

Lumelang! Hello again to all our Paleng friends and family ☺

Welcome to the New Year, and we hope that it will be as good for you all, as we know it is going to be for us!

This little newsletter is late because we wanted to include in it the news from our New Year party, which took place last week. Please forgive us. Paleng has had an unusual, and mixed up year, with a lot of successes, but also with some very tough challenges thrown in ... whoever said that life in a little library was going to be straightforward and easy?

We began as usual in January with both libraries, Paleng and Ithuteng, freshly cleaned, swept and stocked, ready for a wonderful year of reading, playing and generally doing things that children need and like to do, and since the children of Paleng and Ithuteng know exactly what they are about, it didn't take long at all to get back into the swing of things.

Many, many children arrived at our doors, and business began as usual in earnest.

We still have a core group of between 40 and 50 children attending regularly every week, often twice a week at both Paleng and Ithuteng libraries.

These are still mostly girls, about which we are happy, because if we can instill a culture and a love of reading in these young ladies,

then when they

one day become mothers the likelihood is that they will pass this on to their own children, and one day, yes *one* day all children in Lesotho will be reading as automatically and easily and joyfully as they play.



But the boys are coming too, and although the bicycles is still the big draw card, they really do sit and read while they wait their turn, and they do take books home to read. Their favourite books by far are non-fiction, so we always make sure to have a box of those outside at the 'waiting station'.

We want these boys for another reason as well, and this is that many of them are orphans, or have absent parents, and Khothatso continues to be an important role model in their lives, a role that he, and they, take very seriously.

We still have children from 4 years upwards, but our biggest group is once again the 7 to 12 year-olds, and we are happy about this too, as it means that they have something at home with which to practice their emerging reading skills.

We have not given up on trying to interest the Secondary School students in books and reading, we are after all still located on their school grounds, but teenagers being teenagers, it seems that they have far more important social stuff to do than hanging around a library ☺ However, there are one or two young women who do attend regularly, with the express purpose, they tell us, of improving their English. Thanks to Eaton Bray Academy parents, we have a number of appropriate English dictionaries now available, which they read avidly.



Leseli la Thutano, our pen-pal project with Eaton Bray Academy in England saw the children this year really getting into using the tablets that Rahula Trust funded for us. They love being able to learn their way around them, particularly to start learning to type. One day they will be typing and sending their letters over email.



We produced two more titles of our own home-grown picture storybooks in 2017, bringing the total number of titles created in Paleng to a wonderful seven.

'Bophelo's Mistake' is a bilingual picture storybook, and 'Melumo oa Pua ea Sesotho oa Bana', is a small picture dictionary of sounds in Sesotho for beginning readers. If you

want a head start in Sesotho, this is the book for you!

We handed these books out at Easter, along with an easter egg or two, and our children loved reading new stories and, in the case of the little 'dictionary' seeing themselves on the cover and things they know from their own environment on the inside. We took photographs in and around the village to illustrate this little book. There were heated discussions about whether the chicken on page 14 belonged to Ntate Pitso to or 'M'e Masello, and whether the person's head on page



10 belonged to Khothatso or some other handsome Mosotho man!

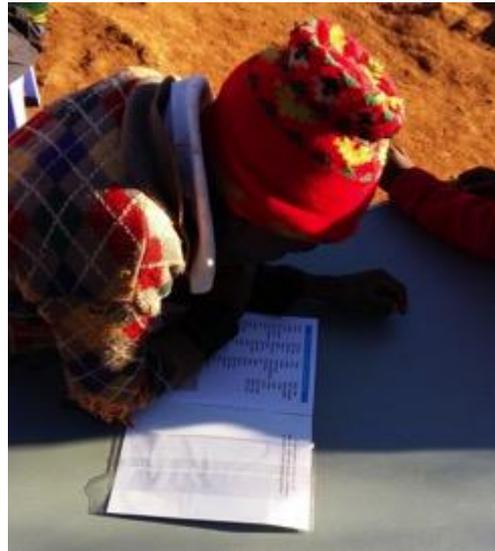
We completed our work with the African Storybook Project, and produced three more stories for them which are up on their website in both English and Sesotho (Lesotho). They are waiting to be downloaded, translated, adapted, printed and used with children all over Africa.

We have worked hard again in getting books out to other children, and kept pushing our stories out into the big wide world.

