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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Amy Bronwen Zemser. *Beyond the Mango Tree*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1998. 166 pp. \$14.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-688-16005-0.

Reviewed by Jo M. Sullivan (Principal, Federal Street School, Salem, Massachusetts)
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Finding Friendship in West Africa

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This is a well-written and engaging story about a young American girl living a lonely life as the daughter of a very ill mother, in Monrovia, Liberia in the early 1980s. The focus of this book is a young girl's world when living in a very dysfunctional family, and her search for friendship and understanding in a new.

Sarina's world is narrowly defined because her mother is a seriously ill diabetic and her father is away for days and weeks at a time in rural Liberia at his corporate job with a logging company. The mango tree is central to the story for many reasons, not least because her mother ties Sarina to the tree every day so that she will not leave the yard, thereby not leaving the mother, who tells Sarina daily how much she needs her to take care of her.

In the beginning, Sarina's only friends are the Liberian family servants, a cook, a housekeeper and the night watchman. Her only contact is these three Liberians and she longs for contact with the children and families she sees beyond her yard. There is an occasional contact with a neighboring American family, but this contact is limited and she has difficulty making friends with their younger, spoiled daughter. Gradually, Sarina gets to know a young Liberian boy her age, Boima, who plays with her, climbs the mango tree and tells her about life on "Old Road" beyond her yard. Eventually, she convinces the maid to take her to the markets on Old Road, and Boima takes her to his home to meet his family.

The Liberians in the story are very real and sympathetic, seen at first through her misunderstanding eyes, and then with more clarity and knowledge as the story progresses. What little there is about Liberian life and culture in the city in the 1980s is background to the main drama of the mother's worsening condition, Sarina's increasing responsibilities and resistance to her situation, and a crisis with her Liberian friends. Nevertheless, the descriptions of Monrovia, life in the tropical city during rainy season, the accuracy of the use and description of Liberian English, and the characters of her friends is right on target. The use of Liberian English is not intrusive (at least to this reviewer) and the small details add to the authenticity: the local foods, Liberian expressions, respect for the night watchman "Old Man," the Liberian convention of introducing a story with the teller saying "Once upon a time ..." with the audience replying "Time!" before the story can begin. More importantly, the humanity, kindness, and compassion of the Liberian children and adults toward a lonely little girl are quite typical of the generosity and hospitality of Liberian friends and neighbors.

There is no political context of the repressive 1980s under Liberian leader Samuel Doe, but the social and cultural context provide a realistic background for the story of Sarina and her search for independence and friendship in spite of her confining family circumstance.

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