

‘What we wanted to do from the very start was to produce and disseminate African stories, told from an African perspective.’

**IN CONVERSATION WITH:
LOUISE UMUTONI**

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Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: Could you tell us more about the history of how you started Huza Press and the steps that took you there?

Louise Umutoni: I started Huza Press in 2015. To be honest, it wasn't something that I had set out to do. I was simply very passionate about African voices. I also wanted to add my voice to that small but growing African literary archive. Ever since I can remember, I wanted to produce and consume African content in books and magazines. However, like many of my peers, I had to settle for mostly Western literature even if a lot of the experiences encountered in these books felt foreign. Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed reading the stories and there is something about the human experience that makes it universal. It's just the context in which these stories were set that seemed so removed from my own experiences.

It wasn't until I was about twelve that I read my first African

novel. It was *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi and I was hooked. I spent hours in libraries looking for similar books. It was how I first encountered Ngũgĩ, Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah. The initial excitement was short-lived as I quickly realized that there wasn't a lot of African literature available. At the time I started Huza Press in 2015, it was clear that this was quickly changing. I was increasingly aware that there was this movement across the continent and the proliferation of literary works from contemporary African writers. It entailed a pushback against the idea that the only African literature worth its name was from the 1960s to the 1980s.

We were being introduced to new voices like Chimamanda Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Binyavanga Wainaina and others. Our stories were being discussed in mainstream media and there was a growing interest in African literary works. Around that time, I started to research what was happening in the literary space in Rwanda. I was surprised to find that this wave had barely touched Rwanda. This movement that was so prominent in places like Kenya and Nigeria was largely missing in Rwanda. The publishing space was completely dominated by the schoolbook market and the shelves of the handful of bookshops in Kigali were filled with Western titles. The reading culture was also still poor compared to Rwanda's neighbours. So I thought, this is what I want to change. It was a mammoth task. At the time, I did not realize how hard or how long it would take to see progress. It was in that context that Huza Press was born.

Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: So if your goal has been to promote African knowledge production and dissemination, what does Huza Press consider to be African writing? Who do

you consider an African writer? Must they be based in Africa?

Louise Umutoni: This is something that I've been asked before. I will start by saying that I'm not a huge fan of putting work by African writers under the African literature tag in bookshops. There are lots of things about that [approach] that are not very exciting, the most important being that it is quite limiting. Some people do want to be identified as African writers. I can't remember if it was Taiye Selasi who said that – don't quote me on this one – but why label it as African writing? Why not base it on the theme, or the genre, as opposed to who is writing it? You don't see a lot of other books from across the world identified with the origin of the writer. Beyond this issue of where it's placed in a bookshop, when I think of an African writer or African writing, I think of work that's created by someone from the continent. They could be residing on the continent or not, it doesn't really matter to me. It's somebody who has roots on the continent and that is informing their writing.

Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: Thanks for that, Louise. Can you talk us through some of the logistical issues you encountered in setting up Huza? How did you actually get things going and how did you structure it in the early days?

Louise Umutoni: At first, I thought Huza would be a nonprofit. And I remember one of the first people I spoke to about this was Kate Wallis who is currently the co-director of Huza Press. She put me in touch with Ellah Wakatama who had been working in the industry for a very long time. I remember Ellah saying to me, 'Well, Louise, listen, you've got to promise me this is not going to be a nonprofit. You've got to make

sure that it operates like a proper business. So you do not do what's been done historically, which is deprive the African book of its value, by not selling it at its value.' Devaluing of the African book has been going on for decades with NGOs or non-profits commissioning the production of certain works and then distributing the books produced from that process for free. This process has stifled the growth of the publishing industry by distorting the incentive structures around book production and dissemination. It has discouraged the creation of publishing infrastructure on the continent as the books are produced elsewhere and since quality isn't emphasized there is no work done to build the expertise required to produce good quality books. So at the time, I immediately thought, 'Well, it's going to be a business.' I took Ellah's advice. I was able to get some funding through a business accelerator programme to put together a small team of two at the time. We decided that we were going to run a new prize for fiction to try and understand what was actually being written about in Rwanda. Like I said, there was just nothing that was being produced in Rwanda that was not for the schoolbook market. We ran our first literary prize as a publishing house and we were just blown away by how much we received, blown away by the range of stories that people were sending in, the fact that people were writing about all kinds of things. At first, we thought most of the submissions would be on the genocide as that was the dominant theme in the writing on Rwanda. Don't get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with writing on the genocide in Rwanda as that is an important part of our story. But we wondered if there would be other themes, and we were pleasantly surprised that this was the case. People were writing about love, about marriage, sci-fi, friendship and more. We started to get a sense of what was out

