

To Instruct and Delight: A Case For Realist Literature

Good evening. A few weeks ago, my dear friend Martin Kenyon, who is seated in front, telephoned me and left a message in which he sounded quite alarmed – because he had just heard that I had been asked to give the Commonwealth lecture. What Martin did not know was that I was just as alarmed as he was. And so I feel a little bit like a pretender to the throne, standing here, but I am deeply honored and I thank the Commonwealth Foundation for inviting me and I thank you all for being here.

I would like to start by talking about bagels. When I was growing up in Nsukka, the university town in southeastern Nigeria, books were the center of my world. I started reading when I was perhaps four years old. I read everything I could find. One day, I read an American novel in which a character ate something called a bagel for breakfast. I had no idea what a bagel was, but I thought it sounded very elegant, very exotic – I pronounced it “bah-gel.” I desperately wanted to have a bah-gel. My family visited the United States for the first time when I was nine. At the airport in New York, I told my mother that, as a matter of the gravest urgency, we had to buy a bah-gel. And she went to a café and bought one. Finally I would have a bah-gel. You can imagine my disappointed surprise when I discovered that this bah-gel, this glorious bah-gel from the novel, was only just a dense doughnut.

Still, even though a bagel ended up not being some sort of exquisite confection, the moments in which I thought it was were well worth it. Because my imagination soared in delight. And there was something comforting and instructive in that discovery of a bagel, in the demystifying ordinariness of a bagel: other people, like me, ate boring food.

I have since, by the way, come to enjoy a toasted bagel with cream cheese, but I wanted to use this anecdote not only to illustrate the wondrous ability of books to enlarge our imaginations, but also as a starting point to make a case for the kind of literature that I was drawn to, and that I continue to be drawn to, as a reader and as a writer.

I have been writing since I was old enough to spell. My writing, when it is going well, gives me what I like to describe as extravagant joy. And when it is not going well, is a source of great depression and anxiety. I write because I have to. I write because I love the solitude of writing. Because I love the near-mystical sense of creating characters who sometimes speak to me. Because I love the possibility of touching another human being with my work. Because I spend a large amount of time in the spaces between the imaginary and the concrete.

Writing, we are often, told is a solitary endeavor. And it is. It is also intensely idiosyncratic. Each time I read of, or hear about, a writer’s elaborate writing ritual, I am immediately tempted to claim an equally elaborate ritual of my own – to claim that I light red candles, hold improbable yoga positions, recite an Igbo chant, fall into

a brief trance before I actually begin to write. But although my ritual is, in truth, significantly less colorful than what I wish it were, it does exist, as I suspect it does for every writer.

There is an Igbo proverb that says "onye na-akwa nka na-adu iru", which translates loosely to 'a sculptor always works with a frown.' This suggests that the sculptor – and by extension the artist, the writer, the creative person – works in a state of the utmost seriousness and rigor, because her vocation, her calling, is not entirely in her control. She is also a *conduit* of sorts, communing with something larger than herself – hence the frown. Now, I don't work with a frown, at least not all the time, but I do think of my writing as both magic and craft. It is a whispering from the spirits, an inexplicable gift I have been blessed with. And it is also a steely determination to sit down for hours and write and re-write until the muscles of my neck and shoulders tighten in painful revolt.

My family and I often joke about how, when I am home and all is quiet and all distraction turned off, and I am supposed to be writing, I am instead wandering around the house, from study to bedroom to kitchen and back again. Which brings to mind a wonderful quote from the American writer Don DeLillo: writers go out of their way to secure their solitude and then, having secured it, they go out of their way to squander it. But that wandering is itself part of the magic and craft process and the hope is that, at some point in the wandering, the literary spirits will intercede, the story or a character will reveal itself, and I will then be able to sink into the hours of writing and re-writing, fully inhabiting an intense, inward space.

