

# ***De Burger-Leeskring*<sup>1</sup>: a brief history of South Africa's first commercial book club and its effect on Afrikaans literature**

Jana Klingenberg

University of Pretoria

## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the history of the *De Burger-Leeskring* and the impact it had on Afrikaans literature and cultural development. It places the development of Nasionale Pers and the Afrikaans language within the context of South Africa's history and the development of language, politics and culture, as well as considering book clubs or readers' circles and their purpose within this context.

This paper uses Bourdieu's classification of different kinds of capital – specifically cultural capital and financial capital – to evaluate the success of this *Leeskring* [Reader's Circle]. It was found that although not financially successful, the *Leeskring*'s influence on Afrikaans literature was vast.

## **Keywords**

De Burger-Leeskring, Nasionale Pers, commercial book club

## **Introduction**

This paper attempts to determine the history of the *De Burger-leeskring* [translated as the 'De Burger Reader's Circle'] and the impact it had on Afrikaans literature and cultural development. Furthermore, it aims to place the development of Nasionale Pers and the Afrikaans language within the context of South Africa's history and the development of language, politics and culture, as well as considering book clubs or readers' circles and their purpose within this context.

Le Roux <sup>1</sup> claims the 'current studies of African publishing tend overwhelmingly to focus on contemporary problems: low literacy rates, low per-capita incomes, poor infrastructure, the small reading publics ... There is thus little historical nuance in most studies of African publishing; title keywords that tend to recur include "current,"

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<sup>1</sup> E. Le Roux, 'Book History in the African World: The State of the Discipline', *Book History* 15, no. 1 (2012), p. 249.

“opportunities and challenges,” the “state of publishing,” “issues and trends,” as well as the “challenge,” the “promise,” and the “future.” Even for research of publishing in 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa, there is often a dearth of sources.

The information available on the *De Burger-Leeskring* is also scarce, and most sources mention it only in passing. However, much can be determined from analysing the context of events around the establishment, as well as considering the books produced. It is thus important to place this investigation within a theoretical framework, in order to facilitate the investigation and analysis, and to place it within the context of other research done within the field.

### **Bourdieu’s fields of cultural production**

Pierre Bourdieu attempts to do an empirical analysis of production circumstances and for this developed the concept of ‘field’. A field, according to Bourdieu, is a microcosm of social practices, a structured space linked to social positions with specific rules<sup>2</sup>. The field consists of overlapping social, intellectual and ideological arenas through which producers (like publishers and authors) and products (their books) are linked with each other<sup>3</sup>. Importantly, this links to the establishment of the *De Burger-Leeskring* by considering the available authors at the time, and skills needed (but lacking) by the publisher.

Furthermore, Bourdieu refers to different kinds of capital – this article will primarily be concerned with two kinds that are inherent of the publishing industry: firstly, publishers are businesses who need to make money (financial capital) for their continued survival, and secondly, publishers produce books that have intrinsic cultural and literary value (or capital). This is what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital – it ‘refers to the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour and is founded on a dialect of knowledge and recognition’<sup>4</sup>. The profit objective of a publisher will be encapsulated in the publishing strategy; some publishers may have started off with no profit objective and only focused on the symbolic capital, and vice versa. The distinction between art and money, between creativity and commerce, is used by Bourdieu almost exclusively to explain influences between production and consumption at the restricted production end of any field of cultural

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<sup>2</sup> M. R. Venter, ‘Die Materiële Produksie van Afrikaanse Fiksie (1990-2005): 'n Empiriese Ondersoek na die Produksieprofiel en Uitgeweryprofiel binne die Uitgeesisteem (Afrikaans)’ (Thesis, 2008), p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Venter, op. cit (n.1), p.45.

<sup>4</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 7.

production<sup>5</sup>. In addition, Bourdieu focuses on how various environments may have an effect on another environment, the ‘interconnectedness of the field of cultural production with other fields’<sup>6</sup>. The emphasis on the effect of the macro- and microenvironments on the club is important because it was instrumental in how the club operated.

Finally, publishers, just like any other product-driven industry, work on a demand-and-produce basis most of the time – producing books that they believe the market wants. They may however also produce books simply to add to the literary wealth or canon of a language. The concept of different kinds of capital is important to consider when investigating the reasons for the *De Burger-Leeskring*’s establishment, what their goals and ideals were, and how, and if, these were in fact achieved.

### **Book clubs and readers’ circles: available research**

Book clubs can be distinguished into two broad categories – a book club created by a group of people informally (known often as *leeskringe* or readers’ circles), or a commercial book club. A readers’ circle is when people read pre-picked books and come together regularly to discuss them; these can be general interest books or books focused on a specific theme, like religion. Readers’ circles are not orientated commercially and may serve various purposes to its members – from having more access to books (by swopping with other members) to enjoying the social aspect<sup>7</sup>. A commercial book club is more of a marketing operation in that selected titles are (most often) posted to subscribing members on a regular basis. These ‘book clubs were established primarily as mail order operations; they still recruit the majority of their members through advertisement in the daily, weekly and monthly press [...]’<sup>8</sup>. According to van der Merwe, readers’ circles are characterised by interaction and communication between members<sup>9</sup>, whereas book clubs is a method of distribution most suited to the mass community, where members can be passive<sup>10</sup>. In this case, although the *De Burger-Leeskring* was called a ‘readers’ circle’ it was in fact a commercial book club, and the different books were never discussed at regular meetings by members. Considering that it was created as a commercial book club, the purpose would seem clear: promoting sales of

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<sup>5</sup> D. Hesmondhalgh, ‘Bourdieu, the Media and Cultural Production’, in: *Media, Culture & Society* 28, no. 2 (2006): p. 223, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443706061682>.

<sup>6</sup> Hesmondhalgh, op. cit. (n. 5), p. 216.

<sup>7</sup> H. M. van der Merwe, ‘Leeskringe met spesiale verwysing na hulle voorkoms in Wes-Kaapland’ (Thesis, Stellenbosch : Stellenbosch University, 1983), pp. 10-19.

<sup>8</sup> van der Merwe, op.cit. (n. 7), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> van der Merwe, op.cit. (n. 7), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> van der Merwe, op. cit (n. 7), p. 16.

titles by requiring an up-front fee while guaranteeing access by postal delivery; a main purpose would thus be sales. Pre-picked books were sent to members on a regular basis.

