

THE **C**ONVERSATION

Peter Randall: a pioneering publisher who established the radical Ravan Press in South Africa

Published: 27 June 2024

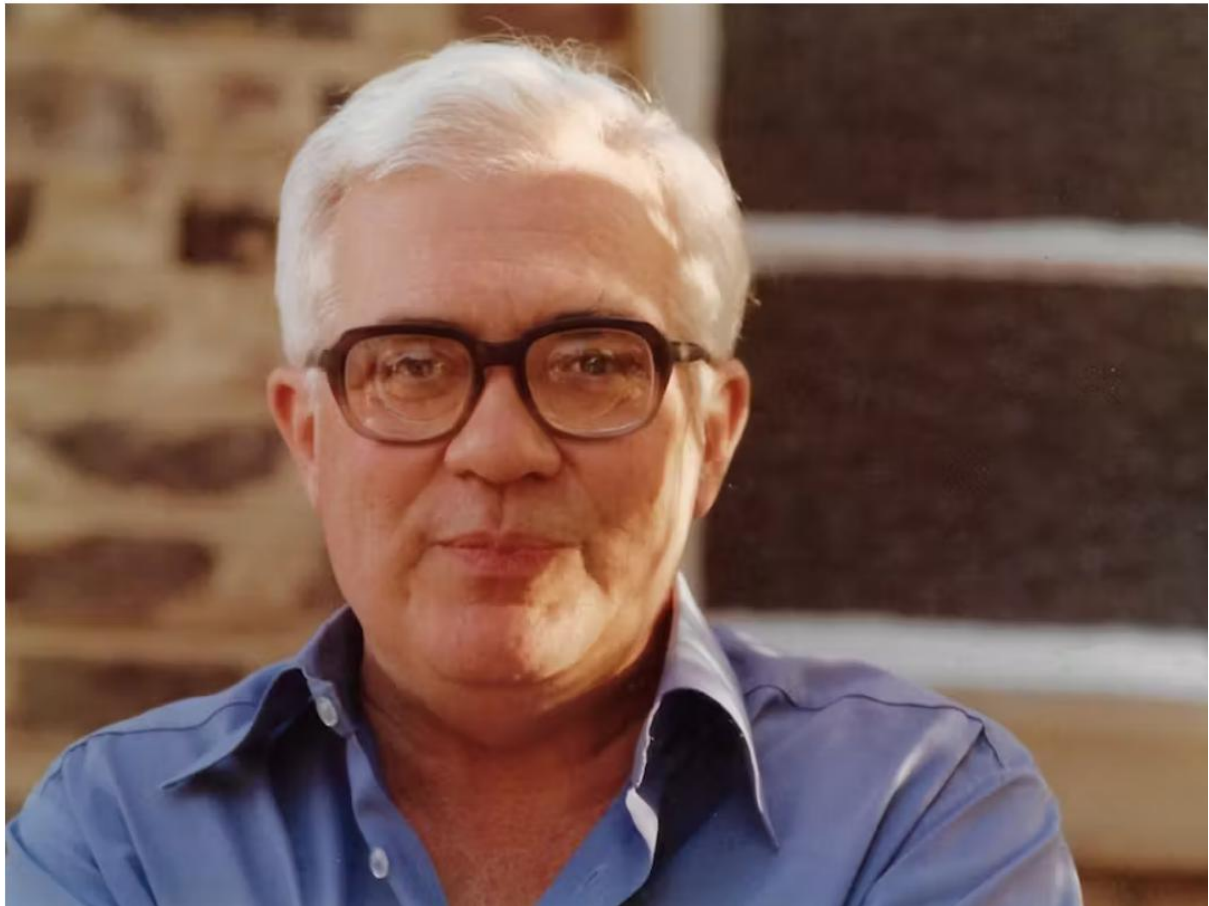
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Disclosure statement

Beth le Roux received funding from the National Research Foundation while conducting research on Ravan Press.



Peter Randall (1935-2024). Courtesy the Randall family

Peter Randall, a pioneering South African activist publisher and educator, passed away on 5 June 2024 in Johannesburg. He was the co-founder of Ravan Press, which published books critical of the racist apartheid state.

Randall was born in Durban in 1935. He was a gifted scholar but was at odds with the country's political environment. From 1948 onwards, the white minority government passed a series of highly repressive laws to entrench apartheid's "separate development" policies.

Randall believed in the innate equality of all and his moral objections to racially segregated classrooms led him to leave teaching to raise awareness about the wrongs of apartheid. He first did so at the South African Institute for Race Relations, an independent think tank conducting research on racial policies.



