

Chapter 3

The Groundwork of the Novel

We have seen that M. Jourdain wanted to improve his way of speaking when he became rich. In Dickens' novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, there is a character that has made a greater leap from rags to riches. Mr. Boffin, who has previously earned a living in the garbage business comes into a fortune on the death of his employer, and one of his desires is to engage someone to read to him. He applies to a street messenger and ballad-singer who he describes as “A literary man – with a wooden leg – and all print is open to him.” (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 93)

Now it's too late for me to begin shovelling and sifting in alphabets and grammar-books. I'm getting to be an old bird and I want to take it easy. But I want some reading – some fine bold reading, some splendid book in a gorging (gorgeous) Lord Mayor's Show of wollumes (volumes) as'll reach right down to your pint (point) of view, and take time to go by you. (op. cit, 94)

The storyteller, whether puzzling out the printed word for the illiterate or adding insights and connections to written accounts of everyday things, is doing for his reader something similar to what Silas Wegg does for Mr. Boffin: he is deliberately enriching the

other's experience, arousing his emotions and making him think about his situation. "Wegg takes it easy," observes Mr. Boffin, shaken by a reading on Roman history, "I didn't think this morning there was half so many scarers in print. But I'm in for it now." He knows his life has changed once he is open to the written word.

The difference is that the writer cannot take it easy like Mr. Wegg, the intermediary. The author both constructs and participates in the story he tells. Dickens enters into Mr. Boffin's consciousness in terms of "shovelling and sifting", putting the same effort into learning as he previously put into the garbage heap. Dickens' books are among the great novels of English, because he was acquainted with wide variety of characters and their way of expressing themselves in both language and action. The details may be obscure to readers of our times in any part of the world, but we get the sense of vibrant and idiosyncratic characters in a lively society. We can compare these long and intricately plotted stories with the brief evocations of Kenyan moods and voices made by Wahome Mutahi, who could make us, laugh at local differences without malice and bear in mind the serious issues underlying them. If he had been spared for us, we should have looked for more fiction and drama from him. It does not matter that readers in other countries may not recognise terms like *kumikumi* or *Kamukunji*. The context explains them. I was proud to be asked to give an overview of Wahome's works for a journal in Australia.

Therefore, in this chapter, I want to look at some of the basic methods and sources of content in the novel. Some of the novelist's techniques are also useful in the composition of biography and other forms of narrative, such as social history or travel writing. The difference is that fiction can concentrate more on significant themes and images. In real life narrative, these will occur, but always subject to the literal and statistical facts.

We start telling stories when we are very young. Normal families encourage children to talk about their experiences and impressions. Conversation is the great East African art form and many of the

ideas for my stories have been picked up from talk overheard in buses and *matatus* (informal public transport vans). Creativity is not limited to what is put down on paper. Those of us who love reading may feel the urge to catch the story and set it out in permanent form. This may just be because it is a good story or because we see a lesson for practical living in it, or because it gives us a clue to understanding behaviour and events that puzzle us, or because the events of the story symbolise our understanding of life and death, duty or morality. But if we choose to put our reflections in story form, rather than in journalism or textbooks, then the result has to *be* a story. The events and characters relate to one another in some meaningful way. The reader at the end of the book understands the time and place even if not at the beginning.

To say, “I went to school. I had *ugali* and *sukuma* for lunch. I did my homework. I went to bed,” is not a story. It is not even a diary entry. You will only put this in a novel if you want to portray tedium and the sameness of day-to-day events. Stories tell us something out of the ordinary. They have to have a plot to move the characters from the opening situation to the closing one and to draw the threads together. An investigative journalist, just like a detective novelist, shows us how movements in the bank account of *A* relate to threats against *B* and the suspicious disappearance of *C*. Each of the three separate events does not constitute a story. There has to be a demonstrable relation between them. Therefore, the novelist must be consistent about the ages and characteristics of the protagonists and the situations which brought them together.

