

No culture of buying books

By Eric Ng Ping Cheun

Last week, I had an unusual conversation with an adolescent who happened to be the son of a restaurant owner. At the end of my lunch at his restaurant, I opened my bag to get out my money to pay the bill. He saw a book in my bag (it was *Alice in Dodoland*) and he asked me what the book was all about. I replied that it was a book about the Mauritian economy, written by me, and I presented myself as an economist. Can you guess his reaction? He said: “*Do economists earn a living in Mauritius?*” I was a bit stunned by his question, but I managed to hide my surprise by telling him that economists could get a job in banks, in government and in the global business sector, among others.

The adolescent had just completed his secondary education, and he could not yet decide on a field of study for a university education. He wanted to be sure that his choice would help him earn a living. That’s a perfectly legitimate ambition, but I advised him to choose a domain in which he would develop a passionate interest. It seemed obvious to me that he would not opt for economics. So I said to myself that if less and less of our young are interested in studying economics, economists may meet the same fate as the famous Dodo.

In Mauritius, I am sure economists can eke out a living, but book writers may not. You do not make big money in writing books. You do it only to educate people.

To be able to publish a book and make it a big seller, you need the support of different people. The first among them is your printer. If he charged you a commercial price for the printing of the book, you might not recover the total costs incurred on publishing the book. Fortunately, I have the privilege to have the support of Cathay Printing, and I am grateful to his director, Jimmy Chung.

Second, a writer needs someone to design his book. My gratitude goes to Kris Seeburn, who has designed all my three books. In fact, Kris produces the graphic design and layout of all media publications of PluriConseil, including our electronic journal *Conjoncture*.

The cover of *Alice in Dodoland* is the work of Kris. I must say that many women have expressed to me their appreciation of the cover and also of the book title, which is mine. On the other hand, I have noticed that the book title caused a few raised eyebrows among men. I don’t know why, but I must have had a wrong impression.

Third, a book launch is encouraging for a writer. This is the second one we organise in this marvellous place at Allied Motors. And I thank Philip Ah Chuen for making it possible.

Why newspapers, not books

Fourth, to become a writer, you obviously need the biggest support of all: people buying your book. Now it is a pity that Mauritians do not have a culture of buying

books. Whenever I go to Singapore, a country that we are encouraged to emulate, I visit a bookshop. I have observed that at any time of the day, bookshops in Singapore are full of people. Singaporeans, I guess, like reading books. Mauritians, on the contrary, do not read books but like reading newspapers. I have arrived at this conclusion based on my experience.

While I promoted my second book *A contre-courant*, I often met people telling me they were not interested in it because it is in French. This is, I believe, a pretext for not purchasing the book. Mauritians buy newspapers, which are in French, but not books written in French. *Allez comprendre !*

True, many friends have encouraged me to publish a book in English. I thank them for having been very supportive, and I just hope that *Alice in Dodoland* will be sold out.

Still, there is another issue, which shouldn't be: the sale price. Last week, a journalist told me that a book for Rs 450 is too expensive, and that she would buy books if they were sold for Rs 200. Now you would agree with me that if book prices were fixed at Rs 200, writers would become endangered species.

I think that there are two problems: one is linked to psychology, and the other to culture. As I mentioned earlier, Mauritians buy newspapers, not books. The price of newspapers in Mauritius is relatively low compared to other countries. So it is possible that psychologically Mauritians expect the price of books to be relatively low as well. But mind you, a book worth Rs 450 is as cheap as a monthly subscription to *l'express* or *Le Mauricien*.

Books are also for adults

The other problem is culture. Here, I will refer not to ordinary people but to professionals and executives, those who are supposed to remain alert through reading and continuous learning. I wonder how many times in a year a Mauritian professional visits a bookshop. I also wonder how many professionals have a personal budget for books. Many spend a few thousand rupees during Happy Hour every Friday evening, but they don't show the same interest in books.

There might be another reason for this lack of interest. Let me share with you what a good friend of mine, a banker, told me with regard to my book *A contre-courant*. His wife, who also works in a bank, said to him that the book would be useful to her child later when she would study at university. I will be happy if my books are still read twenty years after their publication. But let me clarify that my books are for adults, not for children. Many adults seem to assume that books are made for children and for students, not for them. This is certainly not true, for we never stop learning.

That brings me to the philosophy of *Alice in Dodoland*. In the spirit of *Alice in Wonderland*, which is a story about growing-up, *Alice in Dodoland* sends an important message that after forty-four years of independence we need to become grown-up adults able to take up economic challenges, instead of constantly relying on the state to solve our problems.

Speech by the author of Alice in Dodoland at book launch. Reprinted on
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