there. But we also got a sense of some of the gaps, particularly around writing. Some of the basic concepts on what constitutes a story were lacking in a lot of the work. This revealed gaps in the education system, including challenges with language of instruction. Rwanda over the years switched the language of instruction in schools from French to English and you could clearly see the impact of this in some of the submissions where there wasn't a good grasp of the language being used. We started to explore the value of working in the three languages used in Rwanda, including Kinyarwanda. We also felt the need for some more targeted training around creative writing and how to put together a narrative properly. We then started a mentorship scheme, where we paired every shortlisted writer with an established African writer. Some amazing people worked with us, people like Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, Taiye Selasi, Shadreck Chikoti and Richard Ali. Really amazing African authors volunteered to support the Rwandan writers that were just starting out. We were able to publish our first anthology from that *Versus and Other Stories*. We've since published many other titles and worked with amazing authors from across the continent. We've also done quite a lot of capacity building, whether in the creative writing space or in the editorial space. We've tried to build the ecosystem that would support our work because it was very clear that we needed to do that.

Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: Could you be more specific about what that Rwandan literary ecosystem looked like and what was lacking?

Louise Umutoni: We had to do capacity building in most of

the skills that we needed to produce books, including editing, proofreading, cover design and typesetting. This work is still ongoing but I think we're starting to see some gains. For example, we now don't have to go beyond Rwanda to find a cover designer. We know that we have people that can do that here. Also, we've seen some amazing Rwandan writers publishing their work beyond Rwanda and being included in the Caine Prize anthology.¹ We supported Rwandan writers to submit their stories to the Caine Prize and we hosted the Caine Prize workshop in Rwanda for the first time [in 2018]. Seeing all these wonderful Rwandan stories find space in established journals and literary magazines has been very important for us at Huza. Beyond our work in Rwanda, we've also worked with writers from other parts of the continent, like Billy Kahora and many others.

Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: So further along these lines, what do you consider the scope of your publishing house to be? Do you think of yourself as a Rwandan press, an African press, or an international press?

Louise Umutoni: We think of ourselves as all those things. You could say we are an African publisher because we don't only publish Rwandan writing, we publish work by writers from across the continent. We would say that we are an African publishing house because we are interested in African content, and we're interested in telling African stories.

¹ The stories written at Caine Prize workshops are published annually alongside the Prize's shortlisted stories in anthology form. <http://www.caineprize.com/anthologies>.

Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: You've spoken about some of the challenges – as well as strides forward – in terms of literary capacity building. Thinking more specifically about your own local context, what are some of the other major challenges in running a publishing house in Rwanda?

Louise Umutoni: Running a publishing house in Rwanda is probably just as difficult as running a publishing house anywhere else on the continent. One shared challenge is distribution. Distribution has been our biggest issue on the continent for years. We have linkages to the West, but not linkages with each other on the continent. It's much easier for me to get my books to London than it is to get my books to Nigeria or Ghana. It's really hard because the distribution links haven't been properly established. So as publishers within the continent, we are currently having discussions with each other to try and address some of these things. The infrastructure is just not there. The trade links are not properly established. We have to go against this tide. It's one of those issues which are far more difficult to address without support from governments or support from some big players in the public and in the private sector.

The other big one is infrastructure around publishing, say for example, printing presses. We have to do our printing in India, and it's much better quality and cheaper [than printing locally]. This is the same for quite a lot of publishers on the continent. It's cheaper for me to print in India than it is for me to print in South Africa. That's problematic. So, that issue needs addressing. And do we have good proofreaders? Do we have good typesetters? Do we have good cover designers or illustrators? We don't have that many on the continent that are

good and have built this expertise over time. And yes, we've had some training here and there, but it's not been as targeted. These kinds of literary infrastructure also haven't been around for that long. I know the African Writers Trust does some work around building editorial capacities.² Huza Press is also thinking about doing some coaching. We'd have an established editor working with an African editor on a particular text over a period of time and the two of them would produce this text together. That's something we have already started doing with some of our titles. But the gap is still huge and we have a big need for some really targeted interventions in that space. Without long-term support we won't be able to build a group of really good, say, editors across the continent.

Then there are issues of capital. You've got an industry that has not been around for long and there are questions around whether it's actually going to survive and the changes that have to be made for the African publishing industry to survive. It's not easy to access capital. You find that a lot of us are really struggling financially to keep our work going. A lot of our profits are quite small. And that means that we only have so much capacity to produce a few titles here and there every year. I would like to see some investment going into these spaces because, of course, production is always going to be important. One last issue, which is really particular to Rwanda, is around the culture of reading. And we've seen that it's grown over time, but it's never been that great historically. And I know this is

² The African Writers Trust aims to bridge the divide between African writers and publishing professionals living in the Diaspora as well as on the continent. See here for their workshop programme: <https://africanwriterstrust.org/category/professional-training-workshop-for-creative-writers/>.

something that's been actively debated on the continent and something that many find insulting but it's a perception that's held by many that if you want to hide something from an African, put it in a book. That's not completely fair. The reading culture in many African countries is great. I grew up in Uganda where street vendors would be seen reading newspapers. But it is also true that the reading culture could be better, especially here in Rwanda. There's been quite a lot of sensitization around getting children to read early on and to increase access so that we can create that culture of reading. We're not quite there yet.

Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: Talk to us about where you see your publishing company going in the future? In a dream world, with no limitations at all, what would it look like?

Louise Umutoni: That's always an interesting question. Probably like any other publishing business, our big goal would be to publish as many titles as we possibly can. I would like to be able to add to the African literary canon. I would love to have seen multiple African writers' voices added to that and for Huza Press to have been a fundamental part of that process. I'd also want for us to distribute beyond some of the existing geographical regions where we currently distribute. So we are currently exploring South America and Asia. Being able to reach those broader audiences is something that we are really keen on.

Also, to somehow find a way to sort out the distribution problem here in Africa. African titles tend not to travel as well across the continent. Which is sad because what we are doing is producing these titles, to be honest, primarily for the African reader, the African audience. But you don't

get as much travelling of these books across the continent because distribution channels are not effective, they're not well established. And so you're limited to certain geographical areas, mostly cities.

Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: We're thinking extensively about the preferred languages of the various African publishers we are in conversation with. Of course, there's a very long-standing debate about the status of English in Africa as a corollary of colonization. What are your thoughts on this for your work with Huza Press? Do you see English and other European languages as African languages?

Louise Umutoni: I'd very quickly say that I don't think English is an African language. But there have been instances where the English language has been reshaped and bent to the needs and demands of those peoples that were forced to use it. For example, Pidgin in Nigeria, and Sheng in Kenya. I suppose this could be seen as a means to Africanize these foreign languages and probably reclaim a degree of agency in how they use them.

What is really interesting is the debate on whether European languages should be used in African literature. That's one of the questions that has plagued the African publishing industry for some time now. It's recently been popularized by Ngũgĩ [wa Thiong'o] who has championed more writing in African languages and comes against the more practical issue of access. So unfortunately, European languages such as English and French have been used across the continent in such a way that they do allow for accessibility across different borders and across different languages and ethnicities.

As a publisher, I tend to lean towards the more practical

position that publishing in English or French seems to work better in terms of access. And what we are concerned with at Huza Press is access, such that the work we are producing is able to transcend our borders. In Rwanda we are quite lucky that we actually have one language that we all speak – Kinyarwanda. It's not the same with other countries. In Uganda for example, which is right next door to us, you have more than fifty languages. In Rwanda we've made a conscious decision to publish more work in Kinyarwanda if the content is by a Rwandan author for example. But we'd also use Kinyarwanda if we feel it's the sort of content that would work quite well for the Rwandan audience. But I'm not going to lie and say that it's practical to completely discard English as a publishing language. Because this is a language that has gained a foothold in our countries and is far reaching. It allows us to ensure that our stories go beyond our own borders and speak to a broader audience. And as a publisher we are hoping to sell to a broader audience. The numbers matter from a practical stance. I'm sure that there are people who have different opinions about this language issue. I know, for example, Nigerian authors and Nigerian publishers who are quite lucky to be in a position whereby they've got massive audiences for Hausa, for example, or Yoruba. We don't have the same with Kinyarwanda. Even if we're talking about the whole of Rwanda, it's still quite a small population that buys books and would not make business sense to limit our sales to that very small audience.

But I think it's much broader than just a business question. It's also an issue of access. It's also an issue of our stories getting to different audiences. Of course, speaking to ourselves is important. But we also want to speak to others. And that's one mission that's been at the core of Huza Press. What we wanted to

do from the very start was to produce and disseminate African stories, told from an African perspective. So that's not possible if we're restricting it by language and just publishing purely in Kinyarwanda, or Luganda if we're publishing a Ugandan book. That's my stance on this. Of course, it doesn't mean that it's resolved on my end. I still struggle with it as well. And I would much rather we were in a different position, but that's the way things are.

Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: So thinking in very practical and concrete terms, how exactly do you determine which language to use for publication of a particular book?

Louise Umutoni: From our end, it's about who we are trying to reach with a particular title. That's the most important question. If our primary audience for the title is, say, in Rwanda, then, you know, we're primarily going to publish in Kinyarwanda and really push that language of publication for that title. If we think that there could be a much wider audience for that title, for example, an audience more in the Anglophone space, then we will publish that title in English. We can also do the same for titles that we think will have wider readership in the Francophone world. What I find is most useful for us, because we work across multiple languages, is to think through whether a title could actually reach multiple audiences.