We have all read the sort of story that says, “She decided to leave for Paris in the morning.” But unless she has already been shown to be a traveller with plenty of money and no ties, she doesn't just make such a decision. She has to have a passport and a visa, money for the ticket and a source of foreign exchange. She will need time off from work and if she is sharing a house with someone, she must make domestic arrangements. The author does not necessarily have to explain all this, but if she expects to be believed, she must

demonstrate the possibility. Perhaps the character is on leave and house warming for a friend, so she is not in a regular routine, which the neighbours are used to. She has some prize money to spend, and her passport is still valid since she returned from a course overseas. But if she just decamps from home and job, she will be aware that people will be searching for her, and that too could be part of the story. In real life, most of us can tell the difference between an acquaintance pitching us a yarn in an attempt to borrow money and someone genuinely describing what happened to her. When you are learning a new procedure, whether it is playing a game, baking a cake or offering your imaginative work to the public, it is good to get used to the basic rules before attempting variations.

Of course, odd things often happen in real life. Someone starts getting children in middle age. Cousins meet in a distant place without knowing they are related. Someone wins money in a sweepstake. A glamorous career follows a talent competition. We talk about these things, and the conversation may be the germ of a story. But we do not take the events for granted. They have to be accounted for.

In Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* or Cormac McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper*, we are not given an account of the years during which a wild teenager leaves the scene and comes back as a moneyed man. But we do know something about how other people reacted to the event and how that period of absence affects the rest of the story. In real life, a person called up for war service often has experiences, which he can hardly communicate to his family at home, but they are aware of signs of change in him.

People who need to keep their movements secret—criminals, spies, detectives—need more than anyone else to be able to give an alleged reason for being where they are. I would like someone to try to write a story in which the conventions of a spy thriller operate in East Africa—the call that has to be made at exactly 8.12 from the middle call box outside the Post Office, the letter that will

give instructions for procedures next morning, the other half of a torn-off postcard that identifies the messenger. Surely, the call box will be occupied or out of order; the letter will be in the pocket of a security guard who dares not leave it lying about, the first half of the postcard will have been thrown away by the housemaid. A street child will be sleeping in the barrow which was to have served as a dead letter drop, and the door for which a duplicate key has been provided will have been heavily padlocked by auctioneers. Our plots must allow for ordinary life going on round the characters.

One of the techniques of dealing with improbability in a story is to start with the move so that the gaps in our knowledge are filled in retrospectively as the SMSs are recorded and the overdrawn and overstayed threats start coming in.

At the same time, a story is a story. It has to show how time goes on, how people change, sometimes how dull life is while they are waiting for a letter from an absent friend, an appointment or an election result. So, we should not overload the plot by making every simple event carry the burden of being symbolic. A life where every item has special significance is not easy to believe in.

What, then, sets the writer off exploring a situation and a set of characters? It may be a long-time interest, a memory, an unexplained event or a revelation. The great Russian writer Dostoevsky was a fast and fluent worker. He was a compulsive gambler and often had to write for money to repay his debts. But we read that before writing *The Idiot*, he was greatly moved by Holbein's picture of taking Christ down from the Cross, which he saw in Geneva, and made eight different versions of the first draft of the story. (Magarshack: Introduction to *The Ediot*). He then wrote part one rapidly but each of the other parts caused him great agony and many changes of mind. If this can happen to a great novelist, how much more can it happen to you and me. Creative work is of necessity, making a choice among alternatives. It must not be hurried and it must not exclude the possibility of a change of

mind. The Bible tells us that the potter can mould the same clay time after time till it comes out right. The creative instinct is to know when it is right.

When you write a story or tell one orally, you present a setting shared by the teller or the tale and the reader. If it is *fable* – much oral literature consists of fable – the background is not usually very detailed. It keeps to the simple facts of life in almost any society. If you relate the fable to a more sophisticated background, as Rebeka Njau does in *The Sacred Seed*, you bring it nearer to the novel, because each character has more choices to make. George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which we have in Swahili as *Shamba la Wanyama*, is close to a fable. The farm is not set in a particular place or time, and it is the animals that enact the satire on political society. This is very different from his novel *1984* where possible horrors of a totalitarian state are described in a specifically English setting.

