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An African Safari Through Children's Books: Part II

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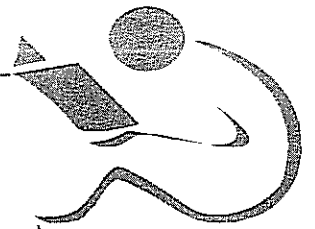
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BOOK REVIEWS

AN AFRICAN SAFARI THROUGH CHILDREN'S BOOKS: PART II

Dorothy Bowen
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What is it like for an American family to raise their children in an African country? What is it like for the children who are sometimes known as "third culture kids" because they are neither totally a part of their parents' culture nor totally a part of the adopted African culture, but rather are a combination of both? Karen Lynn Williams' picture book *When Africa was Home* (1991) illustrated by Floyd Cooper tells it well. This is the story of Peter, an American boy whose parents' job took the family to Africa. Peter is totally at home riding on the back of his African nanny, shimmying up paw-paw (papaya) trees, and using the Chichewa language until he hears the unwelcome news that they are going "home." Peter's response is, "I don't want to go to America." When I lived in Africa with my family, how well I remember my own children correcting me when I talked of "home," meaning the United States. They were very quick to tell me that they were home in Africa. Cooper's illustrations and the text of William's beautiful picture book depict an African culture where the greeting each morning is, "How have you slept?" implying that the one being greeted must have slept well in order for the greeter to have slept well. Cooper's illustrations clearly show the sadness on the faces of Peter and his friends when they part, as well as the joy when Peter's father's job brings them back to Africa again. "Kwatu", Peter says, "Home." And Peter in his bare feet and Yekha in her red ski cap (the souvenir Peter brought her from America) raced to the top of an anthill."

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The purpose of this review is to let us examine this and some other children's books which will help our students understand and appreciate the mosaic of African cultures and what it is that might cause an American child to dream of returning to that great continent. I have grouped these books under the following headings:

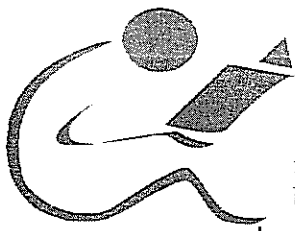
- African Folktales
- Picture Story Books
- Information Books

African Folktales

Verna Aardema was a master at retelling African folktales in a way that demonstrated the fine art of storytelling while at the same time preserving the spirit of the culture from which the story came. Among the last tales that she published before her death in 2000 are folktales representing five cultures spreading from Kenya in East Africa to Nigeria in West Africa. The two Kenya cultures represented are the Masai in *The Lonely Lioness* (Aardema, 1996) and the Akamba in the pourquoi tale *How the Ostrich Got its Long Neck* (Aardema, 1995). The traditional Masai tale tells how the lioness tries to steal the ostrich's chicks and a mongoose helps her get them back, while the Akamba tells that Ostrich started out with a short neck. When Crocodile asks her to help with his toothache, she is warned but tries to help him anyhow. In the process, Crocodile clamps his jaws down on her neck, and it takes much pulling for Ostrich to pull her head out of his mouth. The result is that her neck becomes very very long. She learns not to trust a hungry crocodile, but finds it much easier to reach the berries on the high bushes.

In another Masai tale by Michael Rosen, Giraffe has a similar experience (*How Giraffe Got Such a Long Neck*, 1993) during a draught. The grass disappears and she seeks a way to find food. There are leaves on the trees, but they are too high to reach, so Giraffe and Rhino seek the help of Man. Man tells them to return the next day, and he prepares magic herbs for them. "But Rhino had forgotten all about Giraffe and Man and the magic herb," and by the time he arrives, Giraffe has eaten his share as well. Giraffe not only feels her neck growing longer, but also her legs, and now she can eat from the treetops.

Traveling to Tondo (Aardema, 1991) is a tale from the Nkundo culture of Zaire, and *Sebgugugu the Glutton* (Aardema, 1993) belongs to the traditions of the Bantu culture of Rwanda, also in central Africa. While in the cumulative tale from Zaire, Bowane, the civet cat gets into trouble for paying too much attention to the advice of his friend, Sebgugugu allows his greed to keep him from



following wise advice, and he and his family become destitute. Nancy L. Clouse illustrated this Rwandan moral tale with cut-paper collage.

