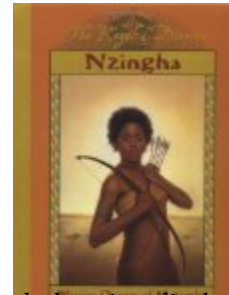


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patricia McKissick. *Nzingha, Warrior Queen of Matamba, Angola, Africa, 1595*. New York: Scholastic, 2000. \$10.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-439-11210-9.

Reviewed by John K. Thornton (Millersville University of Pennsylvania)
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Patricia McKissick is a well-established writer about African and African American history whose work is rightly well regarded. Her writing of fiction with African American historical characters brings the past alive, and has represented some of the best work in the genre. She has also authored and co-authored non-fiction work on Africa as well. This newest work is an attempt to combine her interest in African history with her story telling and historical skills as an installment of Scholastics "Royal Diaries" series. These books highlight the late childhood of a number of famous royal women including Elizabeth I of England, Cleopatra, Isabel of Spain, and the Russian Princess Anastasia. The series aims to inspire young girls and to increase multi-cultural awareness.

Nzingha (known to scholarship generally as Nzinga or Njinga) is a good topic for this treatment. Not only was her life at least as inspiring as those of the other royal females that form the other titles in the series, but she is fairly well known to academic scholarship at least, thanks to an abundant contemporary documentation (including a dozen of her own letters). Unfortunately, McKissick is unable to take advantage of most of this wealth, and produces a decidedly un-historical and inaccurate account of Njinga's life as a young woman of 13.

McKissick's story of Njinga has her as a restless princess in a troubled time of war with Portugal. Ndongo, her country is just reveling in its defeat of Portuguese forces in Kisama in 1594. She wrestles with Ndongo's relationship with Christianity and Portuguese culture through her interaction with the Italian priest Father Giovanni Cavazzi, (disconcertingly spelled as "Gavazzi" and made to be Portuguese), who she at first accuses of treason but later comes to trust. While fretting over her

arranged marriage to be with the colorless Atandi, she develops a friendship bordering on romance (perhaps enough for young readers) with Njali, an Imbangala serving in Ndongo's army.

When Papa Kiluanje, Njinga's father, decides to negotiate a peace treaty with Portugal in 1596 he surprises everyone by choosing Njinga to be his emissary. He sends Father Giovanni along with her as a guide and advisor. There she is held a prisoner, but fortunately Father Giovanni helps her, and she is rescued by her father in a daring raid. Upon returning home, she learns that a younger warrior, Azeze, whom she admires will be her husband.

On the whole, the story is engaging and avoids most of the stereotyping that so often mar stories about African events. McKissick's African characters are interesting and multi-dimensional, and her treatment of Afro-Portuguese relations, especially the use of Father Giovanni avoids the sort of high handed reverse stereotyping that can also mar stories about Africa.

Historians must necessarily allow a certain amount of license for writers of historical fiction. Historical sources often say little about children, even royal ones, and at times the demands of plot and drama require some indulgence. McKissick invokes this license in her "Historical Note" after the story when she relates that she made some historical changes, primarily in having Njinga come to Luanda in 1596 as a girl instead of in 1622 as a woman of 40, in order to enhance the story. Readers are not alerted about other changes: that Father Giovanni, who is a main character in the story and a great help to the young Njinga, was only born in 1621 and did not come to Angola until 1654 is the most glaring. There are many other smaller errors in language and events that

might also slip under the guise of a fiction writer's license.

Do these things really matter? One hopes ideally that a piece of historical fiction like this one takes the minimum liberties with history, and tries as much as possible to get those elements of the story that are verifiable by historical research as right as possible. Fiction should only be used when the sources simply fail, and then probably only in such a way that one can say this or that event could have happened, even if we cannot say for sure that it did happen.

Unfortunately, McKissack compounds the problems of the fictional story by making similar mistakes in the more historical Epilogue that follows the story, and in the explicitly historical "Historical Notes". Here she repeats her statements concerning Giovanni's influence on Njinga in relating her real life visit to Luanda in 1622 as well as continuing the series of smaller historical errors that were found in the story.

McKissack's errors seem to be the result of research that failed to tap scholarly work, and relied on out-of-date popular literature. She cites only one source specifically, a Portuguese translation of an English book, (perhaps Donald Sweetman's well known children's book). She came to know of Njinga only through seeing her portrait among the pictures of "Great Kings and Queens of Africa" commissioned by the Anheiser Busch Company

in the late 1960s. These portraits were excellent art, but neither the pictures nor their sidebars provided much accurate information.

On the other hand, despite the abundant historical materials about Njinga available for historians, there is not really a good English language treatment of her life, outside of a few references in textbook literature and a handful of articles in academic journals. Nowhere is it more obvious that Africanists need to write accessible texts and biographies of the most important events and people of African history. We can only hope that Cathy Skidmore-Hess or Linda Heywood, who are both working on aspects of Njinga's biography, will produce books for the general public soon.

Even beyond the problem of publications, there also needs to be some mechanism whereby writers like McKissack can communicate easily with scholars in a position to offer advice. The internet, which helped McKissack to some degree in her research, is an ideal tool for this sort of communication. Such interaction might not have changed the main lines of McKissack's story at all, but they would have helped to provide her with a better set of small details about the daily life and times of people who participated in events that are fictionalized. These are the elements that make historical fiction such a great teaching tool, for they embed accurate historical knowledge in an exciting and engaging story.

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