

UNDISCOVERED

by J (J-priryodhi)

WHY WE LIKE IT: Senior Editor Tom Ball writes...*This is a story about a genius who goes unrecognized his whole life—inventing things like clothes that never need to be washed and that can change colour. The story explores the myth that brilliant people succeed. But just like Herman Hesse’s ‘The Prodigy’ genius is often very sensitive and crushed by the weight of the world. An insightful story by an emerging young writer.*

Senior Editor Charles Pinch writes...*At FOTD we’re as interested in the emerging writer as we are in the mature writer. What we look for is raw talent. And that’s what we found in ‘Undiscovered’. This is outsider fiction and the expected rough edges and occasional bumps are part of the reading experience. In the interest of authenticity we don’t edit them out.*

The story will be included in a short story anthology of African writing called ‘To Your Troubles’ translated ‘from the traditional Shona offer of condolences’. Under the creative direction of Terence M. Mutuswa. Many of the writers it will showcase have never been published.

Undiscovered

A very bad eulogy

The world is forever full of never-beens, never-wills and the occasional should-have or could-have-beens. I knew one man who was all four and yet far more than any of these labels could define.

He was not born into a rich family, on the contrary, he lived his entire life firmly between the buttocks of a seated lower class.

His only family was a mother, who lived far away so that she could provide for him, and a grandmother, a woman so old that even her pubic hairs had gone bald.

He was never married. He never had children. His life was a humdrum existence and his death was an unexceptional passing.

Now that he has joined the depressingly departed, I can tell his story. Before then, there was a chance that his story would have been a different one. There was a chance that his story would have been a great one.

This is a very bad eulogy for a man such as he was.

This man was one of the greatest minds this continent has ever spawned. He had a light so bright that the sun often glared at him in envy.

He was a global treasure, and that no one ever heard of him, is to our combined loss.

The musings of his mind

He was the most ordinary looking of boys and I mean that in a third world sort of way. That is to say, his skin either glistening from the generous application of Vaseline petroleum jelly or looked ashen from the lack of it. His clothes were badly worn knock-offs that gave his body odd symmetries. For example, he had

a shirt with crooked stitching that made him look as if he was stuck turning his upper body to the left. Such were the adventures of his wardrobe.

At school, he was neither the smartest nor was he the slowest child. Actually, to be the slowest in the local public-school classrooms took some real effort. There were so many intellectual snails and intellectual statues in these schools that your brain would have had to be deliberately going in the wrong direction for you to outdo them. It was not their fault, these children had not been given the correct academic background to learn at pace with the rest of the world.

Physically, he was not the fittest among the neighbourhood children. He was borderline malnourished. He constantly lived slightly over the fence of starvation.

He could have been good looking were it not for the fact that poverty has a way of presenting a person's worst constituents. I am yet to meet a really ugly wealthy person.

Aside from the single condition of being permanently poor, there was absolutely nothing outstanding about him on the outside. He was a poor child among poor people, which sadly, made him seem as normal as everyone else.

Everyone who saw him overlooked him. He was just one nobody in an ocean of nobody's. A scrawny one at that.

To look at him, he was ordinary in every possible meaning of the word. If you saw him, you too would agree that he was nothing special. You too would be wrong.

This bony looking, dirty specimen of 'the African child' had a mind that only comes once in a millennium.

He had a brain that could pierce any form of creative work and disassemble it to its marrow. His brain could also reassemble any artistic concept in a way that would look original to the rest of us basic mortals.

Here are a few of the things he did whilst he lived unnoticed among us.

When he was a small boy he fell in love with films. He first watched television at a friend's two houses over. Whilst all the other children only saw cartoons moving about the screen yammering in an English language they could barely understand, he saw how the basic stories of good triumphing over evil and smartness trumping idiocy were told. After school, while all the other children played in the streets, he did not join them.

Instead, he would sit in the dirt and draw stickman figures with his fingers, reenacting scenes from his favourite cartoon shows. He soon began making up his own scenes as he drew. He soon had no fingerprints on the index finger of his right hand on account of wearing them off in the sand.

As a child, he did not enjoy playing with all the children that he knew. This was an oddity, considering that the high-density neighbourhood he lived in manufactured children in cartons on a monthly basis. None of the multitudes of juveniles exploding around him interested him so he enjoyed his own company.