But it is too simple to claim that writing is a private act, end of story. If it were so I would write in a diary and put it away in a drawer. An audience, or the possibility of an audience, moves writing from a private to a public space. I have often been asked who my audience is, who I write for, and the most honest answer is that I really do not know, because I never consciously think of audience while writing fiction. (I wonder whether if it ever occurred to Turgenev that a teenager in a small town in southeastern Nigeria might be part of the audience of 'Fathers and Sons,' his novel about 1860s Russia, which I love. I don't suppose it did occur to him.) Perhaps a more comprehensible answer to the question about my audience is that I write the kind of fiction I like to read. And so I write for whoever enjoys the kind of fiction I enjoy.

As a child, books about hobbits or flying saucers or alternative universes did not interest me, perhaps because at some level I was always in awe of the vastness of the world, of the many places I was yet to learn about, of the millions of ordinary human stories yet untold, each one worthy, each one capable of Truth and Beauty. And so I was particularly drawn to books that I like to call realist literature, books populated by recognizably real human beings living in real places.

Of course one must use the word 'real' with some reservation. The world of realist literature is not the same as the real world, but it is close enough, aligned enough, to

the real world to be able to illuminate it. And it is books of that sort that I would like to make a case for today, books that have often brought to my mind the words of the ancient Latin Poet, Horace: **the role of literature is to instruct and delight.**

Realist fiction is not merely the recording of the real, as it were, it is more than that, it seeks to infuse the real with meaning, which perhaps is why the artist works with a frown. As events unfold, we do not always know what they mean. But in telling the story of what happened, meaning emerges and we are able to make connections with emotive significance. Realist fiction is, above all, the process of turning fact into truth.

I knew the basic facts of Nigerian history when I first read Chinua Achebe's novels "Things Fall Apart" and "Arrow of God," but it was those novels that made me realize that while I may very well know the facts, I did not really know the truths. Bloodless words like 'pacification' and 'amalgamation' and 'indirect rule' were the facts, but the truths were in the human stories. A respected man being flogged publicly by agents of the colonial government. A priest, once resplendent in his pride and stubbornness, now reduced to sitting on a cold prison floor because he had dared to reject an offer from a British district officer. And in images such as these, I learned a great truth which the history books said nothing about: the loss of dignity.

One of my favorite novels is 'The Dark Child' by Camara Laye, a book of startling beauty, defiant optimism, and the most layered nostalgia. On recently re-reading it, I was struck by a sentence in the introduction by the South African-English writer William Plomer which said: **Laye introduces us to a society which appears entirely free of vulgarity.** The assumption of course being that the society should have been vulgar. A silly comment if ever there was one, but if we are willing to overlook the silliness, we see that Plomer might have been knowledgeable about the so-called facts of what he calls tribal life. But it took this novel, this beautiful novel about a quiet childhood in the plains of Guinea, to make him see the truths.

Most of us know the story of the Philosopher Diogenes the Cynic who, carrying a lantern in daylight, walked up and down the streets of Athens, and claimed that he was looking for an honest man. Scholars say that Diogenes did in fact carry a lantern around Athens' sunlit streets but he did not say that he was looking for an honest man, what he said was that he was looking for humanity. Of course the cynicism of his action is clear – the lantern in daylight tells us that he does not believe he will find this humanity, but it can also be interpreted as his refusal to take the idea of humanity for granted, because humanity is, in fact, something we must always keep searching for. To read realist literature is, I think, to search for humanity as Diogenes did – but hopefully with much less cynicism.

It is easy to assume that our collective humanity is self-evident, that we do not need to search for it. But we live in a time of numbers and facts, in a world where an acceptable response to the news of death is to click the 'LIKE' button on Facebook. We live in a world where we can easily find information about GDP and infant

mortality and life expectancy but not about that which most motivates people: human desire. We live in a world where we so often quote figures of the number of the dead in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Congo until they become just that: figures. Each time I read these news articles, I find myself thinking – what do they dream about in Congo? How do they fall in love in Afghanistan? How do they resolve family quarrels in Iraq? What do they like to eat? Of course we must know about the dead and the dying, and of course these figures and facts are essential, but they must, they should, co-exist with human stories. We should know how people die but we should also know how they live.

