

ALL ABOARD THE BOOK BUS

by Adrian Thompson

Over the summer [of 2014] I was lucky enough to be involved in a charity project in the wonderful Luangwa Valley, in the East of Zambia.

Book Bus, the charity I went with, was founded by publisher Tom Maschler in 2007. Having seen the problems caused in Zambia by a lack of literacy resources (from the age of seven children in Zambian primary schools begin to learn English and, from then, most of their lessons and exams are in English—so they speak one language at home and in the playground and another in the classroom), Tom's solution was to buy an old Leyland Tiger bus, get his friend Quentin Blake to decorate it, fill it with books, and take it out to Zambia. Since then the charity has grown until there are now six projects—three in Zambia, and one each in Ecuador, Malawi and India. The Zambian projects are in Livingstone, the UNCHR Refugee Camp at Mehreba, and in the rural area of the Luangwa Valley—and that's the one I was involved in.

Flying into Mfuwe, the smallest international airport I've ever been to (international only because of one flight a week from Malawi), reveals a dry, dusty, and parched landscape. This was July. It hadn't rained since March, and would begin raining again in October. Once ensconced in camp the first thing to do was to prepare dinner. Chopping vegetables on the edge of an African National Park, while keeping an eye out for the opportunistic monkey thieves, got slightly surreal as a soft grey trunk, complete with the rest of the elephant, snaked under the thatched roof and began to Hoover up the food. By the time the elephant's head has begun to push the thatched roof in we were hiding behind a wall, and hoping it would wander away—which it did, luckily. Welcome to Africa!

The next day was the first in school. We spent four hours working with different groups of children, reading with them, sharing stories—both written and oral. 'Why the sky is so far from the Earth', a West African story, went down well, as did traditional Zambian stories—for example, 'Why Zebra has No Horns', 'The Rhino and the Turtle', and 'the Bell and the Lion'. On returning home, I found versions of these stories in a PDF source book at <http://lubutocollections.org/items/show/77> - 'Folktales of Zambia', collected by Chiman L. Vyas, and published in 1969. While the stories differ slightly (mostly in that they're much more formally told), they are stories which the children told us, and we shared at other schools.

Through the time I was there we traded stories with children and teachers—as well as other members of the community. Teachers enjoyed the oral storytelling as well as the written stories. Written stories obviously develop reading and comprehension, which are vitally important, but speaking in English to native speakers, and listening to stories along with general chat, is as important in many ways.

Over two weeks we visited six different schools and worked with more than six hundred children aged from 3 to 16, sharing stories and books including 'Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain', 'We're going on a Bear Hunt' (and Lion Hunt – this worked well, as the children only had a vague idea of what a bear was but knew exactly what a lion was!) the Very Hungry Caterpillar, and more.

Visiting Zambia with Book Bus makes you a valued member of the local community – you get locals chatting to you as you





shop in the market, you get invited to local organisations and you get to see things which ‘normal’ tourists don’t. The Luangwa, and its closeness to the South Luangwa National Park (it’s the second largest national park in Zambia and just across the river from the site we were staying at) opens up intriguing possibilities for Safari drives, and walking safari, at very reasonable prices. Overall, it was a life-changing experience. If you’re interested in sharing stories of all kinds with enthusiastic, engaged, children, I can’t recommend it highly enough! For more information on the Book Bus project and information of volunteering, go to <http://www.bookbus.org> If you’d like more information, or you’ve got any questions (or ideas for fundraising!), you can also get in touch with me at zambia@adie.co.uk.

[All photos by Adrian Thompson]