An allegory may have a more detailed setting than a fable, but all these details are made to have moral or religious meaning connected with each aspect of the literal meaning. St. Paul's passage in *Ephesians* about putting on the whole armour of God is constructed in this way. Each piece of military equipment is given a parallel spiritual quality. *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan is one of the most famous book-length allegories and for that reason has been translated into many languages. Bunyan was what we would now call a *jua kali* mechanic: he worked at making odd items serviceable. So, he was able to find a concrete term for abstract ideas that helped the reader make sense of them.

Making sense is not necessarily commanding credence. Are all stories meant to be convincing? Events in real life are often inconclusive. Now in fairy tales and folklore, which are the first stories most of us learn to recognise, the end is frequently not believable in the terms proposed by the rest of the story. Seven beautiful girls emerge from the frog's stomach no-one has told us he is not an ordinary-sized frog. A person is turned to stone. A voice emerges from inside an animal that has eaten someone. A

goose lays golden eggs. Vegetables stored in a pot turn into a live baby (What might have happened if you tried to cook half of them?) These things can only be believed if you turn the naturalistic beginnings of the story upside down.

Scholars will give you all kinds of complicated theories about their psychological significance and technical skill. The plain fact is that we often invent or accept stories because we wish things were not as they are or because we think putting something into words will give us power over it. This is like claiming to have borne a miracle baby in three months. It is a strong element of fiction and accounts for the kind of novel where the couple lives happily ever after the wedding or the James Bond type hero escapes against impossible odds. Writing or reading such a story may give harmless relief from real world problems.

There is another kind of fantasy story like Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* or J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*. We are not meant to believe them in a literal sense and yet they give a vivid sense of reality. Some incidents are larger than life but they are not falsified. Disbelief is partially suspended. In some ways, they are like those trick photographs which enormously exaggerate the size of a human hair or a speck of sugar so that you cannot guess what it is but are led to believe what you are told rather than what you see. This is not the same as magic realism, which superimposes on the literal background of a place – what people eat, what work they do, what streets they walk through – another level of action with a fairytale quality that is not in the time dimension of hard fact. In *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, where a psychic link is alleged to exist among the children born close to the minute of India's independence, this does not prevent the reader understanding the chronological account of the children's separate lives. Gabriel Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* leaves us with the impression that after so many revolutions most things

remain the same. *The Last Harmattan of Alisoune Dunbar* is an African example by Syl Cheney-Coker.

There is a distinction between possibility, probability and plausibility. The facts asserted have to be possible *in terms of the thought world of the story*. If the princess can sleep for a hundred years, then the beast can also turn into a man. If soldiers in the Great War can drown in the mud of the battlefields, we can understand that some deliberately injure themselves to get away from the fighting. If the ragman can become a millionaire, some millionaires must release the funds by falling upon hard times. The possible events do not have to be probable, since life is full of impossibilities, but it helps the reader along if some of them are.

To be plausible, arguable, is something very different. In Grace Ogot's story "The White Veil" it is hardly possible to believe that Achola does not recognise the figure and voice of the girl he was previously engaged to, or that the priest will hold her vow, under a false name, binding.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, where Silas Wegg reads to Mr. Boffin, there are many improbabilities, which we swallow for the sake of the story. But when it is alleged that Mr. Boffin has had a change of character and become grasping and ill tempered, urging Bella to make a rich marriage, this is beyond belief. Boffin has been built up as a humane and generous character, eager to foster the romance between Bella and John while they do not know that John has a rich heritage. Dickens explains this as a trick to test their reactions. We do not believe Mr Boffin could be party to such a trick. It is a fault in Dickens' work and would be a disaster if perpetrated by a more modest talent. The writer has lost his reader as soon as the magic hold over his imagination is released. This may not always be the author's fault. The reader may be so attached to expectations of a happy ending, or of one that conforms to his personal sense of justice, that he blames the story rather than his own partiality. For instance, some readers dislike Meja Mwangi's *Carcase for Hounds* because the wounded general is portrayed as a failure. But it is a

fact of life that in all campaigns, there are successes and failures on both sides, and it would be unrealistic to suppose otherwise. The writer's aim is not to transform history but to share his insights with the reader.

