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Nelda LaTeef. *The Hunter and the Ebony Tree.* North Kingstown, RI: Moon Mountain Publishing, 2002. 29 pp. $15.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9677929-9-6.

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Retelling a Zarma Folktale

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In this beautifully illustrated book for five to nine-year olds, Nelda LaTeef takes a Zarma folktale from Niger in West Africa and retells it in her own words. The tale is a standard one: a loving father will only allow his wise and beautiful daughter to marry a man worthy of her, and so he decides that any potential suitor must be put to some test, in order to win her hand. The twist in this tale is that although the daughter knows she cannot contradict her father, she would also like a say in whom she marries. Taking advantage of her father's state of uncertainty, she suggests that her future husband should be able to pierce the trunk of the very old ebony tree standing in the center of their village, knowing that it will take qualities other than physical strength to accomplish the task.

While folktales in general are often the repositories of some of society's most conservative values, especially when it comes to their treatment of women, the description on the dustjacket of this book suggests its story will an exception. However, the small window of agency afforded the daughter in participating in the choice of a future partner is offset by LaTeef's consistent use of the word "girl" to describe the marriageable young woman, while her suitors are all described in non-parallel fashion as "men." Obviously, interpreting this is a hard call. African women are often much younger than their husbands, and the story of a girl is no doubt more interesting to children than that of a woman, but the diminution of women is nonetheless inherent to the book's vocabulary, although the accompanying illustrations do not depict a child. A simple way to avoid the problem would have been to give the characters names, but they remain nameless throughout the tale.

The hunter who eventually wins the contest does so by getting help from his friends in the natural world. This is the most delightful part of the tale, and could also be a wonderful basis for a discussion on friendship and cooperation. A woodpecker taps a hole in the ebony tree for the hunter, a spider weaves a fine web to conceal it, and a butterfly marks the spot where the hole is. At the end of the story the hunter tells his bride, "My dear, with loyal friends and a good plan everything is possible."

The acrylic and collage illustrations in *The Hunter and the Ebony Tree* constitute a large part of the book's appeal. Most strikingly, LaTeef has used actual cloth or photographs of cloth for the long flowing robes, turbans, and other headdresses of the village people. The six-year old and nine-year old with whom I read this book for the first time were particularly delighted with the hunter's leopardskin garments. A valuable addition to this book is the author's note on the last page, where LaTeef describes the origins of the tale. She recorded it from a Zarma griot in Niger and a friend translated it for her into French. The note also provides some accurate ethnographic information on the Zarma and a map showing the parts of Niger, Mali and Benin where the Zarma and other Songhai groups live. This will be of special interest to older children who are studying African geography.

Overall, *The Hunter and the Ebony Tree* is a responsible and charming retelling of a Zarma tale and would be a good choice for an elementary school library seeking to expand its collection in this area. As such, this book is recommended.

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