

My Encounter With The Book, By Babawale

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BY TUNDE BABAWALE



Director General of the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation, Prof Tunde Babawale culled up the teacher's instinctual resourcefulness in him on Friday to take a group of about 600 children through a mentoring session at the opening of the 13th Lagos Book and Art Festival, LABAF held at the Freedom Park, Broad Street Lagos. Babawale, a professor of Political Economy at the University of Lagos, who is current head of the Federal government agency, CBAAC, was the special guest of honour at the Book Festival; and the role required him to mentor young Nigerians -- students -- on the importance of reading and knowledge acquisition. In the past such session had featured eminent Nigerians including Prof Pat Utomi, Richard Mofe Damijo among others. Babawale, a long-standing teacher was at ease with the students as he got them hooked to almost every word of his 30 minutes presentation, that was also laced with anecdotes and wise-cracks. The students loved him and rewarded him with generous applause that led to a standing ovation. Below is an excerpt from his presentation, which he, however did not read, as he decided to speak extempore.

Introduction

Books are widely regarded as veritable sources of information gathering and knowledge-acquisition. They intellectually enrich the individual that cares to go through them. Those who don't suffer greatly from ignorance and a general lack of awareness of what goes on in the world around them or the outside world at large.

As a writer once said, "a person who does not read, is not better than one who cannot read."

Books enable us to understand mankind better through the individual writer's creative works, or his interpretation of what life is, through reflections on societal values, aspirations and even flaws in human character. They expose the individuality of the human being, which sets him apart from lower animals in the universe. In literary works for example, writers try to recreate life and nature using language as the vehicle for conveying their impressions.

The point is that books of the category outlined above are informative and even edifying for young and impressionable minds. The danger here is that there are also bad books. Such exposes the young boy or girl to crime, sex, alcohol and other related negativities.

The good news is that when you pick up a book and look at its title and its table of content, you can decide whether it belongs to the category of good or bad books and then make a choice between the two.

My honest advice is that you should avoid the bad books like a plague and go for the good ones.

How the book influenced my life

At an early age in the primary school, precisely when I was about eight years of age, I came in close contact with the literary works of the late D.O. Fagunwa, all written in Yoruba language.

As someone who grew up in the village, the stories contained in Fagunwa's books reinforced the folktales we had been fed with from about the age of four. The difference was that Fagunwa's stories were more graphic, more comprehensive, more didactic and often times more frightening. Yet people of my generation enjoyed reading them because of the ease with which they can be read and the moral lessons we drew from them.

This marked my first encounter with the book.

From this moment, I developed interest in reading books and the natural progression was that my interest in Fagunwa's works extended to other African writers beginning with Henshaw's *This Is Our Chance* and Olagoke's *Incorruptible Judge*.

Ngugu Wa Thiongo's *Weep Not Child* later caught my attention before I moved to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and The Jewel* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*.

Lest I forget, I had earlier got in contact with Onitsha Market Literature, which further rekindled my interest in reading books.

Having developed interest in books, I became unstoppable and began to acquire books with my own pocket money with the sole objective of building my own personal library.

The book encouraged me to develop interest in arts and the humanities early in life. I seized every opportunity to buy books and read them. Perhaps my interest in books pushed me into the noble profession of teaching.

Without any doubt, my choice of career was largely influenced by the books that I read.

Why read books?

Every child should constantly ask himself or herself the question above in order to fully comprehend the importance of books. Without books, the world will be immersed in ignorance, want and even disease. We need to read books for so many good reasons.

- To acquire knowledge and information especially at a time when knowledge rules the world. Indeed, it would be stating the obvious when we say that in today's world, "knowledge is power".
- To be entertained through reflections on man's ingenuity and follies.
- To understand society better and live as better human beings who have learnt from the mistakes of others.
- To promote and propagate our culture and defend our identity as Africans.
- To encourage youths to adopt positive attitude/orientation that will enhance society's development.
- To educate the populace and encourage the creation of a critical mass of enlightened citizens.

Experience has shown that children who read books exhibit greater self-confidence, intelligence and resourcefulness.

What is to be done?

There is obviously a decline in reading culture of the country today. This trend needs to be reversed through collective effort of the government, schools, the family and the individual.

There is an urgent need for government to give greater incentives to publishers of the educational books to bring down prices of books, so as to make them more accessible and affordable to a greater number of Nigerians.

There is equally an urgent need to put in place policies that will make life more meaningful for people. Such policies should ensure that people have access to the basic necessities of life — portable water, regular electricity supply, adequate and affordable medical care, affordable housing and reduced food prices, free education up to the secondary school level as well as affordable university education.

All of these would help in creating the enabling environment for promoting reading culture.

Schools and universities need to re-equip their libraries with contemporary books and consciously encourage pupils/students to access them.

Parents have a responsibility to buy books regularly for their children instead of telephone handsets or shoes or clothing. We need to challenge our kids to read by constantly monitoring what they read and adopting the reading culture ourselves.

I conclude by re-affirming my faith in books and understanding its positive influence on my career and my intellectual, social, psychological and emotional development.

I urge you boys and girls to take books as your inseparable companion. They will help you in making a living and making life as they have done for me and numerous others.

Let me commend to you words of Abraham Lincoln, the great American President, contained in a letter he once wrote to the Headmaster of a school attended by his son. In the letter, Abraham Lincoln wrote as follows:

My son starts school today. It is all going to be strange and new to him for a while and I wish you would treat him gently. It is an adventure that might take him across continents.

So, dear Teacher, will you please take him by his hand and teach him things he will have to know, teaching him — but gently, if you can. Teach him that for every enemy, there is a friend. Teach him to know that all men are not just, that all men are not true. But teach him also that for every scoundrel there is a hero; that for every crooked politician, there is a dedicated leader.

Teach him that 10 cents earned is far more value than a dollar found. Teach him that it is far more honourable to fail than to cheat. Teach him to learn how to gracefully lose, and enjoy winning when he does win.

Teach him to be gentle with people, but be tough with tough people. Steer him away from envy if you can and teach him the secret of quiet laughter. Teach him how to laugh when he is sad; teach him there is no shame in tears. Teach him there can be glory in failure and despair in success. Teach him to scoff at cynics.

Teach him the wonders of books; teach him to have faith in his own ideas, even if everyone tells him they are wrong.

Try to give my son the strength not to follow the crowd when everyone else is doing it. Teach him to listen to everyone, but teach him also to filter all that he hears on a screen of truth and take only the good that comes through.

Teach him to close his ears to a howling mob, but to stand and fight if he thinks he is right. Teach him always to have sublime faith in himself too, because then, he will always have faith in mankind.

The quotation above aptly captures the essence of life as contained in the written word. This further underscores the importance of books in our lives.

I thank all of you for your attention.