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## **Book Lengths and Target Age Groups: Writing for Young People in Regions Outside the UK and US**

**Kristien Potgieter**

### **Abstract**

Most guidelines for writers for young people concerning book lengths and target age groups found online and taught in creative writing courses are, understandably, geared towards the UK and US markets. But for those authors who are based elsewhere and aim to write for their home market – as in my case, South Africa – categories such as picturebooks, Middle Grade fiction and Young Adult fiction will have different book lengths and target ages associated with them. In South Africa, for example, picturebooks are often read by children as old as eight and nine years old. This has clear implications for the author, who must try to keep the target age of the reader in mind when writing.

In this presentation, I will make use of a few recent examples of South African books for young people, ranging from chapter books to Young Adult novels, and including my own recently published Middle Grade novel, to discuss some regional differences in age groups and target book lengths. I contextualise these differences partly as a result of South Africa's literacy levels and the country's multilingualism.

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## Introduction

In this conference paper, I briefly discuss book lengths and target age groups through the lens of writing for young people in regions outside the UK and the US, with a specific focus on South Africa.

I completed my postgraduate studies in writing for young people in the UK but have since returned to my home country of South Africa, and in 2023 my first children's novel was published by a local South African publisher. In moving from the "kidlit" and writing for young people space in the UK to children's publishing in South Africa, I certainly found that there were differences in approach, especially when it came to book lengths and target age groups. I thus wanted to make use of the opportunity of *Leaf Journal's* inaugural conference, where I presume most of the presenters and attendees will be from either the UK or the US, to present an international perspective on this topic that is not often discussed in this kind of academic context.

I hope that non-South African writers and academics in the field of writing for young people will find it illuminating to learn about some of the unique considerations that go into children's books in other regions, as well as to consider, perhaps for the first time, region-specific factors that could impact the response to and commercial success of books for young people in different countries.

First, I discuss two main contextualising factors that impact the differences in approach to book lengths and target age groups between South Africa and the UK and the US: multilingualism and national literacy levels. Then, I briefly discuss five examples of recent South African children's books that demonstrate these differences in a practical manner. While, unfortunately, the contracted format of a conference presentation does not leave room to delve into the story and narrative implications of these differences – such as how South African authors for young people might approach character, plot and dialogue in the wake of these specific length and target-age considerations as opposed to authors from the UK or the US – this could potentially be fertile ground for future discussion and research.

## Contextual Factors

The first contextual factor to consider is the multilingual nature of South African society. South Africa has 12 official languages, with South African Sign Language having recently become the twelfth. While English is spoken all over the country, it is the home language or first language of only 8.7% of the population (Statistics South Africa, 2022). In addition, 68% of South Africans can read in more than one language, and 78% of the population is able to read in English (Statistics South Africa, 2022). All of this demonstrates that South Africa is a truly multilingual society, which can also be seen in the content of South African literature, which often – in books for young people

and books for adults – incorporates words and phrases in languages other than English. The picturebook *How Many Ways Can You Say Hello?* and its sequel, *How Many Ways Can You Say Goodbye?*, by Refiloe Moahloli, which have been highly successful, incorporate this idea by teaching children greetings in all of South Africa's official languages.

As can be seen on the map in Figure 1, which shows the population distribution by language spoken most often in the household, every official language but English and sign language, such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans and Sepedi, has regions where it is the most commonly spoken language in the home – people's home language or first language, in other words.

However, as indicated on the map, this is not true for English. Therefore, while a person can get along speaking English almost anywhere in South Africa, there is no one region where it is the majority of people's first language.