When we read human stories, we become alive in bodies not our own. Literature is in many ways like faith: it is a leap of imagination. Both reading and writing require an imaginative leap and it is that imaginative leap that enables us to become alive in bodies not our own. It seems to me that we live in a world where it has become increasingly important to try and live in bodies not our own, to embrace empathy, to constantly be reminded that we share, with everybody in every part of the world, a common and equal humanity.

But I must hasten to clarify that I am not suggesting that we are all the same. We most certainly are not. Many of us would be reluctant to live in a world in which everyone were the same; we would be suffocated by boredom. Literature is indeed about how we are different. The American writer John Updike, after reading *Arrow of God*, wrote to Chinua Achebe to say that a western writer would not have allowed the destruction of a character as rich as the protagonist Ezeulu. Perhaps what Updike had implicitly understood was that in Achebe's world, very different from the Western world depicted in the literature with which Updike was familiar, the preservation of the community mattered more than the preservation of the individual. Or in the words of a character in the novel itself – 'an animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, but a man asks his kinsman to scratch him.'

This is part of realist literature's magic: that we are able to thrill to the magnificent diversity in the world. And so we read not to see how other people are like us, but simply to see them, to truly see them. What they love. What they resent. What wounds their pride. What they aspire to. Yet part of that magic of realist literature is to remind us of how similar we are, in the midst of our differences, to remind us that what we all share is the quest for value. To be human is to want to be valued. We want our bodies to be nourished and we want our hearts to be nourished. And this is the humanity we must seek through stories.

I fell in love with Sri Lanka after I read Romesh Gunasekera's beautiful novel, *Reef*, with its evocation of friendship, love and politics in a country about to be torn apart by war. Recently, I visited Sri Lanka and at the airport in Colombo, I saw a collection box, which said something like 'contribute money to help the soldiers.' I was not quite sure which soldiers this fundraising was for, whether the government or the Tamil Eelam, but it did not matter much to me because I put some money in the box anyway. And I dreamed, in that small gesture, of restoration, of healing, of a return

to the country as it was depicted in Reef. Perhaps this was a hopelessly sentimental act but it filled me with a small delight, as did the country of Sri Lanka itself. It was not surprising to me that I fell in love with the country and with its people who felt strangely familiar because I had encountered them in the pages of a beloved book.

Books are immensely powerful. Inherently powerful. A power that often transcends the creator. I don't think that the writer of that American novel I read as a child had any idea that I would come to so lushly romanticize bagels. Nor do I think that bagels would have so completely captured my imagination if I had read of them in a newspaper article, or anywhere else outside the pages of a novel.

Ben Okri tells a story about his father who, after training as a lawyer in England, returned to Nigeria with a great collection of books – Homer, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky – which he didn't quite get around to reading. The books gathered dust and from time to time he would say to his son “Ben, dust the books but don't read them!” This, of course, made the books even more attractive to Ben Okri. And so, while dusting, he would read them and if he heard his father's voice, he would hurriedly return to dusting. As an adult he would recall this story and end with the words: “Books still have this tension for me – the do and don't, the possibility of danger, of secret knowledge. It makes them very potent.”

Of course it is the contents of a book that are truly potent. In Chinua Achebe's essay 'Travelling White,' he writes about a librarian who, at a lecture at the University of California, told him what he described as a curious story. It was about a German judge named Wolfgang Zeidler. This distinguished judge, a president of the highest constitutional court in Germany, had just accepted an offer to move to Namibia and become a consultant to the Namibian regime. Then a friend gave him the novel 'Things Fall Apart.' After he read it, he promptly and dramatically changed his mind. He would no longer move to Namibia because he could not lend his great abilities to an apartheid system that dehumanized Africans. Achebe concludes this story by wondering why a man so accomplished needed a novel to make him see this. Did he not read the newspapers? But perhaps the judge knew only the facts, and perhaps in reading Achebe's novel, he was taking a walk along the sunlit streets of Windhoek, holding a lantern.

Logic can convince but it is in fact emotion that leads us to act. Realist literature reminds us of this, that we are not a collection of logical bones and flesh. That we are emotional beings. That dignity and love matter as much as bread and water. The parts of us that we can measure and define are important but the real influence, the real basis for connection, comes from the parts of us that we cannot measure and define, those ineffable parts, those intangibles.

