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STANDARD ON SATURDAY

# Arts & Culture

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*"Art is the lie that enables us to realize the truth."* — Pablo Picasso.

Time to change: Lecturer says he is disappointed at state of literary scholarship in Kenya

## Prof Indangasi: Let us nurture independent and critical thinking

By ABENEA NDAGO

There is a spacious office at the University of Nairobi's Literature Department, and entering it means plunging into a forest of books, the kind that terrifies Lawino in Okot p'Bitek's book.

The owner of the office is an unassuming literature scholar who is always reluctant to speak, and difficult to please.

"These books represent a lifetime's effort to cultivate an independent, critical, and problem-solving mind," Prof Henry Indangasi says cogently. "I always wanted to draw conclusions backed by evidence — not rumour and hero-worship."

The professor says he has a humble background, and had it not been for an uncle, his education would never have gone beyond primary level.

"My parents were so poor that someone else put pressure on my uncle to pay my school fee," he says. "My uncle lived in Mombasa. I then passed well, but he could not sponsor me for long. He also had his family to think about."

### Sh10 bus fare

He would then proceed to Friends School Kamusinga in the 1960s, which was sponsored by the Quakers. Indangasi remembers that the Quakers were famous for their pacifist approach to issues, and this

may have influenced his own approach to life. He is a quiet scholar who also writes poetry and short stories, not to mention the titles he has authored and co-authored.

"My love for books began in primary school where I read Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*," he recalls. "But it was at Kamusinga where I met Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*."

He says he was good in both Biology and English, and something happened which shocked him.

"My Biology teacher was called Mr Allan Pim. At the time there was a belief that bright students had to specialise in the sciences. When my time came to specialise, I dumped Biology for English. Mr Allan Pim was so disappointed that he never spoke to me again, till he left Kamusinga. He took it for granted that I should have specialised in Biology since I was bright."

After his A-Levels, Indangasi came to Nairobi to look for a job even though he knew he had qualified to proceed to university. He lived with an uncle in Kangemi.

"One day my uncle gave me Sh10 as bus fare. I walked to town, entered a bookshop, and bought Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The rest of the days I just walked till the day my fare was supposed to have been depleted. That was when I went and asked for fare again."

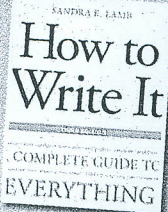
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"My parents were so poor that someone else put pressure on my uncle to pay my school fee"

— Prof Henry Indangasi

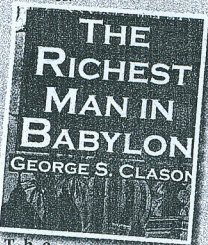
BOOKS

What Kenyans are reading this week



How to Write It by Sandra E. Lamb

Apart from motivational and self-help books, Kenyans are also interested in DIY- do it yourself books. Popular in several book shops is Sandra E. Lamb's *How to Write It* a guide to writing anything be it invitation cards, resumes to press releases.



The Richest Man in Babylon: The Success Secrets of the Ancients by George S. Clason

Written in the early 20th century, and set thousands of years ago, this book has inspired millions by its simple narrative on financial intelligence. The book advocates for paying yourself first, where you put aside a percentage of your income. It also advocates for investments and living within your means. It remains a favourite of Kenyans.



**Money, Real Quick:** The story of M-PESA By Tonny K Omwansa and Nicholas P. Sullivan  
M-PESA has revolutionised banking in Kenya, having been embraced by both old and young, rich and poor. The mobile banking from Safaricom has been a trendsetter in the world, with the authors saying that one out of every two people in the world sending money over a mobile phone is a Kenyan. And the same Kenyans seem curious about the workings of this innovative technology and are buying the recently launched book.

— COMPILED BY KIUNDU WAWERU

# Thrillers: These books captured ills dogging society, fictionalised to a exhilarating end

## Bemoaning death of crime genre

By KIUNDU WAWERU  
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Last week, John Kiriamiti eulogised his fellow author Mwangi Gicheru in these pages, effectively eliciting a discourse about a seemingly dead era of popular narrative and crime writing in Kenya.

The two friends are authors of arguably the two most beloved crime books in Kenya. Kiriamiti for his non-fiction autobiographical *My Life in Crime* and Gicheru's *Across the Bridge*, work of fiction that held the imagination of many in the 1980s and 1990s.

Kiriamiti's piece took me back to December 2012, when I visited him in his home town of Murang'a. At 62 then, he still loved his beer, and sipping cold ones at the Murang'a Mukawa he started narrating of the coming to birth of *My Life in Crime*. As a response to the question on what inspired him, he took out his cellphone and dialed. He then handed me the phone without saying who was on the other end.

I obliged, only to be shocked out of my seat. On the other end came a series of expletives in vernacular, with the light-hearted man obviously mistaking me for Kiriamiti. With my belly contorted with controlled laughter I held the mouth piece and asked the tipsy Kiriamiti to please explain who I was talking to.

