

E-LONG FORM ON MAMPOER.CO.ZA

BY ANTON HARBER

A chance remark at a literary event has led to a new e-publishing venture intended to fill a gap in South African journalism.

At a Troyeville Hotel book event late last year, I lamented the absence of an outlet for substantial long-form reporting. There was little, I said, between the 1 500 words you could do for some of our weekly papers, and the 100 000 words of a book. Writers who wanted to do more meaty pieces that justified spending more time on a story, were frustrated.

Author, friend and host of that evening's event, Anthony Altbeker, called me the next day to say that I was right to suggest that this country could not sustain an equivalent of *The New Yorker* magazine, or *Atlantic Monthly*. But surely e-publishing opened up new opportunities?

He was right, of course. We could publish this kind of material electronically without the massive start-up costs of a traditional magazine. And our gut instinct was that this was the length of the future: more than a newspaper article, but less than a book. Something substantial and rich, but which you could read in one sitting, perhaps in an hour or two of an evening. Perfect for those who are pressed for time, but keen to read more about and understand our country.

Over the next few weeks, we got together with my fellow *Mail&Guardian* founder, Irwin Manoim, and decided to give it a try. We pulled in our joint internet publishing company, BIG Media, and its MD, Noko

Makgota. Between us, we knew about the internet, and we knew about journalism, but very little about books, retailing or e-publishing. So we recruited former Exclusive Books boss Fred Withers to complete our team, and later brought in an e-publishing project manager, Liana Meadon.

We decided to focus on non-fiction and to try a range of different writers and subjects, and see what might work. We commissioned a number of pieces of between 5 000 and 15 000 words and we intend to sell them individually for \$2.99 each. This being the global internet, we had to do it in a global currency.

We went out to talk to writers: we will give you 30% royalties and if this works, you will earn more than you can from almost any other writing in this country, we told them. They loved it – and many of them signed up instantly – including Jonny Steinberg, Justice Malala, Mandy Weiner, Kevin Bloom, Jacob Dlamini, Andrew Feinstein, Fred de Vries, Liz McGregor...

But there is a big if in there. This is a new, untested idea and we would have to create a market and an audience. How many can we

sell? More than most books? As many copies as a weekly paper like the *Mail&Guardian*? What would people be prepared to pay for a single piece? How many might they buy? What kind of work would they buy? What device would they want to read it on?

There are some ventures in America doing similar things, like byliner.com. And of course there are Kindle Singles. Many writers are trying self-publishing on Amazon, but it is easy to get lost among their millions of titles.

We would be different. We would curate only the most interesting material with a South African flavour, and we would create a website that would build a community of people interested in good writing and reporting from this country.

We would make it possible to read it on any device, or print it out.

We would call it MampoerShorts (and the site is www.mampoer.co.za). And what we would offer would be like that local moonshine: a little bit would pack a big punch.

We would be experimental, and try and discover what kind of stuff people wanted, what they would be prepared to pay, how they would want to read it, and what length worked best. This was going to be an adventure, and we have to take risks to find out what would succeed and what would fail.

So by the time you read this, a test site should be up, and the full site will be launched when the glitches have been fixed. We will publish a new piece about once a fortnight.

So here's an invitation to join our e-publishing adventure: come along to mampoer.co.za and sample something. Bring your credit card. Buy one for a friend. Send one to your mother. Sign up for a year. Tell everyone you know about it. Fill your shot glass, raise it and toast South Africa's writers.