

## Ten Years Without Books

by John Kuti

As I write this, I have half an eye on an old James Bond film that is showing on my computer. But this is a story about how I stopped watching TV and began reading again for pleasure, after ten years in which I hardly turned a page.

I suppose I was an avid reader of "literature" between the ages of nine and fourteen. I had enough time to be *White Fang*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Bilbo Baggins* and *Jeeves*. Of course there was room in the schoolboy's imagination for some real historical figures: Scott of the Antarctic, all of the Vikings, and Benjamin Franklin were good friends of mine.

Then, in adolescence, I began a long search for strange and radical ideas. I wanted to challenge my elders and betters, and stir up my peers with amazing points of view. Of course, the only place to look was in books. I hunted out the longest titles and the authors with the funniest names, I scoured the library for completely unread books. Then I found one which became my bible for the whole of 1982, it had a title composed of eleven long words and an author whose name I didn't know how to pronounce. It was really thick and looked dead serious. Even better, it put forward a whole world-view that would take days to explain. Perfect. I took it out of the library three times, proud to see the date-stamps lined up on the empty library insert.

Later, I went to university. Expecting to spend long evenings in learned discussion with clever people, I started reading philosophy. For some reason I never found the deep-thinking intellectuals I hoped to meet. Anyway, I was ready to impress with my profound knowledge of post-structuralism, existentialism and situationism. These things are usually explained in rather short books, but they take a long time to get through. They were the end of my youthful reading.

Working life was hard to get used to after so much theory. It was the end of books for me. There didn't seem to be much in books that would actually get things done. To do things you had to answer the telephone and work a computer. You had to travel about and speak to people who weren't at all interested in philosophy. I didn't stop reading, you can't avoid that. I read all day. But no books came my way, only manuals and pamphlets and contracts and documents. Maybe most people satisfy their need for stories and ideas with TV and, to tell the truth, it was all I needed for ten years. In those days I only had a book "on the go" for the duration of aeroplane flights. At first I would come home and watch TV over dinner. Then, I moved the TV so I could watch it from bed. I even rigged up a switch so I could turn it off without getting out of bed. Then, one fateful day, my TV broke and my landlady took it away.

My new TV is an extra circuit board inside my computer. It's on a desk in front of a working chair and I can't see it from the bed. I still use it for the weather forecasts and it's nice to have it on while I'm typing this... but what to do last thing at night? Well, have another go with books.

Now, I just like books. I have a pile of nice ones by my bed and I'm reading about six simultaneously. I don't want to BE any of the characters. I don't care if a thousand people have already read them. I don't have to search through libraries. There are books everywhere and all of them have something to read in them. I have the strange feeling that they've been there all along, waiting for me to pick them up.

### Glossary

**adolescence (n):** period of a person's life between childhood and adulthood

**avid (adj):** extremely eager or interested

**challenge (v):** to invite someone to compete or take part, esp. in a game or argument

**circuit board (n):** a small electronic circuit which consists of a lot of small parts made on a piece of semiconducting material

**fateful (adj):** very important because of its, often negative, effect on the future

**historical figure (n):** a person famous in history

**intellectual (n):** a highly educated person whose interests are studying and other activities that involve careful thinking and mental effort

**learned (adj):** acquired by learning or experience

**pamphlet (n):** a thin book with only a few pages which gives information or an opinion about something

**peer (n):** a person who is the same age or has the same social position or the same abilities as other people in a group

**pleasure (n):** (something that gives) enjoyment, happiness or satisfaction

**profound (adj):** showing a clear and deep understanding of serious matters

**radical (adj):** believing or expressing the belief that there should be great or extreme social or political change

**rig up (v):** to fix (a piece of equipment) in place

**scour (v):** to search (a place or thing) very carefully in order to try to find something

**simultaneously (adv):** in a way that happens or is done at exactly the same time

**world-view (n):** a way of looking at or considering the world

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