
Handbook for Writers of Children's Books

Mem Fox



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UNESCO/ DANIDA
Basic Learning Materials Initiative

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Foreword

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The idea for the Handbook was inspired by two workshops for writers of children's books, held in Tanzania and Uganda in January-February 2000. The workshops were organized by the Book Development Councils of Tanzania (BAMVITA) and Uganda (BODECU) under the UNESCO/DANIDA Basic Learning Materials (BLM) Initiative with the aim of assisting the countries to enliven their publishing industries by promoting local writing and the production of children's books.

Having arisen from the Education for All programme, the overall objective of the BLM Initiative is to develop a favourable environment for the sustainable production and provision of low cost, good quality textbooks and other reading materials. Apart from assisting Member States in developing strategies for the book sector, strengthening national co-ordinating mechanisms for book development, and building partnerships, its development objective is to build capacity at the national level and provide skills training for the various stakeholders in the book chain. The above workshops focused on the latter by teaching writers skills to enchant the young generation through literacy.

The author of the Handbook, Mem Fox, was invited by the BLM Initiative to provide expertise for the workshops. She is an internationally known Australian writer, who has written books for children that have put her on best-seller lists in both Australia and the USA, like for instance the books: "Koala Lou"

(Puffin Books, Australia) or “Whoever you are” (Hodder Children’s Book Australia). She has also dedicated herself for decades to teacher education, and is a highly regarded literacy consultant.

The present Handbook is a direct outcome of the lessons learned in the Tanzania and Uganda workshops. It is hoped that it will reach a much wider audience than the workshops were able to address, and thus disseminate the knowledge and skills generated in the training for the benefit of writers from other countries. The Handbook does not pretend to provide a detailed and comprehensive guide, but aims to present some basic principles that should be taken into account when writing for children.

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Aicha Bah Diallo
*Deputy Assistant
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PART 1

Some Basic Principles

Books for young children are usually short. Young children themselves are usually short. This leads to an assumption that children have small brains, and that writing for them is easy. The reverse is true. Young children have large, active brains, and writing for them is enormously difficult. It is even more difficult than writing for adults, since only the best is good enough for children – the best words in the best places, and the best characters in the best stories. Where do we begin? **5**

We need to read children's books ourselves

Before we begin it is useful to familiarize ourselves with books which are on sale, and are currently popular with children. If we do not, we might find ourselves writing books similar to those we ourselves read long ago, when we were children, most of which are now out-dated, out-moded, and entirely forgotten. It is also extremely useful to read, and re-read, the books which have passed the test of time – books which *remain* popular today, fifty, twenty, ten, and even five years after they were published. These are classics, and they have much to teach us. It is also useful to recall the stories and folktales we listened to, and loved, as children, the stories which we have remembered into adulthood. What do these classic stories have which other books lack?

A good picture book for the young child has most of these qualities:

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- ◆ Trouble (a problem arising from the things that really matter to us, such as needing to be loved, not getting what we want, etc.);
 - ◆ One of two themes: 'the stranger comes to town', or 'the quest';
 - ◆ Characters readers care about deeply;
 - ◆ A universal theme that speaks to any child, anywhere in the world;
 - ◆ Perfect words in perfect places;
 - ◆ The delight of happiness;
 - ◆ No preaching;
 - ◆ Subtle signposts to living in a social world;
 - ◆ An impact that affects the heart of the reader or listener;
 - ◆ Strange or unexpected use of language;
 - ◆ A complex story that requires the mind to be attentive to detail, to be active in problem-solving, to roll through tunnels of prediction and meaning-making, and to tumble down hills of emotion, and up again;
 - ◆ Or for very young children, an original pattern created by rhyme, rhythm or repetition;
 - ◆ Children saying: 'Read it again! Read it again!', when the book is finished.
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Where do the ideas come from?

The above list is all very well, but the question writers are most often asked, as if it were a deep secret to be dug up and displayed for all to see, is: *Where do the ideas come from?* The best ideas, in my experience, do not come from our heads. They come from our immediate lives, or from memory, and then they are moulded by our imagination into grand stories that affect the hearts and minds of others. Stories created solely from imagination have a flatness about them. They are usually about things that do not matter much. They are here today and gone tomorrow. No one remembers them into adulthood.

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However, when we read classic stories that make us laugh or cry, shrivel with fright, or hug ourselves with happiness, it is my belief that we could, if we tried, track the main idea down to a pivotal moment in the writer's life—or several pivotal moments. These classic stories have the quality of 'difference.' They are here today, *and* here tomorrow, *and* here the day after, since children's books and folktales, which are loved and remembered, do more than entertain for a while: they move children profoundly, and having done so they take up residence in their hearts and stay there. They are remembered affectionately, sometimes word for word, into adulthood.

To find an event that could be a good basis for a story it might be useful to tell a friend, or other people in a writing group, about a strong emotional experience remembered from childhood, and start writing with that event in mind. This way, the first draft will not be drawn entirely from the imagination, which will mean getting off to a good, heart-felt beginning.

For instance, here is an anecdote from Tanzania. It is a true story, which was later given more shape and definition to make it a story suitable for publication. Both examples appear below:

Anecdote in its first version:

When I was a little kid my parents went away to the city to work, and I stayed with my grandparents in their village. One day we went off to visit my auntie who lived in a village about three kilometres away. The path to my aunt's village was sandy, and the grass was so high it curved over the path.

 My grandfather led the way, then came my grandmother, then me. We set off.

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After a while I smelt something. I thought the smell would go away as we walked past—whatever it was, but it didn't. I didn't like it. It made me scared. I told my grandfather I could smell something that was scaring me, and I asked him if I could walk between him and grandma.

'Of course', he said.

So I moved into the middle and we went on. But I could still smell whatever it was, and I was still scared. I tried to be calm but in the end I told my grandfather that I was really scared.

'What are you so scared of?', he said.

'I think there's a lion following us', I said.

We all turned round, and sure enough on the narrow path behind my grandmother was a lion.

My grandfather stood in front of the lion and looked into its eyes, and gestured with his arms and said quite firmly: 'Go away! You're frightening my grand-daughter. Be off with you!' And the lion turned and walked away.

It was incredible! I'll never forget it.

The "same" anecdote after rewriting it:

Pili was a little girl who lived in a village with her grandmother and her grandfather, because her parents had to work far away in the city. Pili loved her grandmother very much, but she loved her grandfather even more.

One day her grandparents decided to visit Pili's auntie, who lived in a village about an hour's walk away. They set off. The track to the auntie's village was soft, and sandy, and narrow.

On either side of the path the grass was so high it curled over, like a cool green roof.

Grandfather led the way, next came grandmother, and last of all, little Pili. As they walked no sound could be heard. The sun shone. The air was calm. The world was full of peace.

After a while Pili thought she could smell something she didn't like. She hoped it would go away. Her heart beat fast. She was scared.

But on they walked. They walked, and they walked, and they walked. As they walked no sound could be heard. The sun shone. The air *seemed* calm. The world *seemed* full of peace.

But still the smell remained. Pili's heart beat faster. She was scared. Really scared.

'Grandfather', she said, 'I'm scared. Please can I walk in the middle, between you and grandmother?'

