

**THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERATURE
IN THE LIFE OF THE CHILD**

By

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BOOKS FOR ALL REASONS

I once saw two cocks playing lawn tennis, a dog flying an aeroplane and a plump bear wearing an apron and a chef's cap and stirring something in a pot. It's unbelievable? Not when one realises that these animals were on a poster - a reading promotion poster prepared by a Latin American children's literature association for the International Children's Book Day which falls on April 2 every year.

One of the cocks was holding an open book in his left hand and a tennis racket in his right. The book was about learning to play lawn tennis. The dog in the plane also had a book on flying in one hand. The bear in the kitchen was consulting an open recipe book held in its right hand. There were other animals doing other things which they studied from the relevant books. The poster's slogan was "Books for all Reasons".

Yes, there are different books for different purposes. Many Nigerians think of books in terms of passing examinations in the different school, college *or* university subjects. Well, passing examinations is important for we live in a competitive world in which certificates qualify us for certain jobs, certain responsibilities. But this is not the end *of* living. As the Good Book says, "Man shall not live by bread alone." Certificates may help us to earn our daily bread, but true living comes from all-round education. One must read different types of books. A person who has cultivated the reading habit is like a person who opens a window and feasts her eyes on an interesting landscape. She may be indoors but her mind roams far and wide. She learns not only about things around her, but about things in distant places which books bring closer to her; her horizon is widened as she becomes acquainted with different characters in books, with different customs and social habits. She becomes more understanding and tolerant of other people's

cultures. Her mind is occupied and if the books she reads are good books, such preoccupation would be to her eternal benefit. While enjoying the company of the other people from time to time, her happiness does not depend entirely on such company. Since she has inner resources for amusing herself during her leisure hours. All this would be lost to the person who has not cultivated the reading habit. The reading habit is best cultivated when one is still young. Literature is a child's third parent. Like the father and the mother, literature helps to bring up a child by moulding his mind and developing his character. I shall now proceed to explain the different ways in which literature performs this important function. This is where children's literature comes in:

General Information Books

Some of these books teach him about the dignity of labour and occupy his hands and mind. Hobbies such as photography, writing, basket-making, making flower pot holders and all kinds of decorations are in this class of books. There are books on these hobbies and many more. For example, my children's literature collection includes eight books entitled *Fun With Shells*, *Decorating eggs*, *Painting stones*, *Painting China*, *Let's Use String*, *Printing*, *Making Pictures and Patterns*, and *Modelling, Building and Carving*. I also have in my possession a homemade wooden jewel box decorated with shells and a decorated mug and saucer which I painted myself in Tokyo, Japan in 1976. It took me four hours, so it was not easy. But how rewarding! I am proud of my effort. Pride of achievement is something that must be inculcated in every child. Children's efforts should not be directed solely towards material benefits. Children must learn to pose themselves altruistic and self development challenges and rise up to such challenges. For people who rise up to challenges are the ones who contribute most to nation

building.

Challenges can be posed to young people by other types of information books which explain the nature of things around us: the universe, our physical make-up and the "why" and "how" of modern technology. No country can advance technologically if her children are not oriented towards technology even at its most basic form. Children cannot be creative if they have not been taught and shown how things work. Children must learn about their country's animals and birds. They must learn about its traditional musical instruments and air crafts, for these are important aspects of their cultural heritage.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

Joseph Conrad, in *Heart of Darkness*, writing about Kurtz, the chief of the Inner Station in the heart of Africa at a time when it was known as the Dark Continent, says,

'There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself.' In these words, Conrad paints a frightening picture of a man without a point of reference and without any 'ideals to which he could aspire, a man to whom Conrad could not appeal 'in the name or anything high or low.'

A person needs to have personal identity, a point of reference from which he can operate. The importance of identity has been emphasised over and over by the number of people of African descent who have left their abode in distant lands to come to Africa in search of their roots. These roots lie in the past and the past is history.

