



Why Should Kenyans--or Any Other Busy People-- Care About Fiction?

By Harry Kraus

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A Somali child soldier shoves the barrel of an AK-47 under the chin of a photojournalist.

A Kikuyu woman lays the body of her granddaughter on the kitchen table and collapses to the floor. She cannot cry. Her tears were spent on her daughter, a promising young woman whose life was stolen by HIV, the same enemy who robbed life from the grandchild.

A diamond smuggler pays a politician to look the other way.

Poverty and hopelessness drive another young African into prostitution.

Two marathon runners race stride for stride towards the finish line.

A man captures the eyes of his lover across a dusty room.

These are the stories of Africa, the tales that grip us, challenge us, prod us into action, fill us with anger, and dare us to hope.

Rasna Warah's October article in *The Nation*, "Kenya: No Fiction Please, We Are Kenyan and Too Busy to Care," bemoans the lack of stories coming from African pens and suggests a course of corrective action. I want to sound my "amen" and offer a few reasons why fiction should find itself front

and center in the stores and libraries of Africa, and into the hands of the masses where they belong.

Naysayers abound and wrinkle sober foreheads. "Come on, we are in the business of development. Serious endeavors must take precedence. Textbooks must remain the priority."

But we have become a people dulled by the statistics of horror: a million more AIDS orphans... the 14th attempt to prop up a crumbling government... 500,000 child soldiers... a billion dollar sex-trade industry.

Yawn. We close the daily newspaper. "Honey, could you pass the toast?"

We need a picture to evoke emotion. We need a person with a monumental problem to whom we bond. Linked by sympathy, we care about an individual and the way they will overcome their misery. Alas, we need *a story*.

Bypass the brain for a moment. Art touches us where we live. Stories open a window for learning about tragedy in a way that non-fiction never will, because we are wired to care.

Non-fiction will never grip our souls the way a good story can. Just look around any

congregation on a Sunday morning and watch the sleepy heads snap to attention when the pastor says, “I want to tell you a story.”

Jesus used the technique over and over. A prodigal finds his way out of the pigpen and into the forgiving arms of his father. A farmer discovers a pearl hidden in a field. Ten virgins await the groom and half of them are running out of oil for their lamps.

Seminaries would do well to teach storytelling as a necessary art. The benches in the Kenyan churches I’ve attended are too hard, and our tolerance too thin, to do otherwise.

Wouldn’t our education be more efficient coming from the standard non-fiction texts? Perhaps. But perhaps not! Wasn’t it Ben Franklin, the great American statesman who said, “Men should be taught as if we taught them not”?

Non-fiction holds up facts and theories for us to contemplate. We struggle to make the connection with our own lives. Fiction

holds up a mirror. In it, we see ourselves coping along with the protagonists. Problems are solved, and we have fun along the journey.

Don’t tell me about 30 million people dying of AIDS. I’ve heard it before. Let me experience the life of one AIDS patient who struggles with relationships.

Don’t tell me statistics about soaring divorce rates. Show me the agony of one woman cast aside for another.

Spend an afternoon with a great story. We smile. We cry. *We learn.*

Nothing makes me happier than when one of my readers writes and says they have been challenged, gained courage or found hope. Others write and tell me of the misery of their personal lives, thankful for the hours of escape they’ve found in my fiction. I doubt my non-fiction-author colleagues are so blessed.

So write the stories, Kenya.

Yes, we are busy. But we are so busy *that we need fiction*—to entertain us, teach us and challenge us to care.

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