

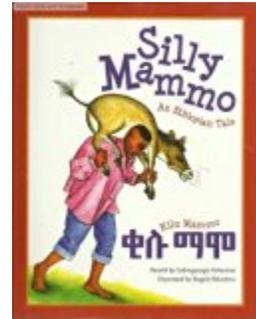
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gebregeorgis Yohannes. *Silly Mammo: An Ethiopian Tale*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Dickinson Press, 2002. 30 pp. \$10.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-883701-04-8.

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Silly Mammo: An Ethiopian Tale is a wildly colorful and entertaining folktale retold by Gebregeorgis Yohannes and illustrated by Bogale Belachew that children of many different ages and backgrounds will enjoy. It is also a fundraising effort for a great cause. With 100 percent of its sales profits supporting the establishment of Ethiopian Books for Children and Educational Foundation in Ethiopia, educators, parents, and children can feel good about the story itself as well as its socially conscious contribution to education and literacy.

Silly Mammo is the name of a simple country boy whose well-intentioned efforts to help his mother by contributing to the household go hilariously awry again and again. Each time he collects his payment for a day's work, his own silliness sees it squandered before he gets home. With each mistake, his mother lovingly advises him on how to do better next time. But *Silly Mammo* takes each piece of advice too literally and continually repeats his dramatic errors to the jeers of other villagers. In the end, however, his silliness pays off when he makes the beautiful but sad daughter of a rich businessman break out into peals of laughter. Mammo emerges the hero when his reward is to wed the lovely Tewabech.

As the author explains on the back cover of the book, *Silly Mammo* (Kilu Mammo in Amharic) is a popular folktale in Ethiopia, yet like most folktales it contains themes familiar across many different cultures and time periods. Similar to the English folktale *Obedient Jack*, Yohannes tells us, the story of *Silly Mammo* is nonetheless very much Ethiopian. With large, colorful drawings depicting the characters and scenery in lively detail and a presentation style that follows traditional Ethiopian storytelling patterns—complete with an elderly blind man calling the

children around him on the first page to hear the tale—*Silly Mammo* feels like an authentic slice of Ethiopian village life. At the same time, its universal themes of love, family responsibility, obedience, human error, and good intentions will appeal to children of every background.

One of the book's greatest strengths is the use of both Amharic and English throughout the text. With the English and Amharic written side-by-side and Amharic words peppering the English text (readers can consult the glossary in the back, although the context is usually clear), *Silly Mammo* has instructional value for children learning Amharic or just being introduced to languages other than their own. In addition to the story itself, the illustrations contain many other details of Ethiopian culture and social life that children can discuss with one another, parents, and teachers. For example, many will be keen to talk about the traditional food, houses, and clothing depicted throughout the story, providing a wonderful context to teach about cultural diversity. Moreover, the introduction of *Silly Mammo* in classrooms with children of Ethiopian heritage will undoubtedly impart to them a sense of pride in their culture and language and also offer them a chance to be teachers to their non-Ethiopian peers. Having tested out *Silly Mammo* myself on several children, with a uniformly positive response, it seems that the book is very appealing for all of these reasons.

The only potential problem with the book stems from the unfortunate reality of a world plagued by racial and cultural prejudice. In this regard it might be tempting to criticize *Silly Mammo* for its focus on protagonists with disabling characteristics and the impression it might leave on children already exposed to negative images of African people and cultures. Mammo is without a doubt

a simpleton, a grown man who acts like a young child and cannot meet his responsibilities despite his best efforts. Tewabech, the beautiful but sad maiden he marries, is isolated because she is deaf and mute. And the villagers who tease Mammo seem oblivious or unsympathetic to his limitations. The focus on human imperfections could inadvertently shape children's ideas about Ethiopian people and culture if teachers and parents are not vigilant in contextualizing the story as a folktale and discussing the positive attributes of the protagonists and other characters. In this regard, it may have been helpful to place the author's note about folktales and universal themes at the beginning, where readers will be more likely to incorporate that information as they share the story with young people. Overall, this is a highly recommendable book.

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