

BORDERS INTERVIEW WITH JUSTIN COX CEO, AFRICAN BOOKS COLLECTIVE

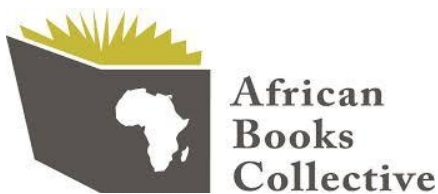


Justin Cox,
CEO, African Books Collective (ABC)

Justin Cox is the friendly, plain-speaking CEO of African Books Collective (ABC). ABC is the world's largest marketing and distribution firm for books published on the African continent. In a brief conversation with him in 2019, he summarised the mission and work of ABC:

“(ABC) is now a self-supporting organisation with some 30 years' experience of marketing and selling books (African Published Books) in markets outside of Africa. Over 3,000 titles published by 150+ publishers on the continent have been made available digitally and in print. The Collective is in a strong position these days: excellent new publishers are signing up and the market for the books we distribute is growing globally, which has reduced our reliance on traditional markets in the US and UK thanks to the new channels we have opened up.”

Cox is a Kiwi, based at home New Zealand a long way away from the Africa-based publishers who own ABC and a long way from Oxford, UK, where ABC is based. Wanting to understand how the professional relationships which make up ABC are configured and how ABC works with links in the wider book chain, I invited him to participate in a full interview on *Borders*. The ensuing conversation was fascinating and helped me understand the global significance of African Books Collective which marks its 30th anniversary in the book business this year 2020.



GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD OF ABC'S ADMINISTRATION





Tell us a little about your journey all the way from New Zealand to the leadership of African Books Collective in the UK.

Yes, Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZ) is a long way from everywhere! I started my work in publishing there from the age of about 16. I have actually never worked in any other industry. I worked in the warehouse of Penguin NZ in my school holidays, and then when I left high school, I worked there part time while I was studying for marketing and publishing qualifications. I then got a job at Harper Collins NZ in the marketing department where I did just about everything. There were only two other people in the department, so I got to do a little of everything: graphic design, database work, writing copy. I was also an Auckland City sales rep some of the time which was really fun. I also used to buy in the Harper Collins US list, which was my favourite job in publishing: picking the books on that list which might fly in NZ stores.

After sometime at Harper Collins, in 2000 I left to travel to the UK as a lot of people my age did in those days, to pay off their student loans! The position at ABC was the job I got. I think I was a good fit for them because of the range of skills I could bring rather than being a specialist, which can often be the case if you work in large departments. NZ is a small country, the market for books is small, and therefore the books are expensive –similar to the markets in many African countries as well as ABC’s. So for me the ‘challenge’ of selling Africa - published books was not something I dwelled upon. In fact, I think independent and small specialist publishers everywhere have similar marketplace challenges. ABC at the time was a funded organisation, and at times I admit I found it tricky working within that context. So much of the work at ABC in those days was directed at being a non-government organisation (NGO). Applying and reporting to donors with bookselling being really restricted to supplying libraries. In the main, given the way the industry functioned in those days, that was about all it could hope for. The big bogeyman in 2000 was book chains, and how they didn't stock a range of titles.



Late Victor Nwankwo,
*Former Managing Director,
Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd*



Mary Jay
*Director
African Books Collective (ABC)*

However, in 2001 the late Nigerian publisher Victor Nwankwo of *Fourth Dimension Publishers*, Enugu, invited ABC to a meeting with Lightning Source, the Ingram owned print-on-demand (POD) pioneer. I attended and was immediately struck by the technology's potential for assisting small and medium sized publishers. I really hit it off with Victor, and after working on his pilot project I spent a month with him in Enugu setting up a digital workflow with his staff there. We also drove up from Enugu to Abuja to attend the Abuja Book Fair, as I think it was called then. This was great fun. Victor was a real 'improver', and I enjoyed talking with him about how you could improve this or that with all of the new technology that was developing at the time. He was very keen for ABC to embrace POD as a means to reach self-sufficiency and was certain the donors would not fund ABC forever. Victor died some months after I left Enugu, and I returned to Nigeria with Mary Jay, the head of ABC, for the funeral. It was upsetting, but his work lived on as ABC did indeed embrace the work done in the pilot project.

