

# LBK

To inspire and encourage readers to be successful.

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## Abi Akello Arunga – Weaving the Thread that Connects Life

The Little Bird / July 12, 2014



Photo courtesy of Abigail Arunga

*By Anthony Okoth*

We all have a purpose to fulfill during our time on planet Earth, a calling to take up and enact. Sometimes we do not find out what that is until it is revealed to us, in a profound way or in a subtle one. Other times, we know from the very beginning what it is that we are born to do. We can never be truly happy, truly fulfilled and we can never be truly alive until we are doing that which our souls truly desire.

Abigail Akello Arunga, more affectionately known as “Abi”, knows what she was born to do. You can tell from reading her blog, poetry or any of her numerous literary works: she leaves a little bit of herself in each piece. They’re all unquestionably a part of her: her humour, her happiness, her anger... She lets it all hang out for everyone to see. From the way she talks about her upcoming book “Akello” to the failings of writers in Kenya, there’s always that raw and unhinged emotion that passionate people can never suppress. So, I present to you another sliver of the being that is Abi: complete with expletives, harsh truths and the love of what she does everyday.

**LBK:** What’s your earliest memory with regards to literature & writing?

**Abi Arunga:** My best friend Chipu and I decided when we were five that “We’re going to be writers and illustrators, and we’re going to make a book for other children who don’t

know the alphabet!” So we literally made an alphabet book: we drew “A” and we drew an apple, we stapled the pages together, we had a cover and everything.

**LBK:** When did you realize that writing was what you wanted to do professionally?

**AA:** About the same time as the alphabet book. I’m kidding! *\*chuckles\** Writing professionally... It was when I figured out that I really couldn’t do anything else. I’m good at things but I’m not as good at anything else as I am at writing. So I kind of had no choice in the matter. Studying Journalism in university was just an “OK fine! I’ll do this! But really, I’m going to write after. That’s the plan.”

**LBK:** You started writing from a blog, & from there you transitioned into scripting and so many other writing genres. A lot of people write personal blogs, but they don’t know how to transition into other writing genres. What advice would you share with people like that looking to make the transition?

**AA:** Number one biggest tip: tweet the f\*\*k out of your blog, tweet it to everybody! Be like “Everyone! Read my post!” and just bother people on your timeline. Don’t do it the way some annoying people do like spam & robots, though. Find the balance, ha. Get someone to monitor how annoying you’re becoming lol. That’s how I got my first job actually: I tweeted a TV producer to read my blog. She read it and invited me to come work for her. Social media is fantastic, so use it as a platform.

Second: most people don’t think you can get jobs at the corporate level by just applying, but you can. When I started working at Saturday Magazine there was someone tweeting out an advert looking for writers. I applied and got the job.



Photo courtesy of Abigail Arunga

**LBK:** Tell us about Akello, your first book of poetry.

**AA:** My first love is poetry, before I was writing blogs and prose I had been writing poetry since I was nine-ish. It was really sh\*\* poetry though! It got better towards my 20s, obviously. The book is my first anthology: it’s a collection of poems I wrote from the year 2008 to about 2010 when I was in university and full of hormones. Most of it is about love because I like boys, and girls... I mean I like people! *\*laughs\** Loving them is fun, and writing poetry about them is fun. Therapeutic. Some of it is really good, some of it is not so good but I’m going to force people to buy it anyway... Oooh! Shout out to Ian “Sketch” Arunga who did the cover & graphic design and layout, because I love him and we’re keeping it in the family. The book would not have happened without him, and it’s his fault that it looks bloody awesome.

**LBK:** There’s a lot more attention on writing in Kenya now, with so many social events about poetry it seems writing is gaining popularity. Do you feel like writing is on the up in Kenya?

**AA:** Funny enough, I don’t. I feel like spoken word is where it has always been: people are trying too hard to sound American in their poetry. I feel like there is a lot of stuff

being written, but a lot of it is bad. *\*laughs\** I do feel like a lot of our writing is bad, just because of the most simple sh\*\* like grammar, spelling and capitalization. When I was working for Spielworks, I was Head of Consultancy and Development at some point which meant people applied to me if they wanted writing or scripting jobs. The quality of people who used to write in saying that they want to script... People are really sh\*\* at scripting. I feel like it's like Project (Sh)Fame: a lot of people who go on it can't really sing; the people who can sing are at home watching the people who think they can sing. The writers who are actually good aren't writing. They aren't applying themselves. So the level that we are at now is the one we were at a while ago. A lot of people who can write are doing other jobs: they're accountants & such because a lot of people can't sustain themselves off their writing. If more people like that wrote, the quality would be better & the industry would grow. So yeah, there are more writers and poets... But they're bad.

**LBK:** In your opinion, how important is reading culture to general lifestyle, and how can we re-establish it?

**AA:** First of all, I don't think we (*Kenya*) don't have a reading culture. I think it's small, but it's growing in leaps and bounds. I think the work of people like StoryMoja and the StoryMoja Festival, which grows every year, has really helped people read more. How many book vendors do you see in (*Nairobi*) Town? If there was no money in it, they wouldn't be doing it *\*like beggars... and pastors\**. People are buying books by the hundreds. I went to get the number and bar code for my book at the Kenya National Library *\*they are so nice over there. SO friendly\**, and they say that people are publishing books everyday. You can't tell me that there are so many people publishing and our reading culture is sh\*\*, it can't be. All these people are forcing their friends, like me, to buy their books. So everyone is forcing everyone to read. Our reading culture is smaller than your average, but we're growing as a nation in reading.

