

# *The Linguist*



## **Inside asylum**

The challenging and sometimes distressing role of interpreting for Kurdish asylum-seekers

## *Net gains*

From improving web searches to redefining the languages professions: a three-article Focus

## *Chinua Achebe*

Translating *Things Fall Apart*, in

# Local heroes

*By publishing in local languages, Room to Read is setting children up for success, says Jessica Moore*

The American novelist Danielle Steel is best known for romantic fiction. She has written about a great many steamy relationships – and has probably inspired at least as many. She is, however, an unlikely catalyst for a global child literacy initiative and a minority-language publishing venture. But for former Microsoft high-flyer John Wood, her role was pivotal to launching both.

This story starts in 1998. Having taken a career break to go backpacking in Nepal, Wood found himself visiting a village school at the foot of the Himalayas. There, he saw a dilapidated and under-resourced classroom, and a well-thumbed Steel romp. It was one of a few books the school owned, alongside *The Rough Guide to Mongolia* and a few other backpacker cast-offs. These books were the school's pride and joy. And, as such, they were kept under lock and key – well out of the reach of the children.

Wood couldn't get Steel – or, more accurately, the school's lack of appropriate, accessible books – out of his head. So he emailed friends and family, asking them for donations. Within two months, he had collected more than 3,000 books. The following year, he returned to Nepal with six book-bearing donkeys. Then, in late 1999, he left Microsoft to start Books for Nepal, a charity that worked with rural communities to build schools and libraries, particularly supporting girls' education.

By 2003, Books for Nepal – by then renamed Room to Read – had expanded into Vietnam, Cambodia and India. Its role had changed too. 'Children weren't reading the English-language books that were being donated,' explains Wilfredo Pascual, who works at the charity's San Francisco HQ. 'Those books were not culturally relevant, they were not linguistically relevant.' And there was

another problem. 'We couldn't find anything in the local languages.' So Room to Read launched a publishing programme, working with local writers, illustrators and publishers.

'I remember [before we started] there was a book that was about celebrating a birthday and cutting a cake,' says Sunisha Ahuja, former Country Director for Room to Read India. 'Children here might celebrate a birthday by going to the temple – but a cake doesn't fit into that context at all.' Instead, Ahuja believes it is important to choose subjects that resonate locally. 'Children have to be taken along the continuum – so you give them exposure to aeroplanes and computers, but you start with what they have around them.'

Today, Room to Read operates in ten countries, having added Bangladesh, Laos, Tanzania, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Zambia to its number. The charity has published more than 850 titles across 27 languages, printing more than eight million copies. Operations are run entirely by local staff who, like Ahuja, are familiar with their community's challenges, customs and languages.

Book development is overseen by a committee, composed of Room to Read staff, representatives from the local publishing industry, established local writers and linguists, university professors, illustrators and artists.



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Books are sometimes commissioned from local authors, but most are developed through Room to Read's writers' and illustrators' workshops. 'Most of the people who attend are from the local university, NGO workers, curriculum developers, some are teachers and some are just writers who want the opportunity to start publishing children's books,' explains Pascual, Global Programme Officer of the book publishing programme.

Vasanthi Thayavaran is one such author, based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. 'It's one of the happiest moments of my life, to see my books being read,' she says. But beyond personal fulfilment, Thayavaran sees a broader value in bringing localised, contextualised children's books to her country. 'Stories have a major role in human history. In Eastern culture, grandmas sat grandchildren on their lap and

*The books children want to read are story-driven... It's about making the child the central character*

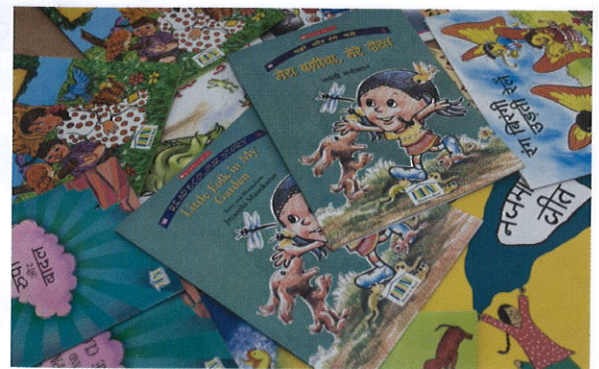


**CHOICE SELECTION**

*A child picks a book in Cambodia from a wide selection (left & below)*

**STORY TIME**

*Children in South Africa read a Room to Read book (bottom left)*



told stories. But now the culture is slightly different; people don't have time and families are separated. We need to fill that gap. We need to give the children books. Books can be their companions forever, through all their life.'

**Meeting needs**

The subject matter and audience of each Room to Read book is determined by local needs. 'When we enter a project area, we open a library and purchase local language books to support local publishers,' says Pascual. 'From those, we can see the gaps in terms of reading levels or genres.'

Governments play a vital role too, offering support and clarifying the needs and literacy levels of their children. Room to Read works with the ministries of education in each country to make sure that 'reading time' is established in schools, and guidelines are put in place to help teachers and librarians establish the reading level of each child, which they can match with appropriate materials.

'We find out which words are being taught in the classroom and we give that list to the writers and illustrators at our workshops,' says Pascual. 'Those words are a starting point for developing stories with really interesting characters. We're setting the children up for success by making sure we're using some words they already know and, by also using

words they need to learn, we're making sure the teachers want to use the books.'

These books are carefully vetted too. Manuscripts and artwork are screened by the charity's book development committees. Those they approve are taken to a focus group of local children to make sure they understand the words and engage with the stories. Books are then edited and printed. Thereafter, Room to Read programmes provide training for teachers and librarians to help them use the books to engage with children, whether that's through reading aloud, group reading or independent reading.

Part of Room to Read's success comes through its collaborative approach to sharing ideas and practices. From his San Francisco office, Pascual often brings country directors and committee members together on Skype. 'Most of the people we work with speak English as well as their local language,' he notes. 'You will have a Cambodian, someone from Bangladesh and someone from Tanzania, and they all have very different levels of English. We learn from each other and share the good things we've done.'

'Through that process, we've had titles that have been adapted from one country to another too,' he adds. That's possible by changing the cultural context. As an example, he cites a Sri Lankan picture book about hands

and tools. 'That concept is universal, so in South Africa they contextualised it using local tools.' Another example is collaborative work between India and Vietnam. 'We sat down together in a workshop and they brainstormed a story about watercolour tubes drawn as characters, talking to each other. They each took that as a starting point and built their own books, working with local illustrators.'

Subject matter varies from country to country, but Pascual sees one common factor across all successful titles. 'The books the children want to read are story-driven and character-driven,' he says. 'Stories with an overt lesson – "the honest boy", "the obedient girl" – are not engaged with. It's about making the child the central character. Have a little girl that solves a problem or a little boy that resolves a conflict. Write stories that are familiar to a child in a context, and make sure it captures their imagination. It's about telling a story and the development of those characters.'

All of which harks back to Wood's 'eureka moment' back in the village school in Nepal 15 years ago. Room to Read is about giving children access to books – and it's about the importance of using appropriate language, content and, crucially, context.

To support Room to Read visit [roomtoread.org/checkoutchallenge](http://roomtoread.org/checkoutchallenge).