Colonialism may have inadvertently played a role in the establishment of the *leeskring*. In Germany, book clubs originated during WWI, and also in France book clubs originated in the period between 1914-1918<sup>11</sup>, around the same time as the *De Burgerleeskring*. This may indicate the close relationship South Africa had with European culture at the time, and may have been influenced by these trends.

There were some ground-breaking commercial book clubs that shaped the systems and workings of clubs as we know them today. The American Book-of-the-Month Club, established in 1926, was a pioneer for licensed and mail-order book clubs. This club was a publishing organisation ‘who bought from copyright owners the right to issue an edition whose sale was restricted to registered members of the club’<sup>12</sup>. In Britain, the first book club was The Book Society, founded in 1929, and ‘followed the American example to some extent’ but were book retailers rather than publishers<sup>13</sup>. The Nederlandsche Boekenclub (NBC) was established in 1937; they used a “member account” where members entered into a yearly agreement with the club<sup>14</sup> but had some troubles with licensing; often these clubs were in competition with book publishers which created animosity in the industry. In Germany, Bertelsmann established a mail-order book-club in 1951; <sup>15</sup> the club grew to be very successful before closing in 2001. All of these clubs – although experiencing their own problems – grew to sizeable businesses.

What book clubs are most often associated with in the literature is the platform they create for discussion of books and topics associated with these – and mostly, the literature refers to informal book clubs. As a result, some of the studies done on informal book clubs include those with a political angle, like the *Left Book Club* by Stuart Samuels<sup>16</sup> where books of a specific political nature were discussed (the club existed from 1936 to 1948 and was the first modern book club in Britain<sup>17</sup>). Book clubs are also often associated with women (assuming that mostly women belong to them); as a result many studies focus on feminist and cultural theory and the influence informal book clubs have on women and their literary

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<sup>11</sup> van der Merwe, op. cit (n. 7), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> John. Feather, *A History of British Publishing* (London ; Routledge, 1991), 187.

<sup>13</sup> Feather, op. cit. (n. 12), p. 187.

<sup>14</sup> Yvonne van Oort and Frank De Glas, ‘Jaarboek voor Nederlandse boekgeschiedenis. Jaargang 10 · dbnl’, *DBNL*, accessed 31 May 2019, [https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_jaa008200301\\_01/\\_jaa008200301\\_01\\_0010.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_jaa008200301_01/_jaa008200301_01_0010.php).

<sup>15</sup> van Oort and De Glas, op. cit. (n 14).

<sup>16</sup> S. Samuels, ‘The Left Book Club’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, in: no. 2 (1966), pp. 65–86.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Victor Gollancz and the Left Book Club’, *The Library Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1 July 1971): 197–215, <https://doi.org/10.1086/619957>.

education or the functions of book clubs among women (like *A Feeling for Books* by Janice Radway on the Book-of-the-Month Club)<sup>18</sup>. Some studies may look at rivalry between different book clubs (a comparative study). Lastly, book clubs are often studied within an educational context and how book discussion may lead to improved literacy or comprehension of a language (like *The Book Club Connection: Literacy Learning and Classroom Talk* by McMahon and Raphael)<sup>19</sup>.

Globally, there have been some studies on book clubs as mentioned above, though not many have focused on the role of the commercial book club on readers and publishers; the largest proportion by far focuses on women book clubs. According to Kleyn, the history of book clubs in South Africa has gone largely undocumented in the literary histories<sup>20</sup>. There is a real dearth of sources – academic books and articles – when it comes to history of commercial book clubs in South Africa. Some small pieces of information may be found in newspaper articles, though no substantial research documents could be found on this topic. The most well-known commercial book club in South Africa has to be *Leserskring* (known as Leisure Books in English), run by Media24 (Naspers), and established much later, in 1980. This club has been in existence for more than 35 years, and has had some real influence on book sales. The club's system was originally based on the German book club by Bertelsmann, and had a similar yearly membership structure as the NBC. Thus, South Africa's first long-term successful commercial book club was only established decades after Europe and the United States experienced success with theirs. Long before *Leserskring*, and under much different circumstances, Nasionale Pers established the *De Burger-Leeskring*. There were similarities in the implementation of this book club to those in Europe (it was a mail-order club, and published its own books, though as part of an existing publisher), but there were unique circumstances influencing the course the club would take. In order to understand the circumstances within which the club was launched, an analysis of the context and their own policies need to be investigated.

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<sup>18</sup> J. A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> S. I. McMahon and T. E. Raphael, *The Book Club Connection: Literacy Learning and Classroom Talk. Language and Literacy Series*. (ERIC, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> L. Kleyn, 'n *Sisteemteoretiese Kartering van Die Afrikaanse Literatuur Vir Die Tydperk 2000–2009: Kanoniseringsin Die Afrikaanse Literatuur* (Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2013), p. 216.

***Context: factors influencing the development of Nasionale Pers***

There are several factors to consider when looking at the period the *De Burger-Leeskring*, an initiative by Nasionale Pers, was established. Especially British imperialism and issues around the perception of Afrikaans as language played a role in the development of the language, although several factors impacted on the routes to development.

In South Africa printing was introduced by the colonial government (during the late 1790s) before mission presses were established (from the 1820s)<sup>21</sup>. The Dutch colonial administration prevented the importation of a printing press until the very last years of its control; the British administration that followed immediately censored the products of the printing press. This of course influenced what could be published<sup>22</sup>.

The Anglo-Boer War – between Boer republics and British colonies – broke out in 1899, and lasted until 1902. This war had a big effect on the morale of Afrikaners because they had lost the war, though it resulted in a push for the development of their language. ‘Afrikaans literature has regarded the Anglo-Boer War... as a key political and literary moment: out of Afrikaner defeat arose new commitment to the language as the shaping force of the volk’<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, Afrikaans was the spoken language among white and coloured people long before the Cape became an English colony, but it was viewed as a low, hybrid form of Dutch, which was used in all public occasions as well as in schools and churches<sup>24</sup>.