Charlotte S. Huck and Doris A. Young stress this in their book *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*. They say:

'Man would not be man without his historical heritage; everything he does is built on the lives and thoughts of people he never saw or knew. Homes, food, clothing, language, schools, beliefs, songs, games, all have developed from contributions of former generations. Man is the only creature who can build all the past, who can profit from the experience of others, and begin where others left off. The wisdom of the ages may be accumulated, refined and transmitted.'

Very young children have difficulty in establishing time concepts. They only have a concept of 'here and now'. As they grow older they begin to relate past events to their own experiences and, in this way, gradually establish their own frame of reference for time relationships. The study of history provides an avenue for giving young people a panoramic view of all that happened to mankind in the past. Man's historical heritage is a foundation for understanding the present and giving him an insight into the future. A knowledge and understanding of the past can give young people cultural identity. Good history books can make the past live for young people. Literature for young people provides three types of books which enrich and extend their study of history. These are:

1. Specially written factual presentation of history
2. Biographies of great men and women of the past
3. Historical fiction

Factual Books of History

These books must feature the achievements of people in various fields of endeavour in order to motivate young people towards higher achievements. A good factual book of history not only answers children's questions, but also stretches their imagination. Factual books or history must

be objective in their reporting and should give both sides of the story. The facts should be presented in an orderly manner and in simple language which can be easily understood by children. Above all, they should be presented in an interesting manner, not in a drab, unimaginative manner as often happens. The historian who writes for children must be prepared to do a great deal of research with the aim of re-creating the atmosphere or the events that occurred so long ago. In this way, children are helped to identify with historical personages. An example is Jaja of Opobo in my award-winning book *Readers' Theatre: Twelve plays for young people*.

Biography

Young people pass through stages of hero-worship. Well-written biographies provide them with heroes more important than themselves whom they can love and respect. In present-day Nigeria, young people need new models of greatness which they can emulate - honest people who through their industry and integrity have made positive contributions to the progress of the Nigerian society.

A number of biographies have been published for Nigerian children. There is the Onibonoje *African Junior Literature Series* featuring 'Things that great men do.' There is also the Oxford University Press Series *Makers of Nigeria* which includes titles such as *Samuel Ajai Crowther* and *Usman Dan Fodio* both by J. R. Milson.

It is generally agreed that children's biographies should be limited to people whose lives were worthy of emulation. One would not, for example, write a biography of the notorious armed robber Anini for the consumption of young people. On the other hand, there is a tendency to write biographies of only very important personalities in history. And yet there are less important persons whose lives are worthy of emulation but who are usually

ignored by writers. These are ordinary citizens who in their own humble way have contributed to the development of the nation. There must be many pioneers whose lives are worthy of the attention of children's biographers. One such pioneer was the clergyman portrayed by me in my autobiography *My Father's Daughter*. This versatile, industrious clergyman whose motto appeared to be "service to others" was also the school manager, scoutmaster, doctor, postal agent and peacemaker to his Christian parishioners. This book published in 1965, has become a children's classic.

In a good biography there must be fair presentation of the subject. He must be a real human being, not superman. Young people may be willing to suspend disbelief while watching "superman" on television, but the same young people would find it difficult to identify with a real life hero who is impossibly good, unbelievably courageous, who never makes a mistake in his life and who never for one moment has any doubts about what he is going to do. Even Jesus Christ had his moments of doubt and temptation. Writing on this subject, Fran Martin says in *Stop Watering Down Biographies*:

'There is a convention that great men and women invariably started out as normal and likeable youngsters, good mixers, and good sports. There is no inkling of the fact that loneliness and oddity often bear a dark fruit of their own. By pushing these books, we muff our best chance to show children that the awkward child, the poor athlete, the boy who comes to school in funny clothes may be the Lincoln and the Thomas Edison of the future.'

Biography, therefore, should portray a real living person, not an idealisation of the person. Through a balanced portrayal of the background of their lives, their conversations, their actions, children are given a picture of a person they can strive to emulate. A biography which comes close to fulfilling this requirement is *Samuel Ajai Crowther* by Milson which makes judicious use of dialogue and incidents from Crowther's life. A memorable

example is the incident of the shoes. A student in Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, Crowther is summoned with three other monitors to the principal's office. They are given shoes to wear with these words, 'When you go to "church on a Sunday in future you will wear shoes so that you present a good appearance to other members of the congregation of St George's Cathedral.'

