

ISSN 2577-0527



WOW REVIEW

READING ACROSS CULTURES
VOLUME V, ISSUE 2

Winter 2012
Images of African Culture

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WOW Review: Volume V, Issue 2
Winter 2012
Images of African Culture

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Contributors to this Issue:

Seemi Aziz, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK

Jennifer Buntier, University of NM

Janelle Mathis, University of North Texas, Denton, TX

Judi Moreillon, Texas Woman's University, Denton, TX

T. Gail Pritchard, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

Kathy G. Short, University of Arizona, AZ

Yoo Kyung Sung, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

Kinga Varga-Dobai, Georgia Gwinnett College, Lawrenceville, GA

Melissa B. Wilson, Tucson, AZ **Editor:**

Janelle Mathis, University of North Texas, Denton, TX

Production Editor:

Richard Clift



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Introduction and Editor's Note

Africa, while the largest of continents, has often been viewed by the Western world through very limited perspectives. This issue of WOW Review was planned with the hope of creating more comprehensive insights into the countries and cultures of Africa through books that reflect authentic lifestyles, issues, and traditions. In response to the call, an interesting group of titles were submitted that do indeed open readers' eyes to a more contemporary Africa whose people are involved in issues both universal and unique to the political and social history of this land. Within this issue are one picture book, one graphic novel, and eight chapter books, representing realistic fiction, historical fiction, and memoir, whose settings reflected diverse countries in Africa and whose intended audience is predominantly adolescents and young adults.

Several themes weave throughout this issue and often link together: identity and coming of age, war, child soldiers, and the tension between the traditional and contemporary and/or rural and city life. While themes of identity prevail in most of these books, it is especially prominent in *Between Sisters*, the story of a 16-year-old who moves from rural Accra in Ghana to the city of Kumasi and becomes "somebody" only to lose her sense of self. *Where I Belong* continues this theme as the story moves between Somalia and London in a modern plot including the fashion runway, kidnapping, and moving between cultures in a search for identity. Coming of age and identity themes also dominate in *This Thing Called the Future*, the story of a young 14-year-old living in a post-apartheid town of South Africa. As she is caught at the intersection of the traditions of the Zulu people and her modern life with AIDS is a predominant issue that weaves throughout the story and their lives. *City Boy* also provides a glimpse into the loss and loneliness that a mandatory move from the city to the country in Malawi brings about for one young man whose parents have died from AIDS.

Displaced children are found as well in narratives of war within this issue. Stepping back in history, *Stones for My Father* tells of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1903 when British invaders sent many Boer families of South Africa to concentration camps—an event that is still politicized today in the region. *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan* is a memoir of survival told by two young people who fled their homes in southern Sudan in 1987. *Son of a Gun*, set in the Liberian civil war, and *War Brothers*, set in Uganda, convey the horrors of war through the eyes of child soldiers and create understandings of the cultural, social, and political contexts that would allow such horrific events to occur. *Aya*, set in the 1970's on the Ivory Coast, provides insights through text and graphic illustrations to a more contemporary working class neighborhood and lifestyle. As the sole work of fantasy, but addressing an environmental issue, *The Canoe's Story* depicts both the lifestyle of fishermen in its author's native Ghana and the problem of cutting down too many trees without replanting.

Previous issues of *WOW Review* contain titles from African countries that speak to other topics in both picture and chapter books. Some are more appealing to younger readers whose images of Africa are just beginning to develop. Among these are: *14 Cows for America*, *First Come the Zebra*, *I Lost My Tooth in Africa*, *The Mangrove Tree: Planting Trees to Feed Families*, *My Name is Sangoel*, *My Rows and Piles of Coins*, and *Sosu's Call*. Other chapter books to note in

previous issues that contain themes similar to this issue include: *The Bite of the Mango*, *A Long Walk to Water*, *The Number 1 Car Spotter*, and *Now is the Time for Running*.

While the carefully selected and reviewed books in this issue do contribute to and nurture complex and contemporary perspectives of Africa, there is still much for readers, both young and old, to uncover and explore in considering this issue's call that stated the goal of creating:

... a rich collection of books that speak to the strength, insightfulness and creativity of the African people, the rich history of this land that theorists claim to be the origin of mankind, the wealth of natural wildlife and geographical beauty, the rich legacy of folklore and cultural traditions, and the critical role this country plays in the global society.

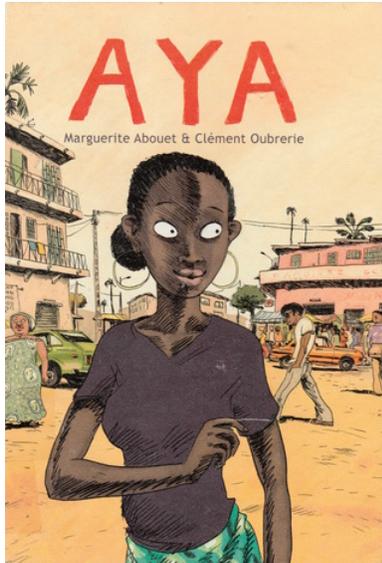
One question is how much of the information exists already in print and how much is waiting to be written by those who best know this great continent. As mentioned in these reviews, the issue of representation and whose perspective is published deserves attention in order to encourage potential native African writers to tell their stories and publishers to bring their work to the Western world. As you read the reviews in this issue and explore previous issues of *WOW Review* for other books on Africa, we welcome your comments and suggestions of other titles that might be acknowledged. We also invite you to consider reviewing any of these suggestions for future unthemed issues of *WOW Review*.

Janelle Mathis, University of North Texas

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AYA

Written by Marguerite Abouet
Illustrated by Clément Oubrerie
Translation by Helge Dascher
Raincoast Books, 2007, 103 pp.
ISBN: 1-894937902

1978 was the year the Ivory Coast, my beautiful country, got to see its first television ad campaign. It was for Solibra, a local beer popular in all of West Africa. (p. 1)

This graphic novel is set in the 1970s, when the Ivory Coast, was coined the “Paris of the West.” The story begins by offering a refreshingly new perspective on the social life of a West African neighborhood. The contemporary dialogue is a much needed addition to the few translations of West African stories available on the western market.

AYA follows the relationship between Aya and her friends Adjoua and Bintou. The intertwining family dramas are insightful strands that not only make for an engaging story but also speak to the culture of a community where life is lived out in the open. Individual problems become public and not only discussed, but often resolved, within the greater community. For example, Adjoua’s pregnancy, the point of conflict in the story, moves from an individual situation to one of communal dialogue. Inquiries into an abortion end for Adjoua with Aya’s strong verbal intervention, “you’re nuts! That old witch ends pregnancies with a knitting needle. You don’t want to die do you?” (p. 57). Class issues are highlighted between the supposed father, Moussa, who is the son of the owner of the Solibra Beer Factory, and his mother when she learns he’s “knocked up...a working class girl” (p. 70). With worries about further community shame and humiliation, because Adjoua’s father works for the local newspaper Calamity Morning, Moussa’s parents agree to a quick wedding. Although the story deals with serious social issues, the tone is one intermixed with humor and surprise.

