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### Competing with God to Create Interesting Characters

To me, the most fascinating yet despicable creatures on earth are humans, and I want to paint them with words from different points of view as they go about the simple business of being human. Sometimes I wonder if fiction writers are not suffering from a sweet but rare form of multiple personality disorder and are just using their fictitious characters to conceal the symptoms from medical diagnosis; regardless, then, of how objective (if there is such an animal) I try to be, my novels reflect my subjective observations of different versions of human relationships in my environment.

My novel *Unanswered Cries*, for example, is about Olabisi, a teenage girl who refuses to follow the tradition of female genital mutilation as a rite of passage for girls in Sierra Leone. The idea for the story came from one of my many childhood memories—not as a teenage girl, but as a 7-year old boy growing up in the village with a paternal aunt who was passionate about the *bondo* ceremony, the native name for female genital mutilation. Memories are messages from the past, and this memory of myself at the age of seven kept replaying itself in my head like a bad movie. Taking a look in the rearview mirror of my village life, I decided, through my main character, Olabisi, and the others, to explore the beliefs behind the passion for this sensitive tradition.

As Maxwell Perkins said in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Now, you are, through, (your characters) expressing your views, of course, but you would do so differently if you were deliberately stating them as your views.”

When we read a book that holds our imagination captive, we enter a different world, a virtual reality, where we turn the words into a mental movie that we watch all by ourselves in the theatre of our minds. In that sense I love playing God (what fiction writer doesn't?) only with words; creating my own world, my own characters, to blow the breath of words into their vague forms and give them life, and pray that God's real creatures will like my imaginary ones. As E. L. Doctorow once said, ‘Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader, not the fact that it's raining, but the feeling of being rained upon.’ It's a goal I'm constantly working towards.

How do I write? Writers of literary and much mainstream fiction, including writers of popular mysteries, begin by imagining a character: Sherlock Holmes, or Hercule Poirot. Other writers of popular and transient fiction begin with a character, but a large percentage that write in specific genres, like adventure, espionage, science fiction, or romance start with a plot and then populate it with characters.

When writing my first three novels, *Double Trouble*, *For Better For Worse* and *Bitter Consequences*, I started with a compelling idea or theme, and then imagined characters whose lives might interact with the idea. *Unanswered Cries* was different. I had no desire to write a story about female genital mutilation until I saw a spirited teenage girl in my neighborhood, and wanted too capture her with words. That was how Olabisi, the main character, was conceived.

My editor at Macmillan UK, Pauline Tait, told me that, as you can see in my first three books, I am more inclined toward writing pages of narratives rather than dialogue. In *Unanswered Cries* I was more inclined toward passages of dialogue instead of narrative. Now I'm writing my fifth novel in a different way altogether. Maybe there is a schizophrenic inside me trying to express himself in multiple ways, because I keep hearing voices. My characters will not stop talking inside my head until I transfer them to a blank page or insert them somewhere else on the manuscript.

Fiction writers like Ken Follet, author of *Pillars of the Earth*, often first write a detailed outline, a blueprint, of their story. It tends to be about 20 to 30 pages long. They then use it to craft out the first draft. Many writers who write on how to write fiction encourage the use of an outline/blueprint. I think it is wonderful advice and would, perhaps, cut down the helter-skelter method of crafting a first draft that I have been employing. (No wonder my books still aren't best sellers) Because of this crazy method of writing, it sometimes took me at least two years to finish writing a simple book of 45,000 words. Yet it took me only three weeks to complete *Unanswered Cries*. The Macmillan African Writer's prize of \$5,000 was a wonderful incentive.

The buying patterns of people browsing books in a bookstore also influenced how I wrote the opening paragraphs and chapter of *Unanswered Cries*. You must have noticed that buyers in a bookstore read the title and author's name, turn to the back to speed-read the blurb, and then browse the first page, and if that first page does not grab their attention, generally they put the book back on the shelf instead of taking it to the check-out counter. If you have, however, made a name like John Grisham or Danielle Steele, it doesn't matter what the first page is doing, people will still buy your book.

The lesson is simple. From the first page, the reader should feel compelled to go on a mental voyage of discovery within the pages of the book. That is a writing technique (foot-in-the-door technique) that I've been working on lately for every chapter of my current draft. I hope it works and pleases editors because there is a huge difference between talking about it and knowing *how* to pull it off on paper. Of course there are many other things to keep in mind aside from an interest-arousing opening chapter. There's the middle, and the end, and all the layering of events and characterization that needs to be done and done well so that your book can be either called literature or transient fiction. As we say in Sierra Leone, *Word na mot, nor to load na aide*, which roughly translated means 'talking about carrying a responsibility is not the same as carrying it on your head.' Meanwhile, if the royalties help to pay the rent and electricity bills, don't worry, be happy.