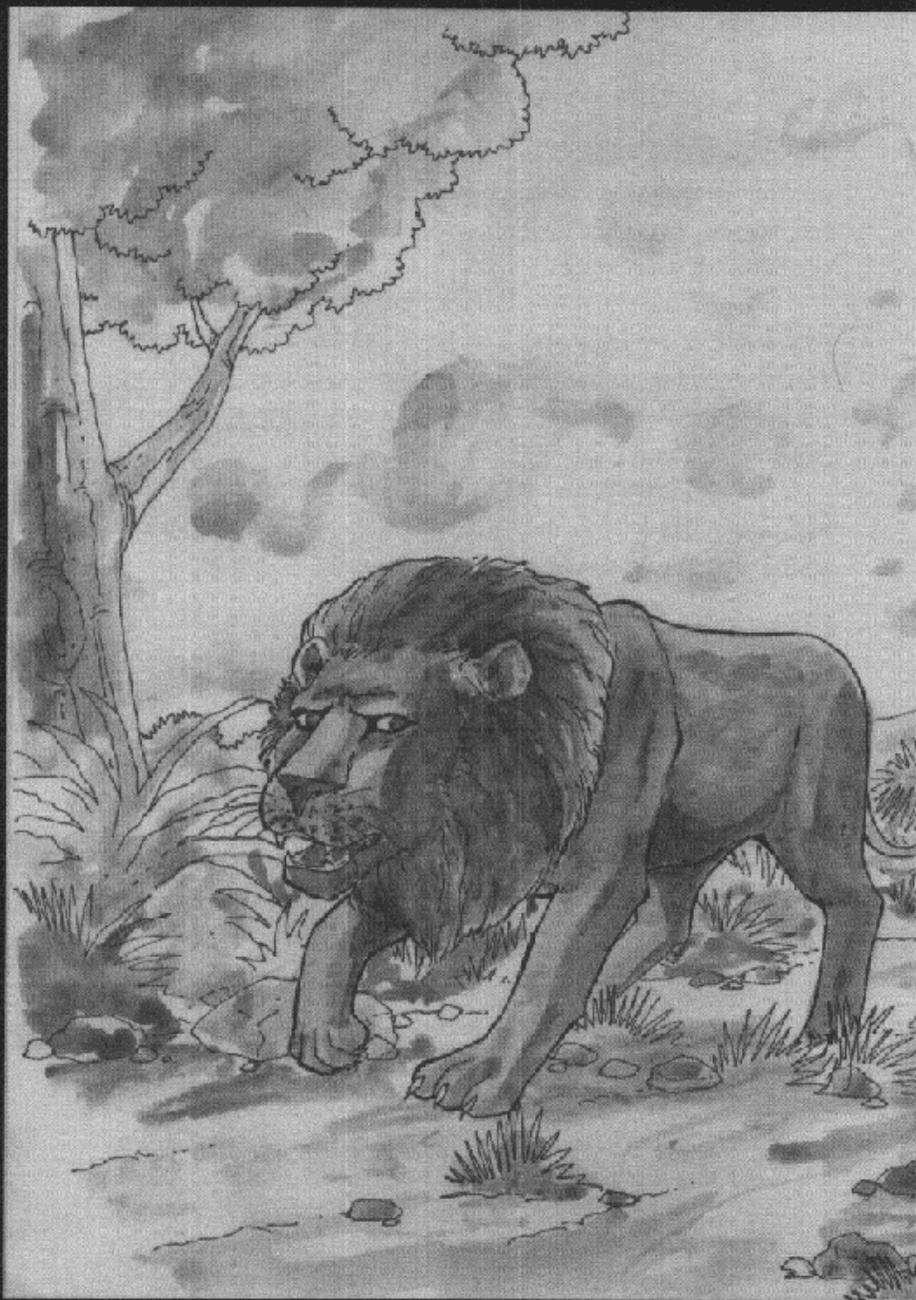
'Of course', he said.

So Pili moved into the middle between her grandmother and her grandfather, and they walked, and they walked, and they walked. As they walked no sound could be heard. The sun shone. The air *seemed* calm. The world *seemed* full of peace.

But still the smell remained. Pili's heart beat faster. She was scared. Really scared. Really, really scared.

Finally she said: 'Grandfather, I'm really frightened.'

'What is it that frightens you, little one?',
asked her grandfather kindly.





'I think there's a lion following us', she said.

They all turned around. It was true! Behind grandmother was a lion, following them along the narrow path.

Grandfather stood in front of the lion, and looked into its eyes. He pointed down the path and said quite firmly: 'Lion! Go away! You're frightening my grand-daughter. Be off with you!'

And the lion turned tail and walked away.

Which only goes to show that lions, like men, understand Swahili!

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Who are we writing for?

It is self-evident that we are writing for young children. Perhaps a better question is: Who are we *not* writing for?

We are not writing for ourselves, are we? Nor are we writing to impress critics. Nor are we writing for academics. Nor for teachers. Nor for parents. Nor for our adult friends. Nor are we writing for the children we once were – those children no longer exist: they have grown up and become ourselves. We are writing for children who are young now, at the beginning of the 21st century. We are writing for young children the world over, who are seven years old, or younger.

Let us be honest: Why are we writing?

We need to be honest, right from the start, about why we want to write for children. If we intend to moralize, teach a lesson, patronize,

categorize, marginalize, or show off our own brilliance, we are doing it for the wrong reasons, and we will need to reassess our motives. We are not writing academically de-constructible literature. Nor are we writing as therapy to eradicate our guilt about the world, and what we have done to it.

We are writing instead to encourage young children to love reading, to inform them, to entertain them, to enchant them, and to affect them. In our writing we are aiming to provide escapist delight, but we will probably be able to rattle children's values and assumptions a little at the same time. For example, we might say to them through a story: 'You think you rule the world? Think again, sweetheart!'

Of course in the end we aim to provide children with universal ideals and possibilities, and make them feel good about themselves and their world. They are too young to be allowed to feel otherwise.

Writers of good books for children are always, simultaneously, good teachers of reading and writing, whether they are aware of it or not. Good books 'teach' reading more easily than bad books. So it is important for us to write sentences that are not only gorgeous, but easy to understand as well, and to use as much rhyme, rhythm and repetition as possible. We do not need to water down the level of individual words, however, since children need to hear as many different words as they can, before they encounter them later, when they are reading by themselves.

When we picture an adult reading one of our books to a child, one of the aims of our writing should be to enhance the relationship between the reader and the child being read to, through the story we have written – to help them love each other even more than they do already.

And finally, to be honest, let us not forget to admit that we are writing also to make money – it would be foolish to do it for nothing – and to leave our mark on the world, and raise our own self-esteem. If we admit all this, and know why we are writing, we can move along.

What should be taken into consideration?

If we want to write for young children it is essential to stay in touch with childhood, either through memory, or through contact with the real live of children in our communities. If we lose touch with children or our own memories of childhood—we will not have in our hearts and minds all the information we need to write well.

14 For example, we need to understand the nature of children's interests, and their emotional needs. We need to know the difference between their *literary* needs and their *literacy* needs, and to be able to fulfil both those needs at the same time.

It is also useful to know what kinds of ideas might challenge their thinking, based on the society in which they live at the start of the third millennium. It is polite to consider the ethnic group to which they belong, their gender, and their religion, if any. When we write we are not necessarily hide-bound by all this information, since that might cause us to censor ourselves too much, and might, in turn, lead us to write bad, banal stories which bore kids to death. Having said that, we should be as open-minded as possible. We need to be able to share ideas across cultures, and to avoid indoctrination in one direction or another. Access to different kinds of information is important for individual development, and for our understanding of other communities.