The preface provides insight into the political, economic and social proliferations that impacted the country’s independence in 1960, under the presidential leadership of Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Abouet’s, *AYA* fills a real need to portray a modern African community against the dominant representations and images that propagate western perceptions of Africa as a monolithic continent that can only speak of revolutions, war, child soldiers, refugee camps, orphans, starvation, AIDS, and genocide. Abouet, drawing upon her childhood memories of growing up in Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast, provides authentic insights into cultural values and traditions within a working class neighborhood called Yopougon, what the locals refer to as Yop City.

About's rich dialogues interwoven amongst Oubrerie's colorful pastel and ink illustrations embellish evocative moods and secretive lighting of many flirtatious desires, while also depicting realist and authentic contemporary African lifestyles. The illustrations honor the book's authenticity, serving as a pictorial bridge to provide insight into class divisions with modern homes, contemporary furnishings, and stylish clothes. Bonus pages showcase tutorials on how to roll your tassaba (your behind), wrap a pagne (a skirt or head scarf) and a colorful glossary defining the slang terms for the male reproductive organ, outdoor dance spaces, and terms of respect.

About's *AYA*, series originally translated from French, goes well beyond demystifying the common western portrayals of life on the African continent. A strong text comparison that provides similar insights into diverse cultures is Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part time Indian* (2007). It is a thoughtful match to *AYA* both in style and humorous storyline. Both novels open up new social worlds for the traditional western reader. The young adult graphic novel, *The Complete Persepolis* (2007) by Marjane Satrapi similarly parallels *AYA* in its storyline of a young Iranian girl's maturation within a rich family life. Both stories are voices not often heard against the backdrop of media events that primarily document a country's power struggles or visages of war. All three books are similar in their cultural revelations and authentic portrayals by providing insider perspectives whose contrasts are critical intersections when considering western conservative publishing parameters. Side stepping these conformities, and in efforts to preserve the colorful mores of Yop City, About chose to publish her young adult novel in a graphic style where culturally authentic languages and lifestyles are not compromised into a censored and water down version.

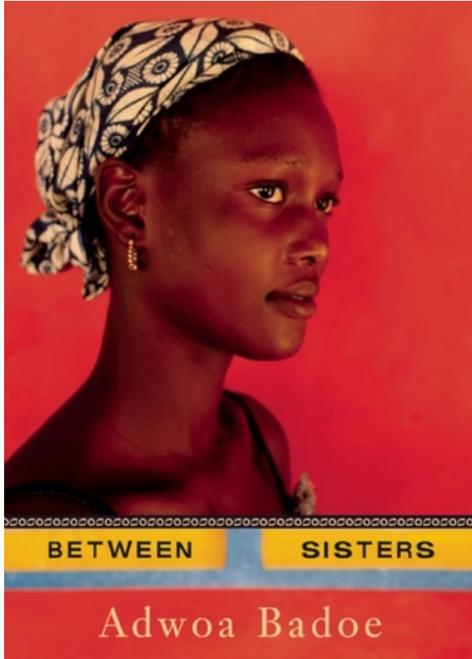
Marguerite About's book *AYA* is first in a series of four that follow the interconnecting lives of Aya's family, her friends' families, and other neighborhood connections: *AYA of Yop City* (2008); *AYA The Secrets Come Out* (2009); and *AYA Love in Yop City* (2012).

Jennifer Buntier, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

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Between Sisters

Written by Adwoa Badoe
Groundwood Books, 2010, 208 pp.
ISBN: 978-0888999979

This story is about a 16-year-old girl, Gloria Bampo, who lives in Accra, rural Ghana. The narrative focuses on her struggle to find her identity as she moves from rural to urban settings. She has just failed most of her high-school exams, which leaves her feeling ashamed that she can barely read or write English. The exam failure drastically limits her options for a future as a 'somebody' in Ghana. Then amazingly Gloria is offered the chance to move to the city, Kumasi, to work for a rich female doctor, Christine, as a 'sister' not as a housekeeper and nanny. One of her aunts arranges this as Christine is a distant relative. Her aunt also assures Gloria that she is supposed

to move in as a 'sister' rather than a servant and that after two years Christine will send her to dressmaking school as a form of repayment. Gloria's family situation has her father unemployed and her mother seriously ill. Her sister, Effie, seems to have a secret life complete with a sailor boyfriend, even though not much is mentioned in the story. The family jumps at the chance, as food is scarce in rural Ghana, specifically in their underprivileged home.

Gloria moves to Kumasi, cares for her young charge, Sam, and goes through her chores with a positive mindset. In the process she is introduced to the nicer things in life as well as the chance for one-on-one academic mentoring from Christine. Circumstances lead her to get new clothes, new friends, and the attentions of a doctor, Kusi, creating their own forms of enticements. The situation gets complicated quickly with Gloria falling in love and having an affair with Kusi (who seems to have done this many times before with young girls) and her new girlfriend stealing from Christine and blaming it on Gloria. When Christine finds out about the lost money, she blames Gloria despite Gloria's impassioned denials. She later finds out about Gloria's innocence but never apologizes. Her own people, thus, betray Gloria. Her greatest shock is when she finds out that the 'sister' she left her family for, was really never a sister at all.

Christine's character also seems to have gone through a transformation. Her husband lives in England while she works in Ghana. As she has assimilated into her higher education and well-to-do lifestyle, she has embraced a new way of thinking and being even though she insists on staying on in Ghana while her doctor husband is pushing to move to England. She seems to have become a 'colonizer' in her own right, e.g. her poor distant cousin. She takes advantage of Gloria's situation, never pays her a penny, is quick to lay blame, and threatens to kick her out without much thought. The irony is that Gloria, in turn, realizes that while Christine is not a 'sister' to her, it is still to her advantage to stay even after so much has

happened. Gloria has nothing to go back home for and she has also changed too much to return to her previous way of life. The issue in this story is the movement of ‘nobodies’ to ‘somebodies’ in present day Ghana. Education seems to be the avenue for this movement. The protagonist loses her virginity as well as her sense of self in the struggle to become ‘somebody’ in urban Ghana, only to realize that she does not belong in her urban or rural surroundings. She goes back home to visit only to find that she is a misfit there as well. Her identity, thus, becomes a confused ‘hybrid’ in her own country, as does Christine’s.

The story delivers an interesting glimpse into a culture, but, unfortunately, does not build from there. The characters seem stagnant and the introduction of apprehension about the AIDS epidemic of the early 1990s seems forced. The pace of the novel is quick with complications being introduced and solved within a few pages. The conclusion of the story does not offer much resolution, as the biggest conflicts are not dealt with, such as those of Gloria’s future, her poverty, or her mother’s nameless illness. Many characters are introduced in the story and they threaten to overwhelm the reader. The universality of betrayals, arguments, secrets and misunderstandings, as well as the building of relationships and romance, however, connects this story to self and world.

