

BOOK REVIEW

Archie L. Dick. *Reading Spaces in South Africa, 1850–1920s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. viii + 93 pages. Appendix. References. Map. Basic South Africa Historical Timeline. \$12.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1108814706.

Understandings of literature inevitably tilt toward writers rather than readers. *Reading Spaces in South Africa, 1850–1920s* by Archie L. Dick provides a welcome shift of perspective by providing a history of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reading communities in South Africa and how their practices shaped definitions of “the literary.” Through fine-grained detail drawn from years of archival research, Dick takes us into obscure village halls, small libraries, and madrasahs to eavesdrop on debating societies, mutual improvement associations, mechanics institutes, and voluntary groupings. Guided by ideals of self-improvement, these forums defined “literature” as literacy, a way of improving reading, writing, and public speaking while acquiring knowledge. Especially in the case of Dutch-Afrikaans, African language, and Muslim groupings, these skills were cultivated with a socio-political goal in mind, redefining these voluntary societies “as people’s universities and political schools” (25).

These themes are investigated in five sections. The first section explores the symbiotic relationship of voluntary associations and public libraries in small towns. In the second section, we turn to Dutch-Afrikaans and African language mutual associations and how these became forums for experimentation with new linguistic and political identities. The third section traces the popular reception of Dickens’ work, setting out the numerous channels through which his words and ideas spread, whether through page, podium, or stage. The final section explores Cape Town’s Muslim community and its imbrication in the global print networks of the Islamic Indian Ocean world and the local multilingual print cultures that these enabled.

These sections are dotted with fascinating material and memorable characters. These include ardent reader and book buyer Zippora Leshoi, a young woman schooled in Kimberley in the late nineteenth century, and Alfred “Gogga” Brown, sometime schoolteacher, postmaster, amateur

palaeontologist, and leading light of the Aliwal North Reading Association and library, to which he donated many books on science. We also encounter well-known figures in different roles: the renowned South African novelist Olive Schreiner appears as a book borrower, poet Francis Carey Slater as a librarian, and writer Louis Leipoldt as a reader. The section on Dickens provides a graphic sense of the wide appeal of Dickens' work to South African readers across time and space, with his devotees including John Robinson, first prime minister of colonial Natal, and Es'kia Mphahlele, pan-African intellectual and writer.

Threaded through this detail are a range of larger themes that will be of interest to scholars of southern African studies. These include the history of libraries and librarians, as well as invaluable data on the shape and size of the South African book market, painstakingly assembled from a range of sources. The role of literary and debating societies in shaping Dutch-Afrikaans literature is illuminating. Writers such as A.G. Visser, Eugene Marais, Jochum van Bruggen, and D.F. Malherbe all logged time in these associations, while C.J. Langenhoven regarded them as "grindstones" for sharpening thought. The description of the polyglot Muslim print culture in Cape Town throws new light on print cultural formations in southern Africa. Especially fascinating is the discussion of Capindia Press, which was launched in 1922 and printed four newspapers: *The Cape Indian* (in English, Urdu, and Gujarati), *The Moslem Outlook*, *The African World* (in English, seSotho, and isiXhosa), and *Izwi lama Afrika/ The African Voice* (in English and isiXhosa). This focus on the multilingual world of Muslim Cape Town is especially important in discussions of South African literature, which tend to be monoglot and to exclude discussions of Islam.

Part of the Cambridge Elements series on Publishing and Book Culture, *Reading Spaces* is intentionally short (75 pages of text) and is intended to combine "the best features of books and journals," drawing on "original, concise, authoritative, and peer-reviewed scholarly and scientific research" (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/what-we-publish/elements/publishing-and-book-culture>). The book certainly achieves these goals. Written by South Africa's pre-eminent historian of books and reading culture, this book builds on the considerable platform that Archie Dick has already established with his previous work, and especially his monograph *Hidden Histories of South Africa's Book and Reading Culture* (2013).

Isabel Hofmeyr
 University of the Witwatersrand
 Johannesburg, South Africa
 New York University
 New York, New York, USA
 Isabel.Hofmeyr@wits.ac.za

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