After around three years of working for ABC in Oxford, I was keen to return home to my family and surfboard. ABC had secured three more years of funding, and I felt I had offered all I could to the organisation at the time. However, they had recently signed a US distribution deal with Michigan State University (MSU) Press, and they asked if I wanted to move to East Lansing and run the ABC operation there. I accepted the offer. I had always wanted to live in the US, and the work at MSU, running a distribution operation, was more where my strengths lay. After two years in Michigan, ABC's funding was not secure, and therefore nor were our jobs, so then I returned home to weather the storm. ABC continued for some months after, but in 2007 the funding was not renewed and in the UK the operation closed. I stuck around and worked without pay for a bit because MSU Press were still trading and the market was still there. Like Victor, I thought there was probably a viable operation in there somewhere based around POD. There was, and the rest as they say is history. It wasn't easy, it was uncertain, and I don't think I really lived anywhere while things were taking shape, but the publishers were pretty determined to carry on – so here we are. I

like to think of ABC as a globally based organisation these days: we have a bank account in the UK, were originally constituted there, and have half of the staff there; our biggest market remains the US; our owners are Africa-based; and I ended up eventually settling in NZ. In the near future, we will look to spread our global tentacles further by making more local connections in different markets.

Talk about the genesis of ABC, and please give us a brief summary of the history of ABC up until the time you took over as CEO.

In 1985 a group of publishers met to address the constraints they were experiencing in marketing and distributing their books outside of their domestic markets. They founded ABC as a collective self-help initiative to strengthen their economic base and meet the needs of libraries and other book buyers. Set-up funding was obtained from The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and the Ford Foundation, and trading began in 1989. Over time many other donors contributed to the financing of ABC: The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation; Danish International Development Agency; Hivos; The Rockefeller Foundation; and Finnish International Development Agency. ABC is governed by its five-person Council of Management and its two directors. It has three founder publishers still with the organisation since its creation, and together with the directors they elect the five-person Council which is responsible for ABC's strategy in consultation with the staff.



L-R

Hans Zell, *African Books Collective*
Victor Nwankwo, *Fourth Dimension Publishing Company*
Ayo Bamgbose, *Ibadan University Press*
Mamadou Diouf, *CODESRIA*
Mothobi Mutloatse, *Skotaville Publishers*
Henry Chakava, *Heinemann East Africa*
Walter Bgoya, *Tanzania Publishing House*
Mary Jay, *African Books Collective*

The collective also ran the donor-funded programme the *Intra-African Book Support Scheme* with Book Aid international. The much-loved programme provided librarians in Africa with a budget to purchase Africa-published books from ABC for their libraries. Alongside core funding, this program contributed to ABC's finances at a time sales were a fraction of what they are today. At the time there was no commercially sustainable model for ABC. Perhaps a vastly slimmed down operation could have been run, but the profile and visibility enjoyed by ABC today is a direct result of the promotional and lobbying activities which were carried out thanks to the donor funds received between 1990 and 2007.

Who are members of the council of management? And the two directors and the three founder publishers who elect them?

Three of ABC's 17 founder publishers remain today: **CODESRIA**, the Senegal-based Pan-African Research Institute; **East Africa Educational Publishers**, Kenya; and **Mkuki na Nyota Publishers**, Tanzania and they are represented on the Council of Management by Divine Fuh, Codesria, Kiaire Kamau, East African Educational Publishers, Kenya and Tapiwa Muchechemera, Mkuki na Nyota Publishers. The two remaining members are Akoss Ofori-Mensah, **Sub-Saharan Publishers**, Ghana and Francois van Schalwyck, **African Minds Publishers**, South Africa. Our two UK based directors are David Brooks and Stephanie Kitchen, who replaces Mary Jay this year. <http://www.africanbookscollective.com/contact>.



David Brook

Director

African Books Collective (ABC)



Stephanie Kitchen

Managing Editor

International African Institute (IAI)

You've spoken about the 3,000 titles you stock and the 150+ member publishers in the Collective and you've mentioned the founder publishers.

Give us examples of other publisher members of ABC.

