

# Edinburgh International Book Festival 2018 – Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

It is very easy in life to be dismissive of those who don't speak your language, but it would be very hard to dismiss Kenyan, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. He is a storyteller who envelopes you in his stories, which is exactly what he did with great charm in Charlotte Square Gardens. He is frequently believed to be a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Reduced to a one word answer for the final question (when time was up), he was asked about keeping going and what makes him do that. His answer? "Fight!"

It has been a life of having to stand up for his beliefs and fighting his own corner. Now he believes that 'multilingualism is the oxygen of culture'.



Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Distinguished Professor of English and comparative literature at UC Irvine, Ngugi, whose name is pronounced "Googy" and means "work," is a prolific writer of novels, plays, essays and children's literature. Many of these have skewered the harsh sociopolitical conditions of post-Colonial Kenya, where he was born, imprisoned by the government and forced into exile. His recent works have been among his most highly acclaimed and include what some consider his finest novel, "Murogi wa Kagogo" ("Wizard of the Crow"), a sweeping 2006 satire about globalization that he wrote in his native Gikuyu language. In his 2009 book "Something Torn & New: An African Renaissance," Ngugi argues that a resurgence of African languages is necessary to the restoration of African wholeness. "I use the novel form to explore issues of wealth, power and values in society and how their production and organization in society impinge on the quality of a people's spiritual life," he has said.

He has written in *Kikuyu, (or Gikuyu)* his native African language, and the session was chaired by Professor Thomas Molony, Director of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Edinburgh. But one of the interesting declarations Ngũgĩ offered was that many of those learning about or researching Africa have not read, or perhaps more importantly written, an academic paper in an African language.

Ngũgĩ's article in the most recent issue of *Gutter* magazine has been translated by Edinburgh Makar, Christine de Luca into Shetlandic, and Nick Barley said to the audience that he wants this piece translated into more languages than any other. Quite a challenge.

Ngũgĩ's life is an important story, both in and out of his native land. He is back at the Book Festival after 12 years, and given that Festival Director Nick Barley introduced him (and shared with us just how excited he was about this session) this was something special.

The author was imprisoned for a time simply as a result of his writing, making him the perfect guest in this year when the theme of the festival is Freedom. All of the authors in Charlotte Square Gardens are asked to consider freedom, democracy and capitalism and the question marks hanging over all of them.

This year 52 authors have been asked to write essays on the subject of freedom and the result, the Freedom Papers examine many aspects of modern life with poetry, fiction and illustrations. The publication of the Freedom Papers as a supplement to Gutter Magazine offers much to think about.

Ngũgĩ explained that colonisation added to the superiority of the English language, but that while there is a hierarchy of languages which we are used to thinking about, we must fight against that elevation of some over others.

He admitted that English is the language of power, but pointed out that each language has its own musicality and there is nothing wrong with any language.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival receives funding from Creative Scotland and The City of Edinburgh Council and this year welcomes over 900 participants from 55 different countries to its tented village in the heart of Edinburgh and runs from Saturday 11 to Monday 27 August 2018.

Entrance to the Gardens is FREE and the gardens, cafes, bookshops and all venues are fully accessible.

Full details of the programme can be found at [www.edbookfest.co.uk](http://www.edbookfest.co.uk). Tickets to all events go on sale at 8.30am on Tuesday 26 June 2018, online at [www.edbookfest.co.uk](http://www.edbookfest.co.uk), by phone on 0345 373 5888 or in person at The Hub, Castlehill.