So although we have to pay attention to religion, ethnic group, and gender, to target specific groups, we must not let this destroy our artistic goals. Questions such as: 'Will the reader be offended?', should not constrain us, nor limit our creativity. We might wish to write about another religion, ethnic group, or gender, in such a way as to provide enriching and surprising elements for our readers, allowing them to become open to new ideas, and other people's perceptions of the world.

For example, at the beginning of the 21st century we need to consider gender stereo-typing. Is it still appropriate to show the

females in the story only in the house, the kitchen, and the garden, and caring for the family? Would it be possible to make the main character a female—a bold, exciting, brave, decision-making female—who has adventures, and wins through, in spite of adversity? This would provide excellent role-models for girls.

Any stereo-typing should be avoided, such as making children who wear glasses into weaklings, who are brainy but hate sport; or old people shown as dodderly and incapable of caring for themselves; or disabled people who are pitied for what they cannot do, instead of being celebrated for what they can do; or people of a certain race or religion mocked for who they are, and what they believe.

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Of course we need to consider the maintenance of the solid cultural values which underpin the society in which we live and write. Sensitivity and respect are essential. Acknowledging this sensitivity, without falling into the trap of stereotyping, is a difficult balancing act, to which much thought should be given.

Finally we have to keep in mind the fact that adults buy and read the books we write. The words will be channelled through an adult reading aloud to a child. Pleasing the adult is certainly important, and must not be forgotten, but *the child is more important and must never be forgotten.*

Children are so clever it is startling

Little kids are as bright as buttons, and they are perceptive when they are talked down to. They loathe being patronized. Their critical faculties are highly developed, and much more than most adults realize. In fact they are altogether smarter than most adults give them credit for.

They love the challenge of fascinating, 'difficult' words. They adore rhyme, rhythm and repetition. They like the thrill of a really riveting story. Because they are young, they do, of course, have a comparatively limited concentration span that must be taken into account. And even though they are clever and confident, they do need constant reassurance regarding their safety in a turbulent world.

Here are some of the things that delight children which we might weave into our stories:

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- ◆ noise and laughter;
 - ◆ being loved and feeling safe;
 - ◆ fright and drama;
 - ◆ grandparents;
 - ◆ food and friends;
 - ◆ magic and fantasy.
 - ◆ toys and pets;
-

And here are some of the things children are ambivalent about, which we might also weave into our stories:

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- ◆ parents;
 - ◆ the dark;
 - ◆ siblings;
 - ◆ settling in to a new place;
 - ◆ school;
 - ◆ learning new skills;
 - ◆ older children;
 - ◆ not conforming/looking stupid;
 - ◆ going to bed;
 - ◆ feeling left out.
-



Taking the illustrator into account

Now that we understand the nature of children and childhood, what interests them, and why we want to write for them—and now that we have come up with an excellent idea—certain practical aspects of writing need to be clearly understood, such as the number of pages required, and how to work with an artist.

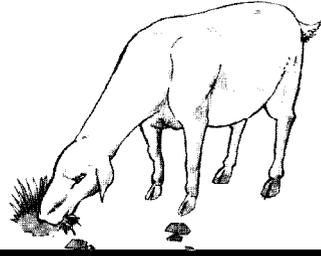
The printing process means that a picture book is always thirty two pages long, and many of those pages are pictures. We need therefore, to cut our text ruthlessly, in order, if possible, to keep the story under 600 words. There is no room for much more text. Little children will often look at the pictures and then say: ‘Turn the page! Turn the page!’, so there is not enough time to read a lot of text on a page.

It is important to keep the pictures in mind. We do not have to say everything in the words. The pictures might tell as much as half the story, which means much of the setting and tone, let alone the plot, can be left to the illustrator. We need not write anything that can be shown in the illustrations. Illustrators love the challenge of filling in our blanks, as it were. We should try not to make life too hard for the illustrator, upon whom so much of the success of our story will depend. For example, a story about chickens is difficult to illustrate, because it is hard to create and differentiate expressions in chickens’ faces.

The publisher will choose the illustrator, and work with the illustrator, and instruct the illustrator. It is not the business of the writer to interfere in matters of illustration, no matter how much writers might wish to impose their will. Writers write. Illustrators illustrate. Each has to be given the appropriate professional space and respect. Imagine how we would feel if illustrators told us how to write.

PART 2

Practical Help



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- 18 **T**he following hints are *hints* only, not commands, since they cannot always be obeyed, nor are they always appropriate.
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The need for trouble

At the start of a story we need to be as direct as possible. It is a common sin to beat about the bush, and waffle on for too long. We should attempt to say who, when, and where, in the first two sentences, and then begin to state the problem. We have to solve a problem during a story otherwise we have no trouble. Without trouble we have no plot. Only *trouble* is interesting.

For instance, if the main character is not stopped from achieving his or her goal, the story is boring. If a child has lost her mother, and goes to find her, she could come up against difficulties again and again, and not find her mother until the very end of the story. We need to feel some anxiety for the main character in order for a story to work.

Rhyme, rhythm, and repetition

There is an option to the theme-and-trouble story, especially when we are writing for very young children: picture books for that age group can swing from the stars on rhythm alone, or rhyme, or repetition or

a combination of all three. Young children are mesmerized and enchanted by a predictable pattern of language, which is fun for them to say, and pleasing for them to hear.

For instance:

There was once a jackal called Nasty.

**He was dirty.
All jackals are dirty.**

**He was mean.
All jackals are mean.**

**He was sneaky.
All jackals are sneaky.**

**He was lonely.
All jackals are lonely**

**He was lazy.
All jackals are lazy**

**He was secretive.
All jackals are secretive.**

**He caused trouble.
All jackals like to cause trouble.**

**But when a lion ate his dinner,
the jackal cried and cried.
All jackals cry, and so do I.**

The need for excellent characters

A story-book (as opposed to a merely rhyme-and-rhythm book) is always tedious without well-drawn characters: characters whose highs and lows and final triumph tug at the heartstrings of readers and listeners. If readers and listeners do not care about the main characters, and cannot empathize with them, the story will fail.

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Showing the story, not merely telling it

One of the famous maxims for all writers is: ‘Show, do not tell.’ Rather than describing, and explaining, and stating, and enumerating, we can instead show what is happening, and how characters feel about what is happening, through their actions and their speech. What they do, and say, can explain a great deal of the story, and cuts out the need for long-winded description.

For example we will not say: ‘Granny was a wild, brave woman. At home she was untidy and sometimes absent-minded, but it was different when we went camping.’ Instead we will describe the untidiness by painting a picture of it, in words. We will show the absent-mindedness by saying how, and when, she was absent-minded.

Consider the theme

After trouble and characters we must not forget a theme, either, such as: ‘All big brothers are a pain.’ A book without a theme is an arid book.

Ensuring there is passion

Finally, to ensure that we have something really worthwhile to say, we can test ourselves by asking 'Is this a "So what?" story, or will it last for ever?'

Reading aloud is essential

As we write we ought to read aloud constantly what we have written – each paragraph, each sentence, each clause and each phrase, since we are writing a book that will be read aloud. We need to be obsessed, even fanatical, about placing the best words in the best places, so our stories are, in the end, rhythmically perfect.

For this reason, it is wise to spend as much time on the rhythm of the first and last lines, as on the whole of the rest of the book put together, since the first and last lines are the most important. The first sentence will grab and hold listeners and readers, and the last will provide a lasting sense of deep contentment.