“It is clear there is no shortage of content being produced in Africa, and the Collective has played a critical role in bringing this work to international markets and in also digitizing this content so it remains available and discoverable.”

Justin Cox
CEO, African Books Collective

The range of publishers ABC represents is wide. Upon its creation in 1989, ABC represented a large number of university presses on the continent along with independent publishers, some of which are large firms and still trading today. Today few university presses are trading or publishing new books, and this work has been largely picked up by private independent publishers and research institutes. In recent years, alongside the work done by independent publishers, many scholars have turned to alternative avenues to get their work distributed. Hybrid models of publishing have become a feature of the book chain in Africa. Publishers or content-producers may take the form of NGOs, whose main purpose is not publishing, but they do need an outlet for their work. Loose networks of writers and scholars have formed their own presses or research organisations. Publishing outfits who carry out publishing work for organisations or book series. There are many small independent literary presses and writers' networks. Ten new publishers signed up for the Collective's services in 2018, following on from eight in 2017, ten in 2016, and ten in 2015. It is clear there is no shortage of content being produced in Africa, and the Collective has played a critical role in bringing this work to international markets and in also digitising this content so it remains available and discoverable.

In terms of distribution of their books via ABC, which are the biggest?

All three founder publishers could be considered in the 'biggest' category with large backlists alongside the new titles they are publishing. **Langaa RPCIG, Cameroon**, has based its distribution model on ABC's services, and as a consequence they are able to produce a large number of titles, which really assisted ABC post-2007 while we were building up again. Scholarly publishers often produce the largest numbers of titles, so they can contribute a lot that way. Good trade and literary publishers like **Weaver Press, Zimbabwe, Modjaji Books, South Africa, Mkukina Nyota Publishers, Tanzania**, and **Sub-Saharan Publishers, Ghana**, get there by publishing a smallish number of well-targeted titles.



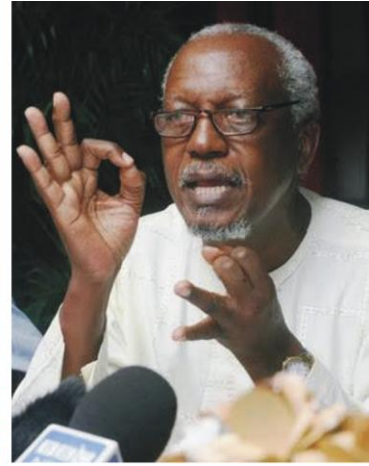
Akoss Ofori-Mensah

Managing Director, Sub-Saharan Publishers, Ghana



Colleen Higgs

Founder, Modjaji Books, South Africa



Walter Bgoya

*Managing Director
Mkukina Nyota Publishers, Tanzania*

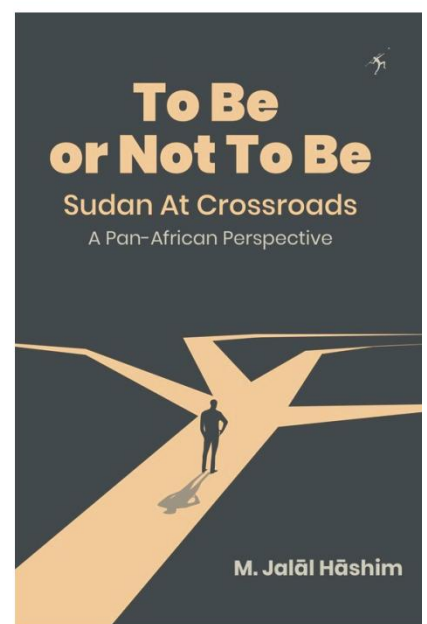
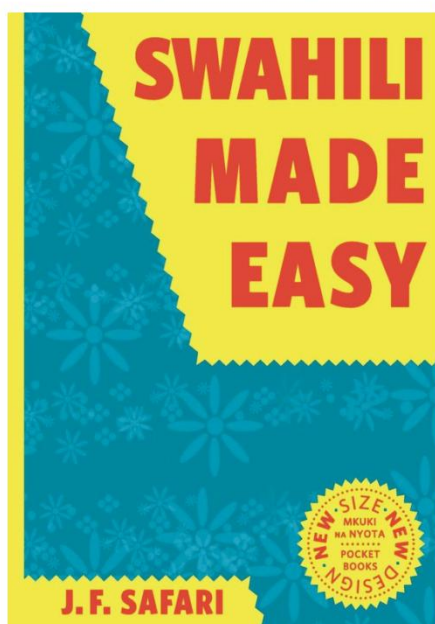
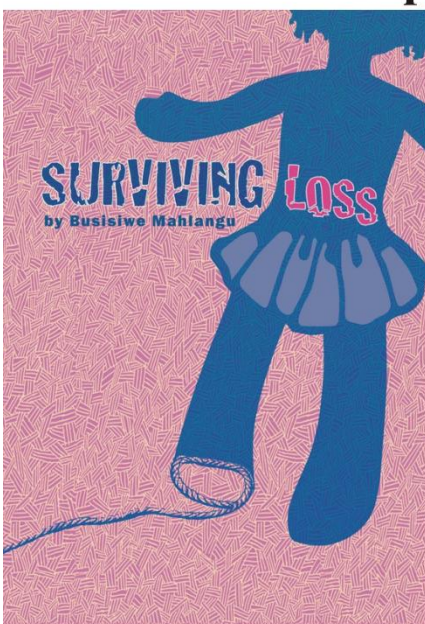
What is the average number of books ABC distributes in any one year, and which books are currently ABC’s bestsellers?