I am a person who deeply loves two languages – Igbo and English. I love Igbo because it is mine, because it is the language of home and laughter and love. Growing up in Nigeria, it was English that had political and economic power, but I did not love it for that reason. I loved it because I was educated in English, and

because I read English books. When I went to the US to go to university, I met a number of international students. From Jamaica. From India. From Kenya. And I soon realized that while we were very different, we did have something in common, something that the students from China or even Senegal did not. A certain way of being and doing, an almost intuitive way of understanding each other. And I would argue that it was not simply because our countries had been colonized by the British, not because we came from places where lawyers wore funny white wigs, but because we had, from childhood, read British books. We read Charles Dickens and Enid Blyton, we read of cucumber sandwiches and ginger beer, and our imaginations were bound in a common familiarity. There was something in this discovery that moved me, although it also left me newly astonished at just how the British had managed to meddle in so many parts of the world.

The African American writer WEB DuBois once said that all art is propaganda. This is the kind of statement that it is easy to disagree with, because of the ideas we have about art and about propaganda, where the former is pure, and the latter a deliberate spreading of often insidious information. But when we think about a more nuanced meaning of propaganda, then DuBois becomes easier to agree with. Here's a quote from DuBois:

"All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent."

DuBois was speaking in the context of what he called Negro Art, the art of Black Americans who were not allowed by the White establishment to write about certain subjects. But in a larger sense, perhaps DuBois was saying that we cannot pretend that literature falls from the sky unburdened by value, or by history. The Senegalese Poet and Statesman Senghor once said "I have always taken care to put an idea or emotion behind my words. I have made it a habit to be suspicious of the mere music of words." Of course the music of words has great value. It matters because it enhances meaning. There is no better way to sear an image onto our minds than with a well-written sentence. But Literature is not just words. Literature is never just words. When I read Graham and Greene and Virginia Woolfe, I am being delighted and entertained, but I am also learning of a certain sensibility, a certain Englishness.

And so in a sense to write realist fiction is an exercise in citizenship. It is strange to talk about creating and citizenship because we like to think of art as separate, that if anything an artist and a creator simply by creating suddenly becomes a citizen of an imaginary land of other artists. And this in some ways is true. But we also live in a world in which the nation-state dominates, in which your value as a human being, the value that the formalized structures of the world gives you, can often be

determined by what passport you carry. I would know, as a person who travels on a Nigerian passport. Travelling with a Nigerian passport means carrying the weight of assumptions – that I am likely to be lying or to be a drug dealer or a fraudster. The many expressions of disbelief when I say I am a writer, being asked to step aside for more questions, the extra processing steps required for visas to countries as diverse as Kenya and Denmark. I wish I could tell the various embassies that I, in fact, am a citizen of the World of Artists.

But of course citizenship goes beyond a mere passport. It is a sensibility. While I have a great affection for America and live part time in America, I know I can never be an American because I will never understand the game of baseball. And I know I am Nigerian because I will always root for the Nigerian football team during the world cup. And I know I am African because, as soon as the Nigerian team is kicked out of the world cup, which invariably happens early on, I then begin to root fiercely for the other sub Saharan African teams.

More seriously, realist literature transmits this sensibility, is steeped in this sensibility, both for the reader and the writer. Nelson Mandela described Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* as 'the book in whose presence the prison walls came down.' I am sure Mandela loved many other novels but would he have felt this way about another book that was NOT African? Arguably not. For many Africans, *Things Fall Apart* was not merely an interesting and moving novel, it was also a gesture of returned dignity. Because it was a complex and humane novel that came in the wake of a long but little-varied tradition of books written by Europeans about Africa, books in which Africa was often portrayed as a place without history, without humanity, without hope.

Chinua Achebe himself first read some of the better-known examples of these 'colonialism classics' as a secondary school student in southeastern Nigeria in the 1940s. He has written about his response to the African characters in those books and here's an excerpt: "I did not see myself as an African to begin with. I took sides with the white men against the savages. The white man was good and reasonable and intelligent and courageous. The savages arrayed against him were sinister and stupid or, at the most, cunning. I hated their guts."

