

PROFILE | Prolific author and scholar died in 1982 aged just 40

Leonard Kibera, the village boy who could not stop writing

Author pays tribute to his brother who was among the country's finest story tellers

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The settler government discouraged the education of Africans, leaving it to Christian missionaries. They were probably afraid that education would produce what they called "native agitators." Primary schools went only up to Standard 4, where a stumbling block called the 'Common Entrance Examination' was set up.

There was another stumbling block, in Standard Eight, called Kenya African Preliminary Examination, meant to block students from any further progress, directing a few to technical schools to become masons. High school was like rare gas in the ozone layer.

As we grew up, my father, James Kibera, despite his low "Vernacular 3" education, could read classics like *The Atomic Bomb*, *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Count Fathom*. We couldn't crack these, so he was always ready to buy us easier stuff, like simplified versions of *Lorna Doone*, *Treasure Island* and *Montezuma's Daughter*. Many kids of the time had them too.

The generation before my father had made use of its little formal education. Jomo Kenyatta had studied at Thogoto Presbyterian Mission School, after which he edited a Kikuyu language newspaper called *Muigithania*, in 1926.

Later on, from the heart of imperial Britain, he wrote *Facing Mount Kenya* and even married an English girl.

We grew up under the clarion cry that the pen was mightier than the arrow. Schools ran like military barracks, with strict discipline enforced with many drills, the cane, and plenty of manual work.

Independence brought more bread on the table, and more budding writers. The whole story of colonial pain had to be told some day. Mugo Gatherer, brought up in the White Highlands and starting in a night-school, went to the US and wrote *Child of Two Worlds*. He may have inspired Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a young man from Limuru, near our

village, who went to Makerere and wrote *Weep Not Child* and *The River Between*, in quick succession.

We younger ones sharpened pencils, too, and from Thika High School, three of us — Chege Mbitiru, Mbuyi Wagacha and I — had several stories published by an old settler magazine, *Kenya Weekly News*.

My brother, Leonard Kibera, was writing, too, at Kangaru High School, and he once won a prize from BBC for a radio play. Leonard soon became a familiar figure at the East African Publishing House, along with Leonard Okola, as an editor under John Nottingham.

Many new novels by post-independence writers like Grace Ogot and David Rubadiri passed through their hands.

Five years older than I, Leonard had always been a very thoughtful coach, holding a bicycle for me when our uncle, who owned it, wasn't looking so I could learn to peddle from the side.

Mau Mau fighters

He guided me as we compiled our stories for *Potent Ash*.

We had grown up under the Emergency in the 1950s, reading colonial pamphlets printed in red ink showing rows of Mau Mau fighters being publicly hanged on high posts. The Lari massacre and subsequent reprisal by government forces had taken place within walking distance from our village.

Nearer, still, the Kinoo home-guard post had been attacked and burnt by Mau Mau fighters.

From Leonard and other bigger boys, we had learnt to make those crude little crystal radio sets, with just a few wires nailed to a piece of board. From an Indian's shop at Dagoretti, we could get very cheap, crude ear-phones discarded by the army or by white and Asian citizens as they graduated to Pye radios. We often got the news, from "cable and wireless" well before the grown-ups, though there was a government radio that broadcast news, in vernacular, from a detention camp nearby. "So many gangsters have been killed.... etc."



Leonard Kibera: 1942-1982

After the burning of the post, all native boys had been ordered to kill their many dogs hampering good spying by homeguards and spreading rabies. Leonard and his friends helped me kill my dog. It didn't die immediately, and I met it the following morning, its face swollen, before it later vanished. It appeared in 'Esther', a *Potent Ash* story, in which a boy and his dog died in a burning home-guard post.

John Kariru, who studied Fine Art with me, came from Kangemi, where he had received shot-gun pellets during the emergency, in his posterior. He lived to become a professor and Dean of Fine Art at Kenyatta University. He designed Pope John Paul II's gown when he visited the country.

Students magazine editor

At the then Nairobi College, now the University of Nairobi, we found Leonard editing *Pointer*, the National Union of Kenya Students magazine, in 1966. "Our target is the student," Leonard wrote. "For in *Pointer*, leaders of tomorrow in high schools, training colleges, university and technical institutions will critically examine their role in society."

His was, those days, known as the "English Literature Department," until the coming of the big

for Zuka. The literature department attracted creative writers from all the other departments, including Joseph Kimura, of Commerce department.

It was through Leonard that I met the new writers and lecturers like Ngugi, who launched our book *Potent Ash*. Angus Calder, who wrote *People's War*, reviewed the book.

Through Leonard, I enjoyed the company of many poets and short-story writers as we slipped into the many city night-clubs. There we watched the pot-bellied chief who had come in his Mercedes to entertain a brothel harlot.

The brothel harlot of the time earned herself unforgettable lines from the unerring pen of Okot p'Bitek who likened her to "a jackal that had dipped its mouth in blood," in the East African Publishing House classic, *Song of Lawino*.

Many daring students, rich from "boom" money, smuggled some of these night witches past sleepy janitors who could always be bribed with peanuts.

Into Cameo cinema we trooped to watch the *Dirty Dozen* and *Language of Love* — or similar offerings that helped deepen our poetry and understanding of art.

During one vacation, Leonard sponsored me and my room-mates Daniel Hinga and Mbul Wagacha on a trip to Malindi, where we camped near Vasco da Gama's pillar. Our little tent collapsed in the night during a storm.

After leaving college, Leonard won a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to Stanford University. His novel, *Voices in the Dark*, appeared in 1970, as he got his MA in literature. He taught in the US and Zambia, ending up as Dean of Literature at Kenyatta University.

In many of his stories, he had the knack of catching life at that moment when the earth had tilted and all were running helter-skelter, scrambling to safer ground.

There was very little calm, as when a tsunami is about to strike.

Once at a university dance, as we passed from rock and Afro-jazz to have a drink with Philip Ochieng and his other buddies who included his fellow student, Valerie D'Cruz, who he went on to marry in the US, I overheard Leonard sigh, grieving at the whirlwind speed of time: "Gosh! In 15 years, I'll be 40!"

Back in high school, we had found each other's letters quite funny.

Once I wrote to him: "I hear your school is coming over — at least the more sprightly among you are — on Saturday. I wonder if you will be coming. I know you are anything but a sprinter, but I guess your team will need cheers (after we have won). But then, you are not good at shouting, either."

Leonard wrote back: "I'm writing before the match and I don't know who is going to win but that's absolutely unimportant to me, being the sort of games player I am. I had the vague feeling they might make the mistake of including you in the team but then it occurred to me that you ain't any better than me, when it comes to kicking a ball."

We were both better at the high jump but, just after he had jumped 40, the earth tilted, and I just had to let out a wounded howl that rang out in the ICU when I saw him breathing through tubes, after his stroke.

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Sam Kahiga on his brother Leonard Kibera