The author is a physician from Ghana now living in Canada. She provides her own interpretation of contemporary middle-class Ghana, including those who dream of leaving for Western countries, as she has done in real life. She has published over 14 children’s books, mostly picture books, and her authorship includes markets for Africa. She is heavily involved with storytelling and dance to share the lives of the people of different African regions.

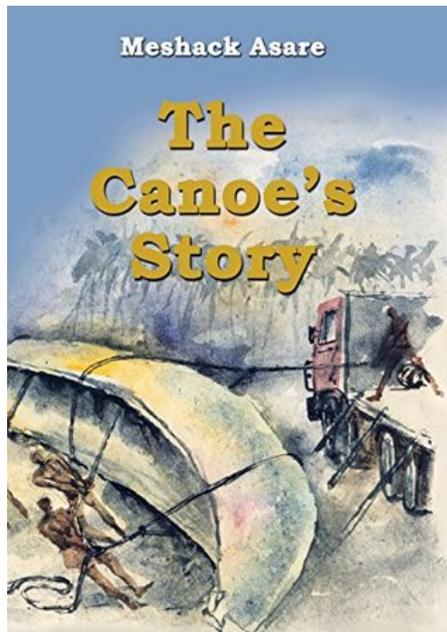
Between Sisters can be paired with other books that focus on identity formation and the struggle to find self. The same thematic threads can be found in books about African regions such as: *City Boy* (Jan Michael, 2009), *Where I Belong* (Gillian Cross, 2011), and *My Name is Sangoel* (Karen Lynn Williams, 2009).

Seemi Aziz, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK

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The Canoe's Story

Written by Meshack Asare

Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2010, 63 pp.

ISBN: 978-9988647995

I started as a tree. I was a giant Wawa tree in the forest of the Hinterland. I was not the oldest tree but being one of the biggest in the forest, my roots went down hundreds of years. (p.1)

Told from the perspective of a giant Wawa tree, the beautiful descriptive words of Ghanaian native Meshack Asare describe the peacefulness of the forest before the arrival of man. However, once man arrives, many trees “wail” as they

are cut down and hauled away. The tree recalls the animals they housed, the leaves that provided a rich forest floor for other growth, and the many lives saved by trees shielding men from guns. When the time comes for the narrating tree to be taken from the forest, he at first is fearful, but the men offer gifts, pray, and sing rhythmically as they take down the tree. The tree begins to rationalize the new life he will have and a sense of pride and adventure evolves as the men treat him with dignity.

A canoe is carved out of the huge tree while it is yet in the forest and the tree feels the admiration of the men. He eventually is moved to the ocean side where he is finished and christened with the name of Ka shi me, meaning in the Ga language, “never leave me.” As he is taken to the sea by the fishermen, he feels welcomed by the water, and the men bring back many fish. He is given gifts by the men in gratitude and at various times fitted with a sail and then a motor.

The tree shares a philosophical attitude as the story draws to a close. Rather than bitterness, he shares insight to the notion of interdependency. Just as creatures depended on him in the forest and he depended on other aspects of nature, so man depends on him. “We all depend on one another and it doesn’t matter what we are. It is what we do” (p. 53). Sensing his value, the tree concludes his story with a wish that people would take caution so that trees do not leave them.

This environmental story is told within the specific cultural context of Ghana and the traditional reverent ritual of crafting a canoe to support and feed families. However, it is universal in its message. The simplistic telling of the story through the personification of the tree reveals the importance of canoes to the lives of the fishermen as well as the great respect that these men hold for this source of their livelihood. While the story is told in a positive vein as the tree gathers excitement over time in becoming a canoe, the message of

conservation prevails as the tree notes that the forest is suffering from so much felling of trees.

Meshack Asare first published books in and about Africa in 1968 and has won prestigious awards such as the Noma Award in 1982 and the 1999 UNESCO First prize for Children's and Young People's Literature in the Service of Tolerance for *Sosu's Call*, which also won the IBBY Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities Award in 2001. With works that are translated into several languages, "Asare has been described as an imaginative storyteller and talented artist who skillfully weaves cultural tradition and daily realities of life into picture stories for children" (http://www.cca.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=413%3Ameshack-asare-ghana&catid=34&Itemid=19).

In addition to being written by this highly regarded Ghanaian author, Meshack Asare, the authenticity of *The Canoe's Story* is supported by it recently being named to the prestigious IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) Honour List which is published biannually and based on criteria established by IBBY as:

Books that are representative of the best in children's literature from the country and that the books are suitable for publication throughout the world. It provides insight into the diverse cultural, political and social settings in which children live and grow and it can be used by all those involved with developing educational and literacy programmes and publishing initiatives to develop exemplary 'international' collections (<http://www.ibby.org/index.php?id=270>).

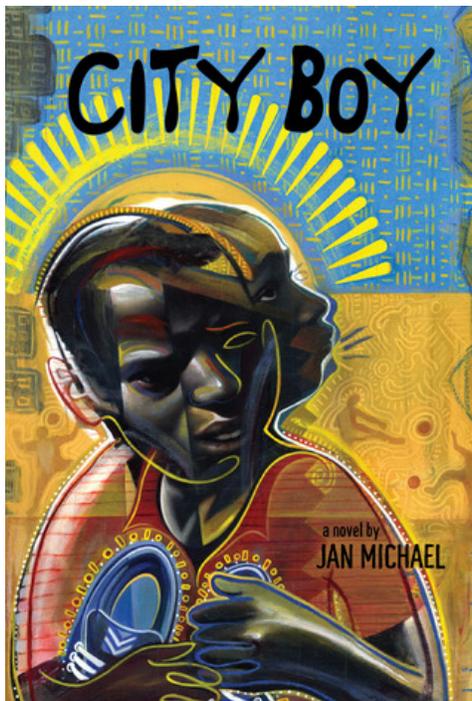
The Canoe's Story can be used with other books by Meshake Asare to provide insights into the lifestyle of the people of Ghana as well as their cultural ideologies. These include: *Sosu's Call* (1997), *Nana's Son*, (2000), *Meliga's Day*, (2000), or *The Brassman's Secret* (1986/2002). The book can also be paired with stories that focus on environmental issues such as *Planting the Trees of Kenya*, *The Story of Wangarai Maathai* (Claire A. Nivola, 2008); *One Well, the Story of Water on Earth* (Rochelle Strauss, 2007), or *A River Ran Wild, an Environmental History* (Lynn Cherry, 1992).

Janelle Mathis, University of North Texas, Denton, TX

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City Boy

Written by Jan Michael

Clarion Books, 2009, 192 pp.

ISBN: 978-0547223100

Imagine being suddenly up-rooted from everything you know and placed where everything is unfamiliar. The way you dress, talk, behave is scrutinized; what you thought was important—private school, computer, television, your own bedroom—is gone; you are no longer the doted upon only child, but one of many; and most importantly, your mother and father have died. Your remaining relatives decide to send you to your auntie’s village—a place your mother has long left behind. It is a place totally unfamiliar—no electricity, mud huts, shared food and clothing, and far from your parents’ graves. What would you do? What would you think? How would you adapt? How would you cope with your grief?