Rhythm is the greatest challenge

Rhythm is the hurdle which most often trips up the amateur writer, let alone the writer who is experienced. Rhythm is the festering sore in imperfect drafts. It must be cured, totally. The amateur writer believes rhythm can be almost right, but 'almost' is never good enough. Only perfect rhythm will do, and only reading aloud will show us whether the rhythm is perfect.

one...

two...

three...

Keeping up our courage

We must not get too discouraged over drafts that do not seem to be working. After all, why hurry to be finished? A picture book of 500 words may take two years, or more, to perfect, and may consist of over forty drafts. Most problems, even the problem of rhythm, are solved eventually by choosing a different word here and there. Gustave Flaubert put it like this: *‘Tout le talent d’écrire ne consiste après tout que dans le choix des mots.’*¹

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Learning from a master

George **O**rwell has a useful list of strategies to use when we are stuck for words, and drowning in literary swill: ‘A scrupulous writer, in every sentence’, he writes, ‘will ask himself at least four questions’, thus:

- ◆ What am I trying to say?
- ◆ What words will express it?
- ◆ What image/idiom will make it clearer?
- ◆ Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?

And he will probably ask himself two more:

- ◆ Could I put it more simply?
- ◆ Have I said anything avoidably ugly?

1. *All writing talent lies after all only in the choice of words.*

Learning how to be dissatisfied

The most important quality in writers is the ability to be dissatisfied with what they have written. Dissatisfaction creates the essential discomfort that will eventually lead them back to the manuscript, to attempt yet again to craft their work to perfection. The least effective writers are the most immediately satisfied writers. They do not understand the need for dissatisfaction, nor do they know what to be dissatisfied about.

So how do we know when something is not right in writing? Here is a revision of some of the elements about which we need to be vigilant and dissatisfied as writers:

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- ◆ Only trouble is interesting; and character is everything.

If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.

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- ◆ ‘...Stories that begin in character and conflict are bound to be more interesting than stories that do not.’²

If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.

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- ◆ ‘Many powerful stories are based on the thwarting of a main character’s deepest needs and yearnings’³

If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.

-
- ◆ ‘In nearly all good fiction the basic – and all but inescapable – plot form is: A central character wants something, goes after it despite opposition (perhaps including his own doubts) and so arrives at a win, lose or draw.’⁴

If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.

2. Gardner, John, *On Becoming A Novelist*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985, p. 55.

3. Ruler, R. and Wheeler, S., *Creating The Story*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993, p. 20.

4. Gardner, John, *On Becoming A Novelist*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985, p. 54.

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- ◆ ‘The difference between the right word and the wrong word is the same as the difference between lighting and a lightning bug.’⁴

If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.

- ◆ Show character and plot through speech and action: do not tell.

If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.

- ◆ Good writing has been re-written.

If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.

24

- ◆ Good writing is full of surprises. For example: ‘The sight of him... rolled a fat ball of irritation into the cool cave of her day...?’

If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.

- ◆ Good writing is totally correct.

If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.

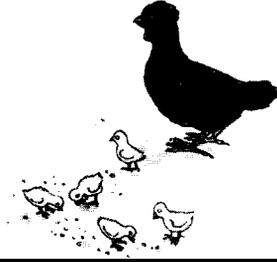
- ◆ Good writing adds to our quality of life by revealing life to us.

If this is not happening it is a cause for dissatisfaction.

And finally, just in case anything has been omitted in all this advice...

PART 3

Checklist of Dos and Do Nots



Here are some **Dos** and **Do Nots** for writers of picture books, to make sure nothing vitally important has been left out. Try to check your own approach and story! **25**

- Do** read recent picture books over and over again.
- Do** make friends with a bookseller, librarian or storyteller: their advice and guidance can be enormously helpful.
- Do** be original: try not to copy the ideas or structures of recent well-known books.
- Do** become familiar with the nature of rhythm in exquisite prose or poetry by reading it aloud: for writers in English a dose of for instance Shakespeare per day, keeps rejections at bay.
- Do** ensure your story makes an emotional impact: the reader should be changed by the reading.
- Do** ensure that the content of the story will interest both children and adults –not just adults– a common fault which might well lead to publication, but will never lead to best-selling status.
- Do** write with narrative tension, i.e. solve a problem.
- Do** ‘show’ and do not ‘tell’: try to reveal action and character through what the characters say and do.

Do keep the text under 600 words if possible. Minimize description. The fewer words the better, since the pictures will provide many of the visual details in the story. A picture book is usually thirty-two pages long.

Do remember that the secret of good writing is re-writing.

Do constantly re-read drafts aloud during the drafting process: hearing is one way of perceiving what is wrong in the text, especially with regard to rhythm.

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Do send the text to publishers without any accompanying artwork, unless you are both the author and the illustrator.

Do ensure the text is written grammatically, and the spelling and punctuation are correct.

Do type the manuscript on one side of the paper, with decent margins, double-spaced. It is acceptable to write the story in blocks of print, which suggest appropriate page-breaks, or simply as a straight telling from start to finish.

Do remain confident and up-beat after rejections. Re-write, re-think, and send the story off to another publisher.

Do stay out of the illustrator's way. Interference by an overbearing author is rarely appreciated.

Do retain humility, even after a best-seller. Success may not last, and you may need the comfort of friends. Those who boast have no friends.

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- Do Not** write down to children. If the story makes adults wince, it will make children wince too. Write always for extremely clever, well-adjusted, lively children: young readers will appreciate the compliment.
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- Do Not** write about inanimate objects such as shoes, a coin, a kite, an ice-cube, a piece of sausage, or similar. Stick to people, toys, animals, birds, or engines.
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- Do Not** use alliterative names or titles, such as Izzie the Ice Cube, Kenny the Koala, or Tommy the Tired Teddy. Use names which reveal something of the character.
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- Do Not** write your story in rhyme. Prose is more effective. Most editors detest rhyme.
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- Do Not** assume that plot is the most important element in a story, or even the only important element in a story. Character comes first. Next comes the precise choice of words, and the correct rhythmic placement of those words. Then trouble...
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- Do Not** forget that the rhythm of the text is the element which will, or will not, bring the reader back to the story again and again.
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- Do Not** write things like: "He gasped", "She spluttered", etc. Use the word "said". The gasping and spluttering, etc., should be obvious from the situation, if the writing is effective.
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- Do Not** write a picaresque story merely filled with one episode after another, with no tension, or problem, or resolution.
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- Do Not** forget that if the writer could not care less about the fate of the characters the readers could not care less either, and the book will fail.
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- Do Not** write stories which end: '...And then they all woke up.' Dreams as stories are frustrating, and will certainly be rejected.





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- Do Not** write to teach. Morals are detested by children and publishers alike. Do not attempt to bring up other people's children through your text.
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- Do Not** get the name of the editor wrong when you send off a manuscript. Check the spelling by phoning the publisher, if possible.
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- Do Not** get the name of the publishing company wrong, nor its address. Check that the company does publish children's books, and that its books are of high quality, and are readily available.
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- Do Not** forget to send a brief covering letter, and do not be 'cute' in this letter.
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- Do Not** be surprised not to hear from a publisher for two or three months.
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- Do Not** be surprised to find yourself working on a picture book text for a couple of years, and do not give up too soon. Also, do not lose heart after rejections: be courageous and tenacious.
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- Do Not** forget that "simple" does not mean "simplistic".
-
- Do Not** expect to be accorded real respect as a writer of children's books. It will never happen.
-

All the best!

