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Using Picture Books to Promote Understanding of the Continent of Africa in the Elementary Classroom

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USING PICTURE BOOKS TO PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONTINENT OF AFRICA IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

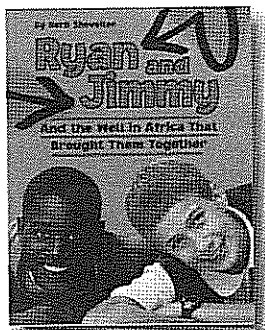
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The continent of Africa covers six per cent of the earth's surface and over 20 per cent of its total land area. Its population is second only to the continent of Asia. The continent is made up of 53 distinct countries, counting the island of Madagascar and other islands associated with the continent such as the Seychelles. More than 1000 indigenous African languages are spoken on this vast continent and over 300 of these languages are spoken in the country of Nigeria alone. How may the elementary classroom teacher convey something of Africa's beauty, and make at least some part of the continent come alive for students?

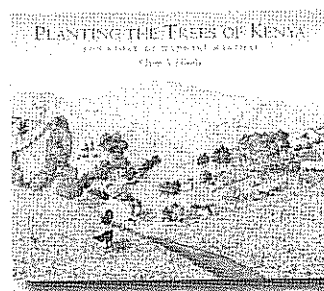
Using trade books with our elementary students is an effective way of bringing a topic to life for them. The textbook normally presents the topic from the historian's or geographer's point of view and may treat it with limited depth, but the trade book may examine it from a child's point of view. Children will be much more engaged when they see the issue being presented through the eyes of another child. During the past decade many beautiful picture books have been published which provide a few windows of understanding into some of Africa's rich cultures and resourceful peoples. Let us look at a sample of these picture books and consider some possible ways they might be used in the classroom.



An example is *Ryan and Jimmy: And the Well in Africa that Brought Them Together*, a story told by Herb Shoveller. When Ryan Hreljic was a six-year-old first grader he learned that in some

parts of the world there is no safe drinking water and as a result thousands and thousands of people, including children, become sick and even die. "That's crazy," Ryan thought. His teacher went on to tell how far some had to walk every day in search of water, which often when found, was not fit to drink. Ryan decided that he would raise the money to build a well in Africa. Many caught the vision as Ryan carried on his campaign. Ryan became pen pals with Jimmy, a Ugandan. When the well was built in Jimmy's village, Ryan was able to go to Uganda and meet him face-to-face.

Ryan and Jimmy may inspire children in the classroom to learn about places like Jimmy's village and to seek ways they can be involved and make a difference. The web site for Ryan's Well Foundation (<http://www.ryanswell.ca/>) gives information on similar projects, shows maps locating these projects, and provides details about how one can be involved. A web site at <http://www.Timeforkids.com/TFK> gives a virtual voyage to the Country of Uganda.

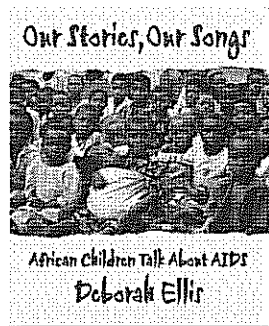


The power of one person to bring change is also told in two books about Wangari Maathai, who grew up in the high-

lands of Kenya when there were many trees and fish-filled streams. Her story is told by Claire Nivola in *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* and also by Jeannette Winter in *Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa*. The authors tell of how Maathai came to the U.S. to attend col-



lege, where she studied science. When she returned to Kenya just five years later, she saw a great change in the landscape of her country. Trees had been cut down and people no longer grew their own food, but instead purchased much of it in stores. One result of the removal of many trees was the lack of clean drinking water that Ryan learned about. Wangari set out to change the situation by convincing people all over Kenya to plant trees. The job has not been an easy one, but in spite of protests and even personal danger, she persevered. In 2004 Wangari Maathai became the first woman from Africa to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. It was awarded to her for the connection she made between the health of her country's natural environment and the well-being of her country's people (Nivola). Reading about this brave woman in Kenya can be used to spark a discussion of how children can take care of the environment where they live.



Another topic that brings understanding of what life is like for some children in Africa is the AIDS pandemic. How can a child in an American classroom relate to the fact that AIDS has orphaned over 11 million children in Sub-Saharan Africa, a number that is expected to rise to 20 million by the year 2020? In her book, *Our Stories, Our Songs: African Children Talk about AIDS*, Canadian author Deborah Ellis tries to show what it really means to be a child living in the midst of this terrible pandemic. Ellis traveled to Malawi and Zambia where she actually met some of these children. Some are in their teens, but some are very young. In her book Ellis tells many of their stories and the stories tell what life is like because of this devastating disease. The author explains in easy-to-understand language what AIDS is, what it does, and how it is and is not passed on. She also defines terms associated with the disease. Ellis writes, "This is what it is to be human: it's about knowing that other humans are just as we are. It's about shouting our stories, singing our songs, and letting them float out into the

universe. It's about celebrating all our stories, all our songs, and all our histories." This title could be used as a resource in a study of many sub-Saharan African countries.