Sam’s father died from AIDS several years before and the book opens with the passing of Sam’s mother, also from AIDS. His auntie convinces other relatives to let Sam come with her rather than placing him in an orphanage. From this point on, everything is different for this “city boy.” One of the first lessons is the idea of community property—Sam must share what he has with his cousins—his clothes, where he sleeps, his food. And when his most prized possession, a pair of blue tennis shoes from his mother, disappears, he learns about trust and family bonds.

The overarching themes of family, loss, loneliness are typical in coming of age stories, but what is atypical is the backdrop of an AIDS ravaged country. *City Boy* does not disguise the fate of children whose parents die from AIDS or the burden placed on relatives, friends, and neighbors who take them into their homes. At the same time, Michael paints Sam’s city life as materialistic and fragile and his life in the village as the point where his real lessons begin. It is in the village where he learns the rewards of sharing and the meaning of family. So while there is the obvious theme of illness and death, *City Boy* also contains elements of self-discovery, survival, and journeys.

City Boy might be paired with Deborah Ellis’ award-winning novel, *The Heaven Shop* (2004). This novel, too, takes place in Malawi and is told from a privileged young girl’s perspective, who suddenly finds her world turned upside down after both of her parents die from AIDS. Juxtaposed with these two realistic fiction titles, *Hope Amidst Despair: HIV/AIDS-Affected Children in Sub-Saharan Africa* (2011) by Susanna W. Grannis, takes the readers directly to the children whose lives are affected by HIV/AIDS through their first-hand accounts.

Author, Jan Michael, was born in England, went to boarding school in Wales, and has

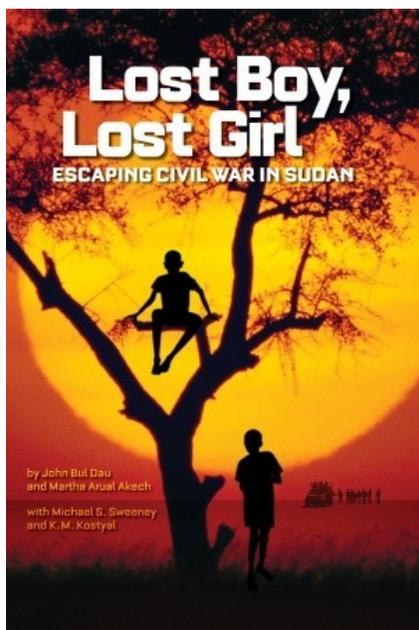
traveled extensively in various African and Asian countries. She is an award-winning author who has written for both adults and children.

T. Gail Pritchard, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

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Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan

Written by John Bul Dau and Martha Arual Akech with Michael S. Sweeney and K.M. Kostyal

National Geographic Children's Books, 2010, 160 pp.

ISBN: 978-1426307089

Told with unflinching honesty, *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan*, is a memoir co-authored by a husband and wife about their individual journeys from a seemingly peaceful childhood in Southern Sudan to their present lives in the United States. It is a messy story and one that involves mini-lessons in geopolitics, religion, culture, and history that help the intended American child reader to make sense of a time and a place that is complicated and far removed from a Western perspective. The narrative of love, hope, and survival, however, is universal. This text offers

the delicate balance of exploring human themes in culturally specific ways that allows reader to appreciate shared humanity while experiencing alternative ways of being and thinking.

A good example of this balance is when John frames the causes of the war that destroys his life in the contexts of postcolonialism and in his culture's (the Dinka) stories. There are two narratives working at the same time cooperatively. The war may have been caused by conflict of two separate cultures, the north and south, being forced to share a country and it may have been triggered by the Dinka choosing the fate of war over drought when given a choice by a tortoise who is sent by God to punish the unfaithful.

Much of the writing is matter-of-fact with no horror glossed over but none explored too closely. The authors take turns telling their story with alternating chapters. This gives the reader a chance to interact with two insider perspectives. While the authors do attempt to explain their culture to their Western readers, they also allow for their words to speak for themselves. And these words would make more sense paired with texts about the Lost Boys (and Girls) of Sudan, such as *A Long Walk to Water: Based on a True Story* by Linda Sue Park (2009) and *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* written by Mary Williams (2005).

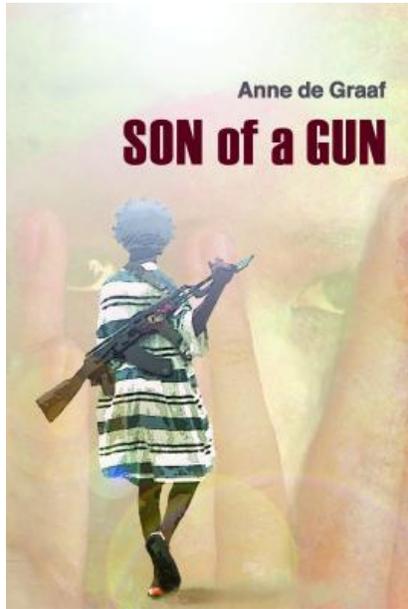
John Bul Dau, from southern Sudan, is one of the thousands of young boys who fled homes and experienced an exhausting journey to refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. He and Martha, his wife, came to the United States in 2001 where they now live. Assisting John and Martha in telling their story, Michael S. Sweeny and Karen Kostyal have written books for adults and children that focus on historical events dealing with war and conflict.

Melissa B. Wilson, Tucson, AZ

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Son of a Gun

Written by Anne de Graaf

Eerdmans Books for Young Readers. 2006/2012, 125pp.

ISBN: 978-0802854063

Son of a gun.

On the run.

No way it's fun.

You won't know 'til you're the one.

(Lucky, 36)

Told from two points of view in alternating voices, *Son of a Gun* is the story of eight-year-old Lucky and his ten-year-old sister Nopi who are kidnapped to serve as child soldiers in the Liberian civil war. Taken from their school by rebel forces, Lucky, Nopi, and their classmates learn to follow orders through intimidation. After they prove themselves, they earn an AK-47, a weapon light enough for a child to carry.

Soon after their capture, Nopi, in a brave and sisterly act of defending Lucky from evil Sergeant Saint, becomes deaf after being hit in the face and kicked while down on the ground. She earns a reputation for charging into battle—"we do stuff grown-ups are too smart and afraid to try" (p. 15). Nopi's experience of war and soldiering is changed by not hearing loud blasts of gunfire, terrifying screams, or the constant threats from her older peers and adult soldiers who bully and abuse the younger soldiers.

The trauma of war erases many of Lucky's happiest memories of family and home. "I had never seen anyone shot dead like that before. And it rips something right out of your heart to see the life leave a body" (p. 22). Nopi tells Lucky stories to keep up his spirits. She secures the needed gun they use as collateral to join a group of boys who escape and travel back to the capital Monrovia. On that road, Lucky and Nopi hope to find their village and reunite with their family.