Dr. Mem Fox, Adelaide, South Australia.

PART 4

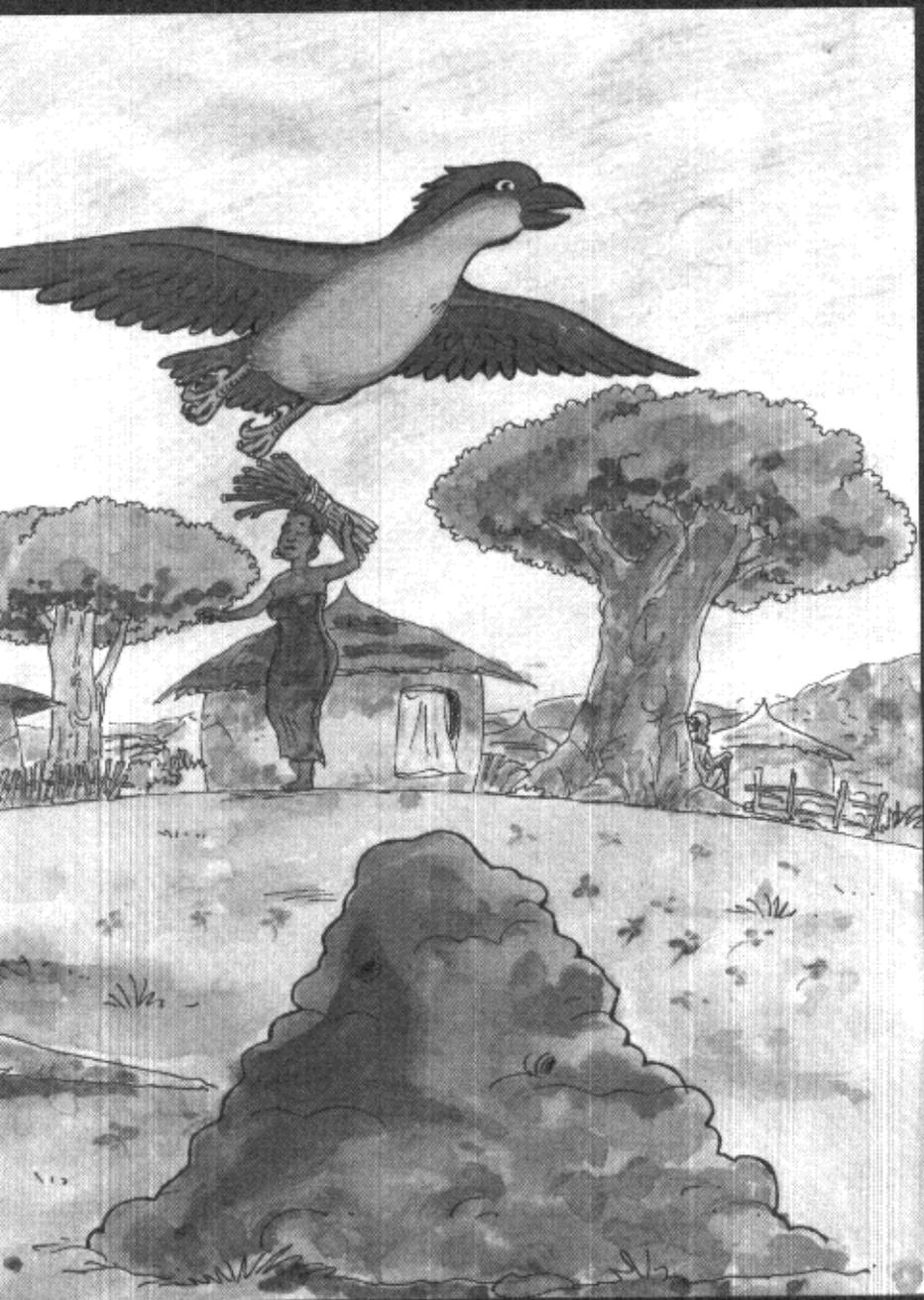
Stories – From Principles to Practice



The following stories were written during the Workshop for Writers of Children's Books, organized by the Book Development Council of Tanzania (BAMWITA), and held in February, 2000. The writers were participants of the workshop, and had been trained in the basic principles presented in PART 1. The stories originate from real anecdotes in their lives, and serve as examples of stories written for publication.







Lost in the Bush⁵

Once upon a time, not a very long time ago, there was a boy called Kasilingi. He and his two parents lived in a big forest.

Kasilingi loved birds very much. He had loved them since childhood. He would stand for a long time to watch a bird. He would follow a bird gliding through the skies with his eyes. But he would not follow a bird which flew into the big forest. His parents warned him not to wander there.



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One day a very colourful bird stopped at their yard. It had golden legs and a red beak. It had a sweet voice. He went close to it. The bird flew a short distance away. Kasilingi went after it. The bird flew another short distance away. Kasilingi went after it. The bird flew yet another short distance away. Kasilingi went after it.



This turned into a nice game. It went on and on. Soon they had covered two kilometres, five kilometres, ten kilometres and they were deep, deep in the big dark forest. There was little light, and the bird disappeared. Kasilingi discovered that he was lost. He felt exhausted and helpless. He did not know where he was. He did not know what to do. What should he do now?

He remembered a trick told to him in a story by his grandmother.

‘If you get lost in the big forest,
recite these words:

Yep, yep, tip, tip

Fortune, show me the way home.’



He recited it many times. It did not help. He started to lose courage. Thoughts of fierce animals disturbed him. He looked for a tree to climb. Just then he heard dogs bark coming in his direction. Yes, those were the barks of dogs. They got nearer and nearer. Now, the dogs were very close. There were two. They stood a short distance from him and barked on and on.

Whose dogs were they? Do you know? They were from a neighbour, Kacheche the hunter. There was Kacheche himself! Good fortune had arrived! And Kacheche took Kasilingi home.



Mkombiro and the Ogre⁶

Once upon a time there was a girl whose name was Mkombiro. She lived in a beautiful village, which was situated on the slopes of a very high mountain. One day, a giant ogre attacked her village. It was very hungry. It swallowed her mother. It swallowed her father. It swallowed all her brothers and sisters. It swallowed all the villagers, and then it swallowed, all their cattle! It swallowed almost everything.

Mkombiro escaped. She ran and ran. The ugly ogre could not catch her, because he had eaten too many people and too many cows. Mkombiro climbed a very tall tree and hid herself in it.

One day the ogre said to himself: 'I can smell human flesh. Can there still be humans in this village?' The ogre searched and searched. He searched in the big river. He searched in the mountains, and in the forest, and everywhere. Then, aah, he came under the tall tree and looked up. And what did he see? Poor little Mkombiro.

6. © Albert Kanuya, Albert Mwaipyana, Rose Japhet, 2000





The ogre roared, 'Climb down you little grasshopper!'

'No! no! no!', cried Mkombiro.

'Why?', thundered the ogre.

'You swallowed my father, you swallowed my mama, you swallowed my brothers and sisters, and all the villagers and their cattle. I won't climb down!', replied Mkombiro.

Then the ogre started to sing: 'Mkombiro, Mkombiro, Mkombiro.'

Mkombiro sang, 'Mkombiro nipo eee, Mkombiro eee, Mkombiro'. (*I am Mkombiro.*)

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The ogre sang: 'Unafanya nini, unafanya nini, unafanya nini?'