Usually, the teller of the realistic novel has thorough knowledge of the background. He may tickle the reader's fancy by introducing local details appreciated only by a few, like old-fashioned names of real places or technical details of craftsmanship. But he must beware of readers more knowledgeable in a particular area. When John le Carre wrote *The Constant Gardener*, with a lot of the action set in Kenya, he learned a tremendous amount about *matatus*, Kibera, Kenyatta Hospital and a lot of it came out exactly right. But he did not understand the Kenyan obsession with corpses or the paperwork that is involved in a hospital releasing a dead or live baby. That does not prevent its being a very fine novel. Not only does he write almost faultless prose in all his works, but also he is a master of the cinema-style “cut” from one scene to another which is required in fast-paced modern writing. Dickens and his contemporaries were helped in these transitions by the fact that their work often came out in instalments in magazines. Nonetheless, the instalments, where they are marked in modern editions, usually included more than one strand in the story. But they had an unhurried audience and could write in linking paragraphs. TV watchers and mobile phone users expect instant connection to the new scene. That is just a warning to immerse yourself thoroughly in the society you are describing.

Several of my stories bring in small financial misdeeds or inconclusive negotiations that go on all the time, but I would not possibly, be capable of describing the Goldenberg scale of operations¹. You can refer to this as a public event, or as something

¹ Goldenberg refers to a financial/political scandal in Daniel arap Moi's government involving millions of shillings looted from Kenyan Treasury

that affects one of your characters because a company reduces staff on account of it, or because a girl attending the hearings meets a friend there. But an account of the inside workings needs special knowledge. Richard Cox is a banker who wrote a book about Kenya some thirty years ago and went on after he had left to write some fascinating financial thrillers that appear to be totally authentic. Those I have read are not set in Kenya but show general acquaintance with Eastern Africa. In novel-writing, as in any other job, we have to start from what we absolutely know and venture slowly into exploring new areas and keeping up to date. My novel *Victoria* was written in Tanzania in the 1970s and the events had to be set in Kenya in the 1960s so as to link up with *Murder in Majengo*. But I did not even think of publishing it until I had come back to live in Kenya and authenticate the descriptions.

Children can often accept statements which an adult would have doubts about because they are learning new and improbable things all the time. But when the story comes back from the realm of ogres and spiders to the home village, they will ask more searching questions. So we may, even as adults, agree that the romantic hero or heroine has unlimited riches, but we still expect that the tickets will be paid for and the luggage looked after.

Some critics may make you think that it is “better” to write about Africans than about Chinese people, about farmers than about factory workers, but in the end, what matters is the writer's understanding and the readers' sympathy. Most often, we like reading about something unfamiliar. A story set in another country or among wealthy people in circles that we do not often penetrate requires the author to set the scene in detail. It is permissible to invent a completely new setting, as in science fiction, which is good exercise in consistency. What in my view an author must NOT do is to falsify a real place or time. You can invent a nameless

through subsidy of exports of gold far beyond standard arrangements during the 1990s.

space compatible with the action of your story. Alternatively, in the mode of magical realism, you can relate what happens at a given place and time to experiences of similar characters at the same place at another time. In real life, similarly, a visit to a historic site or a place of worship may make us conscious of the memories and prayers enshrined there.

I do not undervalue the spiritual or symbolic content of stories. Authors as different as A.K. Armah, Thomas Hardy, James Joyce, E.L. Doctorow, Wole Soyinka and Charles Williams use myth and inherited ritual in their own way. But religious experience is for most of us deeply embedded in everyday life. It is never vague. The rules of consistency and of narrative authenticity, multifarious as they are, still apply.

There are differences of pace and perspective emphasised in the post-modernist period though not entirely new. Anyone can experiment with them, just as the remake of a classic film often amounts to a speeding-up of the action. This is quite different from moving events to an incompatible time or register, setting a slapstick comedy into a tragic frame or imposing political ideas on to a time that had not yet heard of them.

