There is a spacious office at the University of Nairobi's Literature Department, and entering it means plunging into a forest of books, the kind that terrifies Lawino in Okot PBitek's book.

The owner of the office is an unassuming literature scholar who is always reluctant to speak, and difficult to please. "These books represent a lifetime's effort to cultivate an independent, critical, and problem-solving mind," Prof Henry Indangasi says cogently. "I always wanted to draw conclusions backed by evidence—not rumour and hero-worship."

The professor says he has a humble background, and had it not been for an uncle, his education would never have gone beyond primary level. "My parents were so poor that someone else put pressure on my uncle to pay my school fee," he says. "My uncle lived in Mombasa. I then passed well, but he could not sponsor me for long. He also had his family to think about."

He would then proceed to Friends School Kamusinga in the 1960s, which was sponsored by the Quakers. Indangasi remembers that the Quakers were famous for their pacifist approach to issues, and this may have influenced his own approach to life. He is a quiet scholar who also writes poetry and short stories, not to mention the titles he has authored and co-authored.

"My love for books began in primary school where I read Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist," he recalls. "But it was at Kamusinga where I met Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace."

After his A-Levels, Indangasi came to Nairobi to look for a job even though he knew he had qualified to proceed to university. He lived with an uncle in Kangemi. "One day my uncle gave me Sh10 as bus fare. I walked to town, entered a bookshop and bought Tolstoy's War and Peace. The rest of the days I just walked till the day my fare was supposed to have been depleted. That was when I went and asked for fare again."

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BOOKS

What Kenyans are reading this week

How to Write It

How to Write It by Sandra E. Lamb

Apart from motivational and self-help books, Kenyans are also so interested in DTP-do it yourself books. Popularity of several books shows it is Sandra E. Lamb's How to Write It a guide to writing anything be it invitation cards, resumes to press releases.

The Richest Man in Babylon: The Success Secrets of the Ancients by George S. Clason

Written in the early 20th century, and set thousands of years ago, this book has inspired millions by its simple narrative on financial intelligence. The book advocates for paying yourself first, where you put aside 10% of your income. It also advocates for investments and living within your means. It remains a favourite of Kenyans.

MONEY Real Quick

Money, Real Quick: The story of M-PESA by Toney K Omwansa and Nicholas P. Salliean

M-PESA has revolutionised banking in Kenya. Having been embraced by both old and young, rich and poor. The mobile banking from Safaricom has been a trendsetter in the world, with the authors saying that one out of every two people in the world sending money over a mobile phone is a Kenyan. And the same Kenya is curious about the workings of this innovative technology and are buying the recently launched book.

I shouldn't praise Achebe just because he's African

By KINJHU WAWERU