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Susan Altman, Susan Lechner. *Ancient Africa.* New York: Children's Press, 2001. 48 pp. $30.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-516-21151-0.

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Susan Altman and Susan Lechner's *Ancient Africa*, part of the "Modern Rhymes about Ancient Times" series, opens with great promise. The book is a collection of brief, illustrated (by Donna Perrone) rhymes on a whole host of topics and personages outside of those that are typically included and associated with Africa (especially in works for younger students): Kerma, Mansa Musa, Ife, the Monomotapa Kingdom, Tariq, Queen Nzinga, and many others.

The first few verses read as if they were intended to overturn the (not incorrectly?) assumed prejudices of the book's readers regarding Africa's supposed primitiveness and darkness: "In the 1920s, in the village of Nok, / Historians rolled their eyes in shock" ("Nok Sculptures Found in Nigeria," p. 8). And there is, I imagine, a genuine surprise for the 9- to 12-year-olds' reading of "Kerma" and discovering in the final line that this was a thriving kingdom south of Egypt over 4000 years ago.

There is even a rhyme on the "Indian Ocean Trade" (p. 28). It is one of the better verses as well, touching on the extent of the networks, the range of goods, the duration of the trade, and its collapse with the arrival of the Portuguese, in simple (but not simplistic), rhythmic lines.

Yet for all that there is to applaud in this work, there is much with which to take issue. There is an awful lot of silliness in the verse and too many non-sequiturs included just to make the rhyme: of Leo Africanus they write, "He wrote a book on all he'd seen and opened people's eyes. / Too bad that he was born before they gave a Nobel Prize" (p. 41). Meroe is characterized as "This fabled ancient city / Was famous, rich, and pretty, / The capital and hub of might Kush" (p. 11).

It is an odd construction, the language stiltingly contemporary–"Giving African technology a push"–while scanning like a Noel Coward ditty. Twice the authors write of Meroe as "famous, rich and pretty" with "palaces aglow / .... a city on the go"–a city, in fact, with "a solid-iron guarantee" (p. 11). You can almost see the chorus, striding across the stage, belting this one out.

Yet this is, perhaps, an issue more of style–and taste–than of great substance. Much more problematic are the issues raised in the verses "Kola Nuts" (p. 21), "Pygmies" (p. 22) and "Maasai" (p. 30).

"Kola nuts grow on a kola tree. / Africans eat them happily" (p. 21) is how "Kola Nuts" opens, implying that Africans eat them like peanuts or popcorn. There is also an interesting and rather oft-putting, if subtle, dichotomy set up between Africans (munching away on kola) and a presumed "us": "They're part of a special recipe / For soft drinks loved by you and me." I wonder about the effect of such language in reinforcing the rhetorical Otherness that has plagued and continues to plague so many of our discussions of the people, places and things of the Continent.

Much more egregious is the verse, "Pygmies." It is inexplicable why there is not some mention of the term as problematic. Almost every other verse has an attached explanatory note and while most just provide hints on pronunciation, there are a few real informative notes–"Tariq" (p. 40) stands out in this regard. Here? Nothing. Characterized by the attestation that "Their clothes are made from pounded bark," the verse reaches for the grotesque with the parenthetical assertion, "(They don't play basketball)" (p. 22).

I just shriveled reading these lines.

There is also a far larger issue that dogs the entire book: called *Ancient Africa*, the book deals with people and things very much of this age, of contemporary Africa. I have not seen the other volumes in this series–on Egypt, Greece, and Rome–though the selection is suggestive of glories to be celebrated and commemorated; glories of the past. The line between ancient and modern

(or contemporary) is blurred: from historic personages (would anyone contend that Shaka belongs to "ancient" history?) to places and things (kente, kola, the "Dogon Tribe," and the kingdoms of Mali and Ife). So much of what is presented in this book on "ancient" Africa is very much of this, our world.

This pull between the ancient and the contemporary is most acutely felt in the verse, "Maasai." The Maasai were this, the Maasai were that–very much in the past tense: they "made opponents tremble" and "chased slavers off their land"; "Their enemies soon learned Maasai / Were deadly to provoke" (p. 30). And yet like fossils, they are preserved (and harmless): "Someday I'll go to Kenya, / Where I'll meet one and say, 'Hi!' "

These are substantive issues, though not enough to dismiss the work out of hand. The verses that work best are truly suggestive and provide just enough information to allow the curious student to explore and learn more about much of Africa that is not well known. The bibliography is brief and of limited use and if a teacher has found his or her way to this work I suppose s/he will have much more useful and on point resources handy. As one might expect, one of the four web sites listed is defunct, one of the links works as printed, and the other two, though no longer at the exact url provided, are easy enough to find.

There is a certain minimalism to the illustrations; they seem much more like background illustrations than anything else and I wonder how engaging they would be for the average fourth-grader. My five-year-old son is fascinated by them–and enjoys the select verses I read him as well.

I would urge teachers and parents to approach this work cautiously. Ultimately, much of the rhetorical "nuance" that concerns me will probably pass over most children's heads. You do risk reinforcing or perhaps unintentionally introducing some of the underlying prejudices about the Continent that are so troubling; yet *Ancient Africa* also offers up much about not-so-ancient Africa that is wondrous and not so well known. Not to mention a whole host of "teaching moments."

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