PERSPECTIVES

FEASTING ON WORDS: HOW I BECAME A WRITER FOR CHILDREN

TOLOLWA M. MOLLEL *Department of English, University of Alberta*

ABSTRACT. In this essay I look at the influences that have inspired and shaped my vocation as a writer for children. I credit my interest in writing to an early love of books and the written word, life with my grandparents in an oral culture, and my literary and theatrical activities in middle and high school. When I was a young child and lived with my parents, my love of the written word sprang from a lack of books and a fascination with them. Then, after I moved at the age of eight to live with my grandparents, I thrived on the riches from the strong oral culture that made up their world, in which the spoken word was all important. 'Feasting on words' was the Maasai term my grandparents used for the spoken word and the art of conversation. In middle and high school, I translated my love of the written word, and the love of language I had picked up feasting on words, into budding attempts to write – a basis for my future efforts. I conclude the essay with what it is that I've learned from, and enjoy most about, writing for children.

LE RÉGAL DES MOTS : COMMENT JE SUIS DEVENU AUTEUR POUR ENFANTS

RÉSUMÉ. Dans cet essai, j'analyse les influences qui ont inspiré et façonné ma vocation d'auteur pour enfants. J'attribue mon intérêt pour l'écriture à un amour précoce des livres et du mot écrit, à la vie avec mes grands-parents dans une culture orale et à mes activités littéraires et théâtrales à l'école secondaire. Quand j'étais jeune et vivant avec mes parents, mon amour du mot écrit est né de l'absence de livres et par conséquent de la fascination qu'ils exerçaient sur moi. Lorsqu'à l'âge de huit ans, je suis allé vivre avec mes grands-parents, je me suis repu des richesses de la puissante culture orale qui était leur univers et où le mot parlé revêtait une importance considérable. « Régal des mots » était l'expression Maasai que mes grands-parents utilisaient pour désigner le mot parlé et l'art de converser. À l'école secondaire, j'ai traduit mon amour du mot écrit et du langage que m'avait procuré le régal des mots en tentatives d'écriture, premiers fondements de mes futurs efforts. Je conclus cet essai sur ce que j'ai le plus appris et ce que j'aime le plus de l'écriture de livres pour les enfants.

My love of books sprang out of a lack of them. I grew up in the small town of Ng'aruka in Northern Tanzania, a town so small that its only school consisted of one room, and had only one teacher, who also happened to be my father. Despite being the teacher's son, I owned no books at all prior to starting school. No child did. We had no books in our house, besides those my father brought home to mark for students, his teaching guides, the Bible and one or two hymnbooks. All those books ranked right up there with my father's shotgun, which you touched at your peril. Because they were untouchable, books fascinated me all the more.

How I wished I had books of my own!

Since my only chance of owning a book was to be a schoolboy, I ached to become one. But starting school was complicated in those days. Not only did you have to be old enough, you also had to prove you were big enough, able to touch the left ear with your right hand *over* your head. All my playmates were bigger than me and started school before I did. I was left alone outside while my friends spent precious playtime in the classroom. With no toys except the crude ones I could make for myself, life was not exciting. Soon I got so bored that I took to sneaking into the classroom to be with my buddies. I found, to my joy, that my father would let me stay as long as I was good.

Inside the classroom, I watched my father write vowels on the blackboard in careful big letters. You can't form words in Swahili, the Tanzanian national language, without using vowels. They are the first letters you learn. I watched my father as he got the children to learn the letters. I watched and listened to the children sing out the letters in Swahili, in unison: **a e i o u (ah eh ee oh oo)**; then the vowels in syllables: **ba be bi bo bu, ma me mi mo mu, cha che chi cho chu**; again and again. I had no idea what they were saying, but it sounded like fun and at times I forgot I had to be quiet and I joined in, like a parrot. I remember thinking what an absolutely magical thing it was, to be able to read. How could anyone, I marveled in awe, give voice to a bunch of strange looking marks scribbled down? Was it some kind of magic? And just how did one muster such magic? After that, more than ever, I couldn't wait to start school, so I too could learn the wonderful magic.

The next year I was big enough to start school and I became a bona fide schoolboy. On my first day in class, I got my prize, my very first book, brand new, glossy (or so it seemed), with giant vowels and dozens of syllables. So special was it to me I couldn't get my eyes and hands off it. I ran my fingers across the colors on its shiny pages. I touched the letters, delighted to find they were stuck fast to the page and wouldn't come off. I smelled the paper. It smelled of a far off magical place, where I knew books came from. It was

some time before I associated books with people creating them. This mystique made me love books even more.