We were also tremendously fortunate to receive a donation of books from Book Dash, a South African organisation working also to put books in the hands of children. They gave us a batch containing 1000 of their five beautiful picture storybook titles in Sesotho

(Lesotho) to distribute wherever we can. We are very careful about who we give books to, since we want them to be in the hands of children and not sitting languishing in a classroom drawer, or in an unused school library, or in a dusty box somewhere.

So we try to give them directly to children, and should you, as an adult, want a book you have to give us a very good reason, and you have to prove to us beyond a shadow of a doubt that you will use the book regularly and appropriately with the children with whom you live and/or work.



Just like 'M'e Mamatete, the local pre-school teacher, who for a time brought her children regularly to the library where we read to them, played a game or two and where we lent 'M'e some of our big books to use in her classroom. The children who graduated from this little school, we were told by the Grade One teacher of the Primary School, were '*very, very strong*' in terms of their learning, and we like to imagine that we had a little something to do with that!



We held a Most Excellently Successful New Year party at our little satellite library, Ithuteng.

In spite of the heat wave, and the fact that we had to carry simply *everything* down to Ithuteng in wheelbarrows the day before and store it in the chief's house to thwart the possibility of rats, and the fact that we could not cook anything, and the fact that there was a shortage of water, we had just the most fabulous time!



Children arrived from everywhere, dressed in their Christmas finery, some walking long distances to get there; there were eighty in total. We played our usual games, as well as some that were new, and competed fiercely for the prizes (very, very sour worm sweets) on a small piece of earth that we especially cleared for the occasion. We decorated lthuteng with all the decorations from last year, and more. We painted our faces literally 'til the cows came home, and best of all we ate. And ate.

There was no 'food' this time because there was nothing to cook on or with, so we had sweets, biscuits and juice.

Unsurprisingly, not a single child objected, and when we had finished laying it all out for the children to come and help themselves, there was a veritable fog of sugar in that little room. It was utterly delightful, and we got many requests to have 'so, so many sweets next year again *please!*' ☺ The Chinese chemical juice nicely disguised the rather suspect taste of the spring water that had to be hauled up the hill, and joy upon joy there were enough sweets and biscuits to have seconds, and even third helpings!

The presents were piles of pencils, pens, erasers, rulers and sharpeners for the school year ahead, as well as many little picture storybooks; some children took home 4 or 5 in their plastic bags.

In the middle of all this, a small miracle occurred. A young mother with a baby on her back actually asked if she could take some books to read to her baby! This is a first, and we couldn't put them into her hands fast enough.

When it was over, we walked the long walk home, tired, happy, and in a sugar stupor second to none. Thank you Rahula Trust for helping us with this ☺



Getting there!



There are more?



Which books to choose now?



We have said that 2017 was a challenging one for Paleng.

One of the major challenges this year was that Marion had to spend a lot more time in Johannesburg, fundraising and networking to keep Paleng alive financially, and up there on everybody's radar.

That was very hard for both her, and for Khothatso who worked alone in the library for weeks at a time. We were unable to find a suitable assistant to help him in spite of vigorous efforts to do so.

It has borne some fruit, and we are extremely happy to report that Paleng now has a proper committee, complete with Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer.

It also has its own bank account, and best of all, is now registered as a Non Governmental Organisation, and we are about to receive our certificate. We hope that all of these will open up new horizons for us.

But then, in August, the devil came to our valley, and rocked Paleng to its core.

It is a long-standing and violent story which is being played out all over Lesotho, but which finally and tragically arrived on our doorstep.

Please bear with us while we give you some background.

There is what amounts to a 'music war' in Lesotho, waged between Famo musicians (Famo is an indigenous music genre) who have big supporting fan groups across the country. These musicians incite one another deliberately through their music, and the result is very angry sets of fans. These fans tend to be poorly educated, bored and frustrated young village men who often cross the border into South Africa to engage in illegal mining, and who equally often bring guns back with them, since there is little or no border control. It is, in the words of one journalist, Lesotho's well-kept dirty little secret. (Google 'Famo-Lesotho-Violence' if you are interested.)

The situation is not helped by the presence of a multitude of shebeens/bars everywhere, which are frequented by these groups of opposing fans, and by the widespread use of *matekoane* (marijuana/dagga).

