

READING LIBERIA

AN EXCHANGE OF BLUEBERRIES AND GRASSHOPPERS | BY KATHY STINSON



KATHY MEETS WITH LIBERIAN WRITERS



MIKE WEAH AT THE WE CARE LIBRARY



SOON THERE WILL BE LIBERIAN BOOKS IN LIBERIA'S CLASSROOMS



ONE OF MANY ENCOURAGING SIGNS IN MONROVIA

Gbadeh was not afraid of the brilliance of the lightning or the great shout of the thunder. The drip, drip, drip of rain water into bowls spread out across the room did not bother him. And he was not worried about the cold draft from under the door that kept his feet wet and clammy. What bothered Gbadeh, what terrified him — so that he regretted coming to visit his grandfather this weekend — was the ka-ka-ko-lo.

The village ka-ka-ko-lo was an unfriendly one-legged female creature who walked with the help of a stick and came out on stormy nights. She tapped her stick two paces ahead of her, KA-KA, and then slowly dragged her one good leg forward, KOOOO-LOOOOO. Was was especially mean to little boys and beat them soundly with her thick gnarly stick whenever and wherever she found one.

That's an excerpt from what will soon be one of the first Liberian-authored children's books to be published for Liberian children, thanks to a program called "Reading Liberia."

Working with its author Wachen Babalola has been just one of many wonderful experiences I've had through my involvement with this program. Having Nemenborbor Kpahn reveal his abilities to lead a workshop discussion with his peers was another. So was learning the Liberian handshaka from Weyayonvon Roberts. And of course getting to know Mike Weah and his wife Yvonne, the optimistic and energetic mastermind behind the Reading Liberia program.

Like Liberia's president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Mike and Yvonne are passionate in their belief that the way to rebuild their country, after many years of a destructive civil war, is through the education

of its youth. When they envisioned a program that would help Liberian writers write stories relevant to Liberian children, see those stories published, and teach teachers how to make effective use of those books in Liberian classrooms, they approached CODE (the Canadian Organization for Development through Education).

Soon after CODE and IBBY Canada established a relationship, I received an email from IBBY Canada President Brenda Halliday, asking if I'd consider traveling to Liberia in February 2009 to participate in the Reading Liberia workshop program. Regarding travel to this west African country (tucked between Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire), the Canadian government website advised, "Avoid unnecessary travel." Hmm.

While attending weekend meetings soon after my arrival, I grew concerned that I would be totally ineffective there. I had great difficulty understanding my Liberian colleagues' accents, even when I was able to hear them speaking over the noise of downtown traffic, street life, and car horns blaring through the passelous windows of our meeting rooms. Liberians are very kind of their car horns. They use them to announce they're about to cross an intersection (traffic lights disappeared during the war), they use them to warn other drivers not to come out of a laneway (even if the other driver is at a full stop), and I think they use them just to say "Hey man, I am feeling good!" I was hugely relieved to learn that the workshops would be held at a convent school, which would be significantly quieter.

To help establish a point of connection between me and my audience of writers and teachers on Monday morning, and to help explain why the aims of Reading Liberia had drawn me there, I told them I'd grown up in Canada reading books from the US and Britain, before there were any Canadian children's books to speak of. Using *Rabbitfoot* by Sal by Robert McCloskey, a favourite from my childhood, and other books I'd brought from home and pulled from the We Care Library in Monrovia (founded by Mike and Yvonne), we explored the idea that books can act as mirrors (reflecting our own realities back to us) and as windows (offering us insights into realities different from our own). We looked at how whether a particular book acts as a mirror or a window depends on which reader

it, and how books can sometimes act as both mirror and window at the same time. I was pleased when those ideas kept coming up throughout the week, and even the following year, when I went back.

My time with only the writers was spent much as it would be with writers in Canada. In workshop sessions we looked at manuscripts and at how to effectively offer and receive feedback. We did writing exercises designed to tap into stories the writers might have to tell and develop the skills they would need in order to tell them. One-on-one meetings with writers gave me the chance to discuss in depth the strengths I saw in their projects and possibilities for their continued development. There were also group discussions about how writers can work effectively with youth to inspire them to read more and write more. (This is especially important in a country where classroom teachers have had little or no formal training and whose own ability to read may be weak.)

The writers were open, welcoming, warm and patient with my occasional need to have words repeated. They were polite and they were proud. They had stories from the civil war period to tell and they had funny stories and stories of peaceful village life, too. They do not want anyone to think that their ugly civil war is all that defines them.

The first round of books that will be published by Reading Liberia were chosen by a vetting committee made up of mostly Liberians representing a cross-section of literary and educational interests. It will include *Kakakolo* by Wachen Babalola, *Viney and the Monkey Bridge* by James Dwaui and *Living in the Village with Mona* by Elveda Johnson. Augustus Veah's *Under the Bridge* is a grittier story about three boys living under a city bridge who decide one day they want a better life for themselves.

I spent most of my "down time" in Monrovia reading manuscripts and making comments on them, evaluating with Ingrid Ermanovics (CODE Program Manager) and the two professors working with teachers (Alison Prosser and Wendy Snel) how things were going and what we needed to do next; adjusting my plans for the next day; and trying to keep up a journal. I slept little. It was exhilarating and it was exhausting.