The school in Ng'aruka had only Standard (Grade) One and Two at the time, so after two years of school, I was sent to live with my grandparents on their coffee farm in the town (now city) of Arusha, about a hundred miles away. There, for the first time, I met my grandfather, about whom I had heard so much.

"What will you be when you grow up?" was the first question Grandfather asked me, in Swahili. But without waiting for an answer, he told me that I should study, get a good many degrees and become a teacher. Every one should grow up to be a teacher. I had never seen any one as keen on education as Grandfather. He had only reached Standard Two education himself, something he always regretted, I felt this fueled his passion for education for his children and grandchildren.

Every day, when I returned from school, he was waiting for me. "So, what's new? What did you learn?" God forbid if I had nothing to say. "All day in school," he would exclaim, "and nothing to show for it!" He liked to test me in other ways. After I had been going to school for a few months, he developed a favorite question. "If book knowledge were a shilling," he would ask me, "how much of it do you have?" A shilling, Tanzanian currency, consisted of one hundred cents. Already, even then, I had a pretty good sense of the limitless scope of knowledge, and the first time he asked me the question, I opted for the truth. "Five cents," I told him. He yanked his pipe from his mouth and stared at me. "What! Five cents of book knowledge, you say, after all these months in school! You might as well stay home to help me on the coffee farm. Attend my school." Thereafter, I boasted of a higher sum of knowledge whenever he asked me.

At first it was hard to tell him about my day at school. He insisted that I tell him in Maasai. I knew very little of the language when I arrived to live with my grandparents. In school my father had used Swahili, the medium of instruction in primary education. This use of Swahili extended to our house; my father hardly spoke Maasai to me. So I was virtually monolingual when I arrived in Arusha. Grandfather made sure that changed. He refused to speak to me in Swahili and banned everyone from doing so. Gradually I got better at Maasai and had less difficulty communicating with Grandfather. It took me a while to realize that his interest in what I learned at school was genuine. It didn't take me long, though, to use the opportunity to show off to him. As I went from Standard Three into Four, I read whatever I could – school books, discarded magazines and newspapers, anything that would interest Grandfather. I enjoyed dazzling him with startling bits of knowledge, stories, anecdotes and current affairs – to all of which he listened avidly.

You couldn't ask for a better listener.

Maasai elders are masters at listening. In an oral culture, the spoken word is of paramount importance. The Maasai call the art of the spoken word and conversation, literally translated, 'eating words' or "feasting on words". Feasting on words involves skilful speaking as well as listening. It trains you to be a good listener. You are only as good an eater of words as you are a listener. You listen actively, emitting responsive sounds in a rhythmic pattern, to acknowledge the speaker's words: **Mmh, eee, hoo, mmmh, nna, aaya, hooo, eeee.** And thus you listen until the speaker has finished, anything up to an hour later, before it is your turn to speak, as long as you have to.

I liked to watch elders visit with Grandfather. The elders had different styles of eating words, especially listening. Some elders listened with eyes closed. Others doodled on the dust with a walking stick, fidgeted with a fly-whisk, or stared into a hat or an imaginary spot in space. All elders, however, including Grandfather, shared a common characteristic. In listening, each took care not to trip up the speaker's words with his responsive sounds. The listener was careful not to respond in a manner that seemed to rush the speaker. It would be considered rude. The speaker, delivering in an unhurried style, would do so within a rhythm that allowed the listener to respond elegantly.

So, in the fashion of the consummate eater of words that he was, Grandfather would listen to me with his whole being. Whenever I said something that he thought was truly astonishing, he would stop me, and say, his eyes fixed on my face, "Repeat that." Later in the evening in Grandmother's kitchen, he would say to her, "Listen to what your grandson told me today." And to me, "Go on, tell her." Soon, prompted by Grandfather, I found myself repeating things to visiting relatives, family friends and neighbors. This spurred me to read as diversely as I could. History. Greek and Norse myths. Aesop's fables. Arabian nights. Politics. For most grown ups around me, books were an exotic experience for which they had little time, patience or inclination. But they could enjoy them, I found out, through the spoken word. My spoken word. This meant a lot to me.

Grandfather himself loved dishing out words, stories about his childhood and the old days, accounts of the Maasai way of life, stray anecdotes about the Second World War that he had picked up here and there. He embellished whatever he shared with his lively brand of storytelling. I particularly enjoyed eating words when Grandfather and I were working on his coffee farm. Work filled him with cheer and talk. Stories would pour out of him. "Did I ever tell you. . .?" he would start, to which question I had a ready answer. "No, you didn't." Never mind that I had heard the story ten times before. There was another reason why I liked his stories. Sometimes, when

he was really into a story, he would rummage in his pockets for his pipe, look up at the sun, and say, "Time for a puff. Let's rest a little while I finish what I was saying." Grandfather was a workaholic and he tried to turn everybody into one. It was great to rest now and then.

