

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Katrin Tchana. *Sense Pass King: A Story from Cameroon.* New York: Holiday House, 2002. 32 pp. \$16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8234-1577-9.

Reviewed by Leslie Moore (Applied Linguistics, University of California, Los Angeles)

Published on H-AfrTeach (April, 2003)

In this delightful retelling of a folktale from the Northwest Province of Cameroon, author Katrin Tchana and illustrator Trina Schart Hyman share an engaging and richly textured tale of a gifted young girl who triumphs over a jealous and deceitful king. I highly recommend this book, the narrative and illustrations of which beautifully present a character and a story that are both distinctly Northwest Cameroonian and widely appealing.

Born to farmers in the land of Seven Villages, Ma'antah is a child of prodigious abilities. By the age of three, she can cook, speak all the languages of the land, and communicate with animals. Ma'antah's extraordinary cleverness earns her the name Sense Pass King, which means that she is even cleverer than the king. When the king hears of this child's name and reputation, he becomes angry and jealous. He makes repeated attempts to dispose of her, but each time Ma'antah foils him by her intelligence, courage, and excellent rapport with animals. Shaken by the remarkable powers of the girl, the king brings Ma'antah to live in his palace, where he can keep an eye on her. She becomes his covert counselor, and her advice improves the lives of the people of the seven villages.

When the king seeks alliance with a powerful emperor through marriage to his daughter, it is to Ma'antah that the emperor entrusts his daughter. On the ocean voyage back home, a seven-headed sea monster waylays them, demanding the princess. The cowardly king would give up the princess to save himself, but Ma'antah slays the monster and saves them all. Safely returned to the seven villages, the king claims as his own the clever and brave deeds of Ma'antah, but his soldiers make known to the people the truth: that it was brave and wise Sense Pass King who saved them. The people then drive the king from the seven villages. They make Ma'antah queen, and she rules wisely and well.

Tchana's pacing of the story is smooth and dramatic, and her use of dialogue is skillfully restrained. Ma'antah is an extremely appealing protagonist for children: small, smart, courageous, and kind, she triumphs over unworthy authority and uses her gifts to help her people.

Hyman's acrylic double-page paintings are gorgeous and glowing, capturing the hazy gold of bright daylight, the many greens of the forest, and red to purple layers of night in this region of Cameroon. As in her illustrations of European folktales, Hyman situates this tale of a child-queen of long ago in a traditional village setting and depicts everything—individual people, clothing, architecture, animals, food—with exquisite attention to detail. Ma'antah is portrayed in a range of emotional states (thoughtful, smiling, angry, bold, but always sure of herself), giving depth to her character. Children will also delight in the depictions of animals, from the ever-present chickens and lizards to the noble panther family that calls on the queen and princess.

I asked two friends of mine what they thought of the book. Both women are kindergarten teachers with four-year-old daughters. One served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Cameroon and is married to a Cameroonian who grew up hearing the tale of Sense Pass King. Both women like the book very much, and both appreciated Tchana's decision to make Sense Pass King a girl (in traditional tellings, Sense Pass King is a boy). One aspect of the story that disturbed my friend who is not familiar with Cameroon or Africa was the old king's interest in marrying the very young (perhaps five or six years old) daughter of the emperor. With older children, this might require some explanation. Early contraction of marriage has been and still is practiced in many cultures, often to establish or strengthen an alliance between two families. A young girl who joins the family of her intended husband is typically treated as a daughter

of the household until she is old enough to become a wife.

Also, an explanation of how to pronounce the apostrophe in Ma'antah would be helpful for readers who are unfamiliar with this notation. As a linguist, I assume the apostrophe indicates a glottal stop, the sound you make in the middle of the exclamation uh-oh.

Tchana also co-wrote with her sister-in-law Louise Tchana Pami the extremely charming but now out-of-print *Oh, No, Toto!* (illustrated by Colin Bootman). Hyman is a Caldecott Medal Winner who has illustrated many childrens books, including *The Fortune-Tellers* (written by Lloyd Alexander). Inspired by a visit to Cameroon with her daughter and her family, Hyman's illustrations in this book beautifully depict the Far North of Cameroon.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Leslie Moore. Review of Tchana, Katrin, *Sense Pass King: A Story from Cameroon*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. April, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7442>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.