

Batsirai CHIGAMA

...And Writing

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

— Maya Angelou

Where I come from is a place where an average person goes through a lot in a day: you wake up to no water and no electricity in the house; return home to no electricity and no water in the house. The little time that is left to an individual is used to find means with which to prepare a meal, queue for water at the borehole for hours, if you have a car, queue for fuel at the petrol station and, if you are lucky to have a bank account with a little bit of money in it, you also queue for hours to get your cash out. The average person is faced with the daunting primary task of survival. Many other things, including the things one is passionate about like writing, become secondary to all else. “Writing And...” is a myth for many writers. It’s all other things first, then writing when they can.

The book industry is not spared in an economy that is not functioning properly, and in Zimbabwe, most writers have taken to self-publishing. Bookshops are a few, and they barely sell books because disposable income is very little. Individual writers have become mobile bookshops selling their works on their own. The non-existent publishing economy has resulted in a writing industry that pays poorly.

Given this context, the practicality of being a full-time writer is always under scrutiny. I have a friend who quit her job to write full-time. I think she is brave. She has tons of hours to research, to travel, to read, to write. I worry, though, that in a hostile economic climate all her efforts may come to naught. Such dedicated writers often end up frustrated, published in foreign lands but unrecognized in their own country. I am an average Zimbabwean with an 8-5 job doing marketing for an ICT retail company – a job that is in no way related to my writing. I am grateful that my employer recognizes that I am a writer and affords me time away to participate in this beautiful residency at Iowa, for instance, and that my job has been a reliable way of supporting my writing in many ways.

Many writers the world over cannot afford to write full time and find themselves stuck with jobs they hate or, if lucky, jobs they can tolerate. Bills have to be paid, mouths fed, personal health issues have to be treated, and unforeseen circumstances we have no control over have to be anticipated. The writer has to be aware of whatever afflicts them—be it work, hostile political/economic environments, or personal matters such as relationships—and find a way around it, because the pressure is always there when they are asked, “When is the next book or play or film or novel coming out?”

Even though materially and financially there may be nothing to show for doing what we do, this is the reason writers continue to create and share stories with the world: because the writing is unstoppable. As William Carlos Williams said, “I think all writing is a disease. You can’t stop it.”

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 13, 2019

Madara Gruntmane (Latvia), Thawda Aye Lei (Myanmar), Batsirai Chigama (Zimbabwe), Buddhisagar (Nepal)

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Stories and ideas nag us out of sleep until we jump out of bed and just start writing. Inspiration has no decency. It visits at the most improbable times.

Ann Frank said, “I can shake off everything as I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn.” As writers, we do not only write for others to read. We write to save ourselves from demons that haunt us, from stories that demand to be told. Writing keeps us grounded. Keeps us sane. The urgency of a situation knocks at our creative doorway and haunts us until we submit.

There is no one-size-fits-all formula when juggling a full-time job and writing. The good news is that ideas and stories pop up anywhere, and if one is attentive enough, good stories may come from the most unlikely places. When ideas come across the room to flirt with you, write them down even if they are incomplete. Those small ideas are the beginning of everything.

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