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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jen Green. *A Family From South Africa.* Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1998. 32 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8172-4902-1.

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This book, and one would assume the entire series, is remarkable for its simplistic focus on the down-to-earth details of the daily life of a typical family. The family of Simon and Poppy Qampie, referred to as "the Qampies," is one of many salary-earning, industrial-class, urban-dwelling households in southern Africa. There are eight people in the house, two daughters (Pearl, 14 and Irene, 11) and one son (George, 4): the presence of the wife's younger sister, Anna, 18, her 2-year old son Matteo, and the presence of the grandmother, Leah, the wife's mother, creates a family setting expected and acceptable for the growing urban areas of metropolitan Johannesburg and other large African cities.

The book combines bright colorful pictures of family mambers with present tense, narrative text, describing the lives the family members live within the setting of Soweto township, and Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city. The pictures and text are supplemented by quotations from family members, and by a prominent section in the left corner of most of the pages that singles out a particular topic for elaborate explanation. Information about a variety of topics is dealt with in this way, including facts about South Africa and the family, the change to the new South Africa "Soweto" (standing for South Western Townships), "spazas" (local stores), employment, education, and young talent. The book itself is divided into eight sections: Introduction, Meet the Family, A House in Soweto, Cooking and Eating, At Work, At School, Spare Time, and The Future.

The tone of the narration is straightforward and to the point, avoiding the complications of controversies that have dominated South Africa even after the end of Apartheid. Conspicuously missing–and appropriately so– are the historical, political, and cultural background details, owing to the target readership, at least primary level ages 4-8, although not stated.

The pictures are beautifully colorful and would definitely attract the recommended age group. They are varied in their scope, too, capturing the entire family in a group with their prominent household items strategically displayed outside the house on the front lawn specially for the picture; the kitchen; the living room; the house's single bedroom; close-up shots of each of the family members; the wife's workplace; inside a classroom at school; the children at play with other children; holy communion at church; house chores and games; and a mesmerizing twilight view of downtown Johannesburg. The pictures are all copyrighted to Peter Menzel, and are supplied by Material World/Impact Photos.

The family featured is said to have been chosen for being "typical of the majority of South African families in terms of income, housing, number of children, and lifestyle," and the formality and neutrality with which the details are presented should pique the interest of youngsters. The contents page pictures a middle-aged woman seated on something that looks like a low-upturned crate, tending to fresh corn roasting over a grill whose heat seems to be coming from one of the following: burning cow dung, coal, wood, or dried grass, but this needs verifying. Though not a relative of the actual family, the woman in the picture serves to tell primary-level children in America about a number of things– a large number of women in some parts of Africa are heads of families and make a living selling various types of things by the roadside, some of which they cook or grow themselves. The corn, commonly referred to as green maize in southern Africa, provides the staple food when ground into flour and cooked into a hard porridge. The book aptly describes this and what it is called in South Africa, "pap." Most of the time the corn is harvested fresh from the field and boiled, other times it is roasted as the picture shows. Either way it is a widely common delicacy in southern Africa.

Children would also be interested to learn about the sleeping arrangements in a small house like the one the Qampie family lives in. The whole family, the eight of them, sleep in the house's one bedroom. The parents and youngest child share one bed, while the rest of the kids

squeeze in the only other bed, sometimes four of them when one other daughter comes home for the weekend from her auntie's place where she goes to school. The book doesn't say where the children sleep when grandmother is home and sleeps in the second bed. There are families in other parts of southern Africa living in urban areas with small houses which rearrange the living room after dark for the children, or sometimes visitors, to sleep– an impression not given by the arrangement in the Qampie family. Indeed families go to other creative extents to deal with the accommodation problem while maintaining the dignity of parents which is a big cultural issue in Africa.

It becomes, therefore, rather difficult for one to imagine the whole family all sleeping in one bedroom, when they can improvise the temporary use of the kitchen and living room just for that purpose. The issue of respect and dignity between parents and their children is taken seriously in many African traditions, and teenage and older children are not allowed to even set foot in the parents' bedroom, in some societies. The book should have been sensitive to such an issue since to suggest that Anna, the eighteen-year-old sister to the wife, and Leah, the grandmother, could all sleep in the same bedroom as the brother-in-law and mother-in-law and the children also is a serious misrepresentation of the traditional values African societies hold in high reverence.

However, an important point, which should have been noted, is the importance of the extended family in most parts of Africa. Grandparents, uncles, sisters, brothers, nephews, nieces, cousins and other relatives are easily integrated into core families in many communities in Africa, where they are treated as equal to everyone else in the family. Of course problems may arise, but for the age range of the readership, this may not be necessary to go into.

It was also a little strange, if not presumptuous, for the family to be asked to take all of their furniture and household items out of the house for the sake of the picture. The concern here is the impression children might get as to how material possessions can be portrayed as the measure for determining a family's prosperity and well-being. There is also the labor involved in moving the heavy pieces of furniture to and fro.

All in all, *A Family From South Africa* is a book children will find attractive not just because of the big, bright, beautiful pictures, but also the focus on the children's perspective in the South African home. It does well to avoid misrepresentation by not featuring a well-to-do family, nor one that is too poor. Children should learn some basic information about South Africa from this book, and can then use their own curiosity to explore more the complicated background issues–such as Apartheid and how it came to end–as they grow up.

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