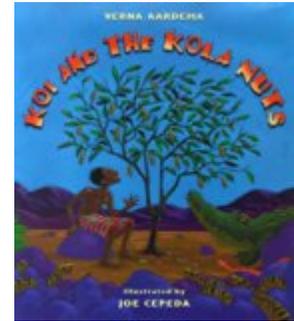


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Verna Aardema. *Koi and the Kola Nuts*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Children, 1999. 32 pp. \$16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-689-81760-1.

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## A Nutty Tale for All

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*Koi and the Kola Nuts* is a well-known story set in Liberia. Originally published as an oral tale in a previous collection by the author, the story has been edited and revised for a modern audience. It has also appeared in an audio production and has been adapted as a play. When Koi inherits nothing but the seeds of the lowly kola tree from his father, the boy decides that it is time to explore the world. He fills his bag with kola nuts and sets off. Along the journey, he meets and helps an array of creatures who just happen to be looking for kola nuts to solve their problems. When Koi finally arrives in the kingdom of King Fulikolli, the creatures repay him for his kindness by helping him win the hand of the king's daughter.

This is a charming tale that emphasises the value of helping those in need. It is aimed at readers between the ages of four and eight. Although moral lessons abound, the story is never preachy. More often than not, Aardema uses humour to convey the message. The complexity of Aardema's humour can be illustrated in the example where the crocodile weeps for the loss of a dog he has eaten. We are almost certain these are crocodile tears when the crocodile offers a toothy smile at the end of the episode. I was reminded at this point of a South African story, *Crocodile's sore tooth* in which a crocodile has some meat stuck in his tooth. None of the animals is brave enough to help him get it out, except for little bird. At the end, freed of the obstruction, crocodile remarks that all the pain has made him hungry. And he smiles at his friend. The irony of crocodile's tears will certainly not

pass by the more discerning reader, and the fact that this story functions on many levels is illustrative of a good storyteller at work.

Written adaptations of oral narratives can pose difficulties, if only in the sense that they often substantially alter the outcome of a traditional tale, or force the story into a linear narrative mode that is not entirely suited to the story itself. Aardema seems to have overcome this problem, for the narrative flows well. However, it would be interesting to compare the original narrative, Aardema's earlier adaptation and the current story. In the present adaptation, Aardema tries to retain the style of an oral narrative by using onomatopoeia to great effect. The sound of the Wise Mañ robes going "ras, ras, ras" and the crocodile's tail swishing "belong-belang" emphasise the presence of an oral narrator and bring the story to life.

There is a very useful and user-friendly glossary at the beginning, yet the story can easily be read without referring to it. Words that are foreign to the English reader are clearly illustrated in the context, and are further illuminated by the illustrations. Joe Cepeda's drawings exploit the humour in the text and, by and large, compliment the story well. I did notice one anomaly, though. In the picture that shows the pythons helping Koi, the tree that is represented has split branches and a pear-like fruit – definitely not the trunk of a palm tree. In the text, it is specifically noted as a palm tree, and in the preceding drawings and also on the following page, the illustrations clearly depict a palm tree.

What was more disturbing was the way in which King Fulikolli's bodyguard is represented. While all the other characters are clad in robes (Koi wears a colourful loincloth throughout), the bodyguard is represented as a virtually naked, spear-wielding hulk. This almost cliched image of a "noble savage" seemed out of step with the rest of the illustrations.

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