His mother could not afford to buy and send toys for him, so he found ways to make do. He collected sticks, cardboard cut-outs and bottle tops. In his room, he would bend and tear these odd bits into all sorts of shapes and sizes. While it may have looked like scattered piles of rubbish to you or I, this was the beginning of his brilliance. He would painstakingly set up his pieces and then he would create elaborate action sequences, plots and storylines. All from the top of his head.

He would spend hours upon hours playing by himself and making his characters talk to each other, which of course sounded like he was talking to himself. This worried his grandmother to no end. She would hear grunts, yelps, voice modulations and nonsense sounds coming from his room. From what she heard come out of his room, she would have taken musterbation over mental illness any day. She also began suspecting that he was playing at witchcraft after she had found the odd collection of twigs that he kept under his bed. She lived with a cocktail of concerns over her grandson.

He taught himself to draw and he began sketching stunts before he knew what a storyboard was. He had the idea to do all his favourite cartoon films into real live-action movies, years before the first animated Lion King was released. This was a fun thought for him, to see the Go-Bots, Voltron, Mask and even the Carebears come to life. In his head, he would imagine what that would look like. He would ponder on how he would make characters fight in far better ways than they did in 2D animation. Such were the thoughts of this little boy in the early '90s.

When he grew a bit older, he became fascinated with cars as most poor boys are prone to. Unlike the rest of them, however, he did not cut out pictures of cars from magazines, he instead designed and drew the body and features of his dream car. A ten-wheel SUV with two doors for the two front seats and two slide doors for the four inward facing seats. The lights on his truck were drawn as lines and not the traditional circles or discs. He even made alterations for his car design to show different models. It was impressive.

When he was thirteen, he was introduced to hip hop by a friend who had lent him a radio cassette of Puff Daddy's 1997 'No way out' album. Music opened up his world and he quickly began to write his own songs. I must point out that he was actually unreasonably good at writing songs.

He soon realised that he could dismantle the beats and melodies he heard and rearrange them to create something familiar yet so unique. Before long, he

found out that writing songs alone could not contain the breadth of his musical abilities. He began to create original artists in his head, working out how they would sound like and what kind of music they would do.

A single song could inspire him to write dozens of songs. He would get carried away and write whole albums for non-existent artists. To give you an example, he created a 'flow' or a way of rapping to the uninitiated, for an artist that would sing and rap interchangeably, decades before Drake came onto the scene. He wrote over forty-nine songs for this artist before he got bored and moved on to other artists.

He enjoyed tracking the annual local and international top 100 charts shows on radio. He would use the music from the charts shows to inspire new songs for him, creating innumerable new make-belief artists in the process. In the 2000s the top 100 charts began having American doppelgangers for some of his creations. Naturally, his artists were better than the ones that came to market.

To test his talent, he would acquire pirated albums of new artists he had never heard before. After listening to their music, he could tell which of them would become hits and which would not. He could even specify which songs would make it to the top of the charts with an accuracy that bordered on satanism.

He even began burning CDs to give his friends who would marvel at how he always seemed to know all the best songs months before they made it to the airwaves. This was a hobby for him of course, he never made money from it.

With his love of music and television, he got hooked on music videos. He was fascinated by the fashion of the musicians. Immediately, he began to draw sketches for his own clothing line. This could have also been motivated by a burning desire to make clothes that fit him in a way his mishap of a clothing collection never did.

He did not like to place logos on the clothes he drew so he instead began to sketch clothes with odd seams and dimensions. His clothes were so different from all the clothes you or I have ever seen. He thought to make clothes that visually stand out without the aid of visible labels.

He found a way to realign joints and stitches that would have baffled anyone who saw them at that time. Indeed, even you would have been perplexed if he ever let you see the secret sketches he drew in his room.

He contemplated trying out different fabrics that were not traditionally meant for clothes. He would ponder on how to include electricity into his clothes so that they could glow. He even thought of how to make clothes that would not need any washing and clothes that could change colour on command

or from temperature variations. He jotted notes of his many ideas for fashion next to his sketches.

His taste in film and music continued to grow. He enjoyed all types of music, mostly because he realised that he could bend any genre into his favourite version of pop music. I assume that you have realised that he had no real active social or love life at this point?

As a teenager, he enjoyed action blockbusters and comedies. This returned him to his love of developing elaborate action sequences, plots and storylines.

