

# Take a leaf out of library gathering's book

**I**N HIS prime, the great Kurt Vonnegut loved dropping little shorty gems in little shorty words into little shorty sentences that nobody could misunderstand. Some of us need him. He also loved volunteer firemen.

His most quoted sentence is "I can think of no more stirring symbol of man's humanity to man than a fire engine" and most of those prime-era books feature a volunteer fireman being bold, generous, honest and the same person deep down as he appears to be on the surface.

Like Vonnegut, I have a special respect for a particular occupation but mine is librarians.

Nobody does more than a librarian to find you what you want and nobody makes less of an issue of it. Librarian culture says mountaineering through archives and bench-pressing boxes is part of the job, as is pretending you did nothing more than snap your fingers.

So, when I was press-ganged into the University of Johannesburg's library fundraising dinner, I was in principle a willing press-gangee but, heck, I had no time.

I snuck in late, aiming to say a few hellos and then sidle out a back door while the people I knew all thought I was sitting at someone else's table.

It didn't work like that. The flow and the interaction was too strong and full, from before I got out the lift. So, especially, was the South Africanness.

Many times one can feel our fruit-salad of colours and cultures and backgrounds making a rich mix but there are fewer times that every part of the mix is on the same wavelength in the same room at the same time, all fully and equally at home.

UJ's library on Monday night was that, par excellence. From the guy in black tie and tux, with pens in his breast pocket, to the guy in no shoes, long

## STOEP TALK



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Rich mix of colours and cultures gets me high on South Africanness

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socks, bare knees and exotic pyjamas, no one was there on sufferance, no one an outsider in someone else's cultural terrain; everyone belonged.

Smart people, like head of libraries Rookaya Bawa, VC Ihron Rensburg, MC Carel Nolte and professor extraordinaire Pitika Ntuli had fun firing broadsides at the great misconception that libraries wither in the Age of Google. This while auctioning a fortune's worth of artwork chairs of many shades of artistry and more shades of sittability, from big names à la Stroud to school-goers à la Sechaba in Grade 11, speaking with quiet assurance of his commitment to promoting Braille in art.

UJ rolls on its Dean of Arts Federico Freschi as baritone and I assume this is home-side loyalty meeting amateur dramatics. Until he lets rip and I'm privileged to hear it.

When Hotstix Mabuse takes the stage and turns up the amps, the library

becomes a dancehall, twirling and reeling in free association of people who never expected to know each other, and likely once upon a time didn't want to.

Several hours after my scheduled escape, I make my way home on a high – not a mind-the-Breathalyser high, a South Africanism high.

I ask why, what made it great? Many answers. Partly it wasn't glitterati; a feel of real people who do real things more than of the cocktail circuit. Partly it was no judging; no political account-keeping over who owes who what to for having been born into the skin they are wearing. Partly, no jockeying over who is higher than who in the status stakes or, what's worse, the righteousness ritual.

Don't really know. What I know is that this kind of full-scale acceptance of person for person is what 1994 was meant to be about.

Here's to that '94 unity and largeness riding again, long and lasting.