

SEBASTIEN IRAKUNDA – BOOK ILLUSTRATOR

The Rwandan Children’s Book Initiative (RCBI) works with local Rwandese publishers and illustrators to increase their capacity to produce attractive, age-appropriate reading material in Kinyarwanda, and catalyse an increased culture of reading in Rwanda. Part of the project involves Save the Children training publishers, writers and illustrators, and supporting them to develop new, quality titles for selling in the open market, whilst guaranteeing the purchase of a selected number. Sebastien tells us how training with Save the Children as part of RCBI enabled him to expand his traditional and digital techniques to produce his illustrations.

Sebastien (pictured right) is a young artist who was selected by Save the Children to participate in training and contribute artwork to children’s books and posters as part of the Rwanda Children’s Book Initiative (RCBI). Sebastien tells us his story:



“My name is Sebastien Iradukunda, I am eighteen years old. I am currently studying computer science and illustration at the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST).

I started drawing at an early age when I was in kindergarten. In kindergarten they taught us how to draw and I very quickly took to this art, which I found suited me well. So I continued drawing through the years up until now.

I’ve worked on my own to diversify my techniques, and [through RCBI] I’ve also received training in different techniques such as collage, oil painting and watercolours.

Most of my inspiration comes from the comic books that I read. I’m a big fan of comic books. I also take a lot of inspiration from online courses that I find on the internet.

When I learned that Save the Children was offering training for artists who were interested in making children’s books and other materials for children, I decided to apply because people told me I had the potential to be a children’s illustrator. So I signed up for the training and I met a lot of other artists, trainers, and Save the Children staff.

Before my training with Save the Children, I mostly used pencils and ink for drawing. But through the training I learned many other techniques such as collage – a technique that consists of drawing a pattern or a texture on paper, then cutting that out into shapes and gluing it down - in this way creating a motif of scenes or objects. I also discovered other techniques like watercolours – which is very colourful and also used in primary schools. The training helped me advance my skills in these techniques. I also learned how to do oil painting, and was given the supplies to do this.

The project I’m [currently] working on for Save the Children is a short book sixteen pages long for children about animals. I chose to make a book about animals because it was the subject that I like the most and this was my first project with Save the Children.”

“For this project I used a mixture of techniques that I learned through my training with Save the Children, like collage. Collage is a very good technique to use for children’s books because it is very simple. When a child sees a picture made through collage, they know right away what they are looking at. It’s important that the images in children’s books be simple so that they can easily understand the message. So when it came time to make a book, I decided that I would use collage because it is easy to do and very effective for telling stories. I also learned in my training with Save the Children that collage is a technique that’s very appropriate when teaching children language and reading. So they encouraged us this way, which was very good.”



Sebastian demonstrating decoupage and collage techniques

“As an illustrator, I am someone with a certain vision, who wants to help make change. In Rwanda, we are used to reading children’s books that come from other countries. These books tell stories that come from other regions and other countries other than Rwanda. I feel that if you are a child in Rwanda reading one of these books and you come across a name that you don’t recognize, or a story that you don’t understand, it’s not very good for learning. But if a child is reading a book that was made by a Rwandan and tells a story that is familiar to them – the child is encouraged to read. A child takes a lot of pleasure in reading something that comes from Rwanda, and me as an artist, I take a lot of pleasure in creating in response to these stories. I think that the books that come from other countries don’t inspire children as much. So I think things are changing quite a bit.”

“The advantage of making children’s books in Rwanda, is that if I am making a book about farm animals for example – I don’t have to look very far to know which local animals to include. Then when a Rwandan child reads this book, they will see the animals I’ve drawn and say, “Hey, I know these animals! I know this cow!” I wouldn’t draw a cow that is like the ones they are used to seeing in books from other countries. I would draw a cow that is like the ones they see in this country. It’s the same with the other animals. They will recognize things in these books because they are used to seeing them in real life, and they’ll think, “Hey, this is cool!””



Sebastien employs a mixture of traditional and digital techniques in his artwork

“I think that when children learn to read well it helps them a lot. For example, in the neighbourhood where I live, there are a lot of children who don’t have access to books. They spend their time playing in the streets without much to do. But then you find there are other children with access to books who are well-educated and know lots of things that other children don’t know and who are very positive. I think the kids who don’t have access to books and education are destined for a life without many options, and it’s easy for them to fall into criminality and drugs, those types of things. But children who have access to books and who learn to read have a much better chance. Reading leads to their intellectual development and helps them in school. Being able to read helps children live in rhythm with the development of their world, and it gives them the chance to contribute to the future of their country.”

Translated from French by Colin Crowley