‘Afrikaans literature, which developed from 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch, came into existence partly as a result of loss of power after British take-over of the Cape in 1805. The initial energies of Afrikaans writers went into producing a counter-movement centred on Afrikaner nationalism as a rival to British colonialism...’<sup>25</sup>.

Subsequently, the First World War (also known as the Great War) broke out in 1914 (and ended in 1918); because of the union between the British and South Africa, many South African men fought in the War on the side of the British. This further soured feelings toward

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<sup>21</sup> Le Roux, ‘Book History in the African World’, in: *Book History*, 15: 1(2012), p. 256.

<sup>22</sup> Le Roux, art. cit. (n. 21), p. 257.

<sup>23</sup> J. A. Smit, J. Van Wyk, and J-P. Wade, eds., *Rethinking South African Literary History* (Durban, SA: Y Press, 1996), p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> J. C. Kannemeyer, *Die Afrikaanse literatuur, 1652-2004* (Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 2005), p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> A. Oliphant in N. Evans and M. Seeber, eds., *The Politics of Publishing in South Africa* (London: Holger Ehling Publishing, 2000), pp. 112–113.

the English among many locals. Scholtz explains that Nasionale Pers<sup>26</sup> was founded in December 1914, about ‘eleven months after the founding of the NP [*Nasionale Party*] and at the same time as WWI began. It was only 13 years after the Anglo-Boer War, and the contempt towards English-speakers from the Afrikaners’ side was monumental<sup>27</sup>. At that time, Afrikaans as a written language ‘barely existed’ and there was ‘no reading culture among the Afrikaners’<sup>28</sup>.

The Spanish flu broke out in 1918, the last year of the Great War, and would go on to cause millions of deaths worldwide. Soldiers returning home contributed to the spread of this illness all over the world, including South Africa (making its appearance in September 1918). Soldiers, malnourished and battle weary, were particularly vulnerable to infection<sup>29</sup>. The flu spread via the port of Durban, from where it spread to the rest of Natal and the Witwatersrand and from Cape Town harbour to the rest of the Cape, the Orange Free State and the Western Transvaal<sup>30</sup>. Furthermore, ‘migrant labour system ensured that the virus travelled with infected miners on their way to the mines or home’<sup>31</sup>. Possibly, because of the virus spreading through the ports, the Cape was the area worst hit. Operating from the Cape, this flu had implications for Nasionale Pers as directors, contributors and authors who were also hit by the virus; many died as a result of it. This contributed to the *Leeskring*’s eventual closure.

Nevertheless, Afrikaans was supported and promoted by its speakers – including through the company Nasionale Pers. ‘Afrikaans was ridiculed...regarded fit only for communication with servants. From this low status it campaigned for and secured a place for itself when the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910’<sup>32</sup>. By 1917, more and more Afrikaans schools were being formed, like *Potchefstroomse Gimnasium* and the *Oosteindskool*<sup>33</sup>. Afrikaans became an official language, along with English and Dutch, in 1925.

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<sup>26</sup> In earlier documents spelled *Nasionale Pers Beperkt*. The name of the company changed to *Naspers* after South Africa became a democracy in 1994, to distance themselves from the nationalistic image. Most sources use *Nasionale Pers* and *Naspers* interchangeably.

<sup>27</sup> L. Scholtz in L. Rabe, *’n konstante revolusie: Naspers, Media24 en oorgange* (Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 2015), p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Scholtz op. cit (n. 27), p.27.

<sup>29</sup> Abongile, ‘The Influenza Epidemic’, 31 January 2014, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/influenza-epidemic>.

<sup>30</sup> Abongile, art. cit (n. 29).

<sup>31</sup> Abongile., art.cit. (n. 29).

<sup>32</sup> Oliphant op. cit (n. 25), pp. 114–15.

<sup>33</sup> Kannemeyer, op. cit (n. 24), pp. 66.

### *Establishment of Nasionale Pers and the De Burger-Leeskring*

‘Historically, Afrikaner identity has drawn heavily on Afrikaner nationalism, which depended on several tightly interwoven discourses. These centred on themes of religious, racial, and cultural purity, superiority, calling, and the struggle for autonomy against oppression – which included the struggle for an independent language’<sup>34</sup>.

It is against this history backdrop of Afrikaner identity that the Nasionale Pers was established by ‘a small but prominent group of Afrikaner nationalists wanted to, and could, use the opportunities they saw’<sup>35</sup>; they wanted to make sure Afrikaners developed into a people with reading culture. Interwoven were political and religious motivations – ‘Nasionale Pers was founded [...] partly as a vehicle for the promotion of Afrikaner interests. Its links with the National Party were firmly established as far as 1924’<sup>36</sup>. For the founders it was not only the establishment of a press, but the vision for how Afrikaans could grow through literature, art and science<sup>37</sup>. There was a real need to establish the *volk* [the people, specifically Afrikaners] as important, and the language as legitimate (at that time, the official languages were Dutch and English). At the time of the establishment, the earliest goals set out by the *Pers* was very specifically focused on their need to ‘further develop the *volk*’<sup>38</sup>. According to Botma, ‘Naspers... contributed to the process whereby Afrikaans and Afrikaner culture gained more social and symbolic capital, which in turn was transferred into cultural and economic capital in the field of cultural production and other related fields’<sup>39</sup>.

The company was founded to ‘be a mouth piece for Afrikaners who, at that stage, were neither economically or politically powerful’<sup>40</sup>, and ‘from the start, Naspers became an embodiment of invented unity among the Afrikaner capitalist classes against ‘foreigners’ of British orientation’<sup>41</sup>. They reflected the dominant concerns behind Afrikaner nationalism.

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<sup>34</sup> C. Verwey, ‘Whiteness, Racism, and Afrikaner Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa’, in: *African Affairs* 111, 445 (2012), p. 553, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/ads056>.

<sup>35</sup> C. F. J. Muller, *Sonop in die Suide: geboorte en groei van die Nasionale Pers 1915-1948*, I (Kaapstad: Nasionale Boekhandel, 1990), p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> P. Mpe & M. Seeber in N. Evans and M. Seeber, eds., *The Politics of Publishing in South Africa* (London: Holger Ehling Publishing, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Muller, op.cit. (n. 35), p. 50.

<sup>38</sup> Muller, op.cit. (n. 35), p. 102.