As for Grandmother, her feast of words consisted of folk tales. Stories about monsters to keep me and my cousins awake as we waited forever for supper in her smoky, shadowy kitchen. Stories with song so we could sing along and stop our dangerous horsing around near the woodfire and a pot simmering with supper. Tales about ill-mannered, gluttonous characters like the hyena, to caution us against selfishness and breaches of etiquette.

After I had finished Standard Four, the schools I attended were all boarding schools. But for a long time, I considered my grandparents' coffee farm to be very much home. I spent a good part of my school holidays with them. As the years went by, I felt obliged to increase my contribution to a feast of words with Grandfather. This became easier as my grasp of the Maasai language had grown sure with time. I indulged his love for stories from the Second World War and history, and his current affairs interest in the Middle East, Cyprus, the Cold War and Communism. In my crusade, I was motivated partly by my love of language. I found it inspiring to try to find the words to convey in Maasai the most un-Maasai of terms and concepts. How did one, for instance, translate 'Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile' into Maasai? An interesting linguistic challenge.

Love of language. Love of words. Love of stories and of sharing them. Love of reading. All these combined to kindle in me the love of feasting on words, first as a reader, and in years to come as a budding writer. Growing up bookless in Ng'aruka and life with my grandparents had helped in various ways. Attending boarding school would help in other, unexpected, ways.

My first boarding school – Mringa Boys'– was a nasty, brutish place of bullies, rotten food, sadistic prefects, and indifferent teachers. A rude introduction into Middle School. For a while, my love of reading sustained me at Mringa. It was my lifeline, my refuge. I was a spectacular failure academically. English and Swahili were the only subjects I succeeded in, thanks to my love of books. If I was not good in anything else, I gained a reputation as a reader. I loved to read aloud the books that appealed to me. I don't know how it came about, but teachers began to get me to read aloud to different classes, including Standard Eight, the top standard in the school. That, I a boy from Standard Five, the lowest class in Middle School, would read to Standard Eight boys, many of whom were my bullies, meant the world to me. It was gratifying to see my tormentors hushed to silence and keen concentration by my reading.

Books, however, could not sustain me for more than a year. At the beginning of Standard Six, I decided that I had had enough. Mringa Boarding

School was not for me. I ran away, but not home to my grandparents. Grandfather, I knew, would not understand. He would send me back to school promptly, if he didn't skin me alive first for jeopardizing my education. I had told him before, in vain, about my problems at Mringa. Hang in there, he had replied. Be tough. Nothing is easy in this world. You are lucky you won't be like me with my Standard Two education. And it was true. I was one of the lucky ones. Very few students, in those days, made it past the formidable Standard Four examination to get into Standard Five, at Mringa no less, one of the most sought after Middle schools (believe it or not) in Northern Tanzania.

So instead of going home, I decided to go to the ends of the earth. Walking and hitch hiking, I made it to the small town of Makuyuni, about fifty miles south-east of Arusha. No one would ever find me there. No more boarding schools. Luck was with me. A kind lady and her husband took me in. I holed up in Makuyuni until my father turned up like a nightmare. A missing person bulletin had been put out, on the radio and in newspapers, and a driver with whom I had hitched a ride and who knew my father, had recognized me. The kindly lady handed me over, but only in return for my father's solemn promise not to punish me when we got back home. What I had gone through, she told him, had been punishment enough. I believe it was the hardest promise my father had ever had to make. But promise he did. The lady was firm on that.

My father, to my shocked relief, kept his promise when we got home. What is more, he never sent me back to Mringa. He sent me away to another boarding school, Longido, where it so happened that one of my uncles was the head teacher.

As I stepped off the bus at Longido, a sea of eyes greeted me. The whole school, it seemed, had come to meet me. Word of my misadventure had preceded me. Every one was curious about this ten-year old boy who had made it to the ends of the earth. And into the newspaper and the radio. There were grins and chuckles from the crowd, gasps of disbelief, whispering and finger pointing at me. I remember mixed feelings of shame and pride. Shame as it struck me what a delinquent thing I had done. Pride as I felt like a hero who had just stepped out of an adventure story.

