

FACT OR FICTION: HOW WRITERS TURN REAL LIFE EVENTS OR CHARACTERS INTO FICTION

By Oscar Katumwa Ranzo

It's true that everyone has a story to tell. Or, better, the desire to share a story, however brief or detailed, real or perceived, anecdotal or objective, rumored or witnessed, that story might be. Right from when we are old enough to string together words into comprehensible sentences, we unwittingly or deliberately look for stories to share with our peers, and, in some cases, strangers. We seek these stories in the world around us or in the media – print, broadcast and social – so that we can have what to talk or write about when the opportunity arises, often passing on our narrations with some degree of exaggeration. It's this uncontrollable act, of willfully sharing our experiences in terms of conversation, that has always formed the cornerstone of social interaction, and it is man's innate propensity to embellish our versions of stories that forms the basis of all fiction. Ask three people who witnessed a similar event and you'll quickly notice that each of them will embellish certain elements of their account to make it more captivating. The only thing writers do differently is set these real events in an imaginary time and space, using crisis to drive their narratives in a manner that will transport their audience out of the real world and into their make-believe world for a given space in time.

Critical analysis of most classic works of fiction indicates inspiration of many, if not all, to have been drawn subtly or otherwise from real life. Timeless stories like *Moby Dick*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Catch-22*, *Madame Bovary*, and *Beloved*, to name a few, were all derived from their authors' experiences – irrefutable testament to the fact that real life is the foundation of good fiction. Writing is an act of invention. Though stories may initially be based on daily occurrences, to pronounce and define them as fiction, the better part of whatever makes them stories – think plot, characterization, dialogue, setting, etc – must be invented. A good writer's genius, therefore, lies in his or her ability to contrive great fiction from real life events.

Day to day resources for writers to mine ideas from are abundant, too. Besides newspapers, TV and radio, there are relationships, family feuds, discourse, scandals, traumatic experiences, and many more, which, all together, provide writers with the perennial well of real life occurrences from which to draw inspiration. Getting the ideas, however, is the easy part. These often strike at the most random times: could be in the middle of the night, at the end of a road trip, or after a brush with death; and the smart writer is, by default, prone to jot down whatever just crossed their mind in their idea journal. The hard part then lies in convincingly turning said ideas into fiction: ideally requires the writer to have an instinct for that incident which could generate a great story, backed with the ability to create a believable fictional account out of the said incident. In the ensuing days, the writer will thus spend hours structuring their story, blending keen observation with vivid imagination, cushioning their narration with appropriate exposition, camouflaging true life characters with fictitious back stories, embellishing their description of

people, places and events, with subtle, often metaphorical, exaggeration; like a magician, conjuring ways in which to persuasively deceive their audience without giving away the secrets of the trade. The challenge is in concocting great, believable fiction while obscuring its relation to the writer's life. The latter takes profound thinking and meticulous planning, and usually involves such activities as inventing major and minor characters, creating a series of crises to drive the characters' actions, dwelling on viewpoints (the best way to tell the story) brooding about the point of departure and point of destination (how to best start and end the story), choosing the setting, drawing plot lines, making up dialogue, etcetera, which, aside from serving to disguise the real-life source of inspiration, are meant to keep the reader interested in the narrative while at the same tricking them into perceiving it in its entirety as the product of the writer's imagination. A writer's worst nightmare is being confronted with irrefutable evidence that their story was based on real life. That's why keen caution must be observed to ensure that works of fiction are as unrelated to the real-life people or events that inspired them as possible.

The whole process of contriving fiction from real life takes time and it could be years before a writer is satisfied with their invention. To put this into context, the idea for my novel, *Skeletons*, struck me one day while reading a news story about the international outcry against Uganda's 'Kill the Gays' Bill; I then spent two years planning the story, and, once I had figured out everything, took one year to write it. Everything considered, however, if successfully done, creating great fiction out of nonfiction can be very fulfilling.