In *The English Patient*, the bomb disposal routines ring true even in an exaggerated sense, but the events at the villa could not have happened in the war-torn Italy of 1945. The beauty of Ondaatje's prose writing cannot blind us to that. Young army nurses are not allowed to live out of camp and care alone for politically valuable patients. Blown spies are not given access to sources of intelligence. Petrol is not available for unauthorised travel in wartime. Villagers will not keep their hands off linen and medicines they need for their own partisan casualties and deserters.

Some post-modernist critics say that, because we do not know all about the past, we are entitled to play about with it. That is not generally true. We can know a good deal about the past, perhaps more than about the present, where people are busy hiding things.

We know the story, once top secret, of the Enigma Machine processing wartime intelligence at Bletchley Park, but we do not yet know who set up the stories about the “Millennium Bug” that was thought to endanger our computers on 1 January 2000, or what they cost. We cannot tell the audience *all* about society unless we are tremendously able people writing very detailed works like those of Dickens and Tolstoy. Even if we were, our readers and publishers can seldom afford to give us that much scope.

So, if our characters are confined to a small segment of the scene – parents of children in private schools or shop workers or long distance hauliers – we will show how things look to their eyes and so reflect a little of the wider community and possibly, the author's view of it. The fact that they may not be active on the public scene does not make them peripheral. Each of us is central in our sphere of life.

The point of view of the character can be different from that of the author. The reader must always be sensitive to who is making an observation and what it tells about the character portrayed. It would hardly be possible to write a story in which all the participants are “politically correct,” and if it were, it could not be an interesting story. The storyteller has to do his researches and then exercise his imagination. No theory of how things ought to have been can make up for failure to perceive how things actually were.

The Australian Nobel Prize winner Patrick White says, “All the houses I have lived in have been renovated and refurbished to accommodate fictions,” (*Flaws in the Glass*, 156). The language will be couched in the writer's own style, but it may be possible to catch the flavour of the period by quoting some contemporary writing and imitating it. Such pastiche is difficult to do well. One can underline period change by pointing out developments in certain words, for instance, that “nice” originally meant “discriminating” and that “silly” meant “innocent” or “naïve.”

Possibly, you will have to explain to your children what “foolscap”, “transparent” and “chill” meant.

A biographer needs to fill in some background events, and may restrict what he has to say about the domestic life of the subjects. The novelist will refer to public events either as the characters apprehend them or as they are unknowingly affected by them. Changes in taxation, for instance, and crop prices are known to the small farmer, even if he does not see them set out in the newspaper. The novelist, drawing out of a story such reflections on life and morality, is interested first in what his characters perceive but also in what determines events. The Joad family, for instance, in John Steinback's *The Grapes of Wrath*, do not realise that their own poor farming practices have helped turn Oklahoma into dustbowl, or that their own refugee presence is upsetting the economy of other states. It is their determination to stay alive and humane that makes the story. But the reader is acutely aware of the larger issues. Critics sometimes dismiss Jane Austen's novels, written by the unmarried daughter of a clergyman at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, because of their narrow scope and middle class outlook. Indeed, the author had to write what she knew, and makes fun of the sensational “Gothic” romances written by some of her contemporaries like Mrs. Ann Radcliffe. But she was not – women generally are not – as sheltered as theorists like to pretend. Her brothers became very senior naval officers, and she shows knowledge of how sailors could augment their income by capturing a prize ship. She knows what goes on in the sordid “sponging houses” where people were imprisoned for debt. She could never have set foot in one, but she understands the circumstances. There are times when all of us are well advised not to go into details about a scene we have not seen at first hand, but stick to plain facts. Jane Austen had found it difficult to reject a proposal of marriage from an Irish soldier: this may have been the source of her sister Kitty Bennett's running away with a soldier, to the horror of her family. She knew a great deal about class distinctions, though not the extremes of wealth and poverty, and

when one of her heroines, a seventeen-year-old girl, has to make a difficult journey by stagecoach without an escort, the mother accepts the fact that she has acted sensibly. She is annoyed that the host family has been so inconsiderate, but not unduly distressed.