Instead, they discover their village has been burned and looted and dead bodies stacked up. They find the strength to go on to Monrovia, locate their grandmother's house, and reunite with their parents. But shortly, they are separated from family again and eventually separated from each other. Nopi ends up the third wife of a colonel in the rebel forces. Eventually, she escapes via boat and joins refugees who are fleeing from several war-torn African countries. Lucky fights on for five years. He discovers his childhood best friend James fighting in the same battle—for the other side. "Yes, I was forced to kill, but I've chosen to stay. The army, this regiment, these other boys, they are my family now. The gun is my god" (p. 82).

In this “kill or be killed” reality, readers see the terrors of war through the eyes of two children whose constant fears for their lives continue long after escaping the grips of their captors or turning in their guns. This brief book is realistically and powerfully written. For readers who have not personally experienced war, it will be shocking to know how war has devastated the childhoods of so many.

Author Anne de Graaf visited Liberia to hear child soldiers’ horrific stories. In her author’s note, de Graaf talks about the “dark places” of childhood—including war, death, divorce, and pain. She questions the wisdom of keeping the dark places out of children’s literature. Instead, she sheds light on these realities and invites readers to consider how we can realize our dreams for peace and justice for the world’s children—our collective future.

The end of the book is devoted to photographs and facts about present-day life in Liberia and information about its political history. Election posters and front page newspaper headlines introduce the section about the fourteen-year civil war in which one quarter of a million people were killed. There is also a section about child soldiers worldwide. One fact that jumped off the page was: “An AK-47 costs the same as one chicken” (p. 112). The author notes that many child soldiers have never gone to school, are not literate, and have no job skills to support themselves after they turn in their guns. *Son of a Gun* concludes on a hopeful note with a letter written by a former child soldier who sees a better future for himself and his country. There are also several pages of drawings by refugee camp children.

Forcing or enticing children into fighting in war is sadly not uncommon throughout history and around the world. During the U.S. Civil War, many children were conscripted and some fought against their brothers and friends as Lucky and James do. *The Boy’s War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk about the Civil War* by Jim Murphy (1990), *When Johnny Went Marching: Young Americans Fight the Civil War* by G. Clifton Wisler (2001), and *Children of the Civil War* by Candice F. Ransom (1998) are three books on the topic of child soldiers in the U.S.

While *Son of a Gun* may be shared with middle school students, both of the following titles about African child soldiers may be most appropriate for high school or adult readers. *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah (2007) is the author’s first-hand experience (ages 12 – 16) of fighting with the rebel and government armies in his native Sierra Leone. Beah’s memoir shows how an innocent child can become a ruthless killer and details the horrific acts he committed. The book ends with his rescue and with how the support he received from United Nations peacekeepers showed him a way out. Today, Beah is an advocate for peace. Similarly, Jal Emmanuel spent almost ten years of his childhood as a soldier in the Christian Sudanese Liberation Army. His memoir, *War Child: A Child Soldier’s Story* (2009), is equally shocking and also ends on a hopeful note with Emmanuel’s rescue and activism for nonviolence through music. He has become a best-selling hip-hop artist in Kenya.

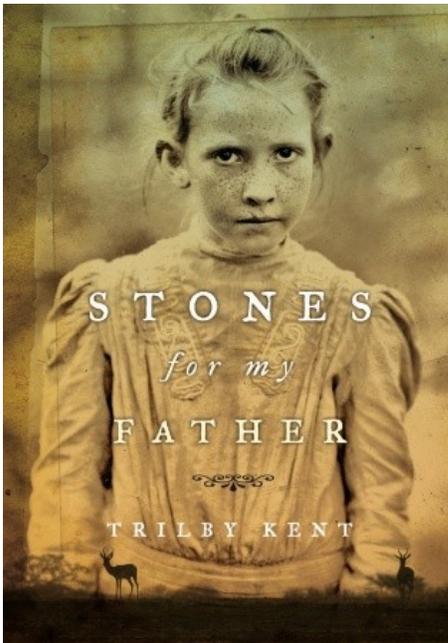
Anne de Graaf currently lives in Ireland and the Netherlands. She travels often to Africa and posts to a blog “International-Intrigue-Injustice” where she continues to share her thoughts and concerns for the struggles of African children.

Judi Moreillon, Texas Woman’s University, Denton, TX

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Stones for My Father

Written by Trilby Kent

Tundra Books, 2011, 170 pp.

ISBN: 978-1770492523

Corlie Roux lives on a farm in South Africa in the 1890s, where life is never easy and where the beauty of the Transvaal is offset by intense heat that causes even raindrops to sizzle. Her life changes when her beloved father dies and she is left with a mother who is cruel and indifferent. Laying stones on her Pa's grave is a lifeline for Coralie as is her ability to make up stories that sustain those she cares about, including her little brothers and a Zulu friend, Siphon. Her world is destroyed when the British invade and drive Boer families from their farms. While some escape into the

bush to fight, others are rounded up and sent to camps where they endure severe deprivation. Hunger and disease lead to the death of many children, including Coralie's brother, and Coralie is saved only through her friendship with a Canadian soldier.

This novel focuses on a time period and war that will be unfamiliar to most readers. The Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 was a lengthy war in which the British sent troops from many British colonies to defeat the Afrikaans, the Dutch settlers who lived on farms in that region of South Africa. The Boers (farmers) had gained their independence from British rule in the First Anglo-Boer War of 1880-1881. When the British sought to regain the territory, the Boers engaged in a long and bitter guerilla campaign leading to high British losses. In retaliation, the British burned farms to the ground and rounded up the children and wives of the Boer guerillas. The British policy in the concentration camps was to halve food rations to exert pressure on family members still on the battlefield; a policy that led to the death of many children from starvation and disease.

Powerful themes weave throughout the book. One is the strength of Coralie as a young girl who faces loss, violence and deprivation but remains steadfast and resilient. The strength of her relationships is the heart of this novel and relief against the cruelty. Themes of racism and war are powerfully interwoven. Although the story is told through the perspective of the Boers through Corlie, her experiences allow her to see the British soldiers as human beings and to gain a sense of their perspectives. The novel makes it clear that both English and Afrikaners acted abominably at different times and in different ways and that both suffered terribly.

Corlie's close relationship with Siphon leads her to question the reality and tragedy of racism. The author depicts the complexity of the relationships between Afrikaner colonists and English imperialists and between these groups and the Indigenous

Africans. Kent hints at the way an oppressed people, in this case the Afrikaners, can become an oppressive people through the seeds of resentment sown during this war that eventually lead to apartheid. She authentically has Afrikaners use racist terms to describe Indigenous Africans but there is no explanation of their insulting nature for readers unfamiliar with this time period and cultural setting.

The book received the 2012 Canadian Children's Literature Award. Trilby Kent is Canadian, but has lived in the UK as an adult and is currently pursuing a doctorate in creative writing. She is an academic with degrees in history and social anthropology and has worked in investigative journalism and international development. Her family has a long history in journalism, both newspaper and television, and her father is the current Minister of Environment in Canada after a career in broadcast journalism. Her mother is South African and this novel grew out of a family pilgrimage to the Free State and family farms. Kent found that people living in that region still have a vivid memory of the war and continue to talk about it as a highly politicized and political subject, leading her to research the war and write this novel. Kent engaged in meticulous research and does not sanitize history for young readers. This book is her second novel for children, with her first being *Medina Hill* (2009), involving Gypsy Travelers in 1930's London.