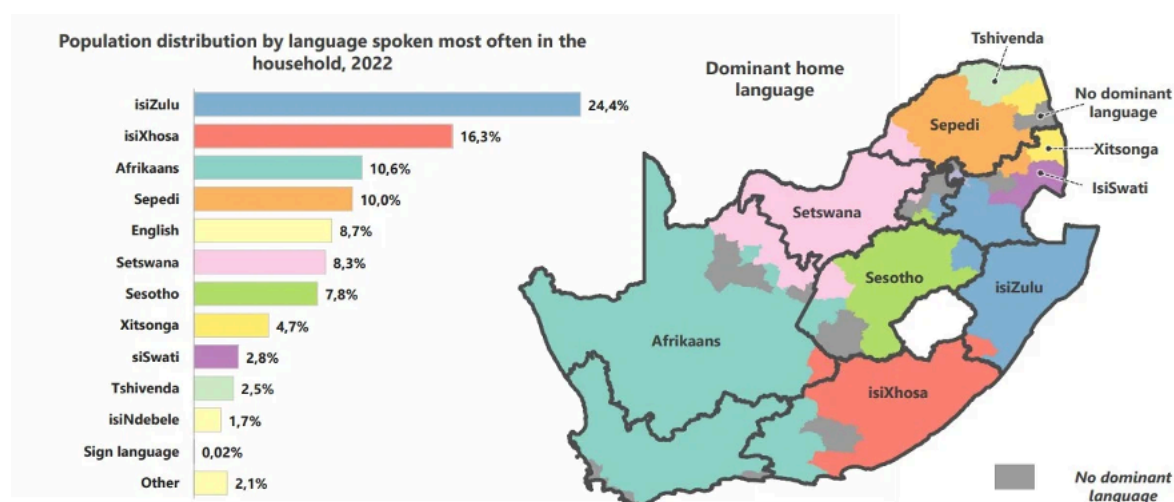


Figure 1: Population distribution by language spoken most often in the household, 2022 (Source: Statistics South Africa, 2022)

This is also relevant to literature for young people because research has shown that children who learn to read and write in their home language first do better overall in school (PIRLS, 2021; World Bank, 2021). However, this is not an option for many South African children, as English is used as the medium of instruction in nearly all schools, especially beyond Grade 3 (Tyler et al., 2023).

It is also worth noting that commercial publishing in South Africa remains largely English-based, although there is a large Afrikaans market (PIRLS, 2021). Sufficiently catering for all of the official languages is still a major challenge facing South Africa's publishing industry; apart from Afrikaans and English, the other languages are severely underrepresented in virtually all published materials (PIRLS, 2021).

The second important factor to consider is South Africa's national literacy levels. A recent study found, rather worryingly, that 81% of Grade 4 children in South

Africa, meaning nine- to ten-year-olds, cannot read for meaning in any language (PIRLS, 2021). There is also a concerning lack of access to reading materials among children. For example, 65% of homes with children under ten indicated not owning a picturebook, and 57% of homes with children between the ages of 11 and 15 also do not own any age-appropriate books (PIRLS, 2021).

This leads one to ask the following question: what are the implications for South African books for young people when the literacy of children under ten is generally poor, many children do not own any age-appropriate books and many children do not have easy access to reading material in their home language?

In addition, because Afrikaans was used as the main medium of instruction during apartheid, many children today are still forced to learn Afrikaans as a second language in schools, even though it is a language many do not speak at home or even colloquially. This last point will be expanded on a bit more in one of the examples, but it relates to the ubiquity of Afrikaans-language books for children as compared to the books in indigenous African languages.

## Examples

I now move on to discussing a few examples of recent South African books for young people that demonstrate the effects of South Africa's multilingualism and literacy levels on the books' target age groups and the books' lengths, especially when compared to books for similar age groups in the UK and the US markets. As mentioned in the introduction, the scope of this presentation only allows for a fairly superficial reading of these texts that focuses on page counts and approximate word counts, although it would surely also be useful to examine some of their narrative aspects in greater detail through a framework of lengths and target age groups.

The first book, *Keegan & Samier: Foul Play* by André Trantraal, is part of a chapter book series called *Keegan & Samier*, first published in Afrikaans and more recently translated to English, which is not an uncommon pattern for South African children's books. The target age for this series of books is seven- to ten-years. This target age is stated on the publisher's website and other marketing materials, so, like all of the target age groups quoted in these examples, it is not simply based on my own assumptions but on information provided by the publishers themselves.

For a chapter book, which is how books for seven- to ten-year-olds are normally classified in the UK or US, the books in the *Keegan & Samier* series are all quite short at around 23–24 pages and 2,500 words. Chapter books aimed at seven- to 10-year-olds, which might also be considered lower Middle Grade in the UK and the US, would certainly be longer. For example, think of books such as the *Beast Quest* series (approximately 144 pages each) or Francesca Simon and Tony Ross's *Horrid Henry* series (approximately 144 pages each).