So, a story can broaden out from an apparently narrow focus to tell us a good deal about society. In *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah uses the perceptions of a nomadic girl who thinks a cluster of ten houses is a town to recreate for us urban and rural life in Somalia.

If you are depicting a real scene, whether in a novel or a history book, and it is outside your own experience, you must make every effort to recreate the facts by reading, visiting places, talking with people who have similar experiences: even if the mechanics of the experience is different – visiting the Arctic Circle and seeing the midnight sun in a modern cruise ship is not like going there in a wooden boat under sail – the actual sights, sounds and emotions will be in some ways similar. Even if you go to Hell's Gate National Park in a Pajero, you will still feel you are seeing the world on creation day. You will study photographs and paintings of the time. You will certainly not use in the story all the material you uncover – I well know the temptation of wanting to put everything in – but you internalise so that your mind is in tune with it. Notice the names given to people – a foreigner may not attach significance to being called Gladwell, Jacinta, Benta, Fanis, Murray or Willis, but we Kenyans do. If you cannot find an actual model of a room in Kisumu in 1938, ask yourself, “what is the floor like? Are there windows? Is there artificial lighting? What kind of furnishing? Who comes in and out? Were the materials you imagine available at that time and place? Is there a radio? If so, it will be housed in a big box. Do people ring a bell or knock at a door? What language is being spoken? Does everyone understand it? How do they address one another?”

Writing a novel is very much like having a baby. You should never do it unless you are prepared to devote years of your life to it. There is a positive beginning, whether or not we can exactly date

it, and there is a time appointed for severance: a few incidental events may alter that expected date of delivery (a state of health, a personal or public event that compels a break) but the process has its own momentum. The length of the pregnancy is determined by the nature of the conception. Any nugget of information relating to a character or event we are embodying is picked up and sucked for nourishment as eagerly as those special brown or white stones expectant mothers can buy in the market for minerals supply in their bodies.

This is why I have given separate sections to plots, themes and narrative and not to character. The characters are there from the beginning; often certain incidents occur only because of the temperament and interests of the people involved in them, not the other way round. Plot and theme do not develop without people, and people are all around us. Our ideas of character are derived from experience and observation. We can invent a story but I do not believe we ever really invent a person. Like an actor learning a part in a play, we study how the named person will walk, talk, eat and arrange his business. These things are normal to him whether the plot we have designed round him takes place or not. Of course, the events we set up may change him in some ways. Mr. Boffin did not have much time for listening to history when he was still raking over the garbage heap. Meja Mwangi's Frank Fundi would not have been promoting the sale of condoms if he had been allowed to complete his veterinary studies overseas. But what the writer has to learn is primarily to choose the right word to describe the person and record his speech. I do not believe that anyone who is not genuinely interested in people can write fiction successfully.

Anthony Burgess, an accomplished novelist and critic says, "I have to do it: there are half-invented people and half-conceived actions in my brain, and they have to be completed and released into novels for the sake of my own comfort"(*The Novel Now*, 210). This is true. The characters, like the baby, struggle to get out and

separate themselves when they are ready. We cannot safely hurry them, and we cannot dismiss them.

In the same book, Burgess praises the fine novelist Henry Green for a less common quality that he can achieve in prose “that unity, close-knit and taut, we find in the sonnet form. His novels stay in our minds as entities” (Burgess). All too often, we remember good novels by certain episodes or characters: there is something special in remembering one for the whole area of society it represents.

A story consists of words on the page, or in the reader's or writer's memory. With the last word the story stops. Beyond that, what happens to the characters is their own affair. They are out of our control as much as the person we once conversed with on a long bus journey and never see again. It is frivolous to create a “biography” of a character that goes outside the framework of the given story.

It is often expected that a novel will address the general public, but sampling will show that there is usually some restriction implied. What seems to the “us” of the writer an obvious, difficult, wise, foolish or ridiculous action has a lot to do with our class, community or religion.

