

Leisure Books and Leserskring reopen its doors

Leisure Books/Leserskring, South Africa's biggest book club to date, will live again.



The news comes just a few months after their announcement earlier this year that they would be closing up shop for good. An existing supplier showed an interest in the Clubs after learning of its fate, and the company has subsequently been bought over from Media24.

IMD Logistics, the new owners, recognise Leisure Books/Leserskring – an establishment that has been part of South Africa's DNA for more than 35 years – as an important industry leader and feel strongly that the brand and its valuable service to readers throughout the country should continue. IMD has developed innovative supply solutions for the effective distribution of a diverse music offering. This successful platform will be used in the Leisure Books/Leserskring business to ensure sustainability.

It's all hands on deck while remaining staff under the combined leadership of the new owners and CEO Lana Barnett gets ready for the official re-launch of both book clubs in August this year. Members can rest assured that there's a strong focus to protect what was good about the Clubs – those things South African book lovers have come to know and love.

Leisure Books/Leserskring's suppliers and known personalities in the book industry responded positively to the news. "It's fantastic to hear that Leisure Books/Leserskring will still be around," says Nèlleke de Jager, fiction publisher at Human & Rousseau. "There are so many members for whom it's always been a lifeline, especially to Afrikaans books. With so many books being released yearly it's quite difficult to choose. Moreover, Leisure Books/Leserskring offers: The best new fiction and non-fiction titles, and especially children's books, handpicked and offered on a single platter. This is indeed good news for the local book industry, and of course also for the publishing industry."

De Jager is not the only one who feels this way. Elmarie Rautenbach, who will once again be the editor of the quarterly club catalogue on behalf of New Media Publishing, echoes this sentiment and is "unbelievably excited" that Leserskring and its counterpart, Leisure Books, will continue to exist. "It's an institution I grew up with. It brings book people together and it makes choosing, especially Afrikaans books, easy in a time when we're all bombarded with information."

Kerneels Breytenbach, well-known author and chairperson of PEN Afrikaans and the web portal SA Vrystuiskrywer, calls the announcement the best news in years – good news for authors and readers.

Leisure Books/Leserskring played a vital role in the South African book industry for the past 36 years – here are some interesting facts:

- Just over 20 000 club members have been with the book clubs for more than 20 years
- 10 000 have been club members for over 30 years
- 300 members have been part of the Clubs since its inception in 1980
- Within three weeks of the initial launch in 1980, 3 000 members had joined
- Since inception, the Clubs have sold over 40 million books in the last 36 years

It's not surprising, then, that when the Clubs first made known their plans to close its doors, the news caused an outcry among loyal members from around the country. Leisure Books/Leserskring was flooded with telephone calls, emails and messages on social media from thousands of heartbroken members. Some were personally addressed to CEO Lana Barnett and appealed for the Clubs to be saved, while others reminisced about the joys of being a part of the Leisure Books/Leserskring family. They also commented on special customer service received from staff members.

- "What a disaster for those of us who reside in small towns, who seldom gets to the city, and who don't experience the enjoyment of a good bookshop where we live," writes Daleen Croucamp, member since 1983.
- Danell Swart shares childhood memories and fondly remembers her excitement when books from the Japsnoet series would arrive in the post. Recognising the influence the book clubs had in her life, she says, "I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for services rendered and good book choices given us. Thank you for cultivating a love of reading in me. The book club will be sorely missed."
- A downcast Pat Wilson writes, "After 32 years (I have been a member since 1984) of wonderful books and excellent service from all your staff, I am very sad to have to say farewell! I wish all the staff every blessing for the future and hope that life will reward them for their excellence."

CEO Lana Barnett will again be at the helm of the revival of this much-loved, heritage business and had this to say about the relaunch: "Through the years, it gave me great pleasure to walk into a home and instantly recognise a carefully built-up book collection – books that could only have come from the Clubs. To know that this will continue, gives me great pleasure. We have an exciting journey ahead of us and look forward to the role our long-standing club members will play in that." Hard work and exciting times await the Leisure Books/Leserskring team. Certainly, with the support of new and existing members, the book clubs can and will triumph once again.