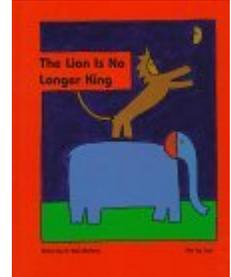


In Koli Bofane. *The Lion is No Longer King*. Toronto and New York: Annick Press, 1997. 26 pp. \$16.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55037-418-6.



Reviewed by Kathryn Z. Weed

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The lion, the self-proclaimed king, terrorizes all the other animals. They each submit to him, fulfill an often distasteful duty, and pay their daily respects. One day, however, the mongoose, the royal body guard charged with keeping snakes away, decides to take the day off. And, naturally, a snake bothers the king. The king sends three animals to bring the mongoose back. The clever mongoose has a retort for each which sends them flying back to the lion with the terrible news that the mongoose can kill lions! The lion spends a sleepless night and arises the next morning to find all the animals attending the coronation of the mongoose. The lion is no longer king.

This picture book, translated from the French *Pourquoi le lion n'est pas le roi des animaux*, sets the scene of the terrorizing lion and the duties of his animal subjects in three pages. The problem is then introduced--the mongoose taking the day off--and the arena is set for conflict. However, nothing comes of it. The mongoose does her part. She is depicted as clever and sly and, through her own statements about her ability to kill lions and her ruse of weaving coconut fibers into lion-resembling pelts, the first two groups of animals the

lion sends hurry back to the king with the bad news. She is only truthful to the turtle whom she assures that life will be better without the tyrant lion. "Just imagine how happy we could all be if we could play, swim, and share a meal in the shade whenever we felt like it..." When the lion learns of the mongoose's lion-killing abilities, he roars, "I'll have to take severe measures and be pitiless!" This is the extent of his threat. He goes to sleep, has nightmares, and is too weak to roar in the morning. He goes to the mongoose's house where, hidden behind a baobab tree, he witnesses her coronation. And that is the end of the story with the caveat that now the lion must "get his own meals, just as you and I do."

Although the story has potential, there is no actual resolution. The two parties do not stand off in any way, there is no compelling reason why the lion did not do as he threatened, no reason why the mongoose should be coronated. Additionally, certain statements, such as the one quoted above by the mongoose have, at best, a false ring of anthropomorphism to them or, as the one she utters at her coronation ("Shy Antelope, fearful Zebra, you won't ever have to be the lion's dessert!") are

downright false. The conclusion (lion must "get his own meals, just as you and I do") not only comes out of nowhere but also introduces its message in the first and second person which has a jarring effect.

The story does not read smoothly, for example, on the first page the lion is being touted as all powerful, in control of all animals, but then an unspecific reference to the reader's background knowledge about snakes ("...but, as we all know, a snake is a snake!") is added. Several elements appear to be added gratuitously, perhaps to fill up space (such as the one-time mention of the crocodile accompanying the mongoose on her day off). The storyline does not provide a compelling explanation as to why the lion is no longer king, particularly in light of the fact that much of the world still considers him as such. Another lack is that of background material. Many international books are now including information about the group whose tale is represented or, if the story is original, the background of the author and perhaps what may have inspired that particular story.

The illustrations are vivid, painted in primary colors with no shading. These would perhaps appeal to very young children who could identify the numerous animals. They might be confused, however, at the eye placement on several animals--even in profile we see two eyes, one in its proper location, the other floating in the background. This artistic device appears random. For example, on the title page, the birds and snake pictured in profile have only one eye, while the monkey, giraffes and buffalo, also in profile, have two.

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