If we know that it's a really good one, then we will publish it in multiple languages. As I mentioned before, our core mission is to insert African voices into the existing canon on Africa or the existing knowledge on Africa. So we've got to be able to publish in a language that is going to reach as wide an audience as possible. We'd have a title in English to start with and then

it would be translated. Translation is a huge part of what we do. We try to ensure that a lot of our titles are translated or if we find a title that's been published and we feel strongly about the story and want to expand its reach then we do consider translating it. That's what we did with Yolande Mukagasana's *Not My Time to Die*, which had previously been published in French.

Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: We'd like to shift gears for a moment, to think about an issue that's particularly close to our own hearts and about which we're curious to hear your thoughts. In terms of reaching as many different people as possible, the multiple audiences you mentioned above, what work do you do in terms of starting new conversations about sexuality? Even though LGBTQ+ issues are considered taboo across much of the African continent, do you see this as part of your mission in terms of giving African LGBTQ+ authors a voice?

Louise Umutoni: You're right that these are taboo issues in many parts across the continent. I mean, right next door in Uganda, there is an [anti-]homosexuality law and it's not exactly the most conducive space for LGBTQ+ voices. It's quite complex to address these issues on the continent. On our end, we've actually worked with some authors addressing these issues and our role is to provide a space for these stories to be told. However, it's still difficult to find a lot of writers willing to write about this. And of course, it's not their fault. It's not the most welcoming culture [for LGBTQ+ individuals]. Here in Rwanda, for example, there's no specific law against it, but it's also not a very welcoming culture in general towards people of

that community. So it makes it very complex.

What we can do is ensure that it is very clear that our platform is very open and available to people writing about these issues. And that they are aware that we will support them because, of course, like I said, it's really important that these marginalized voices – particularly those from the continent talking about issues that have been primarily talked about by the West – are allowed a platform to be able to tell their side of the story or just give their perspectives on what it means for them. Across the continent, we could do with more voices on these issues because what's resulted from this silence is a lot of misconceptions about how sexuality and LGBTQ+ issues are perceived in Africa. What you see from a lot of Western perspectives on this issue is that African societies are completely averse to discussing alternative sexualities. It's more complex than that. These are societies that are not necessarily averse but are talking about these issues in different ways and in different spaces. Allowing those voices into mainstream narratives is really important.

Olayinka Adekola and Barry Migott: So summing up this conversation, how do you feel your work has had an impact on people's lives? And how do you measure success?

Louise Umutoni: As I've mentioned, the primary driver for the work that we do is to provide space for voices from the continent to speak about their own experiences, from their own perspectives, and to get that inserted into the existing narrative about African lives and experiences. So for me the way that I measure success is through asking how many writers we have allowed access to our platforms, how many writers' voices we

have been able to augment, how many African writers' voices we have inserted into the African literary canon.

And in terms of how I feel that work has impacted people's lives... it's really hard to measure whether people's perspectives on other people's experiences have changed. I think what you can measure is whether you have a multiplicity of voices on a particular issue. Most importantly, it's not just the outsiders' gaze and interpretation of your experiences that is the dominant voice. What has always been a problem – and I've talked about this a couple of times – is that we have a continent that has struggled with the fact that the mainstream narrative about us and our experiences is not necessarily informed by us. As a result, it's not exactly the most accurate representation. What you have is someone else who has been telling stories about you for very many years. This has informed the mainstream perspective about who you are, and in some ways, you have people – especially young people – who are growing up reading about their experiences from other contexts, starting to see those interpretations of their context as the accurate interpretation. You know, that's not right.

So if there is anything that I would say I would have liked to have transformed or changed, it's to have added voices of those people from those contexts that had previously been written about by others. Saying, look, this is who I am. This is my experience. This is what it's like. That is very important. There's a sense of humanization. I would like to see that humanity being handed back to those people, because they're being made to feel that their voice is valued, their perspective is valued, their humanity is valued.



About Louise Umutoni: Louise Umutoni is the founder of Huza Press, a Rwandan-based publishing press devoted to supporting African literature. Huza Press has published writers such as Yolande Mukagasana, Billy Kahora and many emerging voices from across the continent. Huza Press also run one of the few prizes for fiction in Rwanda and launched some of the growing number of writers from Rwanda. Louise started her career as a journalist and worked as a regular reporter and contributor for several newspapers and magazines. She is passionate about knowledge creation and dissemination in Africa. She has also written academically on national liberation movements in Africa and women's political inclusion. Her work was selected for the Winihin-Jemide grant at the University of Oxford. In 2023, she started a PhD in African History at Yale University.