As Achebe matured and became more critical in his reading, he began to understand the enormous power that stories had, and how much this power was shaped by who told the stories and by how they were told. As a university student in the 1950s, in addition to reading Wordsworth, Shakespeare and Coleridge, Achebe also read a novel called *Mister Johnson* by the English writer Joyce Carey. It was set in Nigeria, and *Time* magazine had named it the "best book ever written about Africa." Achebe disagreed. Not only was the Nigerian character in the novel unrecognizable to him and his classmates but he also detected, in the description of Nigerians, what he described as "an undertow of uncharitableness ... a contagion of distaste, hatred, and mockery."

Much has been written about Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* being a response to *Mister Johnson*, but one likes to think that Achebe would have written his novel even if he had not read Cary's. Still, the portrayal of Africans in the books he read must have had an influence on him, must have spurred his literary spirits on. How could it not?

When I first began to understand these portrayals of Africans in European literature, I was filled with that peculiar sense of defensiveness and vulnerability that comes with knowing that your story has been grossly mistold. So I turned to Chinua Achebe's novels. In the stark, sheer poetry of *Things Fall Apart*, in the humor and complexity of *Arrow of God*, I found a gentle reprimand: don't you dare believe other people's stories of you. Would a book of reportage, an accumulation of facts, been able to do that? I think not.

Our histories cling to us. The British historian Bertrand Russell once spoke about two little girls from Estonia who had narrowly escaped death from starvation in a famine and had been brought to live with his family. They were fed very well and very regularly but Russell was surprised to discover that they would sneak off to neighbouring farms and steal potatoes, which they hoarded. Even though they were now in the midst of plenty, their hungry days had not left them. Our histories cling to us. We are shaped by where we come from. Our art is shaped by where we come from. The South African writer Eskia Mphahlele writes that under apartheid Black South African writers wrote mostly short stories because of the urgency of their political condition, and so their political space shaped the form of their fiction. Orhan Pamuk is able to create such beautiful explorations of Istanbul because it is where he grew up. And it is unlikely that I would have been so haunted by the Nigeria-Biafra war, which is the setting of my second novel *Half Of A Yellow Sun*, if I had not been born into an Igbo family that was deeply affected by the war. I am often asked where the inspiration for the novel came from, an almost impossible question to answer. It came from a desire to write about love, friendship and family, and how war changes all of that, it came from a faded beautiful photograph of my grandfather David Adichie, it came from seeing tears in my mother's eyes as she told a story of her father's death, it came from the novels of Flora Nwapa and Chukwuemeka Ike, it came from the smell of the dust in my hometown in Anambra state. And most of all, it came from a deep haunting obsession that even now I cannot find the language to describe.

When I was in graduate school in the United States, a professor said, during a class discussion on colonialism in sub-saharan Africa, that the Africans whose lands had not been taken by the European colonizers had really lost nothing because their lands were still intact. At those words, something in me recoiled. Viscerally. I thought she was dangerously wrong, to quantify the effects of colonialism and to reduce it to land. This is not to diminish the enormous practical and emotional significance of the loss of ancestral lands, but the truth is that the losses associated with any unjust government – and colonialism was an unjust dictatorship – cannot

be limited to those things that we can measure. The losses are more nuanced – the loss of language and stories, the loss of a way of being and a way of thinking, the loss of dignity, and the loss that comes when succeeding generations inherit those losses. I sometimes wonder whether it might be a good idea to send a package of books or realist literature to every prime minister and president in the world, (although the difficult part might be finding a way to make sure they actually read them.) Perhaps it would make government policy take into account the parts of us that prove we are not merely a collection of logical bones and flesh. We should read human stories to be instructed and to be delighted. But also to remind ourselves that we are not alone. That we, in the words of Pablo Neruda, “belong to this great mass of humanity, not to the few but to the many.”

I would like to end with some words from Bessie Head, a brilliant, feminist writer from South Africa who lived most of her life in Botswana. When she was asked the question WHY DO YOU WRITE, her response was this: I am building a stairway to the stars. I have the authority to take the whole of mankind up there with me. That is why I write.