'(*What are you doing, what are you doing, what are you doing?*)'

Mkombiro sang: 'Najificha zimwi, Mkombiro eee, Mkombiro'. (*I am hiding myself, ogre, Mkombiro.*)

The ogre sang: 'Zimwi ni nani, zimwi ni nani, zimwi ni nani?' (Who is the ogre?)

Mkombiro sang: 'Zimwi ndiye wewe, Mkombiro eee, Mkombiro'. (*You are the ogre....*)

And the ogre sang: 'Hm, we ngoja tu'. (*Hm, you just wait...?*)

The ogre went away with a murderous anger, and promised to come back. This went on for two days. On the third day, when the ogre had left the tree, Mkombiro quickly climbed down, and made five arrows and a bow. And with the agility of a mouse, she climbed up again, and waited for the ogre.

The ogre came back, and stood under the tree and began to sing as usual. But instead of Mkombiro replying in words she took action.

'Twang!' She shot the first arrow which hit the ogre in the neck.

'Twang!' went the second shot.

'Twang!' came the third.

The ogre fell down, and roared until the high mountains shook.

'Twang!' went the fourth arrow.

'Twang!' went the last, and the ogre with his five souls died.

Then, slowly she climbed down and inspected the 'dead' ogre. All at once the ogre opened one of his five eyes and said: 'Please, please Mkombiro, I am dying but I beg you not to cut the little finger of my left hand'.

Mkombiro said: 'I won't cut it...I promise'.

But after a while, Mkombiro thought, why can't I cut the little finger after all?' So, she cut the ogre's little finger. Surprise, surprise! What did she see?

Her father came out, her mama came out, her brothers and sisters came out, all the villagers and their animals came out. They were all so thankful to Mkombiro for saving their lives. They threw the dead ogre's body in the forest.

One day, from the forest, the villagers heard: 'Mkombiro, Mkombiro, Mkombiro'. But to their relief the ogre never came back.



Grandmother's New Hut⁷

Once upon a time, in the village of Arisi on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro there were several families. People lived on their shambas where they grew bananas and coffee. They lived in round huts made of poles and grass thatch.

Grandmother Mashayo's hut was old. The grass was worn out and some poles could be seen. During the cold season it was very cold inside. Mashayo felt very cold. The grandchildren felt very cold too. Grandmother Mashayo said to her two sons:

'Please make a new hut for me.

The cold will kill me and your children.'

'We shall make a new hut for you mother', said her sons.

The women and girls went to cut grass and carried it to Mashayo's house. The men and the boys cut poles for making the hut. Then the men and the boys built the hut and thatched it. It was a beautiful hut. Mashayo was very happy.

She said, 'Thank you, my sons.'

One day the children were left at home alone. The men had gone to help build a hut. The women had gone to the market. The eldest sons said.

'Let's build a hut like Mashayo's.'

'Yes, that's a great thing to do', everyone replied.

The girls collected grass that was left on the ground. The boys cut poles. Together they built a hut near Mashayo's hut. The hut was smaller than Mashayo's hut. But it was very similar.

One of the boys said:

'Now that we have a hut we must inaugurate it. We must make a fire in it, roast and eat yams in it.'

One of the girls knew where Mashayo hid the key for the hut. She took it and opened the door. She got a matchbox and went to light a fire in the new hut. It was a big fire! The fire spread inside the hut.

‘Oh, our hut is burning!’ the children shouted, and ran out of the new hut. The younger ones were rescued by the older ones.

The fire did not end with the new hut. It burned and spread further until it reached Mashayo’s hut. Mashayo’s hut caught fire!

‘Save us! We are dying! What will grandmother say?’, were some of the words the children said. Some were carrying water from the stream to put the fire out without much success. The fire was too strong for them.

Mashayo and the other women were coming back from the market. They saw a lot of smoke in the air.

‘That must be my new hut burning’, exclaimed Mashayo. ‘No, that can’t be the direction of your home’, said one of the younger women. ‘Let’s run. We have no time to argue.’

The women ran fast. But Mashayo was faster even though she was older. In about ten minutes she was in front of the hut. The fire was very big. There were many people. But Mashayo wanted to go into her hut to rescue the animals, her clothes and other valuables. Many people told Mashayo not to go in, and tried to prevent her from doing so. But Mashayo was not to be stopped. She slipped in and cut the ropes of the cows and goats, threw out her two precious briefcases, and eventually ran out of the hut before it collapsed behind her.

Our fathers said to us that evening, ‘Your adventure caused us a big disaster. But fortunately for you, we have forgiven you.’







Tatu and her Mother⁸

Tatu lived with her mother and father. They lived in a village. Tatu was six years old. She was the only child in the family. Her parents loved her very much. But they both wanted to have more children. One day Tatu went to play with her friends. When she came back home, the house was empty. Mother was not there, and father was nowhere to be seen.

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She called out aloud: 'Mama, Baba, where are you?,'
but there was no answer.

She entered the house, and went to the fireplace to see if there was some food for her. But all the pots were empty. She scooped up some water from the water pot and drank, then she sat down and waited. Soon she fell asleep.

Her father returned around midnight. He woke her up and asked, 'Have you eaten?'

'No', she said.

'Why?'

'Because there is no food in the house.'

Then she added: 'Father, where's Mama?'

'She is not here today. Now go to sleep and stop asking questions.' That night she slept without eating anything.

The next morning Tatu went to her grandmother's house to look for her mother. But Mama was not there, and grandma did not know where she was. Then Tatu went to her uncle's place to look for her mother. But Mama was not there either. And her uncle did not know where she was. Tatu was worried and unhappy. She did not know where else to look, or what to do.

Then she remembered her mama's close friend.

'Maybe Mama might be there', she thought. So Tatu went to her mother's close friend to look for mama. Mama was not there, but her friend knew where she was.

She told Tatu: 'My dear child, your mother is no longer in this village. She has left and returned to her parents.'

'But why?'

'Because she cannot live with your dad any more.'

'But why?'

'Because my child, err, because she has no other kids.'

'But I am here, am I not enough for her?'

'Of course you are, but you're not a boy. And your dad wants a boy.'

'Is that so? Then I'll follow her.'

Her mother's friend said: 'I'll take you to her.' So they took a bus, and went to her mother's village.

When her mother saw them, she lifted Tatu up, embraced her, and they cried together.