It could well have been at that moment that the idea to write down my adventure began, for soon after settling into Longido, I embarked on writing the story in a hand-made little book. And I didn't stick to the truth either. Why should I? It was my story, it occurred to me. I could do with it whatever I wanted. The exciting revelation spurred me on. In no time I had made the story more adventurous and heroic than it could ever have been in reality. I divided the book into numerous chapters just for the pleasure of thinking up different chapter titles every time I revisited the story. I couldn't stay

away from it. Every so often I slunk off into a corner to read and feel the words anew, to revise. The story became both a toy and playground for my creative imagination. I realized, for the first time, that the pleasure of writing lay in the benefit of hindsight that provides you with a better word, image, turn of phrase, sentence, or idea. From nowhere, hindsight sneaks a thought into your head, so stealthily and unexpectedly you wonder why you missed the thought in the first place.

My uncle, the head teacher at Longido, proved to be another source of inspiration for my story. He taught us English and Swahili and loved literature. I remember him bursting into the classroom whenever he had found a new adventure book he thought we would like. For a few weeks after reading the story aloud, we would chatter about it, chuckle over favorite parts, assuming the characters' names and their personae. Any time we read a book he recommended and I came upon a word, description, or a turn of phrase I liked, it would end up in my story. The storybooks we read served as my writing instructor and further inspiration.

From Longido Extended Primary School (as Standard 1 to 8 was called then), I went to Form One (Standard or Grade Nine) at Azania Secondary School in Dar es Salaam. One of my favorite haunts in Azania was the library, a musty narrow room at the head of a steep flight of stairs. To me, no sweeter smell existed than that of the old hard bound books, mostly classics, in that room. I looked forward to Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, the library's only opening hours. Since one could borrow only one book at a time, I would try to read a whole, slim, book in the library itself and borrow one when I left. On Tuesdays, I borrowed a book that I could finish by Thursday, when I would borrow a thick one that would see me through the weekend and Monday. God forbid that I finish the book before Tuesday!

My other favorite place was a second-hand bookstore not far from school. It was owned by a stooped old East Indian man with a quiet smile, a flowing silver beard, and a nose forever buried in a book. As soon as the old man saw me, he would beckon me to follow him among his stacks of books, to new treasures that he had acquired. I would sit between the shelves and read. Then, with difficulty, I would settle on the one book I could buy with the miserly two or three shillings I had. A few times, to my delight, the old man would throw in an extra book for free.

I did much writing around this time. After reading an inspiring story I would find myself creating one of my own, usually modeled on English Literature books that filled the curriculum in those days. I wrote Robin Hood stories. I wrote about knights and dragons, musketeers, and kings and princes and princesses. I wrote more than a hundred pages of a story set on the river Thames! As with all other stories I attempted, I never finished it. My enthusiasm was always greater than my tenacity. What stumped me usually

was how to bring the story to a satisfying resolution. I attempted mysteries, detective and crime fiction, a cowboy novel, science fiction, and romance.

The one writing project that bore fruit was a play I wrote for a religious club to which I belonged, and which had members from our boys' school, Azania, and from a neighboring girls' secondary school. The two schools were separated by a fence, and strict rules kept the boys and the girls from meeting, except through clubs of this nature, and closely supervised social dances. The idea for the play, which was endorsed instantly and unanimously by members, came from me during a meeting to discuss how we could raise money for the club.

But who would write the play?

I had never written a play before, and that's probably why, without hesitation, I volunteered to do it. My foolhardiness came to the rescue. Knowing nothing about writing a play, how hard or easy it would be, I plunged right in. I was lucky. Based on a simple but catchy crime-does-not-pay theme, the play virtually wrote itself. It was a heady, exhilarating experience, which lasted exactly until we realized the play had to be cast and directed. Once again my sweet ignorance of what would be involved saved the day. I offered to direct it. For the second time, I was lucky. I had no shortage of actors and actresses to cast. The prospect of an extended period of close interaction through rehearsal was pleasing to both the boys and the girls in the club. As we rehearsed the play, I discovered I had to rewrite it to suit the cast I had assembled. This only added to the excitement. I took a small part so I could devote my energies to directing and revising. I was on top of the world.

Two weeks before opening night, my world crashed. The lead actor abruptly withdrew from the play. He gave no reason, apologies, or explanation. It could have been nerves. For a while, stunned, we thought it was the end of the project, but for the third time my foolish enthusiasm pulled us through. I became the lead actor, and not only did I have to muster the lines of the main character but I also had to coach a new recruit to play my former minor role. The boy who took over the role never quite mustered it and needed a lot of prompting, up to opening night. During performances I was on edge waiting to make up for his miscues in our scenes together. All in all, it was the most stressful period of my Secondary School years. Day and night the play was on my mind. I wrote and rewrote it mentally as I waited in vain to fall asleep and at dawn when I snapped awake sweating over the rapidly approaching opening night.