National Women's Day Committee/Ravan Press

From 1969, he worked for the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid South Africa, whose work is summarised in his book A Taste of Power (1973). The study project developed into the radical anti-apartheid publisher Ravan Press, founded by Randall and theologians Beyers Naudé and Danie van Zyl in 1972. The name Ravan comes from the names of the three founders, although their logo featured a black bird sitting on a book.

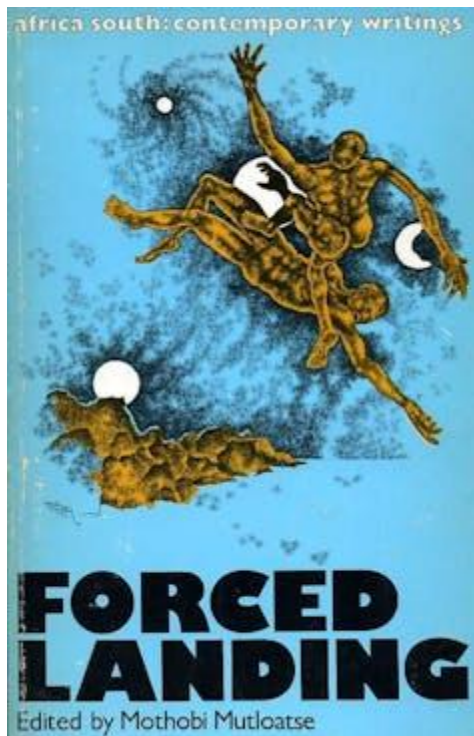
Randall sought to actively make a difference – as an educator, a writer, a publisher and even a candidate in the 1974 elections. He saw books and learning as a platform for opening minds and bringing about social change. He would be banned by the apartheid state in 1977.

As a scholar of publishing in South Africa, I have researched the history of Ravan Press and other oppositional publishers. In the process, I interviewed Randall and also got to know him through his letters, manuscript reports and documents in various archives.

Publishers often operate behind the scenes, almost invisible to the general public. Randall's legacy lies in the lasting influence of the writers he supported, as well as his tireless efforts to create awareness of the effects of apartheid and the need for social change – at great personal cost.

Apartheid's war on books

It may be difficult in the democratic era, when the president can be criticised to his face in parliament, to understand just how much courage was required to face down the repressive South African state of the 1970s and 80s.



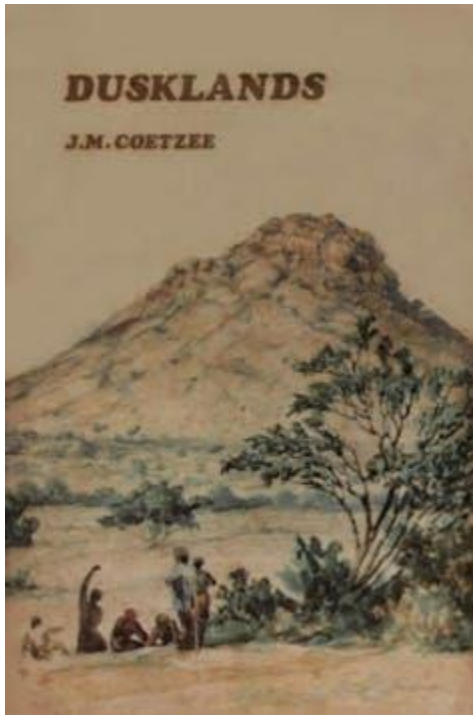
Staffrider/Ravan Press

The government cracked down on any dissenting views, using a range of legislation and restrictions to control information. While books could be censored, authors could also be restricted by a banning order which meant their movements were monitored. They could not attend gatherings of more than two people and they could not be published or even quoted in a published book. It was illegal to own a book that contained the writings of a banned person.

The system was effective, although it was applied inconsistently and often crudely. Ravan – with fellow oppositional publishers David Philip (founded in 1971) and black-owned Skotaville Publishers (founded in 1982) – provided a platform and took the risks of publishing voices, especially black authors, often highly critical of discrimination and inequality.

Ravan Press

Starting with just three staff members, Randall took decisions and performed almost all editorial and managerial tasks himself.



Ravan Press

He was able to promote authors whose views were far more radical than his own: Black Consciousness-inspired clerics such as Barney Pityana and Allan Boesak, academics such as Rick Turner and Chabani Manganyi, protest poets and novelists like James Matthews, Mbulelo Mzamane and Miriam Tlali (the first black South African woman to publish a novel locally), and avant-garde writers like Wopko Jensma.