The author appears to have carefully worked to portray this time period authentically and to provide multiple views on these events through the eyes of a young girl, whose experiences have led her to question, rather than accept, societal views. Although authenticity does not appear to be an issue, representation is a concern. There has been a recent influx of novels and picture books set in different parts of Africa, many of which are written by white authors with ties to Africa, such as *Out of the Shadows* (Jason Wallace, 2011), *Now is the Time for Running* (Michael Williams, 2011), *This Thing Called the Future* (J.L. Powers, 2011), *Burn My Heart* (Beverley Naidoo, 2009), *Promise the Night* (MacCall, 2011), *City Boy* (Jan Michael, 2009), *Beatrice's Dream* (Karen Lynn Williams, 2011), and *The Herd Boy* (Niki Daly, 2012). Many of these books are well-written, raising difficult issues of racism and filling a tremendous void in North America of children's books set in African countries. However, the overrepresentation of white perspectives on life in African countries, many of which could be seen as colonial in their origin, does not provide a set of books that reflect a range of perspectives and experiences. The few books written by Indigenous Africans are primarily authors who fled war and genocide in their countries of origin and now live in Canada, the UK, or the U.S.—an important perspective but one that does not provide a range of views about contemporary life in African countries. Examples are *The Bite of the Mango* (Mariatu Karnara & Susan McClelland, 2008), *Over a Thousand Hills, I Walk with You* (Hanna Jansen, 2002), and *Between Sisters* (Adowa Badoe, 2010).

The paucity of books by Indigenous African authors on contemporary life creates serious issues of representation and the possibility of new stereotypes and misconceptions at a time when books about African cultures are finally entering the reading lives of children and adolescents. Until those books do become available in North American markets, educators will need to search out internet resources to add these perspectives to their classrooms.

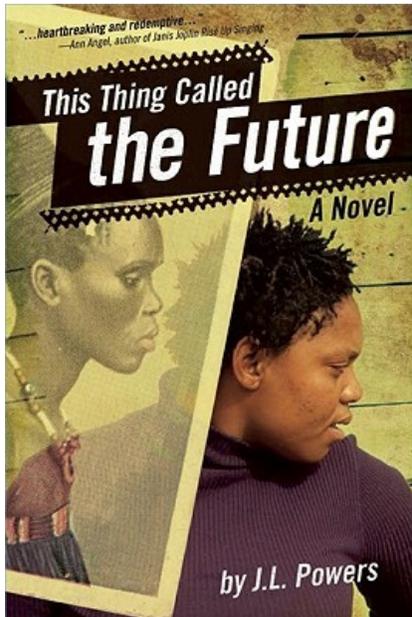
Links with more information: The Boer Wars (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boer_Wars) and a Trilby Kent interview (<http://www.cbc.ca/books/kids/2012/11/trilby-kent-on-stones-for-my-father.html>).

Kathy G. Short, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

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This Thing Called the Future

Written by J.L. Powers

Cinco Puntos Press, 2011, 208 pp.

ISBN: 978-1933693958

Fourteen-year-old Koshi lives in the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg, a post-apartheid shanty town of South Africa with her mother, Elizabeth, her grandmother, and her little sister, Zi. Her parents are not married because her father, being poor, was not able to pay a dowry for Koshi's mother. Although Koshi's family is not privileged, the mother, a school teacher, is able to support her daughters on her own and her independence sets her apart from other women. While Koshi finds joy in going to school and learning, her life is overshadowed by the presence of AIDS and the growing number of

victims in her community. In order to stay safe, the grandmother introduces her to the world of folk beliefs and encourages her to turn to the ancestors for help and protection. Koshi's mother, on the other hand, does not embrace the old traditions of Zulu people, and considers those rituals and folk beliefs silly superstitions. The tension increases when Koshi's mother, accused of stealing money from their neighbor, falls ill. Koshi struggles to decide whether her mother suffers from AIDS or whether she is being punished by the ancestors for doing something wrong. In the face of this dilemma she is forced to take a stand.

As a coming-of-age story Power's book tackles serious social issues and provides a realistic depiction of life. Instead of a complicated plot, the book focuses on Koshi's maturation process and her struggle to reconcile her modern day life with the traditional beliefs of Zulu people. Traditions affect every aspect of Koshi's life from storytelling and her ability to communicate with her ancestors through dreams, to going through rituals when reaching a new stage in life. In parallel she is also involved in mundane activities such as watching soccer games and TV soap operas. The two women closest to Koshi, her grandmother and her mother, represent these two very different life views, one that embraces traditions and one that considers them useless superstition. In spite of this conflict between generations, Powers manages to disrupt the binary through Koshi's character who chooses to take the middle ground. Because of her special qualities, she decides to become a healer and help people in the traditional way. At the same time, she also embraces her favorite school subjects, biology and science, and studies to become a nurse and help people the modern way as well.

Similarly to her first book, *The Confessional* (2007), in *This Thing Called the Future* Powers explores social issues such as gender and sexuality, poverty and death. Although the depictions of violence and death in the book are harsh, the close relationship between the female characters as well as the growing friendship between Koshi and Little Man

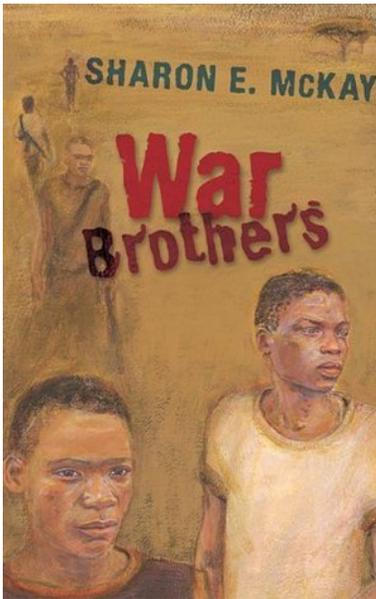
makes this novel a hopeful and powerful read. Unlike other realistic fiction books on similar social issues, for example, *The Fattening Hut* (Pat Lowery Collins, 2003) or *The Day of the Pelican* (Katherine Paterson, 2009) where the main characters escape their country of origin, Powers has not included this element of escape. Koshi stays and, despite the hardships, remains connected to her roots. In the Author's Note, Powers talks about her extended research in South Africa while working on her book and includes a short explanation of the Zulu language in the glossary. Other books on South Africa this novel could be paired with are *Out of Bounds: Seven Stories of Conflict and Hope* (Beverley Naidoo, 2008) and *Now is the Time for Running* (Michael Williams, 2011). Similar books on the theme of spirituality and cultural traditions are *Island's End* (Padma Venkatraman, 2011), on trauma and death in *Fever 1793* (Laurie Halse Anderson, 2002) and on HIV in *Playing with Fire* (Henning Mankell, 2002).