<sup>39</sup> G. J. Botma, ‘Paying the Field’, in: *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*, 1: 29 (2008), p. 52.

<sup>40</sup> T. Vosloo, *Oor Grense: ’n Lewe in die media in ’n tyd van verandering* (Johannesburg; Jonathan Ball Uitgewers, 2018), p. 24.

<sup>41</sup> S. T. Mosime, ‘Naspers Media Group : Ethnic Past and Global Present. Media Firms, Class and Ethnic Identities during the Age of Convergence and Expansion - the Case of Naspers in the First Decade of the 21st Century’, in: *Global Media Journal - African Edition* 8, no. 1 (2014), p. 66.



Nasionale Pers' first publication was a newspaper, *De Burger*<sup>42</sup> and had started to publish books by 1917. The political figure, D. F. Malan, became the first editor of the newspaper (*De Burger*) in 1915 and shortly after was elected as the NP leader in the Cape – clearly, there were political connections. When Nasionale Pers was established, the company's purpose was not about financial gain but rather about its more ideological focus of Afrikaner support. However, they also rapidly became associated with political factions agitating for independence from Britain, and a republic divided along strict racial lines (during apartheid) where segregation into distinct race groups would be enforced by laws rather than mere societal norms<sup>43</sup>. 'According to current views *Pers* and *Party* were too intertwined with each other, and the *Pers* was too ready to be of service to the *Party*<sup>44</sup>.

The *De Burger* newspaper was the only Nationalist newspaper in the Union of South Africa – and this made them a standout political-party mouthpiece<sup>45</sup>. According to Mpe & Seeber, *De Burger* was Nasionale Pers' 'main propaganda tool'<sup>46</sup>. The *Pers* thus had very specific views at the time the *Leeskring* was to be established. The market for Afrikaans books was determined based on serials published in newspapers or magazines, so that the little money they had was not wasted on books that did not have a market<sup>47</sup> – the market for books was still unknown, and printing books was expensive. The press struggled financially for years and could not deliver on their goals as quickly as hoped<sup>48</sup>. The money they used to produce their publications was through small donations from various places – mostly donors who believed in the cause<sup>49</sup>. Muller states that the earliest publications of Nasionale Pers were neither top sellers nor did they bring in a lot of profit<sup>50</sup>. Nevertheless, agreeing to the idealistic pursuit of the Afrikaner-scholars these books had to educate Afrikaners on all levels and orientate them nationally<sup>51</sup>. However, there were not enough writers to produce these kinds of books regularly, and that at that time, Nasionale Pers did not have skilled personnel or enough money to pursue an individual book publishing section<sup>52</sup>. In *Sonop in die Suide* Muller explains:

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<sup>42</sup> Botma, art. cit. (n. 39), p. 45.

<sup>43</sup> J. Moller, *Multilingual Publishing: An Investigation into Access to Trade Books through the Eleven Official Languages in South Africa* (Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2015), p. 41.

<sup>44</sup> Scholtz, op. cit (n. 27), p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> Muller, op.cit. (n. 35), p. 308.

<sup>46</sup> N. Evans and M. Seeber, *The Politics of Publishing in South Africa*, 2000, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 329.

<sup>48</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p.329.

<sup>49</sup> Scholtz, op. cit (n. 27), p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 335.

<sup>51</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p.375.

<sup>52</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 335.

‘Die Afrikaanse boek was destyds nie besonder lonend nie. Deels wens die idealisme van die ondernemers, deels weens die onkunde en onbeholpenheid van die Uitgewers, en deels weens die allesoorheersende strewe van die Nasionale Pers om sy politieke koerante die *Burger*, die *Volksblad* en die *Afrikaner* suksesvol te vestig – om al hierdie redes was die finansiële resultaat teleurstellend’<sup>53</sup>.

*‘The Afrikaans book was not particularly profitable back then. Partly because of the idealism of the founders, partly because of ignorance and unskilled pursuit of the Publishers, and partly because of the all-encompassing pursuit of the Nasionale Pers to successfully establish its papers the ‘Burger,’ the ‘Volksblad,’ and the ‘Afrikaner’ – because of all these reasons the financial results were disappointing.’* [Own translation].

However, ‘early in 1918 a new milestone in the development of the publishing department was reached: the *De Burger-leeskring* was announced’<sup>54</sup>. It is reported that the *De Burger-leeskring* published fiction and historical works<sup>55</sup>. The De Burger readers’ circle was the first Afrikaans book-system (*‘boekskema’*) launched in Cape Town<sup>56</sup>. There were already several readers’ circles (informal book clubs) in operation at this time in South Africa, many of them organised by libraries<sup>57</sup>, for example *Die Unie Lees-en-Studie-Biblioteek* by Het Westen Drukkery in Potchefstroom and the *Biblioteek van Afrikaans Leven* by J. L. van Schaik in Pretoria<sup>58</sup>.

When it was established, the book club had specific strategies and a defined philosophy already, akin to the goals of Nasionale Pers. This can be seen by the decision to share a name with their first newspaper (that had clear political convictions). At this time, the promotion of Afrikaans as language and culture was important to the publisher, but also to the *Afrikaner* reading-public. Clearly, the motive of symbolic capital was their main focus.

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<sup>53</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 346.

<sup>54</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), pp. 339.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Tafelberg Geskiedenis’ (Tafelberg-Uitgewers, n.d.), Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkundige Museum en Navorsingsentrum.

<sup>56</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 338.

<sup>57</sup> van der Merwe, op. cit, (n. 8), p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> Galloway & Venter in H. P. Van Coller, *Perspektief & profiel: ’n Afrikaanse literatuurgeskiedenis. Deel 3*, Tweede uitgawe. (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2016), p. 382.

The practical implications meant there had to be publication of new titles or translations for regular distribution:

‘Die bedoeling is om ’n Leeskring op te rig met die naam ‘De Burger-Leeskring’ en om *alle twee maande gereeld ’n nuwe Afrikaanse boek* uit te gee om onder die lede van die Kring te versprei’<sup>59</sup>.

*‘The purpose is to create a Readers’ Circle with the name ‘De Burger-Leeskring’ and to bring out a new Afrikaans book every second month in order to distribute these among members of the Circle’.* [Own translation].