The boys find **it** is agony to walk in the tight shoes and, Crowther, displaying the leadership which characterises all his later actions, soon devises a way of keeping the Reverend Haensel happy by wearing the shoes when within sight of him and taking them off on the long walk between the college and the church. The principal catches the boys barefoot a couple of times and in the end, buys them comfortable shoes which he should have done in the first place.

Biographical plays can help young people to project themselves into the personalities of great people. But they have to be real plays, not biographical narration disguised in chunks of dialogue - as happens in *Basorun Oluyole* by Kola Akinlade in the Onibonoje *Ajikan Junior Lilerature Series*. The book also lacks action which is a prerequisite for good plays for children.

Historical Fiction

Some amount of historical fiction has been published for young readers in Nigeria. *The Boy Slave* and its sequel *The Return of Shellinza* by Kola Onadipe readily come to mind. *The Boy Slave* is the story of a boy, Shettima, who is taken as a slave by Sheikh Maitama's men to the edge of the Sahara in the mid-nineteenth century. In *The Return of Shettima*, Shettima grows up and wins his freedom from slavery. The two books are very well written. They contain breathtaking episodes and some beautiful descriptions of northern Nigeria.

"Good historical fiction must not just sugar-coat history but tell stories

which are interesting in their own right. The stories must make the historical period come alive for the readers. The author must not only re-create the physical environment of the times but also capture the spirit and feelings of the age. The stories must be historically accurate and authentic, in presenting both the everyday life of their characters and –the events of the period.

Well written books of historical fiction contain a theme. The theme may be a historical one based on the issues of the time or a universal one such as the desire for freedom as in *The Boy Slave*.

Historical fiction for young people usually has a hero who is a boy or a girl experiencing the life of his time. Young people identify more with other young persons than with adults. The young hero and the young heroine must, however, be believable.

They must conform to what young people of their age are capable of doing. It follows, therefore, that authors of historical fiction for young people must not only know their facts but must also have a thorough knowledge of childhood and adolescence.

There are many periods of Nigerian history which lend themselves to treatment as historical fiction. The Civil War is a good example. It contains ingredients for writing about courage, resourcefulness, family togetherness and patriotism.

THE VALUE OF FOLKTALES

In traditional African societies, cultural values were inculcated in young people through folktales, myths, riddles and proverbs which taught them what was acceptable in their societies. Young people learnt to conform to the norms of their society through tales which told about virtue and vice, wealth and poverty, selfishness and selflessness. The dividing lines between

these opposites were made very clear in the storytelling sessions.

Now that tradition-directed societies are giving way to inner-directed societies, traditional story telling sessions have become a rarity even in the village. But all is not lost. The tales still exist - in written form. There are many collections of African folktales and published single folktales as well as modern tales based on folklore. The most successful are those which are not mere summaries or destylised narratives but lively retellings which make use of oral traditional storytelling techniques such as repetition, refrains and rhythm, all of which encourage audience participation. This is not easy to achieve but a few authors such as Chinua Achebe and Ada Onwu and Mabel Segun have captured the traditional elements in their presentations.

BOOKS FOR UNDERSTANDING SELF AND OTHERS

These comprise books about emotional needs, character-building books and multicultural books.

Books About Emotional Needs

At a certain age, the world of folklore becomes remote to children and they are more interested in the world around them. They want real characters they can identify with. It is in their interest and that of society in general that they be shown the real world with its imperfections, cruelties, injustice, not in the sugar-coated pill form of the folktale in which an animal is often personified, but in its real form so that they can understand themselves and other people. They need books about the emotional needs of people and their reasons for behaving as they do; they need books about growing up; books about people who have special problems. Let us examine these in greater detail.

