

National

Going to the highest bidder



This painting of a sailing ship entering Grand Harbour by Anton Schranz together with other paintings, furniture and *objets d'art* will go under the hammer between November 19 and 21. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi » Story on centre spread

Talking Point

Görg Mallia

Dr Mallia is chairman of the National Book Council



Is there really a book crisis?

I will not start this with the usual patter about how books are still valid in today's electronic world. I do not think anyone really doubts that anymore. The change that has come over society and its reading habits are real and tangible but the book still exists in droves, is valid and will be with us for the foreseeable future.

However, Malta does have its difficulties when it comes to books. The Maltese are notoriously reluctant readers, though the research about how deep this cultural welt is and where it stems from is still ongoing. This does not mean that speculation is not rife regarding causes: short and bumpy bus rides, a climate that is more amenable to outdoor activities rather than sedentary reading, a

lack of book culture infusion in the homes, a rather too formal approach to books in schools, to name but a few.

Add to this a market that is minuscule and a bilingualism that is positive in itself, but often divides reading language preference, to the detriment of the home-grown product and we have a crisis in the making.

This year in Malta we have seen the death of a major publisher, the loss of a national newspaper and the closure of a number of significant printing presses. The reasons for these might be many, and not all of them relevant to the topic being discussed here, but the reality is that the crunch seems to be cultural as well as credit-based. After all, it is only natural that financial difficulties tend to hit

those areas that are "non-essential" to basic living first. But it will be a sad world indeed without the cultural and artistic mainstays that make our life worth living.

The situation of our book manufacturing industry - our publishers - is not a happy one. The industry is actually quite a vibrant one and the strides taken in the past years are significantly evident in the production values that make the Maltese book a viable competitor to the foreign one, even though the latter's overheads are far lower because of the size of its native market. But this industry receives very little help overall. It is considered to be a cultural entity rather than an industrial one. The fact that it employs people, has a capital outlay and supplies products that are essential to the well-

being of the nation, as well as providing an important infusion to the national identity, count for very little when it comes to recognition of its value to the country. At this rate, publishers might soon just go for those publications that sell, killing diversity in the market and stunting the growth of literature that depends mainly on the book to thrive.

The National Book Council's role in this and other areas that help keep the book hale and hearty is helped by the enthusiasm the councillors bring to the voluntary work they perform and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport's constant moral backing. But it is impeded by a severe lack of funding that seems to be the order of the day in all things cultural. Even an appeal to the

Good Causes Fund to help the Malta Book Fair has so far been left unheeded, after having been rejected once. It seems that the furthering of culture, and book culture in particular, is not considered to be a good cause in this fair country of ours.

One hopes that the Malta Book Fair, organised by the council and by the Libraries Department at the Mediterranean Conference Centre, Valletta between today and Sunday, and which shows the wealth of books on offer to the Maltese public, in defiance of the problems listed here, will be a roaring success, visited by the thousands that normally go, and more. So that the public can show the nation that the book is important to life and the well-being of society.

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