When the Matrix came out, his imagination had ecstatic seizures and went into hyperdrive. Finally! finally, someone had come close to some of the ideas he jotted down years ago! He started writing plots to films with new vigour. He continued to draw out action sequences and he increased the amount of details and notations on the margins of his concept papers.

He wrote a plot for a wholly underwater movie where fish-like people would fight in gravity-defying martial arts moves. He wrote another for motorbikes that could transform into metallic armour for the riders allowing them to do superhuman feats. He wrote plots too numerous to mention. He thought of so many film ideas that in the end, he resorted to only write single lines on paper while he memorised the rest in his head.

He tried his hand at comedies, but he soon abandoned that idea. It's not that he couldn't do it, quite the opposite. He was so funny that he frequently caught himself giggling at jokes as he wrote them down. No, his reason for stopping came from his realisation that instead of doing comedies which he found tiresome to write jokes for, he could do funny adverts to sell products. He did pencil multiple ideas for several adult animation series after watching only one episode of South Park though.

Around the time CDs went mainstream he saw the opportunity for using them as an alternative to broadcast television. He developed and scripted a comical larger than life personality who went around harassing people. He then devised to write 15-second skits which centred on individual products.

He had an uncanny ability of mapping out brand promotions and coming up with ways to attract the attention of audiences. Of course, this was never tested but I can promise you that it would have worked better than the best marketing strategies of today.

One of his ideas was to film the skits and burn them to a video disc that he would give out for free at supermarkets. He would charge the manufactures of the products he featured in his skits for the production of the disc in exchange for the number of the people who would watch them. He was convinced that if people enjoyed the skits, they would remember the brands associated with the

jokes. I need to remind you that at this time, he was in high school and did not know about marketing principles.

When cell phones arrived and long before they were commonplace, he automatically realised that each person would own one someday and that they would use them to watch television and listen to the radio. He began to think about what that would mean for social relationships.

In time, he would draft a concept for each person to map out their entire social circle and to link it to other people's circles around the world. He imagined that this large connection would have the names of all the people who signed up and the names of those yet to join the inter-connected circles. The result being that the name of every person on the planet would be listed in these circles.

He thought up ways to do business that did not seem plausible at the time. He came up with countless ways to develop products and services that could have improved your life and mine ahead of the current technological developments.

He wrote down only a fraction of all the ideas and thoughts he had while he lived. The rest he forgot or thought that they were not good enough to keep in his head.

With only a spark, his mind would spin into new unimagined pathways. It was a miracle that he did not go mad from the constant concussion of new ideas. I could go on for days about his unexecuted plans, but this is not that kind of story. This is a sad story and he is dead.

The world he left untouched

Disney finally had the great idea to remake comics and cartoon films into real-life movies which is how we got the Transformers and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. He would have enjoyed that. In some of his papers, there was an idea to do a full-length live-action drama with real wild animals fighting over a mythical jungle kingdom. He would have smiled to watch Netflix's Mowgli or the live-action remake of the Lion King movie. This was closer to what he had seen in his mind though he had envisaged much more fantastic fights than what was done by the producers of these movies.

Before he died, he had picked up a technology magazine from the bins near where he lived, and he had looked in amused satisfaction at the concept art for driverless cars. The models he drew up more than a decade ago as a teenager were still much better than the ones in the magazine. As he saw what gadgets and features they intended to include in the future cars, his mind instantly saw ideas that would take us another two decades to realise.

Had he pursued his idea of car lights, he would have been one of the first people in the world to realise that LED lights would revolutionise car design

and technology. He had thought of lights that brightened or dimmed using a sliding system as opposed to standard dial settings. Lights that could follow the steering wheel motion and focus light where it was most needed by the driver.

But he never owned a car so he had thrown the magazine back into the bin and walked on home.

Had he lived long enough, he would have witnessed artificial minds do what his own mind had done to musical melodies a thousand times over. He would have seen computers reassemble melodies from classical piano pieces and create brand new compositions that are indistinguishable from the originals.

Further into that future, he would have seen computers do the same thing to actual songs. He would have seen computers pick out the best elements of modern music and recraft whole new songs. He would have seen a future where people would select samples of their favourite songs and artists and watch computers create real-life CGI musicians for them, singing personalised original music. Much like he did in his head when he wrote whole albums for non-existent artists that he himself had created.

The same computing power and intelligence would go on to be used in film and gaming. People would be able to create their own interactive movies with CGI actors or build personalised video games in minutes at home. These are

some of the musings he had had, long before he had ever laid eyes on a computer for himself.

