

The Book

By Francis B. Nyamnjoh

Behold The Book! I have come a long way with it. Did I say ‘it’? How can I misrepresent such a powerful agent with this unassuming pronoun? It is a force far more present and active, even in its absence, than any single-minded determined human. As a force of light and darkness, freedom and oppression, noun and verb, The Book has charmed the mighty and the lowly. It has spurred rulers to burn and ban, and inspired the sidestepped to ink down the sword. The only humans that come closest to matching The Book’s omnipotent omnipresence are those portrayed within its covers, who are denied – if ever that was what they desired – the conclusion of life that mortality confers. Those who write books and those booked and in books seem to have succeeded in eschewing death the last laugh and denying themselves closure.

I have had relationships of different types and gradations with The Book –from lack to reader to author to publisher. When I was still a child, The Book was as precious as water at the heart of the Sahara Desert. This proved to be both a disappointment and a blessing. While the lack thereof meant that my encounter with The Book would only flower later, I was fortunate to be in a position to pick and choose what I read by virtue of my status as a mature reader. The written word consumed indiscriminately could be toxic and debilitating. All too often many are lost in transition and translation in the rainforest of The Book.

The Book can be bearer of all manners of tidings – good, bad, ugly, useful and useless, neither here nor there. The Book can make or mar. With The Book, the tendency seems to be for few to be chosen from the many that are called. As academics our lives are framed around The Book, to show that we have read them, that we are in them, that we have produced them, and that we can simultaneously supersede and be immortalised by them. However, reading and writing one’s way through the extraordinary bazaar of life does not always yield the outcomes one seeks. Some perish in an effort to publish. Some publish and perish. Some neither publish nor perish. Some are simply crushed by The Book.

With my learning to read came the necessity, and later the deeply entrenched desire, to write and ride the tide of The Book. To write well, one must drink from the well of ink of one’s predecessors. In my first few years of formal schooling, books to read and books within which to write were scarce. We learnt to write on banana leaves with sharpened bamboo sticks; they were more affordable and more disposable than exercise books and fountain pens and pencils. I remember acquiring my first reader and first ever textbook in primary class five, for services rendered to a class seven pupil who – thank goodness – disposed of his books as he saw fit without feeling obliged to seek permission from his parents.

The format of The Book that most impresses and disturbs me is the hardback. The thick hard cover is like a protective shield of steel to its definitive contents – a majestic introduction, a solid body and a conclusive final word all bound tightly together with little breathing room – that seems almost dismissive of an idea of knowing and knowledge making as flexible, fluid and full of ellipses – an unfinished and unfinishable book.

I have produced three hardbacks which I guard assiduously. One is my PhD thesis, which had to be presented in hardback, a job which was done by an expert bookbinder family with a long tradition in the trade, and suitably named Mr and Mrs Bookbinder. My two other hardbacks are both by a progressive publisher whom I respect for their audacity to release my books both in hard and paper backs – and still commit themselves to paying royalties.

I know a thing or two about the games scholars play with the hardback and the games the hardback plays on scholars. The hardback has sparked off and proved handy in many a scholarly battle. Like the tortoise, scholars can use their hardbacks to manipulate and manoeuvre, as well as to protect and shield themselves within and outside the academy, just as they can use them to discipline and punish. Every now and again, a hardback scholar retreats into the calm composure and comfort of their certitudes, the way dictators would retreat to their bunkers when forced to concede. The hardback, in a way, seems like a claim to the effect that legitimate or legitimated knowledge needs devoted protection – not only from wear and tear, fires, rats and termites, but also, and sometimes more damagingly, from sanctioned ignorance and lesser forms or quality of knowledge. However, could not protection gone wild result in a bunker mentality whereby instead of questioning the outdated knowledge of hardbacks – faced with paperback knowledge hot from the mill and freshly delivered – one clings to the hardback the way Christians do the Bible and Muslims the Quran?

Increasingly, one must admit, the hardback is at once a dangerous and an endangered species. Its impatience and blind eye to the fact of a world where theory is in constant open-ended conversation with an ever-evolving reality, makes the hardback dangerous. It is endangered by the proliferation of soft and ever softer forms of packaging and presenting knowledge made possible not only by the more democratic knowledge of the paperback but also by popular, internet and social media driven alternatives. As an elite and elitist medium, the hardback (and ultimately The Book) finds itself at a juncture where it either opens up in all honesty to the reality of participatory knowledge production and dissemination, or it perishes. Would it listen to wisdom, or would it, in the veritable manner of *the great dictator*, bunker itself to the point of being debunked? The hardback may well insist that it is the most enduring and thus possibly democratic of all books – easily shared with those with little access to electronic media and, without worry like the paperback, that it will return tatty, and ...