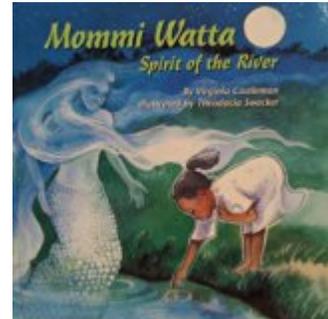


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Virginia Castleman. *Mommi Watta, Spirit of the River*. Ottawa, Kan.: Flatland Tales Publishing, 1995. 24 pp. \$5.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9638421-6-9; \$14.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9638421-5-2.

Reviewed by Sarah Manyika (University of California-Berkeley)
Published on H-AfrTeach (May, 1998)



Mommi Watta is a story set in Liberia. The main character is a girl called Sowa who longs to go to school like her twin brother. In her desire to go to school, Sowa asks Mommi Watta, the river spirit, for help. But, there is a catch to asking Mommi Watta for help because Mommi Watta always asks for something in return for the favours that she grants. In this case Mommi Watta promises to grant Sowa her wish in return for her twin brother. Sowa faces a dilemma and the rest of the story explores how she deals with this dilemma and ultimately makes a decision.

The story maintains a creative tension to the very end and Sowa, is an engaging and believable character. Young readers will identify with Sowa in her struggle to handle desire, distinguish between *right* and *wrong*, and weigh the consequences of her actions. At the end of this book Sowa decides to give up her chances of going to school so that she does not sacrifice being close to her family and brother. For some readers this ending may carry a problematic message by implying that the right thing for a daughter to do is to put up with not going to school. It is doubtful that this is an accurate representa-

tion of gender roles in most parts of Liberia as education is valued for both girls and boys throughout West Africa. Even if it is an accurate representation for some areas of Liberia, the issue deserves greater exploration and questioning.

For the most part, this book manages to avoid the use of stereotypes which plagues so many children's books on Africa. The one page that seems to indulge in stereotypes however, is the page in which Sowa is said to be "lulled to sleep" by chanting voices, the beating of drums and dancers "who circles the fires to ward off evil". Despite this isolated weakness, the story remains a strong children's story. This story is beautifully narrated and the illustrations are colourful and realistic in their portrayal of the setting. This a book that would be enjoyed by children in the early elementary years.

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Citation: Sarah Manyika. Review of Castleman, Virginia, *Mommi Watta, Spirit of the River*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.

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