

Jozi Book Fair Launches 2024 Theme

By The Jozi Book Fair Team

11 May 2024

On 11 May 2024, the Jozi Book Fair (JBF) launched the 2024 theme and issued a Call for Action for public participation to shape the 16th JBF. Established in 2009 as a project of Khanya College, the JBF aims to address the poor culture of reading and writing in South Africa. The launch, attended by 160 people; including children (Poetry Buddies), youth (Tsohang Batjha), cultural workers, post-school youth, Community Healthcare Workers, coordinators, and friends of the Jozi Book Fair, saw participation from various organisations such as PUSH, Rena Le Lona, Benchmarks, Habitat-61 Creative Hub, Page to Stage, Imbumba, Sakha Kids, Fountain of Love Children's Foundation, Afrika Groups of Sweden, Gauteng Community Health Care Forum, and others.

Over the years, the JBF has become a platform for the public, including small and self-publishers, children, youth, artists, cultural workers, and social movements; to engage, share ideas, and explore literature. It is a Book Fair from below, accessible to those who typically do not have access to book fairs and literature festivals. The call for action invites the public to host events — book launches, poetry readings, discussions, seminars — and to exhibit and sell their books at the fair.

The theme of the 2024 JBF is ***Literature and Solidarity in Times of Crisis*** and it gives us an opportunity to critically reflect and understand the many crises facing South Africa and the world. From rising levels of unemployment, crime and water scarcity in South Africa, to wars, genocide, and increasing climate disasters globally, it is clear that life is increasingly fragile and poverty and social inequality is widespread. This year's theme also offers us the opportunity to explore how people cope, work together to find solutions, and build solidarity in such times of crises. We encourage everyone to reflect, and draw on our common heritage: literature, arts, culture and struggle.

The launch was opened by Father Mokesh, chairperson of the Khanya College Board, who emphasised the importance of reading and having reading groups. He highlighted the challenges of accessing books due to their high cost and the lack of libraries in working class schools and communities, which contribute to a poor culture of reading. Father Mokesh also paid tribute to the Late Dr. Motsoko Pheko who has been an exhibitor at the Jozi Book Fair from 2010, and who passed away in April 2024.

Dr. Maria Van Driel, Khanya College Director, underscored the importance of this year's theme, particularly in light of the current global crises and chaos. She discussed the situation in Palestine and how we can use mutual aid to organise and unite working class communities for a common goal.

Dr. Van Driel also paid tribute to Jozi Book Fair patrons and friends, including the late Poet Laureate Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, who taught writing skills and poetry to the youth in 2016; Poet Laureate Wally Serote; Poet Laureate James Matthews, who spent time with the youth; Khanya Board Member Luli Callinicos, whose book *Gold and Workers* has been read each year in Khanya's study groups; the late Ronnie

Govender, and Zakes Mda; who have all donated their books for reprint. She emphasised on the significant contributions of the JBF Patrons and supporters in making literature accessible and allowing JBF to reprint and distribute books to the youth.

The Poetry Buddies (children) and Tsohang Batjha (youth) read their published work, demonstrating JBF's belief that writers can be nurtured. Youth also shared testimonials on the impact of the JBF, with Brent Sibindi from Tsohang Batjha expressing how the Fair taught him to read, love books, and participate in a short story competition.

Andile Shongwe, a six-year beneficiary now joining the Forum for Activist Journalism (FAJ), highlighted JBF as a safe space for improving reading and writing skills and learning about history. "The Jozi Book Fair has been a safe space for youth and children to improve their reading and writing skills in South Africa, it has its own way of bringing people together through study groups, poetry and reading sessions". He added that the Jozi Book Fair has given youth a chance to learn about their history and can vouch on how participating in the project has helped him develop his understanding and English vocabulary.

The audience enjoyed performances by poet Belita Andre, who participated in the JBF since she was in high school, and Page to Stage, who performed their play *Resist my People*, dedicated to Palestinian resistance. To understand further what is happening in Gaza, the youth also watched the film *Angel of Gaza* by Palestinian filmmaker Ahmed Mansour, followed by a discussion on solidarity and calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

The launch also included parallel skills workshops in poetry, theatre, writing, and reading, tailored to different constituencies. Participants spent three hours learning and engaging in these workshops. The launch showcased the ongoing work of the Jozi Book Fair, which culminates in the **JBF 2024 Festival scheduled to take place from 18-20 October 2024 at Newtown Park, Johannesburg.**

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