There have recently been killings in our village related to this music feuding. One was the murder of one of these fans in a local bar in our valley.

In retribution for this, the bar owner was shot and badly injured in his truck when he went to collect the children at the missionary's pre-school just up the hill from us. Thirty-two children were running out of school towards him at the time; it was nothing short of a miracle that none of them were injured.

The second incident that occurred in our village not far from Paleng itself was even more shocking. Two of these same young men murdered both parents of two of our Paleng children, aged 7 and 9 years old in the family home in front of the children at suppertime. These children are now orphans and are being taken care of by a destitute grandmother.

The impact of both of these incidents has been deep and devastating on everybody in our village and indeed the whole valley.

How this all relates to Paleng is that Khothatso happens to be the cousin of the man who owns the bar in which the original fan was murdered. The

brother's and relatives of this young man claim that Khothatso's cousin could have and should have prevented this murder in his bar, and could have and should have taken the dying man to hospital since he owns a truck. Whether or not this is true we will probably never know.

In Lesotho, the family and clan to which one belongs is very important. Family ties are very strong and deeply felt, and take precedence above all else.

So, the reliable talk (because this has happened in other parts) is that because Khothatso is a relative, he is now on a 'hit list' for revenge for the original killing.

At the time, Khothatso left the valley with his young wife and child for his own safety, and we closed Paleng library immediately.

We discussed this matter thoroughly between ourselves, as well as with a range of people across the village and the valley, including church leaders and chiefs, as well as some parents and children themselves, since there is not a child in the valley who is not aware of what is going on. Based on the experience of other villages (this feuding is not confined to our village nor to our valley/district) everyone agrees that this is not the end of the story in terms of this feud.

Khothatso is now back in the village, his view is that one cannot live one's life in fear, and our village is his home, which he cannot allow himself to be run out of.

However the possibility that he could be working in our library with upwards of 30 children and some vengeful thug(s) come in and try to shoot him and possibly some Paleng children in the process is a very real one, and is an unbearable thought. These thugs have clearly demonstrated that they are not in the least concerned about any children who might innocently get in their way.

This is also the main reason why we held our Christmas party in our little lthuteng library, away from the main villages in the valley.

Paleng has reopened once or twice since then from time to time when we felt it was safe, in Khothatso's words, '*to remind children that they still have their library.*'

But this is neither a completely safe, nor a sustainable situation, and so we have decided after much soul searching to close Paleng until the end of February, and after that to reassess the situation and take it a week at a time. We are trying to be very vigilant about keeping tabs on what is happening, especially as far as the safety of the children and Khothatso are concerned. There is a police presence in the valley that is conducting an ongoing investigation, and interrogating various community members about the events.

It is likely however, that Paleng library will not run as normal this year.

We are inundated with questions from the children as to when the library will open again, and this is extremely sad and difficult for us, as we are not able to give them an answer, and not all of them understand what we are doing and why, in terms of the safety of all concerned.

It is an extremely upsetting, disappointing and frustrating situation, and one for which there are no easy answers.

But at Paleng we are nothing if not resilient, and we want our work in supporting children with literacy acquisition to continue.

We do not know what lies ahead in terms of Paleng library itself, many things might have to change, activities, roles, venues, we are keeping open minds. But we feel that there is absolutely no reason why our story creation work, our book distribution, our story-generating workshops and our Lthuteng satellite library should not continue. So we have put our heads together and used those Little Grey Cells and come up with a plan:

- ✓ We will continue to create, illustrate and translate new bilingual picture storybooks for the children of Lesotho. We will do this ourselves in partnership with other people (foremost children) as and when we can.
- ✓ We will continue to distribute our (and other) books wherever we can as usual, in different parts of the country. Khothatso will travel with them to various schools/organisations/projects that we have chosen, and as part of this work, he will read to children, talk to teachers and caregivers about the importance of books and reading, and try to get feedback from these adults and the children themselves as to which stories and pictures they like the best and why. We will take this feedback forward in creating new books.
- ✓ We plan to run story-creation workshops with community members, teachers, anyone interested in stories, storytelling and story creation to generate new stories, but also to continue the work of encouraging teachers and supporting them in the use of picture storybooks in the classroom. Parent and children's workshops are also potentially part of this plan.
- ✓ We have long thought that it would be interesting and useful to get our stories (and others) into children's lives in other ways too. So we are recording some stories using Khothatso's beautiful voice, in both English and Sesotho, and hope to put them onto YouTube, into Podcasts, or even into a CD, which could include the written form as well.
- ✓ We are in discussion with a newly formed, but very experienced South African publishing company about possibly 'translating' our stories into South African Sesotho, and getting them distributed in South Africa. If we are lucky, we might be able to sell them to interested schools and libraries, and generate some income.
- ✓ Our Lthuteng village library will continue with the librarian there, and for this year we have been lucky enough to acquire the services of a Peace Corps volunteer doing other work in the village, which will give our librarian some much-needed support.
- ✓ In order to take this work further, we also plan to raise funds specifically for Khothatso to get his advanced driver's license so that he can transport books and workshop people when necessary.

