The 2008
Rusinga School/Aga Khan Academy
Annual Creative Writing Workshop.

10th May 2008.

Workshop organized by Patricia Echessa-Kariuki and David Wandera.

Pictures by Mercy Musomba

A Bread Loaf Slice in Sagana (Kenya)
WEEKEND WRITING...IT'S SO MUCH FUN!!!
By David Wandera

“Did you go out?”
“Yes and it was fun!”
“Where did you go...what did you do?”

Such is the start of a normal conversation for many teenagers especially on Monday mornings. At this point the expected answer is that they went out to watch a movie, or to party or even for an outdoor adventure. It is not expected that teenagers will be so exuberant about spending a weekend attending a writing workshop! They write all week in school...why should this be fun? Well, the antithesis of this assertion was true on Saturday the 10th May, 2008 as 31 students from Rusinga School (Nairobi) who teamed up with 27 students from the Aga Khan Academy will attest. They went to the picturesque and serene White Water Rafting site at Sagana to take part in a unique out door Creative Writing venture. This was the Aga Khan Academy/Rusinga School Annual Bread-Loaf Slice Creative Writing Workshop, an idea that was actualized by Mrs. Patricia Echessa-Kariuki and me pursuant to our wonderful writing experience at the Bread Loaf School of English (VT. U.S.A.) and our exposure to the benefits of the writing exchange process under the auspices of the Bread Loaf Teacher Network. These students were going to spend the day in these stimulating surroundings writing in response to various stimuli as they enhance their abilities in Creative Writing. For purposes of effective administration, the group was split into 3 sub-groups of 20 students, each of which would rotate and take turns at one of the three writing seminars that had been prepared for this day.

Prior to the event, all students had been asked to write an acrostic poem using their names or nicknames and upon arrival, they were paired up with others whom they did not know and they had to present their self-introductory acrostic poetry to one another and then talk about themselves.
They worked in pairs.

After this they were to introduce the other student in front of the sub groups of 20 students. This was quite an effective ice breaker as students found themselves asking one another who they were, what they liked and were expected to say something funny or special about the other student. We then commenced the three seminars and the first of the three sub groups were to attend a session called ‘Inspired from Memory’ facilitated by Patricia Echessa-Kariuki. In this session students warmed up by completing a writing prompt using the senses for description under the title ‘Going down...’ Pat and I first encountered this writing template when we attended the Andover Bread Loaf creative writing workshop led by Lou Bernieri and both of us have used this template in manifold situations and even in class as a writing prompt, always with commendable results. So this time the students were asked to close their eyes and to picture a place where they were walking...to get in touch with their senses...they would have to complete subsequent sentences detailing the interaction of their sense and the place...

Pat said, “Close your eyes and imagine...”
“I want you to write this, I am walking down some street or place with the words of a song in my head” said Pat. They wrote.

“Add, to my left I can see...now complete that sentence describing as visually as you can what you can see.” She said and paused as they wrote.

“Then add ‘I take a deep breath. I can smell...and her you need to describe what you can smell so vividly so that we can smell it too when you read for us” and they wrote.

Pat taking the group through her session.

After this they read to one another and to the whole group and were very amused by what they had written. This was just Pat’s warm-up activity and the main activity came next...the group was to recall an intense memorable experience that they had undergone for the first time in their lives. They were then to make descriptive notes trying to capture the time before, the time during and after the incident. Pat had prepared a card with relevant sub titles to assist them write. I once had a conversation with a teacher colleague who told me that the reason that students found some topics difficult to write about was because they had not experienced enough and their frame of reference was not adequately extensive. She had added that a student confronted with a topic out of his or her frame of reference would either just make up the story or do a bad job of faking the experience. This is something that I find very revealing of the teenager’s desire to create or make up rather than write real stories. As such, I understood then why Pat was so flexible and permitted some students who upon experiencing “writer’s block” as they put it, implored her to allow them to make up a story of a first time encounter. The group had time to plan, to write and some of them shared in front of their sub groups. The result was as varied as we had personalities there. One of the most poignant creations was, ‘The First Time I Saw a Man Cry’ written by a student who had seen her father cry due to the death of his mother, her grand mother. Others ranged from, ‘The First Time I Fell in Love’, ‘The First Time I Was Trapped in The Eye of Wilderness’ to ‘The First Time I Went to Kindergarten’.

