

Legodile SEGANABENG

Real Work and Fiction

In a world where writing is not considered a real job, or real work, many writers are discouraged from breaking free from “real work” to face the tasks of writing on a full-time basis. Some fear what may become of them should they decide to turn their full attention to the pen. It’s food for the belly first, then food for the soul second, or third. But then, the real jobs can force their way into the writing, and vice-versa.

For this presentation, I’ll draw mostly from my personal experiences as a writer living in a society that doesn’t derive much pleasure from reading, where books are viewed as leisure tools for the middle class. I have a day job, a nine-to-five, something concrete and certain to bring food on my table. But the truth is, what I do during the day with most of my time is second to what I do in my spare time—writing. I don’t consider myself a part-time writer because even when I’m doing my real job during the day, my mind keeps tossing around ideas. I mentally plot my stories, devise and revise my characters, and generally do the writing in my head while I’m simultaneously engaged in my day job.

As an inevitable consequence, aspects of my day job as a teacher of the visual arts emerge in my writing. In the short story “The Moon Has Eyes,” a great deal of visual arts appreciation comes through a character who is a painter trying to earn a living from his talent. The character reminds some readers of me, the writer, especially because there is authentic language from art, history, and theory in the book.

When I write about what I do in my life, what I experience, I feel a command of authenticity, and my stories become quite convincing—full of plausible realism. As they are set in the modern day in a real environment, I find it critical to make my readers believe in my stories, identify with them, get lost in them, and develop a yearning to come back for more. Adding small strokes of my real work, even in minute touches, evokes such feelings. Sometimes the real work, because it’s imbedded in the writer’s subconscious, seeps into the writing uninvited. After all, it is what constitutes most of our day.

For me, real work in fiction can come as a way of trying to rearrange reality, to alter events and things I cannot change—to rewrite history, to make things work the way I would want them to, even if it’s just in my mind. After my brother died in a car crash, I wrote a story in which a character (perhaps my brother), dies a less-violent death—and I believed in it so much that it soothed me and became my sweet little truth.

My job has influenced a lot of my poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. As writers, we cannot subdue the currents rising from the jobs we do, the lives we live, the things we do. Just recently, I read an essay entitled “Path of Thunder: Meeting Bessie Head” by Peter Nazareth, whom we probably all know here at the IWP. Not only did the essay reveal to me some unknown behaviors of one of Botswana’s most celebrated writers, but it also showed me that even writers like Head derived inspiration from real work. Nazareth writes:

Bessie was very good at growing vegetables, as was her protagonist Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*. This was because Elizabeth, like Bessie, knew how to communicate and be part of nature,

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the elements, the universe, and Life. [...] In *A Question of Power*, the growing of vegetables by Elizabeth on dry land balances the inner turmoil she is going through, grounds the story in the real world, and also makes credible the purpose of the novel.¹

The work we do outside of our writing plays a major role in shaping our literary directions. It forms a fundamental base for the stories we write. Also, our writing can intrude into our jobs. It can influence our jobs in various ways. Writers are constant thinkers with creativity always brewing in their minds. Our jobs, sometimes, benefit from this.

In conclusion, I think it's impossible to prevent real life from leaking into the things we write. I believe that even fantasy writers find that their day jobs, or real life experiences, form a part of their ideas.

¹ Peter Nazareth, "Path of Thunder: Meeting Bessie Head," *Research in African Literatures* 37.4 (2006): 222.