Similarly, books of around 2,500 words and 23 pages would probably be aimed at a much younger audience in the UK and the US than the target audience for the *Keegan & Samier* series. However, because of the age of the main characters, which in

this series is around ten or 11, we can definitely see that the publisher intends for the books in this series to be for a slightly older audience than the usual chapter book target audience.

My next example is the Afrikaans Middle Grade series *Minki en Haar Maats* ("Minki and her friends") by Jaco Jacobs. This series has been explicitly positioned in marketing materials as a Middle Grade series for eight- to 12-year-olds. The main characters are around ten or 11. Yet these are very short, fully illustrated texts of only about 750 words and 32 pages each, which is the same length as many picturebooks.

I am of the opinion that Middle Grade texts such as this one are kept deliberately simple and short partly as a response to the lower literacy levels of kids of this age, but also to make it easier for children studying Afrikaans in school for whom Afrikaans is a difficult language to learn. It is likely that, with series such as *Minki en Haar Maats*, South African publishers are attempting to meet a particular educational or remedial need by publishing such overly short and simple texts for this age group – a need that does not exist in the same form in the UK or the US.

The third example I will refer to is my own book, a Middle Grade novel called *Bongi Ballerina*. When I submitted the manuscript to the publisher, I pitched it as a chapter book for six- to nine-year-olds. That is also why I made my main character, Bongi, nine years old, so that she would be on the older end for readers who are between the ages of six and nine.

However, I was still keeping UK-based age groups in mind at that time, and the book's publisher has instead firmly positioned it as a book for nine- to 11-year-olds in marketing materials, even though the length of the book is quite short at only around 6,000 words and 72 pages. It is therefore still considered a Middle Grade book, although a book of this length and with a main character of this age would certainly be considered an early reader or chapter book in the UK and the US.

For example, the books in Swapna Reddy's *Ballet Bunnies* series are considered chapter books aimed at six- to nine-year-olds, therefore for a younger age group than *Bongi Ballerina*, but the books are all around 96 pages, longer than *Bongi Ballerina*.

The fourth example is a Middle Grade fantasy novel, *Waldo and the Vampire with the Yellow Raincoat* by Jaco Jacobs. This is part of a series of Middle Grade fantasy novels all featuring the same protagonist, and the target age group is nine- to 12-year-olds. The main character, Waldo, is also around 12 years old, and all of the books in the series are shorter than 100 pages and around 10,000–12,000 words, with *Waldo and the Vampire with the Yellow Raincoat* coming in at 96 pages.

Compared to similar Middle grade fantasy novels published in the UK and the US, this is fairly short. For example, *Who Let the Gods Out* by Maz Evans is 384 pages and *Alex Neptune* by David Owen is 304 pages. Even though page counts do not provide a completely accurate idea of word counts, we can still see that there is a significant difference in length between these books

Finally, *The Witches of Hogsback* by Sally Partridge is a Young Adult thriller marketed at 13- to 16-year-olds. The main character is 17 and the book is 171 pages

and approximately 30,000 words long. This is also much shorter than UK or US books in a similar genre and for a similar target age, and is shorter even than many UK and US Middle Grade books, such as the aforementioned *Who Let the Gods Out* and *Alex Neptune*.

The difference in length is also clear when compared to popular Young Adult thrillers published in the UK and US, such as *One of Us is Lying* by Karen M. McManus (359 pages), *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* by Holly Jackson (448 pages) and *The Inheritance Games* by Jennifer Lynn Barnes (400 pages).

## Conclusion

It is clear that contextual and region-specific considerations play a role in determining the lengths and target age groups of books for young people. This is especially the case in South Africa, where the country's multilingualism and relatively low literacy levels will affect the reading abilities and patterns of young people, therefore also impacting the books they choose to read and, ultimately, the books that publishers deem viable to publish. Further research into specific narrative and story considerations for South African authors for young people compared to those writing for UK and US audiences would provide additional relevant insights into this topic.

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### Author Biography

Dr Kristien Potgieter is an author, editor and independent researcher from Johannesburg. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University and an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia, where she was also the 2015–2016 Booker Scholar. She currently works as an academic editor, and her first children's novel was published in August 2023.