

By ROUWEN LIN
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ONE day he's teaching English and history in a school in Britain, and then he's standing in a sweltering mud hut in Zambia, trying to communicate ideas and concepts in a land that's new and foreign.

Englishman Vincent Heselwood stayed on for three years in Zambia with partner Sasha Kasthuri-arachchi. He saw how people feasted on live termites, shared his seat on the bus with livestock, risked being eaten by a crocodile – suffice to say, by the time his stint in rural Zambia ended in 2013, he took back with him enough memories for a lifetime – and certainly enough to write a book.

Meanwhile In Zambia recounts some of the highlights of his time there. His astute observations of how things work – or don't – are conveyed through text and drawings. It is published by Akasa and is part of a wider campaign to raise funds for Cyclone Idai disaster relief, with 20% of sales going to this cause. Idai, which happened in March, was one of the worst tropical cyclones to affect Africa and the Southern Hemisphere.

Heselwood, 36, did all the illustrations in this graphic novel by

Adventure of a lifetime

Little did he imagine what was in store, when this Brit schoolteacher packed his bags and set off for Zambia.

hand and it isn't difficult to imagine this book attracting an audience with the stories of the odd circumstances that he often found himself in.

"What inspired me to write the book was the endless novelty of the place and its people. Many of the experiences we had while living there, that our friends and colleagues in Zambia

regarded as everyday and normal, struck us and people back home as funny, outrageous or unbelievable. "When I tell people

snake crawled into the window of the classroom, that I saw an exorcism at the side of the road, or that someone once stole one of our blackboards to use as a roof, they are shocked," he says at an interview held when he visited Malaysia recently.

As always, it is the people that make the place, and Heselwood, sharing that the aspects he enjoyed most about living and working there were the people, cannot speak more fondly of them.

"The first thing that strikes you about Zambia is the warmth of the people.

"I am not saying that everyone you meet there is a picture of smiling benevolence, because that is as much a stereotype as the idea that all Africans are needy. There are just as many grumpy people in Zambia as there are everywhere else, but the majority of people we worked with were intelligent, industrious people who were quick to smile and even quicker to laugh, often at your expense.

"In all my time there I don't think there was a single day that I didn't laugh till I cried," he relates.

Before he left for Zambia, Heselwood had many people telling

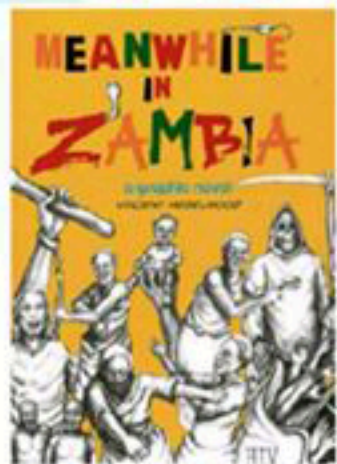
him what they thought he should expect. But their ideas were sketchy and in some cases, felt "like a cross between what they had seen on *Live Aid* or *The Lion King*".

In short, Zambia was one of those places that was big on connotations but short on details. Heselwood was very much in the dark about the country, having only been to the African continent once before for a short visit to Egypt.

"It wasn't the best experience because I was sick at the time, nothing will make you feel more nauseous than being sick in the desert and watching your own vomit evaporate. I felt it would be unfair to let that experience influence my ideas of what Zambia might be like," he says.

So how did he end up in Zambia? A telecommunications company ran a competition and the winner would be offered a chance to work for a charity of their choice. Kasthuriarachchi won, and Heselwood decided to go along with her. The charity they worked for was Britain-based PEPAIDS, which has a partner delivery organisation in Zambia named SAPEP.

"How did I end up in Zambia? I can't tell you how many times I



asked myself the same question, usually while sitting on a minibus made for 15 with another 40 people ... and their animals.

"I'll be honest and say that at the start of 2010, the year we first went out to Zambia, I had no plans to visit the country, let alone live and work there. I guess fate just thought I looked a bit too comfortable and decided to give me a kick up the rear," says Heselwood.

The original plan was for him to run a schools linking programme, which would connect schools in Zambia with schools in Britain that would fundraise for them. But it took all of one visit and one day to a community school for him to realise that this plan wasn't going to cut it.

"The school was made of clay brick and thatch, the teacher was a volunteer from the village who was trying to teach despite having no training, no resources and no support. You have to admire him and the community who had built the school themselves to give the kids an education, but it was fairly clear from the get-go that sending them more pencils wasn't going to cut it," he says.

Heselwood ended up writing a



"It doesn't matter where you are teaching, it is equally rewarding," says Heselwood. — VINCENT HESELWOOD

teacher training syllabus for volunteer teachers, had it approved by Zambia's Ministry of Education and then spent the rest of his time travelling between different villages and training the volunteers there to be teachers. The training covered seven schools and impacted over 1,000 kids. "This same school even outperformed the government school in the end of year exams," he shares.

Through this graphic novel, Heselwood hopes to give people an insight into daily life in the country.

"I have always loved to draw, so putting together a graphic novel and making people laugh with the stories and drawings is a real privilege for me. I never imagined when I was sketching in the bush that one day I would be turning those sketches into a graphic novel.

"I hope that it offers something that goes beyond the one dimensional stereotypes that sadly often dominate narratives about Zambia and Africa in general," he says.

After Zambia, Heselwood found his way to Malaysia and taught at an international school for four years, where he was head of English Language and Literature.

Today, he travels the world in search of his next adventure.

"If we can make it on the road,

and live quite frugally, not spend too much money and make some along the way, then we will keep it going for as long as we can," he says.

Perhaps there will be more stories to be told along the way but for now, *Meanwhile In Zambia* offers a glimpse into what can happen when you embrace the unknown with open arms.

Despite having some poignant and tragic moments in the book, Heselwood hopes that his graphic novel will bring readers much laughter.

"Overall it is a comedy, so a few smiles would be the main aim. Beyond that, I hope they are encouraged to visit these places for themselves and see that there is often much more to a country and a culture than the stereotypes we are fed.

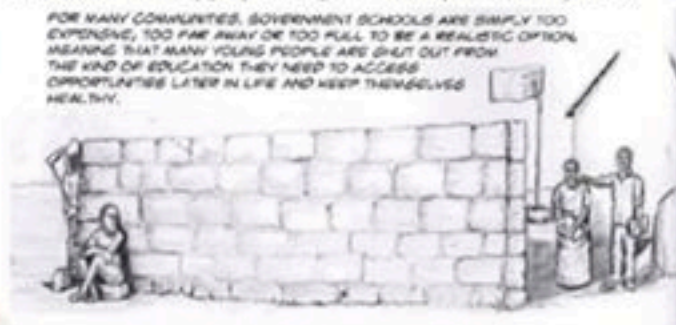
"Zambia is one of those countries that will surprise you whatever your expectations. It is just the sort of place where you will see something new or unusual every day, all you can really do is go with the flow.

"Sometimes, looking before you leap spoils the surprise," he concludes.

It is the best way to enjoy *Meanwhile In Zambia* too. Just dive in, you are in for a treat.



Heselwood hopes that his graphic novel will bring readers much laughter. — ONG SOON HIN/The Star



Part of a page from *Meanwhile in Zambia*. Heselwood illustrates his graphic novel with images of everyday life in Zambia.