Writing can be communally closed. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's early work relates to what touches on the Kikuyu world only. This does not mean that outside readers may not react with empathy, but that some issues are closed out. *Petals of Blood* shows a broadening of scope. Each of the types has its justification. Few villages are neatly self-contained but a far-away reader may understand an isolated village better than a sprawling, amorphous new township. We may see what the villagers have in common rather than the private relationships which keep them in some ways apart. What is not permissible is to depict a part and claim it to be the whole.

Much British and American writing is nationally closed. The unit of potential readership is so large that until recent migrations, the writer might not have needed to envisage an outside audience. But

within the nation, it may also be communally closed in a sense of class or locality. To the ordinary English reader from a working family, the novels of Iris Murdoch are essentially foreign, a lot of clever talk from people who don't have to get up in the morning. The hand to mouth existence depicted in Akare's *The Slums* will shock some of the prudent families housed in Pumwani or Eastleigh. A greater writer like Henry Green separates the microcosms for the sake of brevity and still communicates between them. It took a great publishing imagination to combine his contrasting novels, *Living, Loving and Party-Going* in one volume.

This is a significant example. Green was the son of a rich manufacturer who required him to learn the trade from the factory floor. He therefore had actual experience of life at different economic levels and areas of choice. George Orwell had to experiment deliberately to immerse himself in these extremes, though he was never free of real life financial anxieties. For each story, the author has to select a boundary and a target in order to make a significant statement and search out what Ngugi calls “a fiction language.” The story is not going to solve problems in society: it may expose and analyse problems in such a way that individuals, religious leaders and government get an insight into what options they have. So the choice of area defines rather than restricts. Paul Scott writes about the Raj, the British presence in India. He gives convincing and sympathetic portraits of many Indian characters, but no one writer can portray the enormous spectrum of India. These characters are depicted in relation to the final years of the Raj and the families – military, administrative, missionary and business-oriented (like Tusker and Lucy after independence) – affected by public events. Just as the European presence in Kenya was never monolithic but included great differences in class, taste, speech and standard of living, even more in India, where many white families had made their home over four or more generations, there was great diversity.

Writing can be communally closed but extended by explanation, as when Grace Ogot in *The Strange Bride* says, “Owiny left and went to his *samba* (a young man's cottage in his father's home). The interpretation is more skilful when it falls within the action: this is one of Achebe's great strengths. But most of us need to explain words from time to time. Akare's distinction in *The Slums* between Ofafa Maringo and Ofafa Kunguni is not significant to a reader who knows no Swahili.

Some writing is really class or communally neutral. For instance, in *Three Days on the Cross*, Wahome Mutahi deliberately uses non-Kenyan surnames and suppresses the local idioms identified with his newspaper column. He sacrifices intimacy to make a general point. We all have areas of concern where our personal bias shows even though the story indicates that many fail in this respect. These are areas where a person of conscience cannot pretend to be neutral.

We may have a copy of a treaty or a deed of sale to assert the objective existence of an event that has moved us, but no records of the negotiations or inducements by which it was thrashed out, the smells and traffic noises of the scene. William Styron's magnificent novel about the Nat Turner slave rebellion of 1831 in Virginia is based on very thorough research. But by filling out certain conversations and incidents, it indicated what the character would know or could not know at that place and time. We see Nat reading out a signpost to his illiterate white captors, and see the moment when he first hears himself described as a slave though he has been brought up as a member of his master's family. We grasp the impossibility of the slave-holder freeing him easily. Certain legal forms have to be complied with to prevent the freed man being seized by someone else, probably a harsher master. The novel makes us physically present in the way a documentary history, blank to people's tone of voice, forms of address, their dress and the places they could acceptably meet, could never do.

The novelist does not claim what he writes to be literally true, only notionally true within the limits he has defined for himself. He can dress characters in blue or green as suits him, but he must not assert a limit and then break with it. Only for an explicit and compelling reason, will his characters act against the conventions of their place and time, or show surprise at them.

