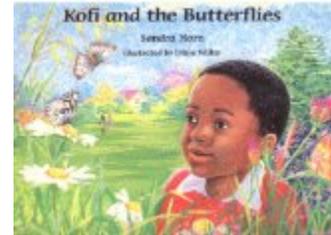


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sandra Horn. *Kofi and the Butterflies*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995. 32 pp. \$8.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86543-519-3.

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A NECESSARY FLIGHT OF FANCY

Kofi and the Butterflies is an allegorical tale of a young boy who loves to watch butterflies in the park. One day, he saves a rare swallowtail butterfly from being caught in a collector's net. As a reward, the butterfly spirits him off to the magical land of the butterflies. He travels through a land of exquisite beauty before being returned to reality. The simple moral of the story is that one should not destroy nature. At the end of the book there is an information page on butterflies in America and on the various butterfly reserves. This is an informative section, although the inclusion of an address or website for at least one such society would have been useful.

>From a narrative point of view, the story holds few surprises. The language is simple enough for a young reader to cope with and it is suitable as a read-aloud to children over 4, and as an independent reader for children over the age of 7. However, the author frequently lapses into clichés such as "He loved the way they (the butterflies) darted and dived and danced in the air." In addition to this, there are a number of instances where the author resorts to trite techniques such as "then", "one day", "all of a sudden", etc. to force the narrative ahead. I am convinced that the story could have been presented in a more exciting narrative format. The transition from reality to a fantasy world is one of the most difficult aspects of writing to master, and in this instance the entire story hinges on the successful transition between worlds. Unfortunately, the author does not succeed in making the transition believable. It is contrived and transparent.

Kofi's only link with Africa is his name, for the story

bears little relevance to African culture. In fact, change the appendix and the illustrations slightly and this book could have been set anywhere in the world. What, then, is the significance of having an African child as the central figure? Surely an American child would be more suited to commenting on environmental issues in his own country? It seems slightly gratuitous to use an African child as the hero of a story if we learn nothing about his culture or his people. Why, for instance does he find himself in America? Is it because of the political situation in his own country? Or perhaps Kofi is an African American child. If so, is there any significance in giving him a name that recalls his African ancestry? There is great potential in this for exploring slavery as a parallel theme to the conservationist one addressed in the book. Other questions also arise: Does Kofi ever think of his home country? Does he sit in the gardens because they remind him of something/somewhere in Africa? The lack of cultural context makes the book voyeuristic and imperialistic in the way it exploits Africa without any noticeable concern for issues that are African.

However, children will be spellbound by the brilliant illustrations. Lynne Willey uses a range of colours that is both exciting and innovative. The pages are full, perhaps too full of information. Willey's use of soft colours enhances the gentle message of the story and creates a peaceful atmosphere. So often illustrators mistake boldness for brilliance, but that is fortunately not the case here. On the whole, I was far more impressed by the artwork than by the story.

If the reader is prepared to overlook the lack of cultural context, and only read the conservationist message on the surface, this book is readable, but not outstanding. If you require more of your reading, and would like your children to explore a variety of cultures in their reading,

then I would stay clear of this book.

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