



Sulwe

Written by Lupita Nyong'o

Illustrated by Vashti Harrison

Simon & Schuster, 2019, 48 pp

ISBN: 978-1-5344-2536-1

At a time when racial inequity and division is at an all-time high, *Sulwe* turns readers' attention towards a divide within Black culture, colorism.

Sulwe, which means star in Luo (a Kenyan language), is the story of a girl who was born with skin tone the color of midnight and who longs for a fairer complexion. Her family is a beautiful range of shades of brown but Sulwe is the darkest of the family. Sulwe doesn't have many friends at school because of her skin tone and is often made fun of

and called names like "Blacky." Her sister Mich, on the other hand, is affectionately given the name "Sunshine." Sulwe wants nothing more than to have real friends and to have the complexion of her sister and takes drastic measures to try to lighten her complexion but is painfully unsuccessful. She is later visited by a star that takes her on a magical journey to the beginning of time, a time when two drastically different sisters co-existed, Day and Night. The star tells Sulwe the story of how the Day was praised for her beauty, but the Night was shunned and called ugly. Fed up, Night flees the Earth and leaves people with only daylight. It quickly becomes evident that the people need Night. Day misses her sister and goes to find Night and bring her back. Day explains to Night that there is brightness in all colors, and she is her most beautiful when she is at her darkest. This story reassures Sulwe of her inner brightness.

The cover of the book is a captivating illustration of Sulwe surrounded by a celestial background. She has beautiful dark skin and a brightness in her striking round eyes that draws readers' attention. On the first page of the story, Harrison's rendering of Sulwe is breathtaking. Her dark skin nearly blends into the darkness behind her; however, the brightness of the moonlight settles on her hair and skin and even in the twinkle she has in her eyes. Readers' eyes are consistently drawn from the left side of the page to the right with the theme of contrasting colors throughout the book. The variety of shades of brown are beautiful and rich with color. Normally, dark colors symbolize a scary or depressing mood but there is beauty in the darkness of these illustrations. The text and illustrations work in harmony with one another; the illustrations alone, as beautiful as they are, come to life as the reader engages with the text that accompanies the pictures.

The theme of the book is self-esteem and challenges the notion of colorism. The message it delivers is that you are more than your skin, and what is inside each person is significant. The fact that the book focuses on colorism is eye opening as this topic is not often discussed but

well known, especially in Black culture. The book addresses young readers but the message benefits all ages.

Books with similar themes that pair well with *Sulwe* include *I Am Enough* (Grace Byers & Keturah Bobo, 2018), *Happy in Our Skin* (Fran Manushkin & Lauren Tobia, 2018), and *Chocolate Me* (Taye Diggs & Shane Evans, 2015).

The author, Academy Award winning actress Lupita Nyong'o, was born of Kenyan parents and has personally dealt with colorism. She was inspired to write *Sulwe* by a letter from a fan. At the 2014 Essence 7th Annual Black Women in Hollywood event, she shared that the fan wrote to her, "I think [...] you're really lucky to be this black but yet this successful in Hollywood over night." The fan also wrote, "I was just about to buy Dencia's Whitenicious cream to lighten my skin when you appeared on the world map and saved me" (France, 2018). These statements resonated with Lupita and as a result, the story of *Sulwe* was born.

The illustrator, Vashti Harrison, is also the illustrator of *Hair Love* (Matthew Cherry & Vashti Harrison, 2019). She has also authored a book series on the New York Times Best Seller list, *Leaders and Dreamers*. She obtained her Masters of Fine Art degree at California Institute of the Arts where she renewed her passion for painting and drawing and her talent has graced the many pages she has illustrated.

References

France, L. (2018, January 19). Lupita Nyong'o penning children's book about colorism. Retrieved February 25, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/19/entertainment/lupita-nyongo-childrens-book/index.html>

Savina Settle, Texas Woman's University

© 2021 Savina Settle



WOW Review, Volume XIII, Issue 4 by World of Words is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Based on work by Savina Settle at <https://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/review/xiii-4/11/>