A young person needs to be helped to have a concept of himself as a worthy

person who can succeed, a person who is loved and who can in turn, respect and love others. Psychologists tell us that deviance in a young person can be caused by a feeling of not being loved. A book that portrays this feeling of inadequacy can help young people to understand why others behave the way they do and "understanding", we are told by the psalmist, is the beginning of wisdom. An understanding child will most likely become a caring adult.

Understanding can come through identification with the characters in a book. A character may have similar problems with those of the child reader and this helps the reader to understand his own problems; shyness, for example, and being afraid. Fear is a universal emotion. A book can help a child to conquer fear - whether it is fear of the dark, of heights or of the elements.

Similarly, a child can be helped to come to terms with physical disability: blindness, deafness, being a cripple, or just being "different", like having a disproportional nose or bulbous eyes.

Nana Wilson- Tagoe does this successfully in *Efiok Begins Again*. This is the story of a boy who, it is said, "seemed to be afraid of his own shadow". A tall, gangling boy, he is ashamed not only of his height but also of his long, narrow face and large, bulging eyes which earn him the nickname "Frogface." One day, Efiok goes into a dreamlike trance in which he meets two old women through whom he overcomes his diffidence and learns to stand up for himself and live with his unflattering features, to the extent of even laughing when called "Frogface."

An awareness of the special problems of some individuals can be given to young readers through books. Examples are: the physically handicapped, beggars, the mentally ill, the rural child who feels out of place in the city, the migrant child who feels "different" everywhere. Two good examples of this type are book *Iheoma Comes To Stay* by Jelen Ofurum which treats the

subject of mental illness with understanding and compassion, and Zaynab Alkali's teenage fiction, *The Virtuous Woman* in which an illegitimate girl who is also crippled rises above these disabilities and wins the love of the man she adores.

Local problems such as child marriage and polygamy can also be portrayed in children's books. Unfortunately, polygamy, which features prominently in traditional folktales, seems to have become a taboo subject in modern realistic books for children. The cause needs to be studied, especially as today's forms of polygamy differ from the ancient type.

Certain universal social problems can also be treated in books - problems of alcoholism and drug abuse, for example. Books dealing with the problems of adolescence and parent-child conflict can also be useful. The adolescent child has a complex character because he/she is at that in-between stage when he/she is neither boy nor man, neither girl nor woman, but wants to be accorded the higher status. Teenage is a period of insecurity, of assertion of independence; indeed a period of confusion, and books such as Anji assai's *Tolulope* can help to clarify the confusion. In traditional societies, life was simple and the developing boy or girl lived and worked in an extended family system in which he or she could benefit from the wisdom of the older members of the family. But urbanisation, Western education, the narrowing of the family circle and the pre-occupation of parents with the "rat-race" have changed the traditional simple idyllic life to a life full of complex problems with the child exposed to a variety of influences, both salutary and insalutary, literature can substitute for the extended family.

Books for Multicultural, Inter-Ethnic and Inter-Racial Understanding

Literature can help a young child to discover his cultural heritage and establish cultural identity. This is very important in countries which have

been subjected to cultural imperialism. Books such as Ghanaian Meshack Asare's award-winning book *The Brassman's Secret* can lead a child back to his roots.

Books can also play a unifying role in national life. The sort of books that can play this role are books that portray the cultures of the different ethnic groups. A book such as Kola Onadipe's *Around Nigeria in Thirty Days* is a good example. Prejudices are acquired at an early age and should be dispelled before they become ineradicable. Better still, books can act as a preventive. Two very well written books on interracial understanding come from Southern Africa. *Crossing the Boundary: Fence* by Patricia Chater portrays the difficult friendship between two girls who lived on opposite sides of the apartheid divide, while in *Tinde in the Mountains* set in Southern Africa in 1800, three young people, a Xhosa, a Boer and a San or Bushman reach out to one another from their separate worlds and achieve interracial understanding through their adventures.

Specially Written Character-Building Books.