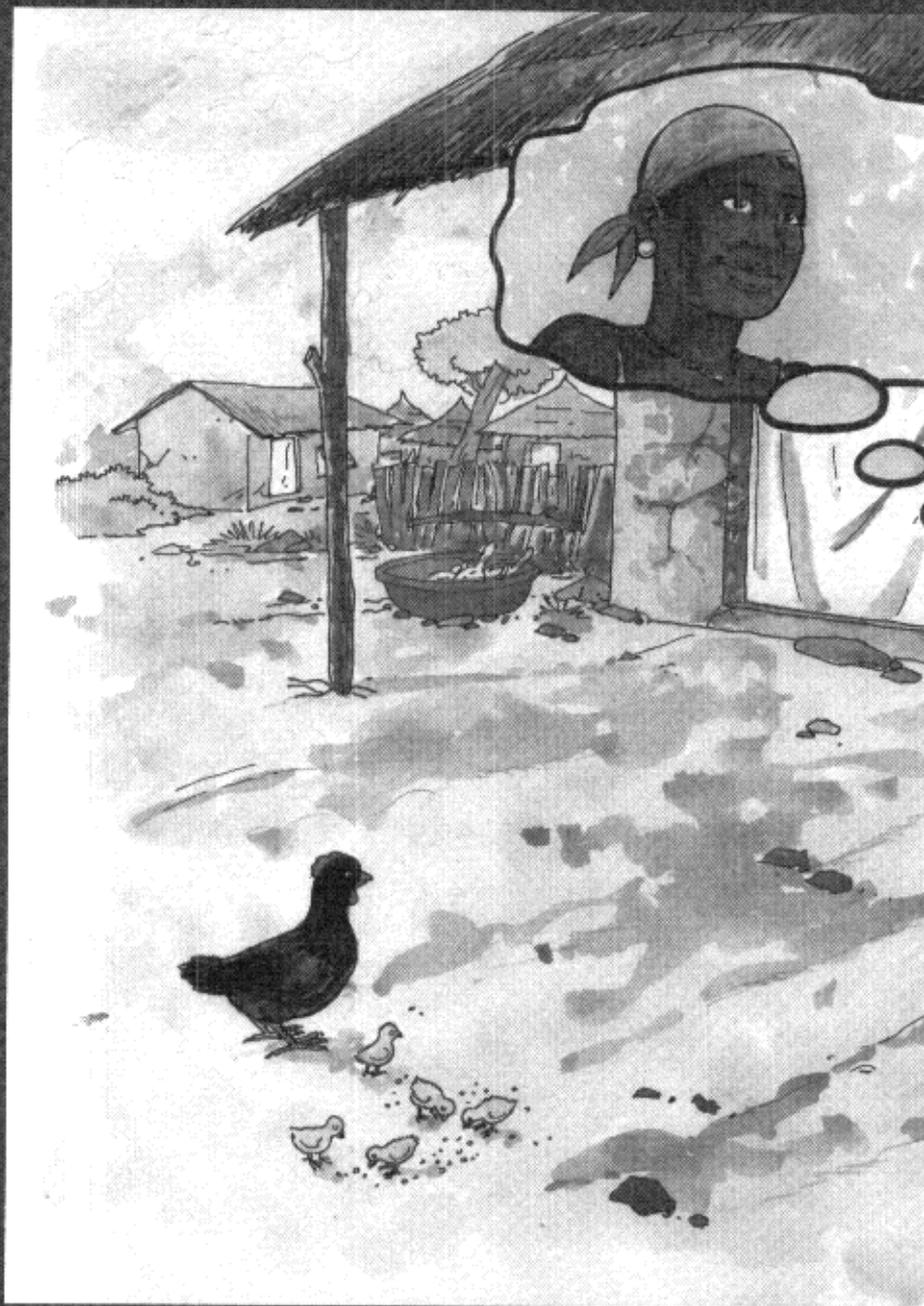
She asked: 'Why have you come?'

'Because I want to be with you', Tatu said. The next day, Tatu's father came looking for her. He was pleased to see her.

'Tatu, I have come for you. Let's go home.' But Tatu said: 'Dad, I cannot go back without Mama.' So her baba returned home alone.

And Tatu lived happily ever after, with her mother.







Les Studios Zottoré



Masulupwete's first Week at School⁹

Once upon a time, in a bush village, there lived a man and his wife. They had only one child who was a boy. His name was Masulupwete. Masulupwete's father had three cows and a few goats. He was also a hunter.

46 When Masulupwete grew up, he used to look after his father's cows and goats. Every morning he would wake up, take a bowl of porridge, and then send the animals to the grazing ground. When he was going to the grazing ground, he always met boys and girls going to school. Masulupwete liked school very much, so he started to sing:

Baba, mama, baba, mama	<i>Father, mother, father, mother</i>
Ninataka shule,	<i>I want to go to school,</i>
Ninataka shule	<i>I want to go to school</i>
Baba, mama, baba, mama	<i>Father, mother, father, mother</i>
Shule ni muhimu	<i>School is important</i>

When he was returning home, he also met boys and girls coming home from school. He started to sing again:

Baba, mama, baba, mama	<i>Father, mother, father, mother</i>
Ninataka shule,	<i>I want to go to school</i>
Ninataka shule	<i>I want to go to school</i>
Baba, mama, baba, mama	<i>Father, mother father, mother</i>
Shule ni muhimu	<i>School is important</i>

After several days he decided to tell his father that he wanted to go to school. His father was very surprised. He told his son: 'Those buildings created by white people are useless. I will never allow my son to go there.'

9. The original version of this story was written by: L. D. T. Minzi, M. Z. Mambo, S. M. Komba, 2000.

Masulupwete was determined to go to school. That night he went to sleep very early. At midnight he took his sandals and walked out silently. He walked straight to the missionary school. He sat near the school until morning. Then he went to see the school head who was a missionary sister.

‘I want to go to school,’ Masulupwete told the sister.

‘What is your name and where do you come from?’ asked the sister.

‘My name is Masulupwete and I come from a village in one of the bushes,’ answered Masulupwete.

‘Why have you come alone? Where is your father?’ asked the sister.

‘My father doesn't want me to go to school so I have run away from home,’ answered Masulupwete nervously.

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After talking with some teachers the sister admitted Masulupwete into the first class. She also gave him a small room to live in.

The second day, which was Wednesday, Masulupwete went into the classroom for the first time. That day they learnt mathematics and reading.

On the third day the teacher for religion entered their classroom.

‘Good morning pupils,’ said the teacher.

‘Good morning teacher,’ answered the pupils.

After a short prayer the teacher began telling them about baptism.

