



M O R A L S O C I A L & C I V I C I S S U E S

Selecting Books on Africa

A Response to "Safari Sojourns"

Barbara B. Brown Lesego Malepe Jo Sullivan

As the authors of "Safari Sojourns" (*SS&yl*, Nov./Dec 1995) show, childrens' literature can offer a powerful entree into another country, especially one far away. The combination of a living story and strong visuals creates a door through which our students can walk to experience another culture. However, locating accurate, appropriate, and engaging books about distant parts of the world is always a challenge.

The authors of "Safari Sojourns" (*SS&yl*, Nov/Dec 1995) offered suggestions for exploring South Africa through picture books, using the new geography standards. The selection of appropriate quality books is key to such an exploration. We would like to raise some concerns about the choices made in "Safari Sojourns" and to offer guidelines for book selection not only on South Africa, but also on Africa as a whole. Our concerns are relevant as well for other parts of the world, especially Asia and Latin America.

1. A focus on a country is a good place to start with children. We applaud the authors of "Safari Sojourns" for encouraging teachers to select books on a particular country. Africa (or Latin America or Asia) is too big a place to be encompassed in a single story book. For example, the landscape and the people in the wonderful

book, *At the Crossroads* (Isadora, 1991), could only be South African. Surprisingly, the majority of the books "Safari Sojourns" recommended for teaching about South Africa were not on South Africa at all. This disturbed us. Of the eight books discussed, only three were on South Africa. Since many students already confuse Africa as a country and not a continent, using books about other countries to lead into studies of South Africa will only confuse students further. Choosing a book on Tanzania, such as *Safari* (Stelson, 1988) is puzzling and will not help students in understanding either Tanzania or South Africa. Of the three books on South Africa, one of them, *Mandela* (Hoobler & Hoobler, 1992) is more appropriate for older students; and a second, *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken and Me* (Angelou, 1994) has serious flaws.

Outstanding picture books do exist on South Africa. Some examples are:
Charlie's House (Shermbrucker, 1991)
Over the Green Hills (Isadora, 1992)
Not So Fast Songololo (Daly, 1986)
Armien's Fishing Trip (Stock, 1990)
Ntombi's Song (Seed, 1987)
The Picture That Came Alive (Lewin, 1992)
Somewhere in Africa (Mennen & Daly, 1992)
The Day of the Rainbow (Craft, 1991)
The Jafta series (Lewin, 1983).

Teaching about South Africa becomes easy with these books, as taken together they showcase the diversity of South Africa—urban and rural, coastal and interior; black, white, and multiracial; with many types of work; and with children, parents and extended families. For background on the country, these story books can be supplemented with non-fiction titles from publishers such as Children's Press and Lerner Publications.

Several sources exist for selecting books by country. *Book Links* (January 1996) carries an annotated bibliography of books on Africa by country. Publications which carry extensive lists of recommended books as well as books to avoid are *Afrofile* (Randolph, 1995a) and *Review of K-12 Materials* (Randolph, 1995b) both from Africa Access, as well as *Our Families, Our Friends, Our World* (Miller-Lachman, 1992) from Bowker. (The Bowker book covers all areas of the world, not just Africa.) In addition, the magazine, *Teaching Tolerance* featured a fine article in its fall 1995 issue on approaches to teaching about Africa.

2. Avoid focusing on the atypical. For example, *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken and Me* does not convey the life of a typical child of the Ndebele people—much less of the wider South African population. Ndebele chil-

dren do not dress in fine bead work all of the time, except in places where they are tourist attractions. Moreover, they do not have pet chickens. The error in this book is to focus on the exotic and to make it seem representative. For Africa as a whole, this type of error is in the frequency with which the Maasai people are depicted in story (and on film) in relationship to their actual representation. The Maasai are featured in another picture book, *Safari*, highlighted in the article, "Safari Sojourns." The Maasai who live in Kenya and Tanzania are about as typical of Africa as the Amish are of America.

In a similar vein, the book, *Ashanti to Zulu* (Musgrove, 1976), is considered by specialists to reinforce stereotypes. It has been "not recommended" for almost 20 years because it focuses on exotica and the strange and neglects the common sights in every African country: students in uniform on their way to school, city dwellers, soldiers, farmers, fishers, and crafts people.

A word of caution—be careful when seeking tourist information from embassies. Because these materials cater to tourists, they emphasize the exotic, the unusual, and the wildlife. They do not accurately reflect the countries they represent.

3. If a book has a child at the center of the story, so much the better, as such a story will help our children connect to a culture and country far away.

4. Folktales can teach children a culture's values and are worth including in any selection. However, we need to be cautious not to overdo folktales, as many young children find it difficult to separate reality from folktale, especially in cultures they are unfamiliar with. Children may not think of Africans (or Native Americans or Chinese) as part of the modern world of

schools, cities, and farms.

5. Wildlife has a legitimate place in stories on Africa.

But if our purpose is to convey a sense of Africa today, then wildlife should occupy only a small place in a classroom. We in the United States get a steady diet of elephants and lions (and lion kings!), skewing our perceptions of Africa. Yet, most Africans have never seen any big game. In fact, most capital cities have zoos which are very popular with the public.

Our final recommendation is both the most important and the most fun. It is to encourage you and your students to read in depth to appreciate the diversity and complexity of South Africa and other African countries.

References

- Angelou, M. (1994). *My painted house, my friendly chicken and me*. New York: Clarkson Potter.
- Aronson, D., & Steel, M. (1995). The African mosaic. *Teaching Tolerance*, 4(2), 48-55.
- Craft, R. (1991). *The day of the rainbow*. New York: Puffin.
- Daly, N. (1986). *Not so fast Songololo*. New York: Atheneum.
- Hoobler, D., & Hoobler, T. (1992). *Mandela: The man, the struggle, the triumph*. New York: Watts.
- Musgrove, M. (1976). *Ashanti to Zulu*. New York: Dial.
- Isadora, R. (1991). *At the crossroads*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Isadora, R. (1992). *Over the green hills*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Labbo, L., Field, S., & Brook, D. (1995). Safari sojourns: Exploring South Africa with the new geography standards. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 8(2), 8-12.
- Lewin, H. (1983). *Jafta*. [series]. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda.
- Lewin, H. (1992). *The picture that came alive*. New York: Chelsea House.
- Mennen, I., & Daly, N. (1992).

Somewhere in Africa. New York: Dutton.

- Miller-Lachman, L. (Ed.). (1992). *Our Family, our Friends, our world: An annotated guide to significant multicultural books for children and teenagers*. New Providence, NJ: Bowker.
- Randolph, B. (1995a). *Afrophile: Recommended titles on Africa, K-12*. Silver Spring, MD: Africa Access.
- Randolph, B. (Ed.) (1995b). *Africa Access review of K-12 materials*. Silver Spring, MD: Africa Access.
- Schermbucker, J. (1991). *Charlie's house*. New York: Viking.
- Seed, J. (1987). *Ntombi's song*. Boston: Beacon.
- Stelson, C. (1988). *Safari*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda.
- Stock, C. (1990). *Armen's fishing trip*. New York: Morrow.

About the Authors

Barbara B. Brown is the Director of the African Outreach Program at Boston University. As director, she consults for schools, publishers and museums on teaching about Africa.

Lesego Malepe, a South African, is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Wheaton College in Massachusetts. She consults for publishers on teaching about Africa.

Jo Sullivan is the Principal of the Federal Street School in Salem, Massachusetts, and the former director of the African Outreach Program at Boston University.