The second group was the first to go to one of my colleagues, Mr. Yves Bleaune, who was leading them in building character descriptions through usage of vivid imagery.
He started off by reading a very expressive and detailed description of a character whose name he withheld testing to see whether the students would figure out the identity of the character. This exemplar covered descriptions of personality, habits, hobbies, appearance, and interaction among other aspects. It turned out to be Homer Simpson the cartoon character much to the glee of the students. A lot of them had gotten this right upon guessing.

He then provided them with a word bank of descriptive phrases and words and set them off individually to build similar character descriptions. The litmus test was that the others would have to guess the identity of the character to prove the efficacy of the imagery used.
During the sharing session, students had a lot of fun guessing who had been described and the characters ranged from movie stars, to singers, pop idols to text book characters, teachers to religious characters. Considering the tribal hatred, looting, arson, killings and wanton unrest that came in the wake of the just concluded elections in Kenya, I had some satisfaction when one student shared with me during her writing period, a description of one of our political figures and compared him to a greedy hyena and a stealthy hunter. ‘How true’ I thought.

The third group was facilitated by Mr. Charles Tsuma, a colleague of mine who had just returned from a teacher workshop on among others, pedagogy in the classroom held in Germany.

Charles Tsuma (in red cap) demonstrating an activity

He led them through a session on characterization and context. First they were to break up into groups of three and then develop two characters and write the make-believe bio data of their characters. Then they all had to throw these into a common pool and pick from it two characters developed by other groups. They were then to compose a group story where these two characters interacted.

…and talking to Elleni (in black cap)
The most riveting part was when they picked the characters developed by others and had to make sense of the character before determining the kind of interaction between this character and the other that they had picked. I came across one group that was raking their brains bemoaning their fate; they had to describe how an alien creature of a cadaverous mien and an unearthly stature was to court this shy school girl with a delicate temperament!

The day’s programme offered an opportunity for a break, individual writing time and lunch.
After all groups had gone through the sessions, it was time to polish one of the pieces that they had written and to prepare to read it in front of the entire group. While they were writing, Pat and I observed that the difference between teachers who had gone to Bread Loaf and other teachers was the fact that the former wrote with the students while the later supervised the students as they wrote. It was always a pleasure to get a student settling beside a teacher and asking to read their piece to the teacher or to “test the clarity of their images”.

Pat discusses style with two students.

I listen to a student read…
One student Grace Olenja of grade 9 proceeded to read her untitled piece thus;

_I entered the house, my heart stopping with every step I took...I held my breath as he turned his deep set brown eyes towards me. “I pay all that money and these are the grades you get!” he hissed in a dangerously low tone. I could feel the storm gathering and this caused my mouth to dry up. Suddenly a hand struck me across the face. I cried out in pain as I scrambled to get away from the monster that was my father. Over and over again, he hit me until I could taste blood in my mouth. I felt angry and hurt and yet detached as though it was someone else getting beaten..._

Grace (grade 9) sharing her piece.

It was pure magic listening to these teenagers as they dedicated so much to their compositions. To crown it all, we assembled under a shaded area and with the back drop of a shimmering river, singing birds, yelps from another group of campers who were learning canoeing, and the occasional call by a bull monkey in the nearby forest, we read to one another. It was the most picturesque reading session I have attended in a long time...student after student called on us to partake of their creation and read to us all loudly, confidently and above all, to the applause of the whole group.

She was the first to share in front of the whole group.
I was so moved that I went to the front and shared my own writing; a poem called ‘The Before, The Now, not After’ inspired by Pat’s session.

Some of the pieces were very comical such as one I recall about a dog that had learned how to talk and was always mixing up the syntax. There were others that were serious which were consumed by the listeners with commensurate sobriety. One student; Elleni Stephanou of grade 9, read from her piece entitled “Pain”. This piece attempted to harness the memory of an actual incident, narrating how a phone call that she had received when she was in her former school changed her life. Subsequently she had to leave her former school which was in a clash torn area just after the Kenyan general election presidential results were announced plunging the country into hitherto unknown hatred and mayhem. Here is a part of what she wrote:

...my childhood was to be stripped away in one phone call. All was silent after this. People became blurry as the road of my future suddenly had a dead end. Had other people known such dead ends or was it just me? Freshly cut grass, sickly sweet, stung my nostrils. I walked in a haze to my home...I crawled desperately beneath my bed hiding from my room, from my friends, from the truth...my mind was in turmoil. My future was uncertain...
One piece that caught me by surprise was read by another student. It took me back to the time of the Hindu celebration of Diwali in 2007. I had been working late when I received a call from my brother’s girlfriend telling me that my brother had been trying to reach me in vain. She told me that he had been involved in an accident where he had hit a drunk pedestrian and had taken him to the Aga Khan Hospital which was very close to where I was. I remember calling my brother and rushing over to see if I could help. Moments later, when I got to the hospital and was walking in, I heard the blare of a horn as a car drove into the emergency section…I remember seeing some people rushing in as I moved off…after a while there was a wail from a woman as more people came. I could tell that they were Hindu from their attire. After meeting my brother we were compelled by the commotion to find out what had happened before resuming on his own emergency and were told by the attendant there, that the other car had brought in a man who had suffered a terrible accident after operating a fire cracker and chances were that the man would not survive. A day later, I was to read a sketchy blurb in the ‘Daily Nation’ newspaper about some man who had his head blown off by a firecracker during the Diwali festivities. Even back then I had thought how unfortunate it was that a man’s last moments would be summarized by such a sketchy report of not more than six sentences with an impersonal tone about the “firecracker accident” and that that was “the worst Diwali accident” that year. The piece that the girl read at Sagana captured the moment when she was called from playing and she was told that her uncle had suffered a terrible accident as he was trying to set off some fire crackers. It was impassioned, raw and vivid and definitely a better memoir of the girl’s uncle than the hurriedly written conservatively worded news brief.

By the end of the session, students from both schools were so closely bonded that it is accurate to say that friendships were formed, hearts opened and lessons learnt. A wonderful yardstick of their engagement was not just the alacrity with which they shared their pieces but also the zest and fervor that they put in the writing process that led to the intriguing content of their varied writing. At no point did any student want to go home nor did anyone lament on his or her usage of the weekend.
There were very many successes on this day as evidenced by the feedback that students gave at the event and after the event. It is no wonder that when I asked one of our students to assess the day, she said, “The drive was long but the crowd was cool and the place was great...I enjoyed the writing”. Another from Rusinga was heard quipping, “We should have these outings every weekend. They are so much fun!” Perhaps the greatest success lay in the fact that teenagers went out and spent a Saturday writing and being creative as opposed to watching movies or playing games on their mobile phones. It is unfortunate that modern day attractions especially from the electronic media, I-pods and mobile phones (not to mention other time consuming undertakings) are preferred to writing but as these students will attest, writing is not just challenging, not just involving but it is experientially enriching. I once read a funny quote (when I was scouring the internet for quotes on writing for our school magazine) that now comes to mind. It was by one Paul O'Neil and it said, “Always grab the reader by the throat in the first paragraph, send your thumbs into his windpipe in the second, and hold him against the wall until the tagline” How engaging!!!

So. To serve as an icing for this memorable day of days, students were able to solicit advice, guidance and response from the teachers who were present. While there were many pithy and wise words said by the facilitators to individuals, small groups, and the entire group, I was able to collate the following modest sample of the wisdom that freely flowed and buttressed the writing process on that weekend.

*Writing starts with imagination*
  *Patricia Echessa-Kariuki*

The greater the repertoire of words that you have, the clearer your imagery when you write.

*Yves Bleaune*

Writing is personal. There is usually a part of the writer’s personality that finds its way into the writing. That makes what we write unique and individualized.

*Charles Tsuma*

Writing has to do with the soul. Good writing is not only sharing a bit of your soul, but helping others sense a bit of their own. Excellent writing is inviting someone into your soul.

*Christine Mbugua*

Writing, when infused with the right amount of creativity and dedication, bears the power to move mountains and even create some where there were none, to build whole cities, and at the stroke of a pen, writing can create characters, destroy them, and ultimately such writing forms a world of its own.

*David Wandera*
At the end of the workshop Pat and I handed prizes to ten students for effort, creativity and commitment. We had categorized the students as juniors; Grade 7 and 8, and seniors; grade 9 and 10 for the award of prizes. All students would also receive certificates at their school assembly at a later date.

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Pat bestowing prizes to students.

...and pausing with Shiro (grade 10) who scooped the award for ‘outstanding senior writer’

A GALLERY OF THE SAGANA WRITING WORKSHOP

Getting started…a pair introduces one another. Looking on is Ms. Christine Mbugua (in red and black floral top on the right)
...a group writing...creating a character in one of the sessions...

...another group working together...
There was quite a bit to think about and write.

Ms. Mercy Musomba (one of our photographers looks on)

Shimona and Shiro busy writing…
They wrote and wrote…

It was also a lot of fun…
…there was time to play piggy-back or even pat the friendly camp-site dogs…

Shruti and Khaleesa taking a breather…

…and reading to an audience…
Back to work...

The final session where students shared with the whole group.