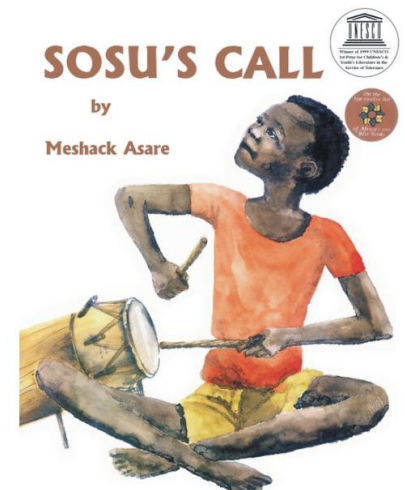
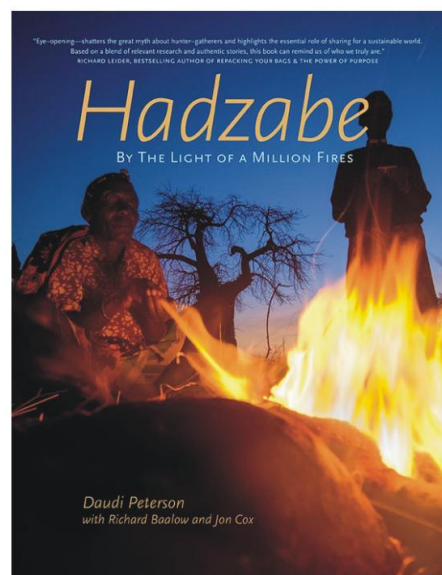
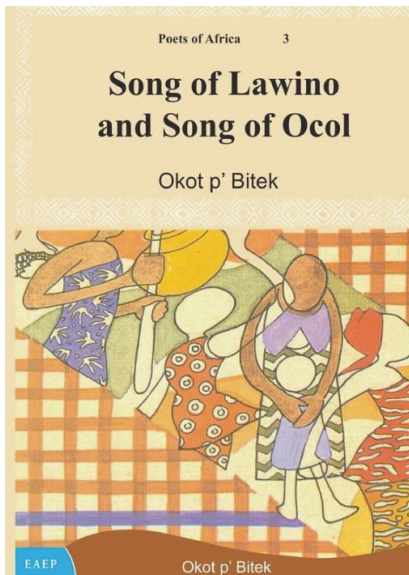
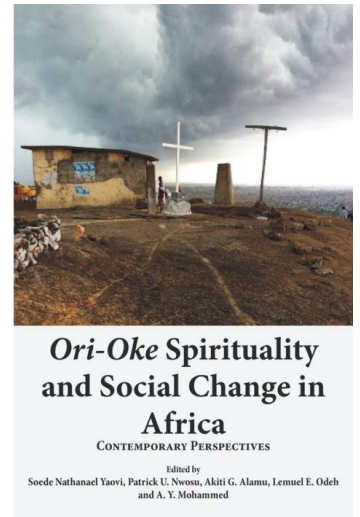
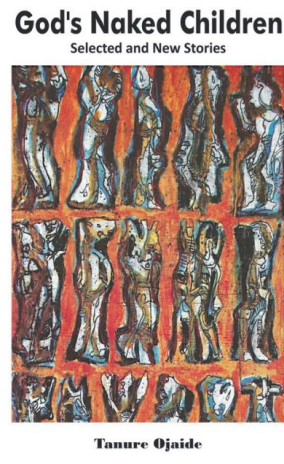
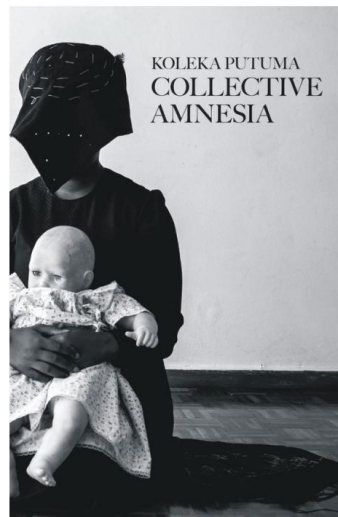
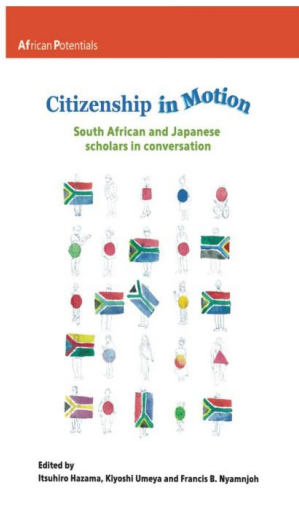
These days ABC has really grown, and we receive around 250+ new books a year. Bestseller status can be achieved by books in any category: literature titles can sell widely and so can good children’s books, whereas scholarly titles are purchased more widely by institutions. Our 2019 bestsellers can be viewed, and purchased(!), here:

<http://www.africanbookscollective.com/collections/2019-top-ten>

So as you can see, it is a real mixture, and language titles and dictionaries are always a feature.

Top Ten ABC Bestsellers 2019





How, where and to whom do you distribute? And which institutions outside Africa tend to be the biggest holders of Africa published books?

“Germany is really taking seriously the call for more diverse voices in their institutional libraries and is a fast growing market, as is China.”

Justin Cox
CEO, African Books Collective

Well, the short answer to that is we sell everywhere and to everyone! Building a successful distribution network involves making books available to buyers within the countries they live, for local supply basically. The freighting or couriering of books across borders is not viable in business-to-business or business-to-consumer markets,

it simply adds too much to the cost for individuals and restricts penetration in the wholesale, trade and institutional markets. Our biggest market has always been in the US, and though it remains the biggest, our expanded reach has meant that the proportion of books sold there has decreased. Germany is really taking seriously the call for more diverse voices in their institutional libraries and is a fast growing market, as is China. The library trade is still the biggest supporter of ABC distributed titles given the high proportion of scholarly books being sent our way, but individuals, too, all over the world, are buying via retailers like Amazon and ABC directly.

You're a big supporter of the digital revolution.

How does ABC fit into that revolution? And what is your ratio so far of digital to print books?

Yes, I suppose I am. But I think because ABC was remodelling at the same time as so many digital innovations in publishing were also evolving, I didn't think about it much in terms of a revolution. Looking back gives it a little more context, and its impact is obviously really huge. I do remember at the time becoming pretty tired of the over-hyped narratives about eBooks on both sides. One side saying the printed book was 'dead' and the other arguing that eBooks had no smell. I think a lot of people involved in publishing just had to ride all of that out, they are just formats and different people will prefer different formats. It is the job of publishing to offer consumers the choice. I think it is that simple and I think we are probably at that point now, thank goodness. I think where eBooks have real value other than as an extra option, is in the library trade. In this market libraries are able to take on a much bigger selection of content as part of collections or subscriptions. ABC and its publishers have certainly benefited from this and continue to do so as the market keeps growing. More than half of the new titles we released in 2019 were made available digitally, and this proportion has been on the increase year upon year.