Ravan was also the first to publish the work of J.M. Coetzee, who would later receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Referring to Dusklands, Coetzee's debut work, Randall told me:

This unsolicited manuscript by an unknown author, which had been rejected everywhere else, was the work of a writer of genius.

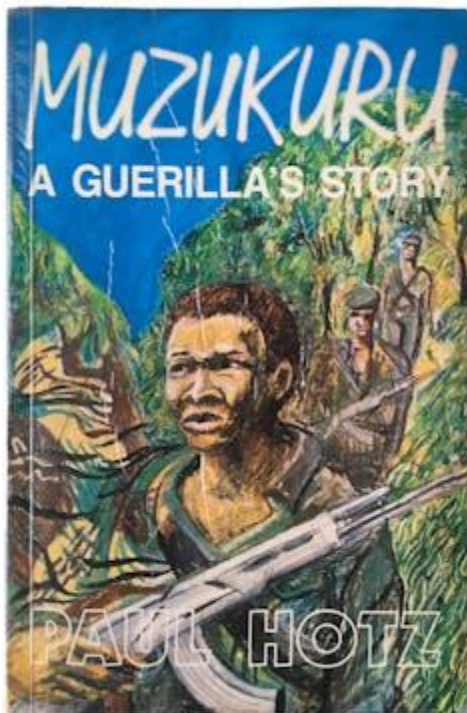
They were flooded with manuscripts from young black writers. Without Ravan, many would not have reached an audience. Nobel-winning novelist Nadine Gordimer, who served on Ravan's board, referred to it as "a tiny, lively, publishing firm" that published "books that showed what the young black consciousness movements were thinking".

At the time, most South African publishing favoured Afrikaans writers or was focused on schools. State-sponsored educational publishing thrived, especially at the three major houses, HAUM-De Jager, Perskor/Educum and Naspers.

International publishers dominated leisure reading. Randall lamented in a 1977 letter that is today housed in an archive:

I sometimes think only lunatics try to publish anything other than travel guides and gardening books in this country!

In contrast, Ravan bravely championed critical writing, for example the papers of the Black Renaissance Convention, a civil society group of churches and student organisations, immediately after the Soweto Uprising of 1976. Randall and his team – including his wife, Isobel, and even sometimes his children – would work through the night to edit and print books that commercial printers deemed too risky. Ravan often lost money on books that could not be sold and on court appeals against arbitrary banning orders. Based on their intense idealism, profit did not feature as a motive – but Randall’s ingrained frugality helped keep the company afloat.



Ravan Press

The security police and other agents of the state were extremely aggressive in their treatment of Ravan Press: authors and staff were harassed and monitored; books were confiscated; and their offices were raided and then firebombed. Randall’s phone calls were bugged, his house monitored and his passport confiscated.

Speaking to me in interviews, he recounted some lighter moments such as a “surreal” evening drinking cheap wine with a member of State Security who came to his home to ask questions about the people he knew.

Banned

In October 1977, Randall received a banning order, along with his fellow Ravan founders, on charges relating to the Suppression of Communism Act. At least 40 black leaders were detained in the same month, and 18 organisations were declared unlawful. Ravan would continue under the leadership of Mike Kirkwood, and later Glenn Moss and Monica Seeber.

When I interviewed Randall, he referred to his life as being divided: BB (before banning) and AB (after banning). While he had fearlessly put his ideals first, the banning took its toll on the couple and their three children: he could not attend school events without permission, for instance, or even enter the premises of a publisher or educational institution.

An everyday radical

Over time, he was allowed to work as a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand and he later earned a PhD in the field of teacher training. He continued to work for Ravan, behind the scenes and often via his wife. Later, he was sometimes bemused to reflect that he was renowned – and celebrated – for a relatively short period of his life.

Former Ravan colleague Gill Berchowitz called him, in an interview as part of my ongoing research, “a radical in the most fundamental and down-to-earth way”.

His legacy reminds us that publishing is not only about profit and entertainment, but can also make a crucial contribution to social and political awareness – even in a democratic society.

Reference:

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Beth le Roux, Associate Professor, University of Pretoria. (2024). [Peter Randall: a pioneering publisher who established the radical Ravan Press in South Africa](https://theconversation.com/peter-randall-a-pioneering-publisher-who-established-the-radical-ravan-press-in-south-africa), from *The Conversation*, 27 June 2024 [online]. Available at <https://theconversation.com/>. Accessed on 8 September 2025

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