Despite the stress or perhaps because of it, the play was my most rewarding and inspiring experience thus far. Opening night was magic. Everyone in school was hungry for the play. Theatrical events were rare in schools and the country. My play was treated as the novelty that it was. The school auditorium was so packed that some students occupied the stage. We had to

shoo them away to make room for the performance. We performed the play at two or three other schools, to similar success, before we ran out of steam. From all the performances, we made more money than we could ever have imagined. For me the whole experience was gratifying not so much because of the money, which was great, but more for the sense of creative accomplishment it gave me. I could hardly believe that these were my words the actors had valued enough to memorize and make their own on stage. I could hardly believe that this was my dramatic story the audience had streamed in to see, and had paid for.

It was a pleasure I found I had retained years later when I took up story-making seriously. It's a pleasure I get whenever I discover a story worth sharing from my life experience or someone else's, or from folklore. It's a pleasure I get when I unearth the little things that make a story work. It's the thrill of a treasure hunt – following a reluctantly unfolding map from idea to a finished story. I enjoy struggling for a nifty beginning that would ensnare the reader. I enjoy reflecting on what motivates and makes each character essential. I like the search for words that successfully marry action to character, setting and theme, while I listen closely to the dictates of the story. And after the characters have lived their life, I feel rewarded when I find a way to bring the story to a satisfying end.

My favorite story is always one that I happen to be working on. To embark on a new story, for me, is akin to stepping on the threshold of an adventure. I look forward to discoveries I will be making. I look forward to hard questions to do with plot and character leaping out at me, and to answers springing out when I least expect. I look forward to beautiful nuggets to be mined out of the story and the creative imagination. Nothing is more stirring than to suddenly alight on a word, a phrase, a description, an image, or an ordering or paring down of words, that jolts a limp story to life; that brings clarity to an awkward sentence, and tightens a slack scene or plot. Writing picture books has taught me about the microscopic aspects of writing. In a picture book story, every word is worth its weight in gold. To smelt for this gold, I revise again and again, setting the story aside between revisions to let time help me along. Then, by reading the story loud over and over, I let the ear pick out what has eluded the eye, the discordant note in the music and the rhythm of the words. I feel rewarded rewarded if that whole process enables me to present a story simply and engagingly, in terms relevant to a child. In the end, I will be gratified if, through my stories, I can inspire a child as I had been inspired, to develop a love of feasting on words.

TOLOLWA M. MOLLEL is a Tanzanian-born dramatist and author for children. His books include *The Orphan Boy* (Governor General's Award winner for illustrations by Paul Morin), *Big Boy* (R. Ross Annett Children's Literature Prize from the Writers Guild of Alberta), *My Rows and Piles of Coins* (Corretta Scott King Honor Book for illustrations by E. B. Lewis), *To Dinner, for Dinner* (Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People of the Year), and *The Flying Tortoise* (A Bank Street College Children's Book of the Year). Some of his books have been published in the US., Australia, Britain and South Africa, as well as Canada. He has worked as an actor and university theatre instructor in Tanzania and Canada. In recent years, he has combined his storytelling, writing and dramatic skills in theatrical work for children. He is currently completing his doctorate at the University of Alberta. His dissertation involves writing a play, and doing scholarly work around the process. He and his family live in Edmonton.

Né en Tanzanie TOLOLWA M. MOLLEL est auteur dramatique et auteur de livres pour enfants. Parmi ses livres, il faut citer *The Orphan Boy* (lauréat du Prix du gouverneur général au titre des illustrations de Paul Morin), *Big Boy* (Prix R. Ross Annett de littérature enfantine de la *Writers Guild of Alberta*), *My Rows and Piles of Coins* (livre d'honneur Corretta Scott King au titre des illustrations de E. B. Lewis), *To Dinner, for Dinner* (*Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People of the Year*) et *The Flying Tortoise* (*A Bank Street College Children's Book of the Year*). Plusieurs de ses livres ont été publiés aux États-Unis, en Australie, en Grande-Bretagne et en Afrique du Sud, de même qu'au Canada. Il a été comédien et professeur d'art dramatique à l'université en Tanzanie et au Canada. Depuis quelques années, il associe ses talents de conteur, d'écrivain et de dramaturge pour créer des œuvres théâtrales pour enfants. Il termine actuellement son doctorat à l'Université d'Alberta. Sa thèse consiste à écrire une pièce de théâtre en menant parallèlement une réflexion savante sur ce processus de création dramaturgique. Il vit à Edmonton avec sa famille.