

## College of Arts and Law

### UG and PGT Essay Competition

**Imagine you are in charge of choosing next year's book: what would it be and why?**

Imagine a book that depicts events of such epic, unbelievable proportions that it is easy to mistake for fiction. Reading it is like reading a favourite novel: a case of devouring the words and turning pages as if in a race to finish. From the first page an exciting scene is set and soon the main characters in the 'story' can be identified, the ones you know will influence the turn of events. One character in particular is rich, powerful, frightening and fascinating. He is a medley of juxtaposed personalities, like other famous book characters: Rochester in *Jane Eyre*; Professor Snape in *Harry Potter*; and more obviously, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. But this character isn't fictional and the book doesn't end with a positive resolution, like *Jane Eyre* or the *Harry Potter* series. The consequences of the events depicted in this particular book have resulted in substantial economic, social and political failures in a country 4000 miles from this University that should be rich due to its immense natural resources. The book is Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*, and the country is the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

I must acknowledge that this book that I am so passionate about is one that I would not have glanced at if I hadn't chosen African Studies as part of my degree. My class was only required to read a small section to improve our basic background knowledge of the DRC, but I was instantly compelled to read the whole book. And so I read.

It is difficult to explain the magnitude of the story's impact on someone who, until that point, had not fully acknowledged or addressed the effects and aftermath of colonialism in Africa. *King Leopold's Ghost* demands and holds your complete attention from start to finish, with a story so engaging, horrific and brutal that you feel the need to question it. The events depicted are almost unbelievable. Hochschild doesn't need to use any artistic licence in his writing to encourage you to read on; the unfolding truth and facts about the situation do that for him.

*King Leopold's Ghost* made me question what we are taught in history during our school years. I have not come across anyone who knew anything of this, one of the most horrific genocides of the last two centuries. It seems as though this story and the unforgiveable crimes committed by the Belgian King Leopold II have been swept under the carpet, untouched in our education system because of the horrors they depict. Reading also made me question why some equally disturbing historic events seem to be of greater importance than others. Why is it that, while growing up, we are all so well informed of the Holocaust, yet unfamiliar with the genocide of close to 10 million Congolese, occurring forty years beforehand? Hochschild writes of how nine out of ten U.S publishing houses turned down his outline, making me wonder why a minority of qualified educationalists, publishers and politicians have such power over what we, as young people, learn about?

In addition to increasing our knowledge of historical events and encouraging us to question aspects of our society today, *King Leopold's Ghost* explores why countries like the DRC are still experiencing political, social and economic difficulties. We must, therefore, acknowledge that the ghost of King Leopold II continues to haunt this country. Hochschild clarifies why it is that some colonially dominated countries have remained in turmoil since they became independent, despite their immense natural resources. This is particularly important in explaining situations that we repeatedly hear about in the news, like the never-ending conflicts in the DRC.

For these reasons, I feel deeply that *King Leopold's Ghost* should be required reading, available for everyone. As students, we should be presented with books that make us question what we read into different situations. Hochschild's writing has simultaneously acknowledged an important part of Africa's colonial history whilst seeking to clarify why certain parts of the continent are still classed as 'unstable' and he manages to do so in a concise and stimulating manner. Never before has a book encouraged me to engage so fully in something about which I had previously been totally ignorant.

I therefore feel it is my duty to recommend this book so that others might become more aware and cognisant of the gruesome history of this one country after the arrival of the colonialists.