Finally, good literature can create in young people an awareness of the expectations of a decent society and acceptable behaviour patterns. People have often lamented in this country the absence of good public opinion. It is the absence of good public opinion –that makes the rich flaunt their obviously ill-gotten gains in the face of an impoverished people. It is lack of good public opinion that makes "sugar daddies" go to parties with teenagers and no questions asked. It is lack of good public opinion that makes people demand bribe openly. Where good public opinion exists, bad behaviour is frowned upon and only the incorrigibly depraved would persist in deviant behaviour of the flagrant type.

Acceptance of responsibility, good leadership, honesty, selflessness

and patriotism are some of the qualities which, if well portrayed in books can influence young people for their own good and for the good of society. Such books should not be preachy, for young people are quick to resent preachiness and may, out of sheer perversity, do the very opposite of what they are told. Books whose themes are subtly woven into the plot are more likely to have a positive effect on the young person than the routine mouthing of the pledge or parrotlike chanting of the National Anthem.

An example of the types of books being advocated is *Youth Day Parade* written by me during a writing workshop in Nairobi, Kenya. In this book, a schoolboy, Tunde, is given the responsibility of making arrangements for his schools' participation in the annual Youth Day parade. There is a prize for the school that marches best and Tunde is determined that his school should win the prize. But there are stumbling blocks in his way. The problem of the tattered banner is disposed of through his resourcefulness in designing a banner made of batik supported by palm branches with woven fronds. But the intractable trainee marchers send him *to* the brink of despair. Then he has a brainwave and goes to the Police College to watch the Police Band in action. A fortuitous meeting with the son of the drum major changes his fortune. The drum major's son who is a new pupil in Tunde's school and who has learnt the art of making fancy patterns in the air with a stick, is drafted into the marching team. His presence works like magic, the marchers become motivated and in the end Tunde's school wins the coveted prize. Resourcefulness, persistence, co-operation and pride of achievement are some of the values depicted in this story. Tunde works with a committee of his peers and also consults both his father and the headmaster from time to time. Thus he learns the value *of* consultation and teamwork. This story was dramatized in Readers Theatre.

BOOKS ABOUT GLOBAL CONCERNS

It is important in today's world for children *to* be made aware of global concerns such as the environment, gender discrimination, human rights, war, and peace. One *of* the most effective ways of creating this awareness is by providing them with well-written stories, poems and plays whose themes reflect these concerns.

So far most of the stories about the environment have been written in Southern Africa, but a beginning has been made in this part of the continent with Mabel Segun's *The Twins and the Tree Spirits* in which she weaves the need for tree planting into the story of a pair of twins, their grandfather and two warring tree spirits, Oroko and Erike.

Gender discrimination in African books often takes the form of a girl being denied access to schooling as in *Jande's Ambition* by Asenath Odaga, a Kenyan. The theme of war and peace has been recently treated in a play *Skeleton* by Lookman Sanusi. A human rights series by Amnesty International aims to inculcate in children caring and responsible attitudes towards other people through story, poetry and drama.

BOOKS FOR ENRICHMENT, ENTERTAINMENT AND CREATIVITY

Adventure and Fantasy

Children need to complement reality with vicarious adventure and fantasy as these develop their imagination and satisfy their need for excitement and change. Once in a while they need to step out of their familiar and predictable world and explore a world where there is no set pattern of behaviour, where a lift may suddenly shoot up into the sky as in Flora Nwapa's *Journey into Space*. In the fantastic world printed wild animals may come alive and step out of a stolen handkerchief and admonish the thief as in *Siime's Handkerchief* by Edreda Twangye of Uganda and a stolen "joromi"

suit force the thief, to leap up and down in a wild, uncontrollable dance in the open market as in *The Dancing Joromi* by James Eboh Whyte, a Ghanaian. It is a pity though that the writers of these fantasies still cannot help being didactic. The concept of a book written purely for entertainment is generally alien to Africa. Science fiction is akin to fantasy, only it involves the employment of scientific principles. Not much science fiction has been written for Nigerian children. However, one book deserves mention. The children in Lanna Solaru's *Time for Adventure* find themselves in the year 3,500 and are sent on a peace mission to planet Cornelia to save the Earth. It is an exciting story with fascinating local colour.