With regards to reading as a lifestyle... Reading IS life. If you want to go anywhere with your mind, do anything and be any form of intelligent, express yourself in any way...

Reading and words are the thread that connects life together. Biblically, though I'm not the best person to ask about this, words are what brought the world into being. On a spiritual level, even in my life, the things that I say I am going to do, if I write them down or speak them out, they actually happen. I wrote down in my diary when I was 14 that I was going to publish a book and travel the world... And I'm doing it.

How do we make it grow? Keep publishing, keep reading, keep writing blogs about reading, keep pushing the message that reading makes you smarter and smartness is hot! We're becoming a sapiosexual nation, or at least I hope so. We're becoming a nation that values knowledge instead of or hand in hand with beauty . Hopefully we can turn this whole socialite thing around and I can be a "readalite": "Oooh, look at how many books I've got! Ain't I sexy?"

**LBK:** Writing isn't a popular career choice in the country because there's greater emphasis on white-collar jobs. Most people also think that you can't make a living off writing. What are your thoughts on living off writing and the view that writing is an inferior career?

**AA:** There's no such thing as an inferior career. If you've chosen a career, it's yours and

you own it. You can't say the Jua Kali (*informal sector*) guy is less than the CEO of Safaricom just because of what he does. The path you've chosen is your path, & no one should tell you it's inferior or not.

With regards to writing not paying... The arts in general in our country right now, they don't pay a lot. I'm one of the few people I know who makes a living off their writing. It's definitely changing though, because there are actors making a living off their acting. In the same way for writing, there are different forums and opportunities because people write badly. The people who write well are not that many as a result, even if the jobs are few you're going to get one. All you have to do then is prove yourself.

Number two: if you're freelancing, there's so much to do. You can join a media house if you want to. A lot of people in media houses can't write though, and a lot of people writing books can't write. So if you can figure out a way to find what you can do and be good at it, consistently... If you've never blogged, do the blog thing until someone notices and starts paying you for it. Then you will be able to live off it. You have to be prepared to do a lot of free sh\*\* at the beginning, & be prepared to do many writing gigs at the same time. I write for five jobs/publications at the same time. We're not at the level where you can just do one thing yet.



Photo courtesy of Abigail Arunga

**LBK:** Are you into any other line of work apart from writing?

**AA:** Like stripping? *\*laughs\** I do social media management, but I really want to do an album because my second love is singing. I was in the BEST acapella group in the world in my church called "Harmony". I've never seen people who can sing like that, my voice has never sounded as good as then. My voice now is a bit sh\*\*, but then... I don't know if it was because we were singing for the Lord, but damn! I need to get back to that. I sung the theme song for a show coming out on M-NET called "How to find a

Husband”, so I guess I’m going in that direction. I want to do everything: I want to do the arts thing, you know? I wanna sing, I wanna rap, I wanna write...this is just the beginning of the wonder that is Abigail Arunga. Ok, the middle.

**LBK:** Of all the writing work that you’ve done, which would you say is your favourite?

**AA:** It’s definitely not scripting, I don’t like it but I do it because I can. Scripting and the amount of work and thought that goes into creating characters and cohesive storylines and plots...it can be extremely draining. The newspaper articles are cool because they get a wide audience, but no. I’d have to say my personal blog & poetry. Poetry is because it was my first love, and I feel like it’s what I’m best at. Blogging because I feel like I’m funny as f\*\*k. I didn’t think I was going to do blogging, but I figured since I talk a lot & I have a lot of sh\*\* to say I might as well start a blog. I love writing that blog, man! It’s taken me places. I just sit down and pour out everything.

**LBK:** Where do you see Akello the person and the brand in future?

**AA:** I like reviewing stuff. When I used to work for Nairobi News I used to review film, blogs, books, movies, and restaurants. I want to get into that more, & I want to be travelling the world to do that. I want to be a lecturer, teaching people stuff and marking it wrong because their grammar is sh\*\*. I want to help create the next crop of writers who will actually be good writers while trying not to be the professor who sleeps with her students... I want to be getting mad royalties from my six-book poetry anthology like a boss! But you know what, as long as I’ll be as happy in the future as I am now, I’ll be good. And rich! And happy. But mostly rich.

Check out Abi’s blog: <http://theshynarcissist.blogspot.com/2014/07/on-crazy-women-2.html?m=1>



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July 12, 2014 in Interview, Writing. Tags: Akello, blogging, poetry, prose, scripting

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**TheGirl** July 12, 2014 at 7:32 pm

I did just check out her colorful blog.

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**theshynarcissist** July 13, 2014 at 3:35 pm

Thank you. 😊

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**Magunga Williams** July 27, 2014 at 7:52 pm

Her mind is sexy. Enjoyed reading this piece. Questions answered beautifully. That book Akello is one I want to read. Plus, anyone who has been reading The Shy Narcissist needs little convincing

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**Renee** July 28, 2014 at 8:52 am

I have been reading tSN too! She truly is funny as f\*\*k.

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