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Justin Cox
CEO, African Books Collective

African publishers were pretty quick to get on board with eBooks, and we currently have just under 2,000 titles available in either PDF, ePUB or both. Scholarly books to the library trade are sold in PDF and we put fiction out in ePUB.

Consumers can purchase ePUBbooks directly from www.africanbookscollective.com and we will soon add PDF format eBooks to that too. All eBooks can also be purchased from a variety of retailers.

Talk a little about the print-on-demand approach which you instituted and about ABC's marketing strategies. How have they evolved under your leadership?

For a long while after the POD pilot project we ran with Victor Nwankwo was expanded to other publishers, ABC was really only making use of POD as a printing option. During the remodel and as part of some of the commercial deals we put in place during the time, ABC also started to take advantage of the wholesale channels available. This unlocked a lot of doors, because the books almost overnight became much more widely available. Amazon is the retailer which gets the most attention, but really it was in the business-to-business environment where we were putting in the most groundwork: developing relationships with wholesalers, retailers and library suppliers who now had a guaranteed source of supply without having to import books. Simultaneously, this work was also being carried out with eBooks. Business-to-business relationships with key account reps were a huge help. Much of this work was done in the early days at the London Book Fair and at some specialist conferences alongside the customer base ABC had developed from its inception. In the main, the work focussed on distributing our book data as widely as possible and then ensuring that the data was also linked to a purchasing option. ABC attracts a lot of attention from all sorts of suppliers due to the size of its list and this too has advanced the cause of publishers in the Collective which is a nice circle back to the original aims of the organisation upon its foundation: publishers acting together are stronger.



Justin Cox and late Victor Nwankwo at a wedding in Eastern Nigeria

How do you account for the global growth in the market for the books ABC distributes? Talk about that and about the new channels ABC has opened up.

I think the interest in Africa and African books has always been there in one form or another. ABC has been in this business for 30 years and has seen cycles of interest come and go. The difference between where ABC was 30 years ago and now is that so many barriers to trade have been removed. If someone, an institution, or part of the book trade, wants to buy a book, they can, and this was not always the case. We forget that. When I joined ABC in 2000, we sold to libraries which often made special exceptions to purchase directly. We sold to the odd individual and rarely to the book trade. Additionally, I would like to think that attitudes about Africa have changed: people across the globe and particularly in ‘the north’ are becoming more interested in diverse points of view.

You’ve mentioned the important work being undertaken in South Africa to decolonise their library collections.

Talk about the role ABC has played in South Africa in this regard and tell us about other interventions ABC is planning in the area of decolonisation in libraries in other parts of Africa.

“I believe librarians are acquiring content from African publishers because if you are responsible for holdings on Africa, then it would just make sense that you would purchase books being produced by people living and working there.”

Justin Cox
CEO, African Books Collective

I am not sure ABC is doing anything special in South Africa particularly. I am a little wary of ABC attaching what we do specifically to decolonisation, which seems to be a word that gets attached to many things it probably shouldn’t be attached to. ABC is certainly, and obviously should be, seeing growth in South Africa. This may have something to do with decolonisation, but more likely it has more to do again with the barriers to trade there that we are removing. I believe librarians are acquiring content from African publishers because if you are responsible for holdings on Africa, then it would just make sense that you would purchase books being produced by people living and working there. In the US, for example, librarians have been purchasing ABC distributed books for 30 years, and why would they not? On the other hand, if decolonisation is selling books for us, then we will take it! In other parts of Africa the barriers, as I understand it, are that libraries are not funded sufficiently and as a consequence we do not see any sales there. Individuals living in Africa do purchase from ABC and our customer services staff do work with them on the most reliable and economical methods of getting those books delivered.

ABC is signing up some young, energetic publishers.

Tell us about some of them and the exciting work they do.



Yes, ABC continues to grow the list of publishers we represent. We have recently relaunched our site which profiles many of these new and not-so-new publishers. We wanted to bring to the Internet's attention some of the less well-known publishers, amazing people committed to the work they do despite the difficulties. I would recommend you check the site out where we have both publisher profiles and interviews with others involved with the African book trade.



Host, Olatoun Gabi-Williams