People had to pay a small fee to become part of the *Leeskring* and receive the books on a bimonthly basis. The membership fee was £1 per year, which made a member entitled to a copy of each book that was published as part of the readers’ circle that year, and the books were to appear with about 250 pages each<sup>60</sup>.

The founders of this book club claimed to have recognised a need to be filled by their new venture. Firstly, there was a need for providing reading material to Afrikaners; secondly, their larger purpose was to create and provide Afrikaans literature, but also a certain kind of Afrikaans culture. Their philosophy can already be noticed in an announcement about the new readers’ circle, or book club, which appeared in *Die Huisgenoot*<sup>61</sup>:

‘Ons wens die aandag van ons lesers op die volgende belangrike aankondiging te vestig: Die Bestuur van De Nationale Pers Beperkt, het al vir geruime tyd in oorweging ’n skema om in die dringende en snel-aan-groeiende behoefte aan goeie Afrikaanse leesstof op die goedkoopste en mees doeltreffende manier te voorsien. Die spoedige uitverkoop van ’n aantal nuwe Afrikaanse boeke in die afgelope jaar deur De Nationale Pers uitgegee, het die Bestuur oortuig dat die tijd nou aangebreek is om die skema in werking te stel’<sup>62</sup>.

*‘We draw the attention of our readers to the following important announcement: The Management of De Nationale Pers Beperkt has for some time considered a system to provide the urgent and growing need of good Afrikaans reading*

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<sup>59</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), pp. 338.

<sup>60</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 338.

<sup>61</sup> ‘De Burger’ -Leeskring’, *Die Huisgenoot*, February 1918, p. 264.

<sup>62</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 338.

*material at the cheapest price and most effective way. A number of new Afrikaans titles published by De Nationale Pers have been sold out in the last year, and this has convinced the Management that the time has come to implement this new system.*’ [Own translation].

Furthermore, various scholars (also referred to as *die direksie* [‘the board’]) were called in to be part of the *Leeskring*’s planning and the creation of new titles by the managing team. The editorial members from *De Huisgenoot* were also on this board<sup>63</sup>. The scholars would be integral in the selection of the yearly six titles and the ‘best’ books in other languages had to be translated and made available to the Afrikaans reader. Authors were commissioned all over the country (and party lines) and in the Netherlands to contribute to the six books per year<sup>64</sup>. This is interesting, because it shows that developing Afrikaans literature was even more important than imposing political goals. In addition:

‘Die boeke moes nie net gereeld verskyn nie, maar moes gehalte en verskeidenheid bied;’ hulle moes ‘goed versorgde, aantrekklike Afrikaanse boeke [wees] wat baie verskillende smake sou bevredig [...] van blywende opvoedkundige waarde wees en in ’n ontspanningsbehoefte voorsien’<sup>65</sup>.

*‘The books did not only have to appear regularly, but had to be of good quality and variety; they had to be well-edited, attractive Afrikaans books which would satisfy different tastes [...] they had to have lasting educational value and had to satisfy the need to read for pleasure.’* [Own translation].

In order to reach their goals of the promotion of Afrikaans literature (and culture), management considered various strategies. Specifically, Afrikaans authors would be developed and original Afrikaans works of good quality could be taken into the book series<sup>66</sup>. At the same time, good books in other languages could be identified so that they could be presented in good Afrikaans translation to the readers<sup>67</sup>. The *Pers* were expecting these books to be trendsetting (*toonaangewend*) in terms of spelling, language and literary teaching (*letterkundige voorligting*)<sup>68</sup>. Whether or not a book was “trendsetting” or of good enough quality to be accepted, was at the board’s discretion; the overriding need however was to

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<sup>63</sup> van der Merwe, op. cit (n. 8), p. 50.

<sup>64</sup> Galloway & Venter op. cit (n. 58), p. 382.

<sup>65</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 339.

<sup>66</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 338.

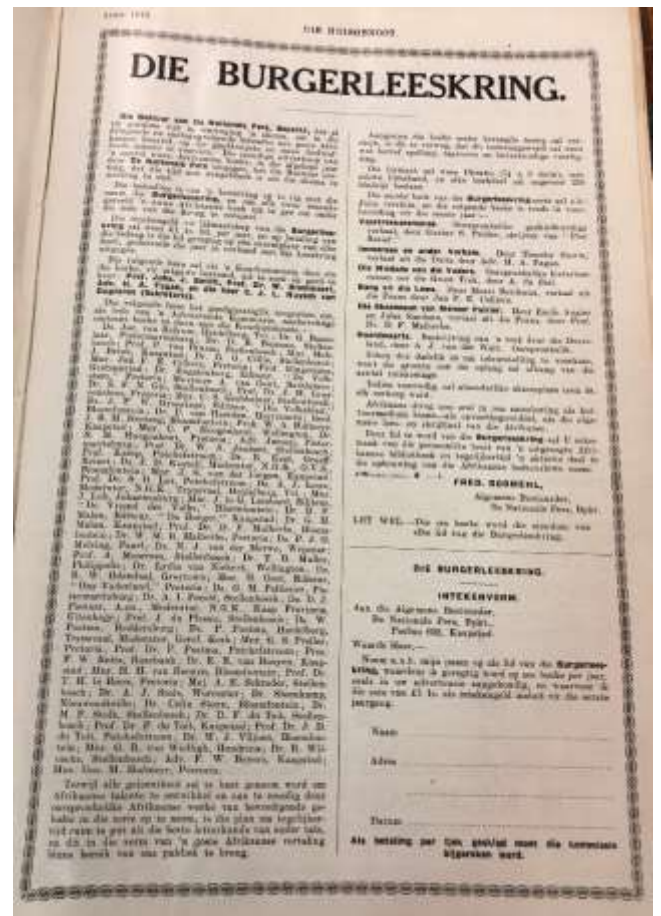
<sup>67</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 338.

<sup>68</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 338.

create an independent literature and culture. The fact that there was, at this stage, not much Afrikaans literature available, and few authors, must have made the task a difficult one. By translating works already known for the literary merit had ensured that the works had literary merit, though the translation still had to be top-notch.

