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John Tessitore. *Kofi Annan: The Peacekeeper.* New York: Franklin Watts, 2000. 96 pp. Ages 10 through 14. $15.40 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-531-16458-7.

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African History for the Young Reader

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Author John Tessitore nicely blends the story of Kofi Annan's life with a concise introductory explanation of several key points in twentieth century African history. These events are well-chosen as they are also moments when African history intertwines with world history. This is a good use of biography in service of historical understanding by middle school and junior high school children. A good biography is never just about a person; it is about the worlds in which that person lives. Tessitore shows that elite Africans, like Annan, live a complete and coherent life in a number of settings in Europe, America, and Africa.

This is a good book to read. Many interspersed black and white photos illustrate the story in real life. The text is big and clear, parsed frequently in short headed sections, but the language is not simplistic. It assumes some years of reading experience in a student.

Annan's career in the United Nations roughly corresponds to the history of the United Nations (UN), which Tessitore documents in terms of events that forced the world to recognize the need for an overarching body to regulate the independent activities of individual states. Tessitore takes an admirable non-American point of view as he describes the UN's tricky position in trying to serve both the wealthy and powerful nations and those with less world influence. The tempestuous role of the United States in the ongoing mission of the UN is nicely framed in terms of this non-American leader navigating a love-hate relationship with this most powerful yet difficult member state.

Annan happens to be from Ghana, the first of the European colonies in Africa to gain political independence. Tessitore takes the opportunity to help young readers understand economic colonization in Africa through the example of British exports of cocoa, tin, diamonds, and gold from the then Gold Coast colony. He then also is able to use Annan's Ghana to introduce readers to the widespread movement for political independence around Africa, tied to the influential publication of the Atlantic Charter.

Through the discussion of the development of the UN, a young reader also has the basis for understanding various recent events of particular world importance, like the nationalist struggles in Bosnia and the wars in Iraq. Tessitore misses opportunities as well. Because he has synthesized this history from secondary sources, his book sometimes reflects the Eurocentrism of general world history. While he mentions the "horrifically violent war" (p. 62) in Rwanda, he gives young readers no tools with which to grasp this complex, very important, yet largely overlooked event.

Annan is clearly not representative of a majority of Africans; but then, who is. He is a member of an elite class; but this is not obvious in the text. Students may come away with an idea that Africans regularly gain access to opportunities for higher education in Europe and America. But he does a good job of showing that elite Africans live simultaneously in an African way of life and a European or American one. In fact, the book shows moments of ambiguity in Annan's life as he struggles to decide what and where his major role in life should be.

Tessitore uses Annan's experience as a college student in the United States in the early 1950s as an opportunity to historically place the American civil rights movement in the larger context of world events. Here again is a missed opportunity to attend to the fact of Annan's elite status, which determines an experience that is unreflective of the vast spectrum of experiences of American people of color of various national, ethnic, and economic backgrounds.

A bit much is made of Annan's relationship and marriage with a Swedish judge. His first wife, who is from Nigeria, is not even named, but his "romance" with his

second wife is given great detail and photos. The problems with this approach are obvious and trite.

The weaknesses of this book are instructive in themselves. The author is self-critical in his "A Note on Sources" (p. 89). This short discussion of the challenges of sources and methodology for writing history through the biography of a living person gives valuable insight to young students who are ready to be introduced to the notion that history is indeed written by people for particular reasons under particular conditions and restraints. His provision of a bibliography for further reading on various topics in his story, including Rwanda, Iraq, and Yugoslavia, is an important lesson in the fact that one book, one historian, cannot stand alone.

This is a fine piece of work, in the deceptive way that seemingly simple children's books are actually an intricate art of selection, synthesis, and suggestion. There are tragically few opportunities for young people to begin gaining an understanding of Africa and African history. The story of Annan simultaneously lays out a great number of issues and world historical events and makes them accessible for a young student. Teachers, parents, and kids will find a great deal to talk about together after reading this book. This book is recommended for purchase by libraries, teachers, and parents.

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