Poetry and Drama

While there has been considerable advancement in published prose literature for Nigerian children, the same cannot be said of poetry or drama. The number of plays for children can be counted on the fingers of one hand and these are not of the highest quality. This is deplorable since Nigerian children are such natural actors. One only has to watch them on television or to have seen the pupils of the International School in Ibadan perform *The Wizard of Oz* to be convinced of this. The dearth of good plays for children can be attributed to lack of competent authors and the reluctance of publishers to publish school plays since they may not sell, with teachers being, unwilling to sacrifice their time producing plays. An answer is Readers' Theatre which does not require memorization, costumes or even a stage.

It is commonly agreed that poetry is natural to the African. It permeated traditional life in the form of work-songs, moonlight games, praise songs, lament for the dead, ceremonial chants etc. And yet, until very recently it had almost disappeared from the life of the urban Nigerian child since written poetry was often taught in an off-putting manner. With the

upsurge of national consciousness and a re-awakening of traditional cultural values, poetry is coming back into its own, but mostly in the form of oral presentation at social functions and on radio and television. A few very good poetry books have been published both in Nigerian languages and in English. *Okiri*, Books One and Two by J.C. Maduekwe contain Igbo rhymes whose attraction lies in their delightful play on words, onomatopoeia and captivating rhythm. In English there is Lanna Solaru's *Coconut Palms and Other Poems* for very young children and "middle-aged" children. They are obviously written by an author who is familiar with the world of the Nigerian child. Thus, they deal with subjects such as mangoes, naming ceremonies, *Egungun* and a child's naming ceremony. Two other books *Under the Mango Tree* Books One and Two by Mabel Segun and Neville Grant were the results of a conscious effort to bring to African children poems from all over Africa and the diaspora so as to acquaint them with their African cultural heritage. The poems come from Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Southern African and Cuba. Some of the poems were written by children, the aim being to encourage Nigerian children to write poetry. Since there was a dearth of poems with an African background, the authors wrote new poems themselves based on oral tradition, adapted others from existing collections and made translations of poems from folklore. Teachers' Notes at the end of the poems give suggestions about how to make poetry into a pleasurable experience through games, song, and drama.

Regarding poetry, Carmen Bravo says in "The Function of Poetry in the World of the Young Child, a paper given at the 15th IBBY Congress:

'Poetry gives the child a sense of rhythm and musicality.

Verse and music arouse the aesthetic sense in childhood. And in teaching, they make the learning of the language much

easier. At this early stage in life, repetitions and refrains are to be recommended.'

Unfortunately *Under the Mango Tree* Books One and Two are not available in Nigeria and self-published 'poets' inflict substandard overtly didactic poems on Nigerian children. They should borrow a leaf from Sam Mbure of Uganda who likens the half-moon to a half-eaten apple and makes other felicitous comparisons.

THE NEED FOR LIBRARIES

Children's books have very little impact if they are not accessible. It is common knowledge that in Nigeria the cost of books is prohibitive, presenting a situation similar to that in which the boa constrictor invited Tortoise to dinner and prevented him from reaching the food by coiling himself round the dish. What is the use of books if children can only stare longingly at them in the few bookshops that stock children's books? This is where libraries come in,

During a Young Readers Forum which I conducted in 1986, the young participants deplored the paucity of libraries in Ibadan where I used to live. School libraries were almost non-existent and the few public libraries were poorly housed, inadequately equipped and unsuitably sited, sometimes adjacent to a noisy market. The situation has not changed and the Ibadan experience is replicated all over the country. This is a deplorable situation. If we are to have a reading culture in this country, there must be libraries, particularly children's libraries and school libraries. Our various governments, federal, state and local, need to pay attention to library development all over the country. Private individuals and organisations

should also be involved in library development. Some years ago I was invited to give a talk at the formal opening of the Ikoyi Club library, a well-equipped library for club members with emphasis on children's book needs. This is the kind of initiative that should be emulated by other private organisations.