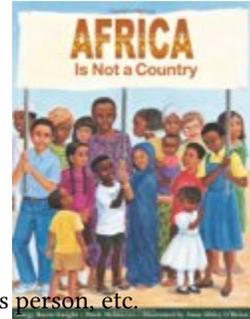


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Margy Burns Knight, Mark Melnicove. *Africa Is Not A Country*. Brookfield, CN: Millbrook Press, 2000. 39 pp.p. Ages 7-12. \$24.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7613-1266-6.

Reviewed by Merry Merryfield (Ohio State University)
Published on H-AfrTeach (August, 2001)



Elizabeth Akingbola, Lolu Akingbola, Awatif Elnour, Mbula Mbole, Sharon Subreenduth, and Deo Tugaraza,

Africa Is Not A Country recently won the Children's Africana Book Award for Best Book for Young Children. It addresses the enduring American stereotype that Africa is homogenous, a continent without diversity. Through one-to-two-page illustrated vignettes—Arim and Efreem leaving for school in Eritrea; Thomas and his father riding horses through the mountains in Lesotho; Henri and his friends playing football in Cote Divoire—the reader experiences events in the daily lives of children across thirty countries. Words from Tigrinya, Fon, Sesotho and other African languages are used effectively to educate young readers about the intersections of language, culture, politics and geography. For example, in the page on Botswana, the authors explain why pula (which means rain in Setswana) is also the name of their currency and why the girl pictured in the book was named Mapula. The vignettes and their illustrations demonstrate some of the diversity of Africa's geography, social classes, rural and urban living, cultural practices, and leisure time (from visiting a zoo in Madagascar to watching television in the Congo to playing on the beach in Senegal). At the end of the vignettes there is a listing of African countries with their capitals, population, a national holiday, and the name of their currency, followed by a distinguishing fact related to the country's history,

geography, architecture, a famous person, etc.

Weaknesses of the book relate mostly to its structure since showcasing one scene from a child's life per country, cannot depict a country's diversity and can lead to overgeneralizations if further study is not done. However, with the exception of the focus on Kenyan children as runners, the authors do an excellent job of staying away from the usual stereotypes in their choice of scenes and activities. There are some places where it appears that choices were made to Americanize content, such as calling the sport known across the continent as "football" by its American term "soccer". Some events and places would be much more likely to have been selected for their interest to Americans—for example, the salt trade from Timbuktu and the Lucy exhibit in Ethiopia—rather than their central position in daily life of people living in those countries. Some sections, such as the one on Rwanda, offer so little information about complex and quickly changing events that students cannot possibly understand what happened or why, yet are left with images of orphaned refugee children.

Overall this book contributes to introducing young Americans to the complexity of the continent and can be used effectively with elementary classes to preface their study of specific cultures or regions and interest them in learning more about children and cultures in different African countries.

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