The *Leeskring* was well advertised in Nasionale Pers' newspapers and magazines and gathered relatively good interest<sup>69</sup>. In February 1918, the first announcement about the *Leeskring* was made – it was an introduction about the purpose and how it would work. In subsequent months, the same announcement for the *Leeskring* is placed regularly in the *Huisgenoot*, with all the names of the board members and other collaborators – presumably to show the prestige and clout of the new *Leeskring*. In April and May, the announcement was repeated but included the names of the first six books to be published by the *Leeskring*, and it was stated that the first title would appear in July. The announcement reappeared in consequent issues of the magazine.

*De Huisgenoot*, February and April 1918 (Archive: University of Pretoria).



<sup>69</sup> Galloway & Venter op. cit (n. 49), p. 382.

The *Leeskring*'s marketing also clearly brought their strategies across; they played on the reading public's feelings of patriotism and their need to be seen as a cultured, literary people. The manager of the *Leeskring* stated:

'Deur lid te word van 'De Burger-leeskring' sal u seker maak van die persoonlike besit van 'n uitgesogte Afrikaanse biblioteek en tegelykertyd 'n aktiewe deel in die opbouwing van die Afrikaanse kultuurlewe neem'<sup>70</sup>.

*'By becoming a member of the 'De Burger' Readers' Circle you will make sure you have in your possession an admired library and at the same time be an active part in the building up of Afrikaans cultural life.'* [Own translation].

The following were the first six books named in the announcements from April onwards<sup>71</sup>:

1. *Voortrekkersmense*. Oorspronklike, geskiedkundige verhaal deur Gustav S. Preller, skrywer van 'Piet Retief'.
2. *Immensee en ander Verhale*. Deur Theodor Storm, vertaal uit die Duits deur Adv. H. A. Fagan.
3. *Die Misdade van die Vaders*. Oorspronklike historiese roman oor die Groot Trek, deur A. du Biel.
4. *Bang vir die lewe*. Deur Henri Bourdeaux, vertaal uit die Frans deur Jan F. E. Celliers.
5. *Dir Skoonseun van Meneer Poirier*. Deur Emile Augier en Jules Sandeau, vertaal uit die Frans, deur Prof. Dr. D. F. Malherbe.
6. Noordwaarts. Beskrywing van 'n trek deur die Dorstland, deur A. J. van der Walt.

[1. *Voortrekkersmense*. Original, historical story by Gustav S. Preller, author of 'Piet Retief'.

2. *Immensee en ander Verhale*. By Theodor Storm, translated from German by Adv. H. A. Fagan.

3. *Die Misdade van die Vaders*. Original historical novel about the Great Trek, by A. du Biel.

4. *Bang vir die lewe*. By Henri Bourdeaux, Translated from French by Jan F. E. Celliers.

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<sup>70</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 338.

<sup>71</sup> 'De Burger' -Leeskring', art. cit. (n. 61).

5. *Die Skoonseun van Meneer Poirier*. By Emile Augier and Jules Sandeau, translated from French by Prof. Dr. D. F. Malherbe.
6. Noordwaarts. Description of a journey through the Dorstland, by A. J. van der Walt.]





Half of these titles were translations, and most had an historical angle. The first series started with Preller's *Voortrekkermense I*, and the second series started with a new *Voortrekkermense II*. The third series started with *Die Koningin van Skeba* by S. J. Du Toit, and was by far the most popular book of all the *Leeskring's* editions<sup>72</sup>. In the commission's introduction of this title, an overview of the first twelve titles is given and it is claimed that they are 'happy to go onto another series, and that tips and constructive criticism is valued'. Furthermore, it is mentioned that the book has great historical value, and it is stressed how important this first Afrikaans edition is<sup>73</sup>. The fourth series contains two books from Langenhoven and two from Preller, with only one translation (*Baas en kneg en ander verhale* by Tolstoi) appearing. The last title only launches in 1925 – much later than planned – with no title appearing in 1924<sup>74</sup>. C. J. Langenhoven was the most popular author of the series<sup>75</sup>.

*Voortrekkermense* was an original publication by Nasionale Pers, the first and subsequent titles appearing between 1918 and 1938. *Immensee* was translated from German, and was believed to be originally published in 1815 by Bern, Alfred Scherz as a work of fiction, known for its symbolism and realism. *Misdade van die Vaders* was another title about the Voortrekkers, published around 1920 by Nasionale Pers. *Bang vir die Lewe* was originally published in French as *La peur de vivre* in 1914 by Fontemoing & cie. It was translated to Afrikaans and published after the 137<sup>th</sup> French edition and is a work of fiction, also with themes of realism. *Die Skoonseun van Meneer Poirier* (*Gendre de Monsieur Poirier*) was a play published in 1854 dealing with themes about the emerging (prosperous) middle class and the dispossessed nobility.

The titles that were original Nasionale Pers publications had a heavy historical focus. This seems to indicate a need to capture Afrikaner history and to develop an Afrikaans literature that pays homage to their past struggles. Most of the translated titles are fiction, although with serious themes. The only play - *Die Skoonseun van Meneer Poirier* – also made some comments on classism, which is something the Afrikaners struggled with (Afrikaners were heavily marginalised by the British, and the Afrikaans language had a low status for many years after its development). The original versions of the translated titles are all well-known (even today), with some considered literary masterpieces, others simply famous for how well they were received.

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<sup>72</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 340.

<sup>73</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 340.

<sup>74</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 341.

<sup>75</sup> Galloway & Venter, op. cit (n. 58), p. 382.

