forum. She lectured in children's literature for 25 years at four universities and was the head of the Department of Information Studies of the University of Namibia when she retired. She continues to work in the area of children's literature and readership and creative writing for children, and has recently begun to write short stories and puppet theater plays for children.