Albert Einstein said, *"Out of clutter, find simplicity. From discord, find harmony. In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity."* and we are searching for just those things in the midst of this extremely trying situation in our lovely Paleng.

So please help us have a Little Think, and any creative, amazing, fabulously 'out-of-the-box' ideas that any of you might have for a new path forward would be most, most welcome 😊

On a positive note, and last but not least we have many thanks to give to all of our Paleng friends who have supported us in so many ways through this year.

Rahula Trust in England for giving us yet another grant for printing yet another picture storybook, and for supporting the running of our lthuteng satellite village library, making those children very happy indeed.

Thank you for your unfailing support Sheila, Tessa and Jenny from the **African Storybook Project** for our work. You really do understand the challenges of what we are trying to do here! (www.africanstorybook.org)

Thank you **Book Dash** (www.bookdash.org) for the wonderful donation of 1000 of five of your beautiful Sesotho, Lesotho books.

Thank you **Mario and the team from Jetline, Wits** for printing our books for us, for which we are eternally grateful. We will be once again at your door!

Thank you to our newly freshly formed Paleng committee, **Nadia, Sally, Lydia and Megan** for agreeing to take us on, you absolutely won't regret it.

Thank you **Lydia Ovenden** for once again skillfully and beautifully designing our picture storybooks, and getting them print-ready for us. We absolutely could not do without you!

Thank you **Abuti Thabo and Sandy Wagner** for your ongoing contributions, and big, big thanks to **Leona Sedlaczek** (otherwise known as Ausi Rethabile) and her **Weitblick Kiel** team in Germany for raising the funds for much needed, and greatly appreciated new tables, chairs and other very useful things. Since we have limited use of the school hall, being able to set up tables and chairs outside to make things so much more comfortable was wonderful!

Thank you **Clongowes Wood College** in Ireland, whose boys spent three afternoons with us playing games with and entertaining our children. We really appreciated our contact with you this year, as well as the kind donation of many useful things for our children. To Father Michael a special thank you!



Bernhardt from Austria, our faithful annual visitor was also here again, carrying interesting news about other parts of Lesotho, and some unusual and useful booklets for older children about Africa that we hope to have translated in time.

Thank you also to **Jennifer and Angela** who visited Marion in Johannesburg and whose encouragement and inspiration are boundless, bless you!

Thanks to **Pieter, Keila, Jon and Jaime Mierke** from 'just up the way', for your constant support, encouragement, advice, visitor accommodation and help in the library, as well as of course, prayers.

Thank you **Teboho Lenyora** from Future Stars BMX Bicycle Project (check him out on FaceBook) who continues to help us with our bicycles so generously!

Thank you **Rekha Slatter** and your class at Eaton Bray Academy in England who have continued with our *Leseli la Thutano* children's group. The dictionaries that you funded for us remain some of the most well used books in the library.

Thank you also to Tara, Zorah, Jade, Shakiraw, Heather and their Mimosa families who have donated clothes, toys and books, the many small things that make a big difference to the children of Paleng.

And of course a big thank you to all our spunky, sparky children who come to Paleng through sun, rain, hail, snow, drought, tsotsis, angry music fans and whatever else life may throw at them, to read, play, think and create. We wish all of you selemo se secha semonate haholo 😊



And our very best wishes to all of you who continue to support us in so many ways, we wish you a magnificently prosperous, peaceful and very happy 2018 (and please do visit our FaceBook page 'Paleng' to see how we go)

Salang hantle 😊

Marion and Khothatso