Kinga Varga-Dobai, Georgia Gwinnett College, Lawrenceville, GA

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War Brothers

Written by Sharon E. McKay
Penguin Group, 2008, 241 pp.
ISBN: 978-0670067848

Your friend will die no matter what you do. He is injured. He is of no use. You will lose an arm and he will die, or you will not lose an arm and he will die. Here, we are fair. Here, we allow you to decide your own fate. (p.95)

This contemporary realistic fiction tells the story of three Ugandan boys' enforced journey of entering and

escaping the world of child soldiers in the guerrilla group, LRA (Lord's Resistance Army). The story starts and ends with notes from the protagonist, Jacob, to readers. In the first opening letter, Jacob briefly and as matter-of-factly introduces himself. He was born in Gulu, a city of 110,000 people in north of Uganda and he is from the Acholi tribe. After his seemingly universal personal introduction, the information of the guerrilla group, LRA, is noted. "Kony, the leader of an army of abducted children. He and his LRA gang of rebels steal boys and girls from rural farms, villages, schools, and buses" (p. xii). Soon the letter makes a confession that he was one of those abducted children who became "a child soldier in Kony army" (p. xiii), emphasizing the trueness of the stories he is about to tell.

The two main boy protagonists, Jacob and Oteka, are destined to be mates through different encounters with chance and eventually they reunite as child soldiers at the LRA camp. Oteka is an orphan who lost his parents to AIDS and became a family with an old woman, Adaa, who also lost her family through the LRA. Adaa dies and Oteka takes off on a journey after a medicine man conducts a spiritual ceremony for him. Oteka receives a cue, "Kony", for what he is to do from the departed spirit of his mother. In contrast, Jacob is from a wealthy father. His high socio-economic status is represented through his big house, servants, guesthouse, and education. Jacob starts his school dormitory life at the privileged school, George Jones Seminary for Boys, excited to be with his good friends, Tony and Paul. Tony is to be a Catholic priest and recipient of many of scholarships. Paul is a city boy from a capital city, Kampala and has traveled to the U.S. due to his father's job.

One night, LRA invades the school and abducts boys even though Jacob's father, for the safety for his son and the school, hired more guards. The majority of boys at school are abducted and placed under other LRA soldiers' surveillance. Jacob finds out that many of those soldiers are children and some are even younger than Jacob. Oteka and Jacob reunite after their accidental encounter in Gulu. The main method of controlling child soldiers that the Kony army employs is the manipulation of their fear of being killed or to

a victim of atrocity. Minimal food and water supplies also amplify their suffering and pain. They witness cruel atrocity and are often asked to be the torturing tool. If not, they fail to save their own lives or normal body form. The future priest, Tony is forced to kill one of his mates from school and gradually loses his mind and personality as he suffers from trauma.

“You go first.” The commander motioned toward Tony. Not Tony. Tony who wants to be a priest. Dear God, help us in our hour of need... Tears ran down Jacob’s cheeks. He closed his eyes. “Why do you close your eyes? You look away again you will be punished by death.” Lizard, standing in front of Jacob, pointed his gun between Jacob’s eyes. (p.85)

Kony’s army makes the boys walk continuously so as not to be caught by the government troops and severe starvation and dehydration from long walks bring extreme challenges to boys. Eventually Jacob and Paul decide to escape with Oteka and another girl victim whose ears were removed by the Kony. Jacob invites Tony, but his changed personality resulting from mental trauma makes it hard to communicate with and trust Tony. The journey of escaping Kony’s army is described in rich language about the ecological contexts in Uganda. During the journey, teen dynamics and their desperation to protect each other illustrate powerful universal themes of friendship, hope, vision, justice, and dream in spite of harsh realities, haunting fear, trauma, and self-serving roles for protection. In the end, Jacob shares his closing note about what happens to his fellow teens who joined the journey of escape, fighting for their lives and human rights.

The main focus of this contemporary child soldiers’ story is indeed the victims, both young and old, from civil wars and violence of mutated armed groups who claim to fight for justice—such groups as the LRA in Uganda. The story also illustrates African humanity and universal connections beyond our socially limited knowledge about Uganda. Rich cultural diversity in race, language, religion, class, immigration, politics, and social attitudes is experienced through different characters without enhancing, romanticizing or marginalizing Uganda. For instance, Jacob is from a wealthy family yet he is motherless and from a village. Meanwhile, Paul is from the capital city but his mother is from the Gulu area and his father has a business with the United States. Linguistic diversity also reflects historical background through not only French and English, but also indigenous language such as Acholi and Langi. Contemporary Ugandan childhood is reflected through their passion in soccer with strong fan support of Manchester United and their interest in math as well as specific dreams for the future. In addition, humorous conversations among Jacob, Tony, and Paul invite readers to reverse their perspectives through the three Ugandan boys’ curiosity and limited knowledge of Americans. “Do they [Americans] all smell sweet?” Despite his amazement Tony could not stop his questions. “Even the black people in America smell white!” laughed Paul” (p. 61). Such global perspectives may briefly sketch their awareness in a global world that differs from old documentary films like “The Bushman.” This film shows Africa as isolated like an unreachable island disconnected from the rest of the world. For a long time, depictions of Africa have focused on primitive/ barbaric places and such unbalanced romanticized perspectives have been problematic with insufficient portrayal of contemporary and diverse humanity experiences (Yenika-Agbaw, 2008).

Throughout the story, indigenous language enriches Ugandan contexts. The Canadian author, McKay, uses code switching to engage the audience and also to add an authentic vibe in the story. McKay's recent books tend to focus on areas of global conflict and most of all our western society's perspectives and gaze toward tensions in global communities. In the glossary section, McKay lists not only Ugandan indigenous words but also English words that are understood differently from American English like football and soccer. Words that evolved from political contexts in Uganda are also defined in the glossary.

The author, Sharon E McKay, studied LRA army and Ugandan cultures through a wide range of sources like Ugandan Canadians and Ugandans and the reliability of her research sources is evident. She notes in her Acknowledgments that the Law Society of Upper Canada licenses her Ugandan Canadian source as a barrister and solicitor. Her Ugandan sources are specifically from Gulu in Northern Uganda instead of general sources as people from Uganda. McKay's effort to have authentic reflections of Gulu is shown through a range of Ugandan people who have different backgrounds, including a school principal, a Ph.D. student in Canada, a student in Gulu, and a former lieutenant brigade administrator officer. Adrian Bradbury, the founder and director of the campaign of Athletes for Africa called Guluwalk, offers a testimonial statement in the Afterword to support the accuracy and authenticity of the stories in *War Brothers*, stating, "*War Brothers* is fiction. The war in northern Uganda is not" (p.233).