The clothes he sketched years ago would have looked much better than the smart clothes that companies like Under Armer are currently producing. His ideas were far ahead of the modern-day technology of 3D printing and nano-fabrics and his clothes would have changed our view of apparels forever. There is every possibility that his clothing designs would have been the Apple equivalent of the fashion industry.

It is unfortunate that no one ever came near to his vision of possible action sequences in the movies. We will never see action scenes so unbelievable that they will create a cult following of their own. Only he enjoyed that pleasure. Warner Bother's 2018 Aquaman movie was hailed a cinematic marvel, if only they had seen his imagined version of an underwater movie. The makers of the DC movie would have killed themselves.

His numerous ideas of marketing products on social media platforms by having YouTube channels, Podcasts and Facebook pages would have been the first if he had had the opportunities most of us have in our lives. He would have built personalities to sale brands much like the influencer business long before the advertising industry had turned to product placement and personalised selling.

His platform for mapping every individual on earth using social circles would have become the fastest growing African social media start-up. He would have competed with Tencent and would have eventually sold off the company for billions of Yuan Renminbis.

Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO Now and Hulu proved him right, personalised viewing choices of people that would be the future of entertainment. He, of course, had a lot of thoughts on how to reach people in the inevitable eventuality of the disruption in the broadcasting industry, but he never wrote them down.

I could go on forever on the promise, potential and possibilities he held for the world in many fields including engineering, business development and marketing but that would take a couple of lifetimes. He was one of the brightest sparks this continent has seen yet and yet no one even knew he existed until now.

At his passing, we should have all mourned and offered each other the condolences of 'to your troubles' for our collective loss. In our lifetime, we will not see his like. We will see many that have one or two of his unique talents but never one with all of them bottled in the same unassuming container.

I will say only a few more things about him. I will say that on the outside, he lived and died a life as mundane as the rest of us. I will say that he was born

poor and he died the same. I will also say that I do not pity him, I envied him. I envied him for the wonders that he saw in his mind that we will never enjoy.

His story was only one story. Imagine the hundreds or better yet, the thousands of similar stories out there. We have passed the half-line mark of global internet connectivity. In the next 10 years, everyone alive will be online.

Think of the multitude of undiscovered savants, geniuses and proteges scattered across the continent. Most of them have had zero exposure to the areas of their particular brilliance. Think of what such minds will contribute to mankind when they encounter the world in its entirety for the first time.

Imagine what a musical talent that has never had formal training in music will do when they come into contact with music making software. They will do things we have been conditioned to not do. They will break all the rules and they will create something absolutely brand new.

Prepare to be wowed.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This was my attempt at tackling the story of the inherent disadvantages of poverty and how they rob humanity of talent and potential. I believe that not all talent will be realized and that most talent will remain hidden. I believe that most talented people, by being poor, will never be able to rise above their circumstances.*

I did not want to provide a solution, instead I sought to paint a picture of 'what if?' I imagined it would take three separate parts to achieve this.

This is what I wanted for this story.

For the first section, I wanted to set the scene. I wanted to first make the reader imagine this unnamed person and wonder why they should mourn for him. The only way I could do this was through a eulogy. I would begin with the death of this person and call it a huge loss for humanity. This part was simple.

For the second section, I wanted to then present the life this person lived in a way that made sense. I wanted to show the seemingly great thoughts this person had but never acted on. The problem here was to create believable ideas and stories that did not look as if I cheated from knowing the future.

Here I ran into my first real challenge. How to write original ideas that are believable and to portray these thoughts as the work of a genius mind. I frequently had to hold myself back from wanting to explain each thought in order to convince the reader of its exceptionality. The jury is out on how I succeeded there.

For the final part I wanted to do two main things. One, to show that the thoughts of the deceased could have changed the world and two, that they were too numerous to recount. This too was tricky, and I ended up resorting to glossing over many aspects of this man's life.

By way of apology, I meant to create a sensation of overwhelming talent that no one could fully contemplate nor an author articulate. Here's hoping that this worked.

BIO: *J (J-piryodhi) is a Zimbabwean writer and an avid South African hermit. She works off an old Dell Inspiron and hands over flash drives with her work for editing and publishing. She is currently off the grid working on three manuscripts and a host of short stories no one has asked for. If you follow her on Twitter handle @piriyodhi she will probably follow you back the next time she is near civilization*