

# Hearts and Minds

The rising popularity of romance fiction in South Africa could point the way for the rest of the continent. Frederica Boswell reports

**Y**ou know the books. Scarlet italics emblazon the cover bearing words like 'passion', 'love', 'true' or 'need'. The hero could be an earl or duke, or even a sheikh. He has unnaturally dark and shiny hair. His heroine swoons beneath him. She has fallen for him against the odds, and he has earned her love.

You may scoff at the books. You may even say you have never really read them, but judging by the worn and well-thumbed covers found on bookshelves from London to Lagos, you probably have. Admit it – just once, just to see what they are about. In fact, 200 million Mills & Boon novels are sold worldwide every year, as readers long to “drown in the cool blue water that was his eyes”, or “want more . . . need more”, as the stories go.

Moky Makura, a Nigerian-born author, presenter, actress and now publisher, noted these figures and

*“You buy one, read it, chuck it out and buy a new one”*

decided to set up her own romance series in South Africa last year – Nollybooks – in which the hero's eyes would be brown rather than blue, and instead of being of the British upper classes, he might head up the Africa division at MTV.

The name is inspired by Nigeria's thriving movie industry. “Nollywood proved that Africans want to see themselves reflected in what they consume, and that is exactly what Nollybooks represents,”

says Makura. Defined by and written for a female audience who are young, urban, black and can but maybe don't read, Makura is not the only one who has discovered this market. South African publisher Kwela Books has created Sapphire Press in response to a need for 'black romance' in the country. As Lindsay van Rensburg, a junior editor at Sapphire, explains: “Mills & Boon sell more than 20,000 units per month here. We

thought it would be quite appealing for those readers to have access to books set in South Africa.”

So is this a mere business venture, or is there a more ideological drive behind it? Both says Mokura. “In order for it to be ideological and successful, it's got to be sustainable. If I set out to give books away, it's just not going to work.” She feels that it is important to challenge the perception held in Africa that books are purely for education. “We don't see books as entertainment yet. I see Nollybooks as almost having a soap opera in your hand.”

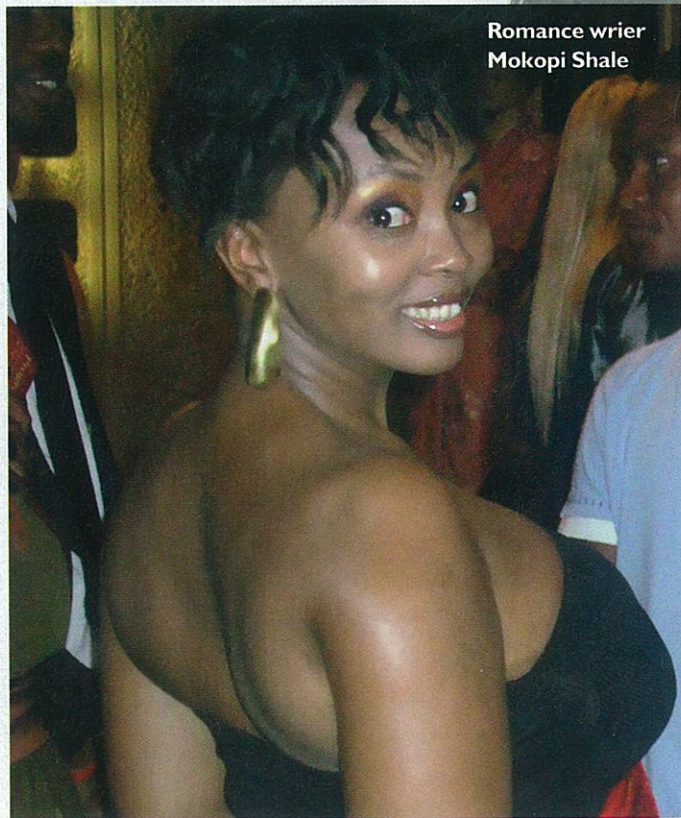
For Mokura, initial sales prove that the concept works, but there are still challenges. “I still feel the cost of the books is high at around \$10 each. We need to get more books out there so that I can bring the price down.” Even though this is half the average price of a book in South Africa, she is aiming to make romance fiction cheaper still. “I think it should be like a daily newspaper, you buy one, read it, chuck it out and buy a new one,” she says.

But is this disposable fiction really going to make its mark on South Africa's literary

*Nolly*  
**BOOKS**



Moky Makura,  
founder of Nollybooks



Romance writer  
Mokopi Shale