

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of Arts and Africa. First today the launching of a new book for children and one that may help to create a better understanding of African culture. It's called 'Ngunga's Adventures' and is about a young orphan boy in Angola. It's part of a much larger project called Young World Books which aims to bring literature from developing countries to the classrooms of Britain. They have already published a collection of stories called 'Tales of Mozambique'. Anne Bolsover attended the launching of 'Ngunga's Adventures' and first heard a young black schoolboy - Paul Harris read an extract from the book. It's about the orphan boy Ngunga, and his first meeting with a group of guerrillas in the bush. It tells how he learns of the death of one of them, called by the name: 'Our Struggle' who has looked after him.

TAPE

EXTRACT - 'NGUNGA'S ADVENTURES'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Also present at the launching was Neil Kinnock MP, the man who many observers believe may be Britain's Minister of Education in a future Labour Government. Here is how he saw the Young World Book Series.

NEIL KINNOCK

Here is the real message, the real experience of thousands of children, millions of children, in the world and it is by the way that they saw it, that you can win understanding for the nature of the struggle. Now the paragraph that seems to define the purpose to me is written at the beginning of 'Tales from Mozambique'. One of the aims of Young World Books, it says, is to help children through learning about, and appreciating, the cultures of their international brothers and sisters, creating a new mentality, breaking down the complexes and prejudices manifested in the old mentality which still exists around. It is, in breaking down that prejudice, that education has its most important function, and indeed the primary function of education is to do that. In R.H. Tawney's words, to liberate ourselves from ourselves, of all the purposes of the educational experience, is in order to give us dimensions of understanding, the accumulated wisdom and experience of the ages, the rationalisation of records that enabled people to move outside themselves and to comprehend the experience of others before and to rationalize the experience of their contemporaries and to forecast what should be the direction in which the world travels.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Neil Kinnock, British Labour MP and opposition spokesman on Education. Kate Beecham is Secretary of Young World Books and she told Anne Bolsover about the project.

KATE BEECHAM

So far, we have got two titles. One is 'Tales of Mozambique' which are from the oral tradition of Mozambique. They have been handed down from generation to generation and when Mozambique became independent, the very first book which they produced for their schools was this book. Then it was taken up by artists in this country who managed to get eighteen artists from fifteen countries to illustrate it and so it is really a wonderful international effort because these artists from every continent in the world have helped in illustrating it.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How were these stories in 'Tales of Mozambique' found?

KATE BEECHAM

Well, Chris Searle who translated them from the Portuguese, was teaching in Mozambique and he found that this book was being used in the schools and so he translated it and brought it home with him when he came back to this country. Then he had the idea of forming this Young World Books in order to produce fiction from the Third World. So he has really inspired the project and he translated both books both this one and 'Ngunga's Adventures', which as you heard tonight, was written by the Deputy Education Secretary in Angola, when he was fighting against the Portuguese before they won their independence.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What are you trying to do? You say you are trying to bring literature from different developing countries, I mean why?

KATE BEECHAM

Because in our books, in this country, children's books particularly, people from the Third World only appear as either camp followers or as the subjects of pity like Oxfam showing starving babies. But we hardly ever see them as heroes and heroines and one thing that we must do in the next book is show some of the girls as heroines because so far we have shown the boy as the hero because boys and women have played so much part in the liberation struggles but in the fiction we must also show them as well as men and boys.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Who are these books aimed at? Are they aimed mainly at children?

KATE BEECHAM

Yes, they are aimed at children but I think that adults can gain tremendously from them. I found them very interesting myself. I have read 'Ngunga's Adventures' three or four times and each time I have learned something new in it. As for 'Tales of Mozambique', well I can open it anywhere and find humour in the drawings and particularly in the illustrations as well as in the stories.

ANNE BEECHAM

'Ngunga's Adventures' is the book you are launching today. Can you tell me a little bit about the story?