Other titles published in the *Leeskring*'s series included:

- *Uitgesogte Afrikaanse verhale*, compiled by Henry Allan Fagan (published in the *Leeskring*'s second year, 5<sup>th</sup> book)
- *Colomba*, by Prosper Mérimée and translated from French by Jan F E Celliers (1920, in the second year). Originally published in 1840.
- *Jean Valjean* by Victor Hugo and translated (and adapted from *Les Misérables*, originally published in 1862) from French by M. F. Toerien (published in two volumes, 9121-1922, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> series)
- *Die Koningin van Skeba, of, Salomo se ou goudvelde in Sambesia : historiese roman met prente* by S. J. du Toit (1921, 3<sup>rd</sup> year)
- *Getrou* by A Du Biel (1921, 2<sup>nd</sup> year)
- *Uit ou reisbeskrywinge : dagverhale en ander letterkundige bronne oor die Kaap* by Willem Blommaert and translated from Dutch by Stefanus F N Gie (1922, 3<sup>rd</sup> year)
- *Die Koerantskrywers: blyspel in sewe tonele* by Gustav Freytag, 1919 (*Die Journalisten* published in 1853), translated from German by J. F. W. Grosskopf (Leipzig : S. Hirzel, 6<sup>th</sup> series) and issued with *Sandeau, die skoonseun van Meneer Poirier*.
- *Die smarte van die oorlog en wie dit gely het* by Emily Hobhouse and translated by N. J. van der Merwe (released by the *Leeskring* in 1923)
- *Staan jou man* (1920) by G. R. von Wielligh (also originally serialised in *Die Huisgenoot* from 1919)
- *Oorlogsoormag en ander sketse en verhale* by Preller (originally serialised in the magazine *Die Brandwag*)  
(University of Pretoria Library)

## Uit ou Reisbeskrywinge,

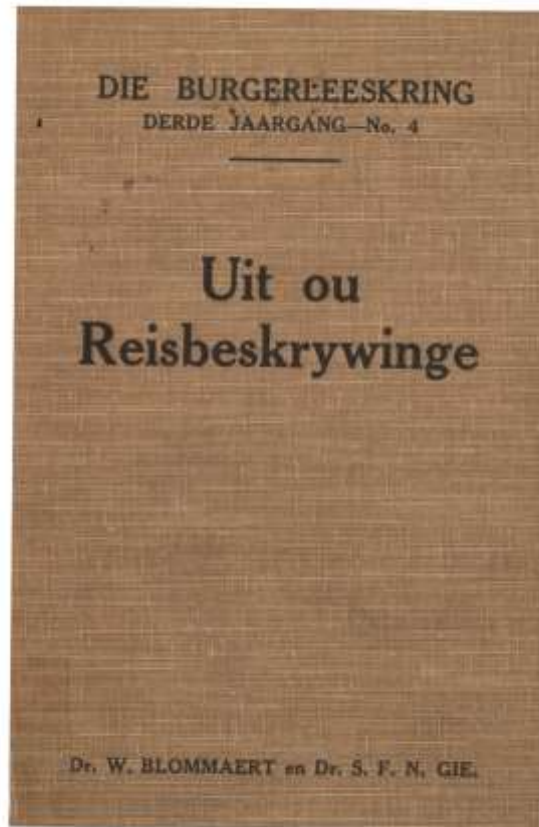
DAGVERHALE EN ANDER LETTER-  
KUNDIGE BRONNE OOR DIE KAAP.

RESOND DEUR

Dr. W. BLOMMAERT en Dr. S. F. N. GIE  
(Professors in die Geschiedenis aan die Universiteit van Stellenbosch.)



Gedrukt en uitgegeve deur die Nasionale Pers, Repet., Kaapstad,  
Kullasbaan, Bloemfontein en Pietermaritzburg.  
1911.



(University of Pretoria Library)

Some of these were original Afrikaans publications – *Uitgesogte Afrikaanse verhale* – with short stories and *Koningin van Skeba* – a novel based around the Biblical story. *Getrou* – first serialised in *Die Huisgenoot* before published – was a fiction title about French Huguenots. *Uit ou reisbeskrywinge* was a Dutch title – “*verafrikaans*” (turned into Afrikaans) – about the Cape, containing several 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch texts. This title was “compiled too idealistically” and the hope that it would be used in schools was not realised, the professors had “aimed too high”<sup>76</sup>. French titles included *Colomba* and *Jean Valjean* – both historical novels. *Die Koerantskrywers: blyspel in sewe tonele* was a German play – a comedy. Quite a few titles are for leisure reading, although history and serious themes are still present – though *Getrou* and *Koerantskrywers* seem to be the exception, being more comedic, lighter reading. The translated titles all have some literary significance in their original form (and most titles were several decades old before being translated to Afrikaans). In the fourth series, only one translation was released – *Baas en kneg en ander verhale* by Tolstoi. This may be because fewer titles for translation had been identified, there were not enough skilled personnel to

<sup>76</sup>Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 343.

translate, or because more original Afrikaans titles were being produced. Sometimes, identified titles remained unpublished for several months because of circumstances beyond the publishers' control, for example the translator being ill.

Although various factors led to some rocky times and the eventual closure of the *Leeskring*, their motives, strategies and philosophies were clear and were followed as much as possible throughout its existence. Muller claims that the *De Burger-leeskring* was well planned and that the profit motive was subservient to the supply of educating and relaxing reading material for the Afrikaner<sup>77</sup>.

It seems the purpose of this *Leeskring* was to develop Afrikaans readers and their tastes, represent and develop a certain kind of Afrikaans culture of the *volk*, and represent a resistance to English colonialism. Considering the goal of the *Leeskring*, the board said:

‘Ons is van die veronderstelling uitgegaan dat die ontwakende wil van die Afrikanervolk om homself te wees, die begeerte om hom te verdiep in die lektuur wat die weg is vir self-ontwikkeling en geestelike vooruitgang sal open, versterk is’<sup>78</sup>.

‘*Our assumption is that the awakening will of the Afrikaner nation to be himself, the desire to deepen himself in the literature which is the way forward for self-development and spiritual growth, has been strengthened.*’ [Own translation].

However, their visions might have been too idealistic as by the beginning of their second series, the board claimed that they had suffered severe financial loss (although two very important contributors had passed away with the Spanish flu pandemic, which probably also had an effect)<sup>79</sup>. While they were aware that some titles were better received than others, the overall feeling was still that the books were making a significant contribution, in accordance with their goals.

The *Burger-leeskring* closed in 1925, after four complete series (24 books). The 24 books that were published were released over the span of eight years instead of the planned four<sup>80</sup>.

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<sup>77</sup> Muller, op. cit (n.35), p. 338.

<sup>78</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 340.

<sup>79</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35, p. 340.

<sup>80</sup> Galloway & Venter op. cit (n. 58), p. 382.