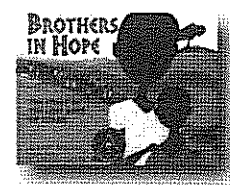


Two picture books tell the stories of international projects that have enabled African children to earn money in order to go to school. Page McBrier's *Beatrice's Goat* relates the story of a young Ugandan girl who longs to attend school but does not have the money for uniforms and books. She comes from a family of six children, and the prospect looks impossible. When the family receives a gift of a goat through the Heifer Project, the goat provides milk for the family and the sale of extra milk eventually allows Beatrice to attend school. The day Beatrice's mother tells her that she has saved enough to pay for school is the day her dream comes true.



A similar story comes from Ghana in West Africa. The young boy Kojo is given a loan which he uses to buy a hen. The hen lays eggs, which Kojo is able to sell to buy more hens, enabling him to complete school and college. This eventually changed his community by enabling others to succeed. Katie Smith Milway tells his story in *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference*.

These books help children to understand that schooling is not always a given for children in some parts of the world. The books not only inform children of how blessed they are to have an education provided for them, but also suggest that they can be involved in organizations that provide heifers, goats or small loans to people all over the world. The teacher can go to YouTube.com and search "aid projects in Africa" and find video clips that demonstrate what can be accomplished through such projects.

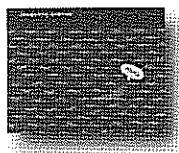


The Coretta Scott King Award winning book, *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan*, enables children of elementary age to understand in part

what effect war has had on the children of Sudan. It tells in picture book format the story of eight-year-old Garang who is tending cattle in Southern Sudan when war breaks out in his village. He returns home and finds everything has been destroyed. He joins a band of other boys who walk hundreds of miles through Ethiopia and Kenya, and finally finds a new home in the United States.

One of the criteria for using books that deal with such devastating issues as AIDS, poverty and war is that they should always give hope to the reader. Williams' book meets that criterion in spite of the hardship portrayed.

On December 26, 2004 a tsunami struck in the Indian Ocean near Indonesia. *National Geographic News* reported that it is estimated to have released the energy of 23,000 Hiroshima-type atomic bombs. By the end of the day more than 150,000 people were dead or missing and millions more were homeless in 11 countries, making it perhaps the most destructive tsunami in history. In spite of the deadly destruction on that day, a beautiful story of hope and friendship has come out of that event. The true story of a baby hippo who loses his mother during the tsunami has inspired at least five picture books for children.



Isabella and Craig Hatkoff and Paula Kahumbu and have written three books about the hippo. All three are illustrated by photographs by Peter Greste. Jeanette Winter has published a wordless picture book telling the story as well. Her book has the title *Mama: A True Story in which a Baby Hippo Loses His Mama during a Tsunami, but Finds a New Home, and a New Mama*. Marion Dane Bauer wrote the story in fiction form, but her book, *A Mama for Owen*, is also based on the actual event.

Winter's book is a charming story of the hippo Owen, showing him when he was at home with his mother and the rest of the herd;

when the tsunami struck his life changed forever. He is washed up on shore, captured in a net and taken to a game preserve where he meets Mzee, a 130-year-old male giant tortoise. Mzee means "old man" in Swahili. The two became inseparable. The Hatkoffs and Kahumbu tell the story in much greater detail, including many actual photographs of the event that brought Owen and Mzee together and the ongoing friendship that developed. Bauer embroiders the story a bit, but basically tells the same story told by the other picture books.

The Owen and Mzee web site (<http://www.owenandmzee.com/omweb/>) is a wonderful resource to complement the picture books. It includes several videos, some actual footage of the rescue of Owen, some actual news reports, and some animated stories about the friends. The presentation of these videos is at a variety of age and interest levels.

A search under "Owen and Mzee" will bring up a number of other web sites which can add to the resources for a study of many topics, e.g. tsunamis, friendships, animal friendships, Kenya, game preserves, etc, etc. Children could create a mural which tells the story of Owen and Mzee, truly a story of hope out of disaster.

The trade books we have examined and the many others which are available can greatly enhance the exposure of elementary children to some of the cultures of Africa. These books will show them not only the differences which exist, but also the many similarities between childhood in the U.S. and in some areas of Africa. Most of all, they can help children to see that there is hope even in the most difficult of life's circumstances.

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Editor's Note: Dr. Bowen was a librarian and teacher in Kenya for 33 years.

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