Anansi does the Impossible! (Aardema, 1997) comes from the West African Ashanti people of Nigeria. Lisa Desimini has illustrated the story with cut paper collage and has appropriately dressed Anansi and his wife in Kente cloth. Clever Anansi, with the help of his wife, manages to buy Sky God's stories by rounding up a live python, a real fairy, and forty-seven stinging hornets. Eric Kimmel also tells stories of the clever but sometimes lazy Anansi. In *Anansi Goes Fishing* (Kimmel, 1992), Turtle manages to outsmart Anansi into catching and cooking a fish for him. However, some good does come out of the experience for Anansi when he learns how to weave nets and how to use them to catch food.

In Kimmel's retelling of *Anansi and the Talking Melon* (Kimmel, 1994) lazy Anansi tries to find a way to get one of Elephant's melons without working for it. He outsmarts Elephant by hiding and talking to him from inside one of his melons.

A wise spider is a key character in Léonard's West African *Tibili* (Léonard, 2002), and although this spider's name is Crope, he reminds us of Anansi. *Tibili* does not want to go to school, and Crope has a wise idea to help him see the value of learning to read.

Isaac Olaleye also tells a tale in which children and animals interact. Although in his *Lake of the Big Snake* (Olaleye, 1998), Snake does not actually talk to the disobedient boys, Ade and Tayo, we are told he feels and knows and he manages to see that they are found out in their disobedience. Snake does this by eating Tayo's shirt, thus ensuring that his mother will know he has disobeyed her.

Aaron Shepard's *Master Man* (Shepard, 2001) is a tale from the Hausa culture of Nigeria. This is the story of an African superhero who teaches a lesson to a boastful man. It is illustrated by the master of the art of cut paper illustrations, David Wisniewski.

Picture Story Books

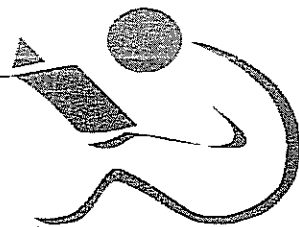
Children can learn about the momentous day when black South Africans got the vote through Sisulu's *The Day Gogo went to Vote* (Sisulu, 1996). Who can forget the television coverage of those history-making days when we were shown long lines of people of all races waiting to vote for the president of the New South Africa? The story is told from Thembi's point of view as she accompanies her great-grandmother, Gogo, who "never goes out of the yard" when she goes to the polling booth. The story ends with the words, "The whole township celebrated after the elections. When Mr. Nelson Mandela became president of the country, people danced and sang in the streets all day and all night. There were many parties and we all enjoyed ourselves, but for me the best day was when Gogo went to vote."

Boundless Grace by Mary Hoffman (Hoffman, 1995) is a sequel to her *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1995) and tells the story of Grace's visit to her father, who has returned to his native Gambia. Caroline Binch's illustrations authentically depict the countryside where Papa lives. We see mango trees, the open market, and beautiful African cloth. Grace becomes acquainted with her father's new wife and children and learns that not all step-mothers are like those in *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Hansel and Gretel*, which was her great fear.

Mama Elizabeti (Stuve-Bodeen, 2000) is a sequel to Stuve-Bodeen's *Elizabeti's Doll* (Stuve-Bodeen, 1998). Elizabeth now has a new baby sister, so instead of taking care of her rock doll, she helps her mother care for her brother Obedi. Obedi is a bit more trouble than her rock doll Eva, but in spite of her annoyance with him she realizes how very much she loves him.

Information Books

Every library media center should also include quality informational books which will help children understand that *Africa is not a country* but is a continent comprised of more than 50 countries, each with its own unique cultures. Margy Burns Knight's *Africa is not a Country* (2000) gives us a brief view of each of the Continent's 53 countries. Margaret Courtney-Clarke's photographs, which illustrate Maya Angelou's *Kofi and His Magic* (Angelou, 1996), give us a beautiful view of Kofi's home and the Ashanti culture in the town of Bonwire, Ghana. The end papers and many of the photographs include Kente cloth which is woven in this part of Ghana. We see Kofi's school, West African food, and a Ghanaian festival. It is all magic as Kofi thinks in his Ashanti language, and we "hear" him in English!



As we have looked at folktales and picture storybooks from cultures in the south, east and west of Africa, we begin to understand why Peter wanted to go "home." There is a saying, "Once you have drunk the waters of Africa, you will always want to return for more." Perhaps this "sip" of the waters of Africa will give our children the desire for that drink.

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