

The quiet American bringing books to a nation

Small-scale literacy initiatives in the impoverished country are making profound strides in kindling a reading culture among youngsters **By Tibor Krausz**

It is a sight to warm the heart of any teacher, scores of schoolchildren absorbed in their books — and during a break from class.

Dozens of them are perched like birds on a wire on their elementary school's breeze block. Other students sit in areas of shade — their heads bowed in concentration.

Each one has a brand-new book in hand: A pocket-size alphabet book, a book of short stories, a science primer, or a collection of fairy- and folk-tales.

But this scene did not take place in Thailand, where you may be more accustomed these days to seeing children absorbed in games on their mobile phones. It took place in the village of Pakseuang, outside the historic capital of Luang Prabang in northern Laos.

The local youngsters, many of them wearing soiled and tattered old clothes, had just received the books at a "book party" held by members of staff at Big Brother Mouse, a small Lao publisher.

For children in the small landlocked nation, one of the world's poorest, storybooks for children have been almost nonexistent until recently. Apart from dog-eared old textbooks in village schools, most children have nothing to read. In many village schools teachers have only simple blackboards to use during lessons. Sometimes students have to do without even notebooks and pencils.

"I knew I couldn't do education reform here, but I could set up a small publishing project," says Sasha Alyson, founder of Big Brother Mouse, a small but thriving enterprise that has a bookish cartoon mouse for its logo. Mr Alyson's mission is to "make literacy fun for children in Laos".

The American and his energetic staffers of about 30 young Laotians, who are all in their late-teens and twenties, create amusing stories on local themes, record spoken folktales, and translate out-of-copyright foreign children's classics into Lao. The company also publishes titles on weightier subjects such as basic astronomy, history and zoology for local children.

Mr Alyson launched Big Brother Mouse in 2006 after he realised, while travelling in the country on a trip from Thailand, that Laotian youngsters simply had no books to read. The retired publisher from Boston, Massachusetts, started a non-profit publishing venture, which is run from a modest two-storey building in the heart of Luang Prabang.

His initiative has helped open up a whole new world of literacy for children throughout the countryside. In just seven years, the small publishing outfit has produced more than 250 high-quality books for young readers, giving an estimated 160,000 children their very first book of their own.



OPENING MINDS: Children read books that they have received from Big Brother Mouse during a Book Party by the charity in their village.

To illustrate each new book, the publisher employs talented local teenage artists, picked from local schools through drawing competitions.

"Very few people read books in Laos," explains Siphone Vouthisakdee, 28, who works for Big Brother Mouse and grew up in a

village where only five people have finished primary school. "For one thing, local books are not interesting. For another, no one encourages children to read."

Big Brother Mouse employees do. They regularly travel across the rugged Lao countryside with heavy stacks of books strapped

to their backs to reach remote hamlets, many of which do not even have electricity.

When they arrive at the villages, they hold book parties and hand out books to children. They also organise "swap libraries" in the bamboo huts of local volunteers so that children can exchange books they have already



TURNING A NEW PAGE: Left and right, children in various northern Lao villages are immersed in their new books.

finished reading for new ones.

"It's fun to read and learn from books," confirms Boonken Thongsamai, an 11-year-old boy from Pakseuang village, while he glances up from a book of stories for a second. Presently, he has his nose buried again in his new book.

Khamla, a shy nine-year-old girl who wears a Young Pioneer's red kerchief, chooses *Animals of Africa* this time around. At a previous book party she received *The Monkey King* storybook. "When I read, I feel happy," she says.

The school's headmaster, Phoonsook Bhandasak, stresses the importance of developing reading habits among youngsters. "These children are from poor families, but now they have books to read and learn about the world. Their reading skills have already improved a lot," he says.

The literacy rate in Laos, an impoverished communist holdout of six million people, is around 70%, with female literacy rates at only 63%. In Thailand, the overall literacy rate is 93% with more than 90% of both males and females above the age of 15 being able to read and write.

Nor is there a dearth of fine reading material in the Kingdom, where bookstores are stacked with titles by myriad local authors and the translations of foreign bestsellers from the *Harry Potter* books to Dan Brown's mysteries to more substantive works of world literature.

Yet neither a high level of literacy nor the ready availability of books has translated into strong reading habits in the country. Rare is the sight of a young Thai reading a book for pleasure — other than an installment of some popular Japanese manga comic book series.

The reasons for this are manifold. Perhaps most importantly, many traditionally run schools, heavily invested in tried-and-trusted techniques of rote learning, rarely encourage students to pursue a route of intellectual curiosity for its own sake. Students are expected to read only their textbooks, if that.

