

How the rich sell books

As traditional, everyday authors fail to make a mint writing, the rich seem to have cracked the code and are laughing all the way to the bank.

BY PHILIP MATOGO

On May 7, all roads and their *panyas* (short-cuts) led to the Fairway Hotel in Nakasero, Kampala. Mr Shem Bageine was launching his memoir titled *Foresight—Treads of a Leader, Professional and Philanthropist*. The book traces Bageine's life from his modest childhood in Ndurwa, Kigezi (born in 1944), where he engaged in small village ventures like selling *mairungi* to truck drivers. It follows his rise to political leadership, exploring his contribution to the East African business community, his public service career, and his long-standing philanthropic work with organisations like Lions Clubs International.

The event was organised by TFK-Luminary Publishers (part of TFK-Luminary Investments Co. Ltd), a Ugandan publishing firm founded in 2012 by CEO Frank Kabushenga. They specialise in helping individuals and organisations tell their stories.

As we stepped into Fairway's premier indoor ballroom space—the Solarium

Vista—we were greeted by traditional dancers of the Kigezi variety. It was a lively launch, featuring two former prime ministers—Mr Amama Mbabazi and Mr Ruhakana Rugunda—along with many other luminaries from Kigezi Sub-region and beyond.

The launch doubled as a fundraiser. Millions of shillings were rustled up to further feather Mr Bageine's already well-feathered nest. It was a bonanza in which the book, costing Shs80,000 was auctioned at Shs500,000. The author certainly made bank, which is redolent of how books by other illustrious figures hit literary pay dirt.

This is also the curious case of the book: *And Then What? Reflections on Life, Leadership, and Meaning Beyond Success*, the highly acclaimed reflective memoir written by Francis Kamulegeya, the former country senior partner and managing partner at PwC Uganda. Officially launched at the Sheraton Kampala Hotel, the autobiography explores the illusions of corporate status and details Mr Kamulegeya's personal transition from global boardrooms to coffee farming and social entrepreneurship in Masaka. Mr Kamulegeya is reported to have made quite a windfall during his book launch.

As traditional, everyday authors fail to make a mint writing, the rich seem to have cracked the code and are laughing all the way to the bank. This is because of several reasons.

Compelling backstory

An author's compelling backstory undoubtedly hooks readers. Mr Kam-

ulegeya is accomplished and highly regarded across East Africa as a premier corporate executive, tax expert, and transformational leader. Peers and industry leaders widely celebrate him for his technical mastery of finance, his mentorship of young professionals, and his seamless transition from corporate leadership to impactful philanthropy and governance. His reputation is thus the product.

While professional authors sell purely on the strength of their prose, unique concepts, or brilliant world-building, the likes of Mr Kamulegeya rise to a literary podium finish because such successful persons are what they have achieved. And Mr Kamulegeya has achieved highly, so his book sold highly.

To be sure, the writer is fundamentally greater than what is written. Writing is merely a vessel. It captures a snap-

shot of the creator's mind, experiences, and thoughts at a specific moment. The writer remains the conscious, breathing source of infinite ideas, whereas the written text is a static, finished limitation. However, there's more.

Business sense

Well-heeled authors treat books as purely business ventures and not communicative tools. When such an author sells a book, the author invites his or her equally well-heeled colleagues, and they splurge on books like the shilling is going out of print.

Also, when an author dies, their books generate ongoing revenue as a legal property (intellectual property rights) that is passed down to their heirs or a designated literary estate. This serves as further impetus for the author's family to market and sell his book.

MARKET IMPACT

While the books of moneyed authors make money, they do not grow the industry. Books by wealthy individuals or celebrities often fail to grow the broader literary industry because they rely on pre-existing fame rather than literary merit. This creates a system that stifles debut authors, homogenises storytelling (rich Ugandans write autobiographies or have biographies written about them), and drains marketing budgets from genuine literary craft.

This is because publishers allo-

cate disproportionately large marketing budgets to a few high-profile names based on their ability to pay for such publicity. This leaves very little financial room to discover, nurture, and promote unknown or debut literary writers.

A rich person's books frequently function as lucrative brand-building or marketing merchandise rather than original literary works. Many, if not all, are ghostwritten, which risks degrading the artistic perception of writing into a cheap, mass-market commodity.

Again, these books target their wealthy colleagues, friends and fa-

In this context, book royalties are treated exactly like physical property, such as real estate or stocks. By Ugandan law, copyright protection lasts for the creator's entire life plus 50 years after their death.

The rights and royalties pass to the beneficiaries named in the author's will, or to the immediate family under standard probate laws. Some wealthy Ugandan authors set up formal "literary trusts" to manage the property smoothly.

Furthermore, if the author had publishing contracts, those contracts remain legally binding after death. The publishing house continues to print, distribute, and sell the books, but instead of paying the author, they pay the author's estate.

For self-published books on platforms like Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), the estate needs to contact the platform's support team. The family must provide official documents—such as a death certificate and a will—to transfer the author's KDP dashboard and royalty bank accounts to the heirs.

mily, providing a quick cash grab for the publisher. However, they rarely create a loyal, long-term readership for the broader publishing ecosystem. Readers who buy a tycoon's memoir are unlikely to suddenly begin reading other diverse, emerging literary fiction.

Finally, the wealthy and famous tend to write books that prioritise protecting their public image or repeating popular self-help tropes. This steers the market toward safe, generic content, leaving less room for the risk-taking or innovative storytelling that traditionally pushes literature forward.