Child soldier stories appear in *Bitter Chocolate* (Sally Grindley, 2010), *The Bite of the Mango* (Mariatu Kamara with Susan McClelland, 2008), *Son of a Gun* (Anne de Graaf, 2006), and *Chanda's Wars* (Allan Stratton, 2008). Settings in these books are in different nations and regions in Africa like Liberia, Seirra Leone, and West Africa, among others. Child soldier experiences are illustrated differently and similarly across these books. Sometimes child soldiers are the centering voices and sometimes they are characters who pass quickly by, yet leave unforgettable impressions. Overarching and superficial themes may be civil wars, child victims, and child soldiers in Africa. On a deeper level, discussions around the meaning of fighting for our rights and lives and the lives of others will bring rich dialogue. Child soldier themes can be explored with various subthemes—physical abuse, child labor, friendship, and child as material. *Iqbal* (Francesco D'Adamo, 2005), *Boys without Names* (Kashmira Sheth, 2010), and *No Ordinary Day* (Deborah Ellis, 2011) specifically illustrate global child labor and child abuse issues. Lastly, *War Brothers* can be read alongside *Red Scarf Girl* (Ji-li Jian, 1997), *Hitler Youth: Growing up in Hitler's Shadow* (Susan Campbell Bartoletti, 2005), *Daniel Half Human* (David Chotjewitz, 2006), and *When My Name Was Keoko* (Linda Sue Park, 2002) to avoid stereotypes of child soldiers as only associated with African nations. These books help to explore the power of collective ideological controls and the importance of thinking critically through historical examples about the role of young people as targets when society experiences chaos. In these books, young people's internal conflicts and external pressure are thoughtfully depicted.

Yoo Kyung Sung, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

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Where I Belong

Written by Gillian Cross
Holiday House, 2011, 244 pp.
ISBN: 978-0823423323

Set in London and Somalia, this book wrestles with issues of identity, trust, and family. In the hot historicized desert of Somalia, Mahmoud is kidnapped and held for a ten thousand-dollar ransom. His older sister, Khadija, is in London, sent there as a savior of her family in Somalia. Khadijah's identity that she is Qarsoon "the Hidden One," the face of renowned fashion designer Sandy Dexter's latest collection, is discovered by her people and they are the ones who kidnap her brother. The main concern is Khadijah's dilemma about who she can trust to help her as she prepares to appear publically on the Fashion Week runway. She can only earn the ransom money to save her

brother's life by being part of an entourage that travels to "backward" Somalia to be part of the fashion show and it is Sandy who takes things into her own hands and saves not only Mahmood but also Khadijah and her "brother" Abdi.

Cross's book has three protagonists and each chapter is dedicated to the personal dialogue of one of the three characters. The third character is that of Freya, daughter of the designer, Sandy. It is Freya and her thoughts and life that provide the necessary comparison between the two Somali characters and the Caucasian family. Cross uses Freya's character to provide connections for Western audiences. It is also, ironically, the chapters dedicated to Freya that provide a space for Khadija's Somali brother to put his oppressed life and circumstances as a filter to the Western audience. Khadijah is a young Somali girl sent to England to be part of a family she does not know. She has to take on an entirely new identity and name as she leaves her family and beloved younger brother in Somalia. The legal issues of sending a girl as a daughter and sister of a family she is not related to are not mentioned in the book. She is sent as a savior of her family who is poor and stuck in the violent circumstances in Somalia. Her family is fighting poverty, disease and bandits in their day-to-day lives—"Concentrate on your education. That's what my father said when he sent me away. So you can earn a good living and help us all" (p. 34). She poses as a daughter and sister of her 'new' family while her heart is with her own family in Somalia. Khadijah is spotted by a famous clothes designer who wants to cast her as a model to launch her new line inspired by Somalia. She is given another identity as a model: Qarsoon meaning "hidden." So by this point in the story 'Khadija' has three identities to juggle:

They wanted to know my family and where I belonged, and when they found out I wasn't going to say, I knew what they were thinking. Someone who won't tell those things surely has a secret to hide. But if I had been allowed to tell them, which name would I have use? Khadija Ahmed Musa? Geri? Or my real name which would give away everything? Maybe it was simpler to say, I am Qarsoon.
(p.195)

The main concern throughout the story is the secrecy that they have to maintain—“Qarsoon, the hidden one,” veiled and hidden. Somali bandits find out about her good fortune and abduct her real brother in Somalia for ransom. It is her own people in England and Somalia who betray her for their own fortune. These bandits initially use her exposure and use of her body as a model as the reason for their actions, and they later provide an explanation of their actions as a way of getting money for Somalia and its people. The grand finale is set in the dramatic fashion show in Somalia where Khadijah is ‘unveiled’ along with gun wielding Somali bandits leading to a showdown. All are caught in real time as the event is being streamed live to England and the U.S. as fashion capitals of the world.

The male Somali character Abdi is living in England with his mother and sibling. Abdi is Khadijah’s ‘brother’ in her new family and a co-protagonist in the story. He is told and believes that his father is dead. His family is well connected to the strong Somali families living around his family in England. He is an a-typical Somali teenager who is responsible as he is the ‘man’ in the household because of the father’s absence. He accepts a new ‘sister’ easily and is a male support to Khadijah throughout her changing circumstances. He knows himself as a Somali but has never visited his homeland. Cross provides her world-view on Somalia through a young Abdi’s thoughts when he thinks of Somalia:

SOMALIA. There! My father would say. That is where you belong. I would look down at the jagged, angled shape and think of warlords and pirates. Kids strolling down the streets with AK-47’s over their shoulders. Battle wagons with submachine guns mounted in the back, and men haggling over ammunition at the arms market in Mogadishu. (p. 3)

In Battle Hill when people talked about Somalia they went on about the big skies and huge empty spaces—as if emptiness was something to be proud of. I just didn’t get it. When we drove away from Galkayo, I felt as though we were dropping out of the world. What was it like living here all the time? Looking after goats like those boys we’d pass on the road? It was impossible to imagine. What did they do about music? Where did they meet their friends? (p. 192)

The reality of Somali life seems alien to him except for his background knowledge, until he goes there for the fashion show and is disillusioned by the land and people as he discovers that his father is alive as the head of the bandits. He realizes that he belongs in England not Somalia. Abdi’s struggle is brought to life when Khadijah says, “he could have chosen to go with his father...he could have stayed in Somalia forever. But he didn’t. He knows where he belongs, I thought. For a second, I almost envied him” (p. 242)

The exotic paradigm at the heart of *Where I Belong* reinforces stereotypes of African Muslims. The impression of exoticism stems not only from the image on the cover but also from the traditions described within the book, the inclusion of words from languages other than English hint at the mental structures of people from another culture (Bradford, 2007; Aziz, 2011). The

depiction of the exotic is more than an attention device to capture readers, it establishes the vital 'otherness' of the people depicted and suggests that they suffer from a deficiency of the kind of subjective agency assumed as an accepted mode of behavior in the West. The same trends can be found in other books about Africa and Northern Africa e.g. Nai'ma Robert's (2009) *From Somalia with Love* and Adowa Badoe's (2010) *Between Sisters*.

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Seemi Aziz, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK

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