KATE BEECHAM

Well it's the story of an orphan boy who was in Angola, of course, and his parents were killed by the colonialists in the war against the Portuguese and he was living with someone who took care of him, "Our Struggle". But then they got separated and he was all alone. He travels round and meets various guerrilla groups but everyone tells him that he ought to go to school, because he is only thirteen, and he ought to learn and because he has never been used to sitting down, he finds that very difficult. But he does go to school and he lives with the teacher because he is an orphan. The colonialists come when the school isn't open and these two, the teacher and the boy, have to defend the school and they've dug a trench. So they go into the trench and they put up a tremendous struggle and use their last bullet but finally get captured. When he is taken by the colonialists, his teacher, who he loves very much who he really feels is the one really great man he's met, his teacher is kept under very strict guard and is tortured so that he will tell about the liberation struggle and betray his comrades. The boy is used as a servant to look after the officers and the boy then realises that if only he could read and write he could give a note to the teacher and they could plan the teacher's escape. But because he can't read and write, he can't make any contact with the teacher and he just sees him as he is being taken off in a helicopter to go somewhere else and so he loses touch with the teacher as well. But then the ending is very, very surprising. I'm not going to say anything about it because you have to read it for yourself.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What do you think the book teaches children about the Angolan struggle?

KATE BEECHAM

I think that the effect on children in this country would be to feel that here is a young boy just like themselves but involved in a very great struggle and showing the ability to play an heroic part and it's that they usually read about the white people as heroes and they get so many of the Westerns where the white Americans are always the ones conquering the Indians and this completely redresses the balance.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - ANGOLA SIEMPRE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was music from Angola: 'Angola Siempre' by Roger Izeidi and L'Orchestre African Fiesta. And now to a very different struggle. The struggle for the freedom of the Artist in Kenya. We recently heard from the controversial novelist and playwright Ngugi Wa'Thiongo. Ngugi, you will recall, was imprisoned after a production of his play, "I'll Marry When I Choose", in Kikuyu and then later released following a world-wide outcry. He was in London recently and we were glad to take the opportunity to learn more of his views. Anne Bolsover asked him how he saw the role of the African writer.

NGUGI WA'THIONGO

When you ask what is the African writers role you might ask which writer, because some writers are on the side of the people in their struggles for a better life and others might be on the side of other people who prevent others from having a better life. But ideally the African writer's role should be to be the voice of the voiceless many.

ANNE BOLSOVER

But you now have started to write only Kikuyu. Surely you're excluding everybody who doesn't come from your tribe?

NGUGI WA'THIONGO

No, the question of language is really a question of class audience. In other words when you choose a language, you are also, in a more basic sense, choosing an audience. Now if you use foreign languages you are automatically excluding anybody who does not understand foreign languages. Now the majority of those who understand the English and so on are either foreigners or a small elite in any one African country. If I write in a language of one nationality, I am not solving all the problems but at least I'm speaking to a percentage of peasants and workers. When I write in English I'm excluding all workers and peasants.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Have your prison experiences radically altered your way of writing?

NGUGI WA'THIONGO

I think in a more basic sense, yes. In the sense that it was really in prison that I started writing a novel in Kikuyu, the first modern novel in Kikuyu language. So to that extent, it is a definite shift in my writing.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Have you got a new novel coming out at the moment?

NGUGI WA'THIONGO

Not really except the translation of that new novel 'Shaitini Mutharabh Ini' in Kikuyu. The English translation will be entitled 'Devil on the Cross'. But I have a few other books coming out. I have a collection of essays called 'Writers in Politics' which will be coming out in April as well as my prison memoirs which will be coming out much later in the year.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa'Thiongo. And that's it from Arts and Africa for today and remembering our earlier item and the 'Tales from Mozambique', I'm going to leave you with some music from that country. It's called Timbila Xylophone and is based on 'The Entry of the Dancers' from the orchestral dances of the Chopi of Mozambique. And it's goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, goodbye.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - 'THE ENTRY OF THE DANCERS'.