The accumulated background information must never take precedence over our more intimate understanding of the accidents and oddities of human behaviour. Completely, ordinary people do not inspire us to write about them. Men and women around us do not always behave according to strict law and custom, nor do natural and public events always conform to a prescribed pattern. People in private do not stick to an officially acceptable vocabulary, and they do not always know the things a historian expects them to know. Governments often keep military movements, and the reasons for them, secret from common people. What is more, the implications of an event may not be clear at the time. For example, the population of monitor lizards in Nyanza has drastically reduced because the revised 8-4-4 music syllabus led thousands of schoolchildren to catch them in order to make *orutu* (a one-string instrument). Previously, only those with special musical gifts had tried to make and play the instrument. On a world scale, the people of Nagasaki, victims of the second atomic bomb in 1945, did not know that a bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima a few days before, though they had heard rumours of a new weapon. The doctors treating “radiation sickness” did not know about its genetic effects, not because of a news blackout but because it had never occurred before.

Everyone in my generation knows – most of those reading this book know, though less obsessively – that a puff of smoke indoors indicates a person smoking tobacco. But most likely, these readers’ grandchildren will not know it at all. But unfashionable people, other than a few sailors, in late sixteenth century Europe, did not know it, and wondered why a seaman or an explorer back from

America should be setting himself on fire. Many jokes were made about that. That is what the novelist has to be conscious of, since it is not something statistically recorded, and this is what will make the reader feel he is actually in Tudor England.

Characters are distinguished by their speech as depicted by words on the page: there is diction appropriate to each and these interact in the reader's ear. So, we have to be conscious of the pitfalls in writing dialogue.

Most of the time, we talk in incomplete sentences with pauses and abbreviations. Few people make set speeches. So, you have to find a middle way to represent the sense of a conversation making up in words for the looks and gestures we understand when we are talking to somebody face to face. When we are translating, for instance, representing Luo conversation in English, it is not correct to translate word for word, so that the speaker is represented as being unfamiliar with the structure of the language, or to use the sort of English the speaker would use if he were talking in that language: to do so is to misrepresent the situation. Most Luo speakers use words correctly and idiomatically and we want to present them in the narrative as speaking in that same register. Generally, their mode of speaking is not part of the subject. It is only a small child or a foreigner who will be represented as making mistakes in speech. If different dialects are being used, it is generally best just to say so. To introduce variant English dialects is only confusing: I have seen translations from the French which are very misleading in this way. So, when a gifted writer like Achebe flavours his prose by bringing in proverbs or catch phrases from the language represented, this is an extra wealth. They are always translated into correct English in the style of address appropriate to the fictional speaker. We can do the same with English sayings like “after the Lord Mayor's Show comes the dust cart” or “a nod is as good as a wink to the blind horse,” and make sure that the sense is conveyed within the passage instead of having to be the subject of separate note.

But sometimes, the characters' failure to understand one another is the point of the story. It may be a doctor explaining to a patient what is wrong with him in such complex terms that the ordinary person is baffled, or it may be someone talking in pidgin English or Sheng in a way familiar only to certain age groups or classes. Then the reader has sympathy with the character who does not understand. This technique is used also in film.

Also as in film, there will be details that some of the audience miss. Just as a teacher knows that not every point he makes will be grasped by everyone in the class, so the writer knows that some subtleties of language, custom or social difference will not be understood by all readers. This is not a reason to leave them out. In both cases, you have, without looking down on anybody, to say as much as you can and try to see that the main themes of the story are clear in terms that most readers will follow. You must never despise your audience or appraise their intelligence in terms of your own special studies.

When reading a novel about horse racing, ballet or nuclear research most of us have to accept the author's technical vocabulary. Similarly, the jockey, the dancer and the physicist are not bound to know our terminology relating to age sets, customary avoidances or food preparation in East Africa. That does not mean we cannot reach them in many ways and stimulate their curiosity.

But the proverb says that even Homer, the greatest poet, sometimes nodded and let his attention slip. We do not make a song and dance about it every time mother makes the tea or prepares water for hand washing. So, normally intelligent readers will also come to take it for granted that in Achebe's world, the kola nut is broken and the chalk rolled across the floor, for specific occasions.

