

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*.

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