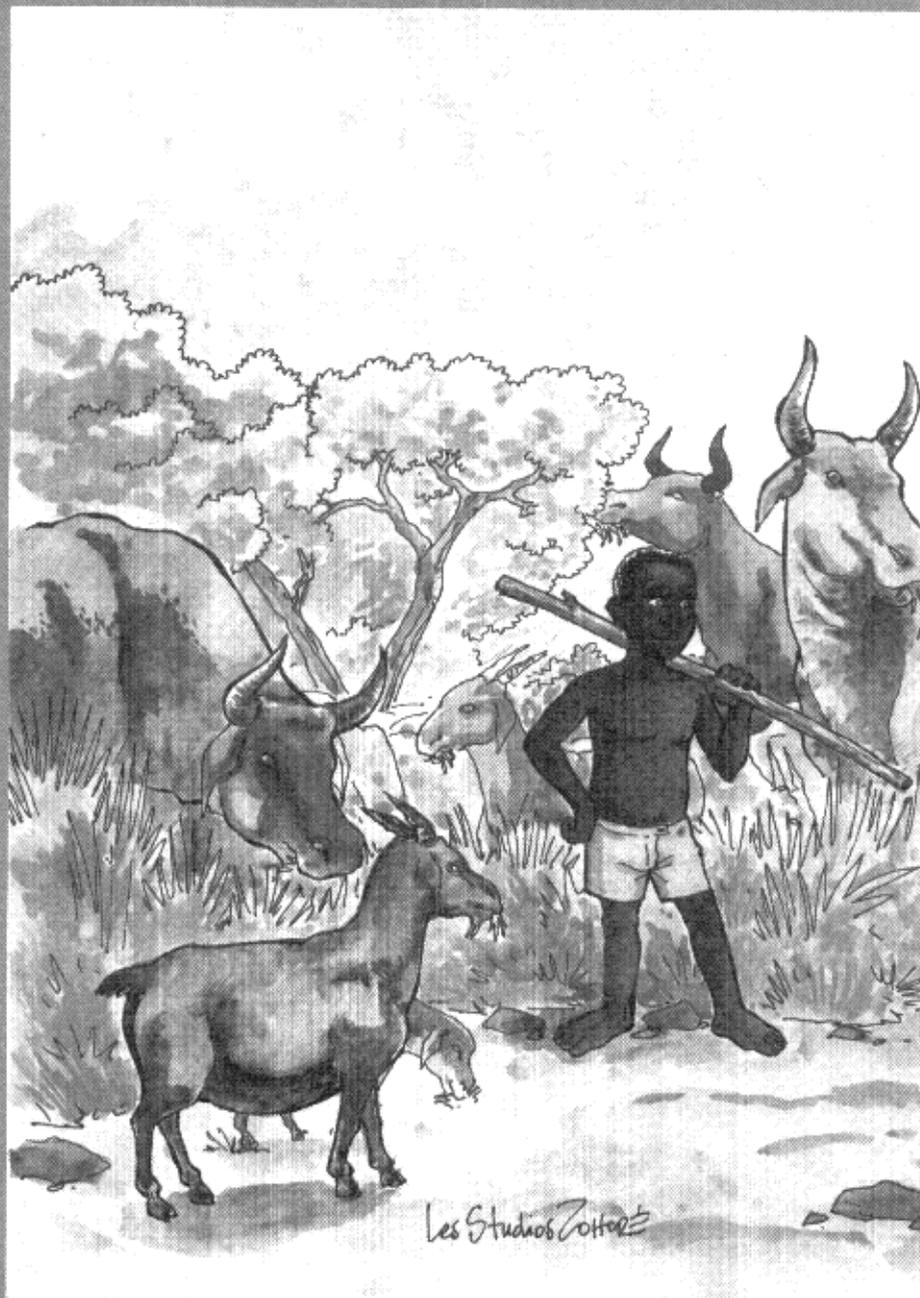
‘Everyone of you is supposed to be baptised. If you are not, you have to go home,’ said the teacher.

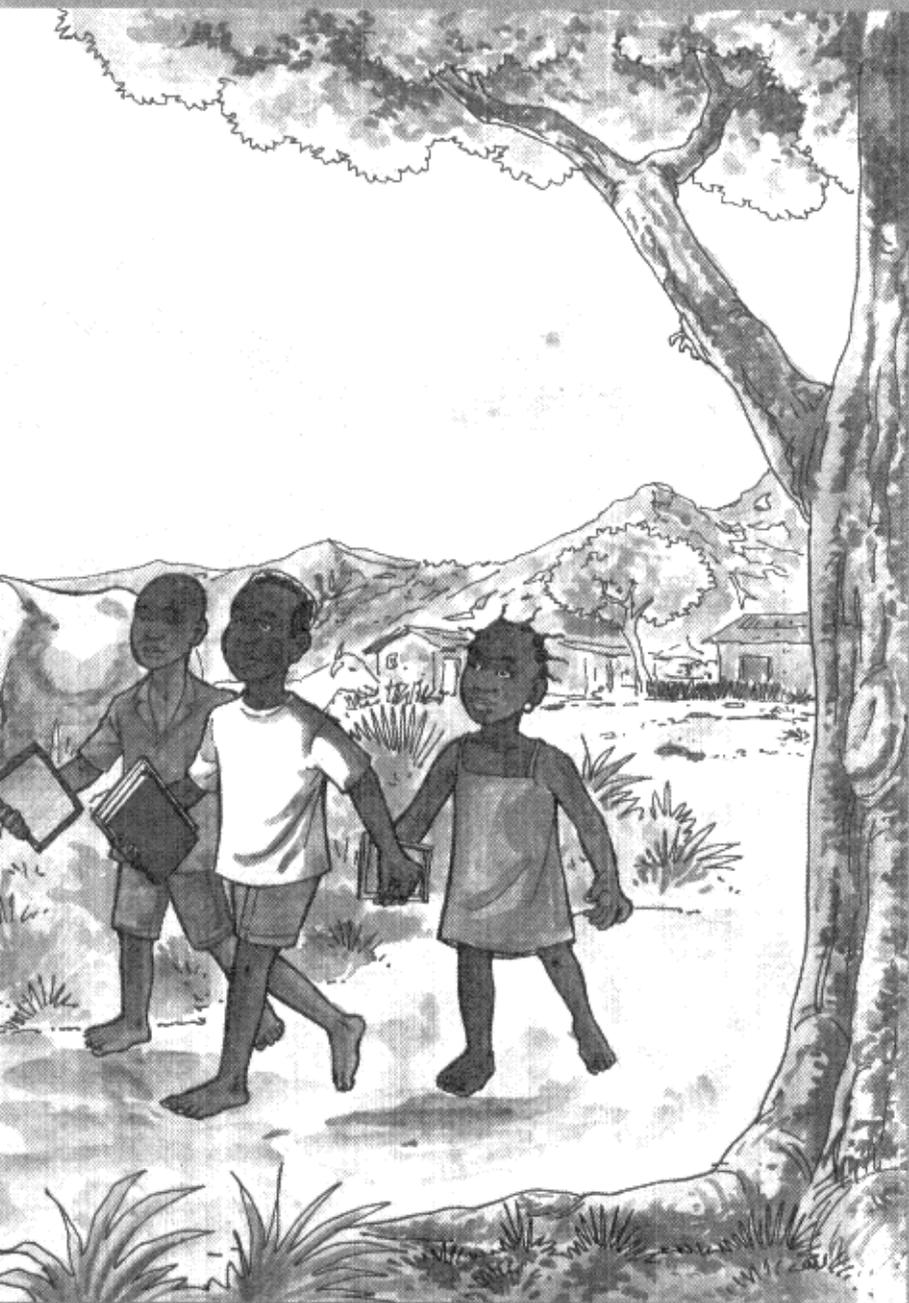
‘What is being baptised?’ asked Masulupwete.

‘It is being a new person. Forgetting about your past,’ answered the teacher.

Masulupwete spent the whole night thinking about what the religion teacher said.

‘This is terrible. I can't stand it,’ he said to himself. The next morning he ran all the way back to the village where his father greeted him with joy. He was pleased to see his son again, but he was also concerned about what had happened. Why did he return home?





He called his wife:

“Mama, Masulupwete has come home from school. It seems that there may be a problem”.

The mother called her son:

“Come here my son. Tell us why you have returned home”.

Masulupwete explained to his parents telling them of his experience with the teacher of religion. As they sat together again in the evening his father asked him:

“Do you still want to go to school my son”.

“Yes, I want to go to school, but I am afraid. I do not want to be baptised”, Masulupwete answered.



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The next morning the three of them, Masulupwete, his father and his mother, walked together back to the school. They met the Head of the school together with the teacher of religion and explained that the greatest wish of Masulupwete was to stay in school and be a good pupil. But he did not want to be baptised. The Head of the School looked first long at the parents with knitted eyebrows, then he looked even longer at Masulupwete, and said:

“You are a smart fellow. You want to learn. Join your class again tomorrow. You should stay with us and you will not be baptised”

His parents were happy with the discussion and the decision. And from that day on Masulupwete went to school every morning and made also a lot of new friends.

Personal notes:

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