## Conclusion and final remarks

Overall, the mission and vision of this *Leeskring* was clear and focused, which is something needed for a publisher to be successful. However, their goals may have also led to their demise – the focus needs to be flexible, considering the macro and micro influences a publishing endeavour will necessarily experience. Furthermore, the fact that this was such a new undertaking meant that there were many unknowns.

The *Burger-Leeskring* was successful in many ways. It contributed to the effective translation of various titles and it laid a foundation upon which could be built; some considered it a breakthrough in Afrikaans literature<sup>81</sup>. Being the first commercial book club in South Africa, it could even be considered ground-breaking in South African literature as a whole. The *Leeskring* was also well-advertised in magazines, newspapers and brochures which created interest among its readers<sup>82</sup>.

However, the interest they created was curbed by their choice of titles; it was reported that their focus on history was too heavy for their readers' tastes. With the board's need to publish Afrikaner history, they accepted manuscripts by the popular author, Preller, but the 'time was not ripe for it'<sup>83</sup>. Afrikaner-reader tastes were still being tested and mistakes and resulting corrections were expensive<sup>84</sup>. On the one hand, they did not know what their readers wanted - readers' desires were at this stage still developing – and on the other they wanted to influence their readers' development and push them towards being a society reading a certain kind of literature. There was also a lack of good Afrikaans authors, and the language was still being standardised. Lastly, there was also a lack of funds: the strategy of the *Leeskring* was more culturally-driven than profit-driven, with their supporting publisher, Nasionale Pers, also struggling financially. The initial subscription fee was too little<sup>85</sup> and even though the price was later increased to £1 7s<sup>86</sup>, it could not save them.

The *De Burger-leeskring* closed their doors because, according to Muller, too much had to rely on too few and too idealistic co-workers<sup>87</sup>. Furthermore, the Spanish flu had taken its toll; several contributors had passed away, including translators, authors and selectors (on the board). Lastly, the choice of original Afrikaans manuscripts was limited, because there

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<sup>81</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 344.

<sup>82</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 343.

<sup>83</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 342.

<sup>84</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 343.

<sup>85</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 343.

<sup>86</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 344.

<sup>87</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 341.

were still too few Afrikaans authors<sup>88</sup>. Nevertheless, although the *leeskring* was not a financial success, it was a valuable learning experience for those involved<sup>89</sup>; one could say that the *Burger-leeskring* was one of the first tests of Afrikaans readers' tastes.

As such, a commercial book club can have a variety of functions, for the creators of the club and for the readers of the club. For the creators (or publishers) a book club is an extra avenue where books can be sold; a specific type of book can be advertised and to a degree they can guarantee income (when one considers pre-orders). For the reader, there is an element of convenience (having a book delivered to you close by) but also access: especially in rural areas, people may not have ready access to a bookshop or similar place to acquire books.

In contrast to discussion book clubs or readers' circles, in commercial book clubs like *De Burger* the 'passivity of book club members strengthens the gatekeeping function of book clubs and is illustrated by the "package book clubs" where a number of predetermined books is sent to the reader (the reader does not choose their books)<sup>90</sup>. The *De Burger-leeskring* did have a gatekeeping purpose, in trying to encourage the development of Afrikaans literature – and readers – in a specific way, their purpose moving beyond that of the accumulation of financial capital.

The club was started with a specific ideology in mind: creating new Afrikaans literature, supporting Afrikaans authors, catering to readers' tastes with good quality Afrikaans books (whether new titles or translated works). New works or works that were 'the best' were chosen by a board of selectors to be published for the club.

Books were to be produced, translated and published for the *Leeskring* specifically. They had decided on a specific format and length the books had to be, and the books needed to be educational but also entertaining. There was some lack of knowledge related to processes of producing books and the publisher (Nasionale Pers) was experiencing a learning curve. This ignorance sometimes resulted in costly mistakes. A membership fee had to be paid to the *Leeskring* – the initial annual fee was £1 – and the new books were then posted to members. In retrospect, this fee was not enough for all the costs that had to be covered on the publisher's side.

Feedback from readers could be measured by more members wanting to join. Although reader interest was created by successful marketing, it was later reported that the

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<sup>88</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 341.

<sup>89</sup> Muller, op. cit (n. 35), p. 344.

<sup>90</sup> C. van der Westhuizen, 'Judging the book', in: *Journal for Language Teaching = Ijenali Yekufundzisa Lulwimi = Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig* 38, 1 (2004): p. 147.

heavy focus on history (motivated by a need to capture Afrikaans history and culture) were not to readers' tastes, which may have meant a cancelling or non-renewal of subscriptions, or fewer new members. The need that had to be identified – readers' wants – was missing. This indicates that the *Leeskring* was more focused on the creation of Afrikaner nationalism, or what they thought was important to contribute to Afrikaans literature; they did not seem to respond to the reader feedback in a way to create more reader-friendly titles.

In the case of the *De Burger-leeskring*, it was clear that the cultural impact, as defined by Bourdieu, was the most important thing for the managers of the club, considering their publishing strategy. Clearly, the club did have a lasting influence on the development of Afrikaans literature, and the encouragement of reading, as well as on the mother company, Nasionale Pers. However, without financial capital, the cultural capital cannot be created, and the potential cultural capital is lost. Had the managers diverged from the kind of cultural capital they were looking to create, the club may have continued to survive – by responding to readers' feedback in a logical and creative manner could have resulted in more sales and more subscriptions. The managers however found their initial purpose to be too important to change. In the end, the *De Burger-leeskring* had a big cultural impact on Afrikaans literature, Afrikaans readers and the continued success of Nasionale Pers, and very little financial impact. Yet, the cultural impact is what is remembered.

The limited sources available on the *Leeskring* indicates that more research could be done on decision-making around the titles that were published – the way titles were chosen is not exactly clear. A comprehensive list of titles published through the *Leeskring*, their themes and what this says about the publishing strategy of the *Leeskring* could also be analysed. Comparative research with other early commercial book clubs could also be done, as well as the exact impact of colonial influences (Dutch, British and French).

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<sup>i</sup> The title of the book club varies with different sources. It is referred to as the *De Burger-Leeskring*, and later *Die Burger-Leeskring*. It is also referred to as *Die Burgerleeskring*. This may be because the language, at this stage, was had not yet been standardised, and was still growing and changing. In this article, the club is referred to as *De Burger-Leeskring*.