A recent nationwide survey by the National Statistics Office found that on average Thais, aged 10 and older, spend only three minutes a day reading. At normal reading speeds, that translates into fewer than 10 lines of text per day. Youngsters in the crucial 10-14 age bracket spend only an average of 1.28 minutes reading a day.

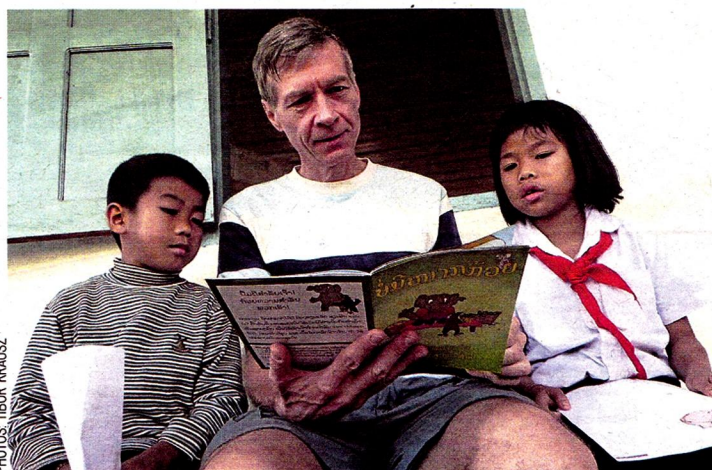
Overall, only a meagre 4.4% of Thais aged 10 and over are believed to be regular readers. The rate stands at 8.6% in urban areas and at 2.6% in rural regions. The vast majority of Thais can read, but they simply don't.

To counter the trend of a poor reading culture, the Ministry of Education's Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education has recently launched its "Smart Book Home" project with the aim of inculcating in Thais of varying ages a love of reading for pleasure. The initiative specially targets youngsters and people living in rural areas.

"The project calls for the establishment of community libraries, or community learning centres, in all villages nationwide," the ministry said in a statement. "The objective is to provide opportunities for local people to have greater access to lifelong education through reading," it added.

The government has designated April 2, the birthday of HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, as the Love of Reading Day. Its Smart Book Home project seeks to establish some 42,000 community libraries in the country's 80,000 or so villages by the end of this year. Such libraries could be set up in village coffee shops, the homes of community leaders, or village pavilions with resident volunteers working to help promote reading locally.

Up in Laos, Mr Alyson and his small local staff have been conducting these projects for years.



BIG BROTHERS: Above, Sasha Alyson reads to two elementary school students in Pakseuang. Top, children at the elementary school of Pakseuang village listen intently as a Big Brother Mouse staffer reads for them.

"The goal," the American philanthropist says, "is for children to enjoy reading, look forward to it, and develop the habit of reading."

A useful method he has devised is to encourage older students to read aloud with younger siblings, with parents, or with other children in school. "Lao people, like Thais, like doing things together. We promote reading aloud as a way to enjoy books with others."

The publisher has also distributed 40,000 copies of its booklet *The Joy of Reading*, which gives teachers and appointed storytellers basic tips in how to read stories out loud to children. These include changing their voice for different characters or situations; using gestures and facial expressions, much like trained actors, to animate action; and pausing occasionally for dramatic effect.

"With a little practise, storytellers discover

that this is fun for them, and for their audience," Mr Alyson says. "After being read to and enjoying reading on their own every day, children acquire a valuable habit. Parents and teachers should strive to see that habit firmly established before children get their first mobile phone."

A lot also depends on the availability of quality books. The stress is on "quality", Mr Alyson tells *Spectrum*. "Good books are better than mediocre books. Anyone who's ever read a book knows that. Yet libraries and reading programmes are consistently measured by the number of books they have, not their quality."

"Quantity is easy to measure, quality is not," he says. "We've seen literacy programmes using books that simply didn't appeal to children. The adults simply concluded that 'the

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Very few people read books in Laos. For one thing, local books are not interesting. For another, no one encourages children to read

children just don't want to read'. But the real fault was in the books."

He adds: "Remember [the craze about] *Harry Potter*? There's a big difference between children's response to an okay book and their response to a great book. Parents, schools and libraries need to search out the best books, rather than take whatever comes along, as if books were all interchangeable."

The American publisher's relentless efforts to promote literacy in Laos are paying marked dividends.

"Before Big Brother Mouse brought books, the rate of students who graduated each year from grade one and grade two was 60% to 70%," says teacher Khamsing in Natak Village in Xayaburi, a Lao province bordering Thailand.

"Now it's about 90%." ■