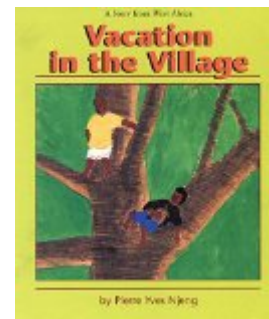


**Pierre Yves Njeng.** *Vacation in the Village*. Honesdale, Penn: Boyds Mills Press, 1999. 32 pp. \$14.95 (cloth) ISBN 1-56397-768-0, \$6.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-56397-823-4.



**Reviewed by** Donnaræ MacCann

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Traveling from city to countryside is not a deep subject, but it serves as an ideal springboard for Pierre Yves Njeng, an accomplished colorist, in *Vacation in the Village*. His town-to-country storyline becomes a richly visualized excursion.

As for the narrative journey, it highlights small tensions confronted by young children, as, for example, when they face the unknown. Njeng treats these tensions respectfully. His young hero, Nwemb, leaves behind friends and toys to visit grandparents in the interior. His fears about loneliness and boredom are soon dispelled since the family has arranged for a boy to meet his train and become a constant companion. From this point, the tale is a "buddy" story -- a chronicle of boys fishing, tree-climbing, and crafting toys from bamboo. Beyond such simple pleasures, Njeng introduces less tangible satisfactions: the closeness within an extended family, the generosity that accompanies friendship (Nwemb's new buddy presents him with a pet turtle), the special coziness of wood fires, kerosene lamps, and grandfather's tales of ancestors and forest magic. Life for a child in Cameroon is a good life whether it

means an urban school, modern kitchen, and automated toys, or, on the other hand, a corn field, forest, and fishing hole. Urban and rural settings have beauties of their own, and over all is the beauty of a caring family.

These settings and characters are a good starting point, but the essential language of a painter is visual. Njeng uses a palette of rich colors and paints bold and delicate shapes as a means of producing the warmth and solidarity of his theme. Using this pictorial technique, he highlights body language rather than facial detail (as, for example, in his orchestration of human figures and the limbs of an enormous tree). Additionally, he lets bits of white serve as accents, as in a pair of shorts and especially in the many patterned textile designs in garments, bedclothes, and curtains. Nothing interferes with this overall aesthetic conception. All viewers (young and old) can join in appreciating Njeng's painterly proficiency and radiant personal style (although the publisher pinpoints ages four to eight as the primary age range).

Looking at this book in a larger context, I must add that Njeng's work is a welcome antidote to the books with an anti-African bias. Njeng's treatment of African experience is far removed, for example, from the condescending caricatures that populate Niki Daly's *Not So Fast, Songololo* (1985) and *Charlie's House* (1989). Daly's work emphasizes backwardness, incompetence, and low aspirations in indigenous South Africans. His White-over-Black subtexts override his attempts at humor. Yulisa Amadu Maddy discussed in 1995 the problems in *Charlie's House*: "The message here focuses on . . . the so-called 'backwardness' of a boy who revels in the creations he can make from mud . . . . Is it true that Africans are content to live in squalor and play in open sewers?" (p. 125).

In contrast to Daly, Pierre Yves Njeng is true to a multicultural perspective. As a Black artist with African subjects and settings, he joins Veronique Tadjou from Cote d'Ivoire (*Lord of the Dance*, 1988) and African American artists John Steptoe (*Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, 1988), Terea Shaffer (illustrator of Angela Shelf Medearis's *The Singing Man*, 1994), and Kathleen Atkins Wilson (illustrator of David A. Anderson/SANKOFA's *The Origin of Life on Earth: An African Creation Myth*, 1993). These African and African American artists should be recognized as among the standard bearers for African picture books.

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