"They had stories from the CIVIL WAR period to tell and they had funny stories and stories of PEACEFUL VILLAGE LIFE, too."

By Friday at lunch time, I felt I'd made it to a finish line. That afternoon each writer would be presenting something they'd written to a small group of teachers who would then use their newly acquired teaching strategies to plan how they might use the writer's work in their classrooms. I was ready; at last, to relax, when Thory Grant, a writer, approached me.

Thory is a sweet man, a policeman with a deep scar running from his cheek to his lip. He was working the night shift that week so he could attend the workshops during the day. "Sister Kathy," he said, "could you please read this poem I wrote and tell me what you think?" He had to be at least as tired as I was. I wanted to do what he was asking, but in the hot, noisy lunch room, where the excited voices of a dozen writers and dozens of teachers bounced off the hard walls and floors, I had to tell him I was sorry, but my brain was fried. I was no longer capable of a single helpful thought.

The look of boyish disappointment on his face did me in. I said I'd like to read his poem — as long as he understood that I could only read it for the pleasure of it because I was simply too tired to do anything else. He looked so grateful I was even more ashamed of having turned him down to start with. I took Thory's poem outside, where it was hot, but quieter. It was about grasshoppers, eight or ten lines long, and, I thought, pretty weak. I was glad I'd told him I wouldn't be commenting on it.

Giving it back to him, I found myself telling him what I liked about the first two lines. That led to more chat, and as I looked over the poem again, it dawned on me that it was just the third and fourth lines that were someone messing up several quite neat things about the poem. "Thory," I said, "would you mind reading this to me leaving out those two lines?" He agreed that the poem was much better that way, and went back to his lunch a happy man.

Later that afternoon, after the writers had met with their small groups of teachers, the teachers presented their writer's writing to the whole assembled group. Thory's group recited his poem, stamping their fingers and shaking their hips to its grasshopper beat. I will never forget the look of absolute joy on Thory's face. (Sadly, I did not get a copy of his poem from him, and by this year's work-

shop, police work had taken over his writing time, and he did not return.)

I've said nothing about the schools I visited, about a 'personal heroes' anthology that's growing out of a writing exercise, or about the children on the beach across from the hotel. I've said nothing about my second trip to Liberia, in February 2010, or how eager I am to go back. But I've used up the word count allotted me. I hope you'll visit my blog to read more of what I've written about Liberia and the wonderful people I had the privilege of working with there. [x](#)



IN 2010 GORD PRONK WORKED WITH ILLUSTRATORS WHILE KATHY WORKED WITH WRITERS. NOT A BAD SPOT FOR FOR DOING END OF THE DAY FOLLOW-UPS.

Kathy Stinson is the author of many books for young people, from *Let's be teens*, her book, *The Highway of Heroes: Welcome Home, Soldier* is scheduled for publication by Fitzroy & Whitehead this fall. Kathy also works as a freelance editor and workshop facilitator. You can read more about her experiences in Liberia and see more photographs at <http://kathystinson.wordpress.com/tag/liberia/>.

IBBY CANADA AND CODE

The IBBY Canada/CODE connection has brought more Canadian writers to African countries since Kathy Stinson's first trip to Liberia. Author and editor Hadley Dyer has visited Tanzania three times to act as a judge for the Burt Award for African Literature and to conduct workshops with writers and editors.

The Burt Award program has recently expanded to two more countries. Editor Peter Carver has travelled to Ghana twice this year (in February and June). Author and teacher Ted Staunton recently made his first trip to Ethiopia.

For more information on CODE, visit www.codecan.org.

For more information on IBBY Canada, visit www.ibby-canada.org.

The TD Bank Financial Group and the Canadian Children's Book Centre are pleased to announce the finalists for the

2010 TD Canadian Children's Literature Award

The TD Canadian Children's Literature Award, established in 2004 and awarded for the first time in 2005, honours the most distinguished book of the year. Two \$25,000 prizes are awarded, one for a book in English and one for a book in French.

English-language Finalists



Dragon Serr
written by Janet McNaughton
HarperCollins Publishers
978-0-00290881-1 (hcl)
\$19.99



Home Free
written by Sharon Jennings
Second Story Press
978-1-89718-705-5 (pb)
\$8.95



The Hunchback Assignments
written by Arthur Slade
HarperCollins Publishers
978-1-55448-356-3 (hcl)
\$18.99



A Thousand Years of Pirates
written and illustrated by William Giberson
Tundra Books
978-0-88776-924-5 (hcl)
\$25.99



Watching Jimmy
written by Nancy Harby
Tundra Books
978-0-88776-871-2 (hcl)
\$18.99

French-language Finalists



Comme toi!
written and illustrated by Genevieve Côté
Éditions Scholastic
978-0-545-98182-5 (pb)
\$9.99



Le géranium
written by Mélanie Teller
illustrated by Melinda Josie
Éditions Marchand de feuilles
978-0-545-98182-5 (pb)
\$9.95



Monsieur Leloup
written and illustrated by Philippe Béha
Éditions Fata Morgana
978-2-76213-017-1 (hcl)
\$24.95



Rêver à l'envers, c'est encore rêver
written by Guy Marchand
illustrated by Marie-Claude Fournau
Soulaines éditeur
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Vents d'ailleurs
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