"Mwangi Gicheru."  
I gasped. Kiriamiti laughed as he took the phone from me and asked Gicheru to explain to me about their relationship. It turns out Kiriamiti was inspired by Gicheru's *Across the Bridge* published in 1976. In the book, Chuma, a houseboy falls in love with his employer's daughter, Caroline and impregnates her. Obviously, her father is not amused and when Caroline elopes to be with her poor lover in his village, Chuma is forced to steal in order to make her happy. He is dragged to jail.

"If this man could write fiction so well, then my life in crime would make for great reading," said Kiriamiti.



In 1984, Kiriamiti's book edited by Ngugi wa Thiong'o came out and mesmerized or 'gripped' Kenyans. As Wa Thiong'o puts it, East African Educational Publishers maintain it's their bestseller ever.

Back to the phone conversation, Gicheru speaking from Mtwapo got passionate about their works. He invited me and Kiriamiti to visit him down coast for a weekend at his Hotel where we would relax as we talked about the era gone by. Unfortunately the visit never came and now he is gone.

So, is his passing an indication of the death of an era, as he so passionately indicated then that though there are great contemporary authors, the 1970s and 1980s popular literature, especially on crime fiction, remains unmatched?

We then reminisced on these works, bestsellers which competed with the iconic Ian Fleming's James Bond series, Sidney Sheldon's sassy popular novels and of course the thrilling James Hadley Chases. Of Kenyan, think the *Mystery Smugglers*

(1975) by Mwangi Ruheni and Meja Mwangi's *The Bushtrackers* (1979). There was also Paul Kitolo's *Short-cut to Hell* 1982.

These books captured the ills dogging society at the time, fictionalized to a thrilling end. Like coffee smuggling, as in *Black Gold of Chepkube* (1985) by Wamugunda Geteria and on bank robberies infamous in 1960s through to 1970s mostly high-

lighted in Kiriamiti's *My Life in Crime* and John Kiggia Kimani's fictional *Life and Times of a Bank Robber* (1988). Earlier in 1984, Frank Saisi had released *The Bhang Syndicate*.

Meja Mwangi credited with more literary works like *Carcass for Hounds* started writing in the 1970s and is celebrated as one of the pop writers in Kenya though he was vilified in literary quarters for 'turning'. *The Bushtrackers* is about poaching in Kenyan game parks which is happening, with a fury even today.

Which brings the question, why even today we have ills like terrorism, crime and poaching are we not seeing writers bringing the issues alive in books like in Gicheru's era? Well, with perhaps an exception in the name of Tony Mochama who in 2012 released a crime fiction with the bohemian title, *Princess Adhis and the Naija Coca Broda*. Set in contemporary Kenya, the book explores the themes of drug trafficking, child sex, crime and *mpango wa kando's* (clandestine affairs).

“Why even today we have ills like terrorism and poaching are we not seeing writers bringing the issues alive in books like in Gicheru's era?”

## 'I shouldn't praise Achebe just because he's African'

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When his circumstances became worse, he sought an untrained teacher's job with the Teachers Service Commission, which posted him to Musingu Secondary School in Western. But even there, he did not stay long.

"I did not see their salary for three months," he says. "And I was desperate. So I wrote a letter to the TSC: 'I appeal to your moral faculties.' They sent me all the money at once, and sacked me immediately. That was when I went back to Kamusinga to look for another teaching job, but the principal told the late Masinde Muliro about it. Masinde was livid with anger. He asked why I had not been admitted to the university. He threatened to take the matter to Parliament."

The lecturer was eventually admitted to the University of Nairobi in 1970 after a late application. That was where he met the Irishman, Dr Andrew Gurr, the person who mentored him throughout his life in college.

"He discovered I had read Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* when everyone else hadn't," he says. "Even more than that, I often scored highly in his exams."

Indangasi then found himself at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where he earned his PhD after writing a thesis on the war between Chinua Achebe and Joseph Conrad. He was the only black student in a class of 45. He later returned to lecture at the University of Nairobi.

Having seen it all, the lecturer says he is disappointed at the state of literary scholarship in the country. "Except in extremely few cases, there is total lack of independent, critical thinking. Respectable scholars steep themselves in too much ethnic hero-worship. Even in the newspapers, book reviewers don't tell me why I should, or shouldn't read a book. They merely re-tell the story. In that case, why don't you let me find out for myself?"

He says that there is every benefit to be had when intellectuals are honest with their country.

"You will agree that Russian Literature was way ahead of American Literature," he poses. "And when I was at the University of California, American professors first accepted it, and then actively challenged their students to do more. I do not see that here in Kenya. Instead, I see even intellectuals misusing the autobiographical genre to execute an ethnic agenda. If you read specific autobiographies, there is too much distortion of objective Kenyan history."

He says intellectuals should "rise above ethnicity and embrace our common humanity. By speaking out both for and against our communities depending on the circumstances, a certain sense of ethnic awareness is likely to grow."

He reiterates: "I shouldn't heap praises on Achebe against Tolstoy simply because the former was an African like me. Lack of independent, critical thinking is what misled some into thinking I criticised Achebe's eating habits, when I indeed admired it."