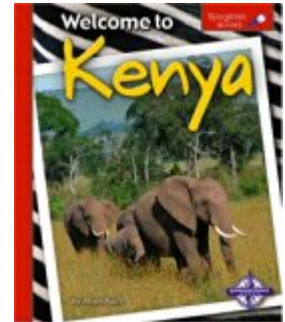


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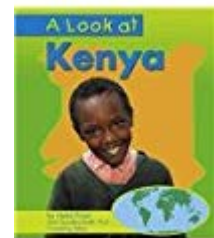
Alison Auch. *Welcome to Kenya.* Minneapolis: Compass Point Books, 2003. 24 pp. \$13.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7565-0369-7.



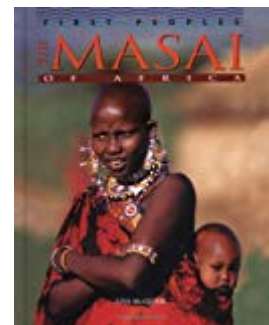
Catherine Broberg. *Kenya in Pictures.* Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2003. 80 pp. \$27.93, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8225-1957-7.



Helen Frost. *A Look at Kenya.* Mankato: Capstone Press, 2002. 24 pp. \$11.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7368-0984-9.



Lisa McQuail. *The Masai of Africa.* Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2002. 48 pp. \$23.93, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8225-4855-3.



Barbara Saffer. *Kenya*. Mankato: Bridgestone Books, 2002. 64 pp. \$18.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7368-0771-5.



Reviewed by Herine Ogutha and Barbara B. Brown

Published on (August, 2004)

In this review of five children's books we consider the pitfalls of writing on Kenya. Three of the books were written for younger readers and two for older ones. While Kenya is one of the better known countries in Africa, ironically it also suffers from being one of the most stereotyped. This stereotyping arises directly from knowledge created in popular films and books of Europeans and Americans: from Ernest Hemingway to Isak Dinesen, and from Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn to Robert Redford and Meryl Streep. The stories they offer revel in the exotic and in the wildlife, with whites always in the foreground, as the only people genuinely making and shaping the country. In recent years, safari tours and endangered wildlife have reinforced these old notions of "primitive Africa." Consequently, writers for the general public, including for children, must work against widely accepted notions of what "Kenya" is. Of the five books under review, not all succeed or succeed all the time. Each book will be reviewed in turn on its own merits, with a concluding commentary on key criteria for assessing children's books.

A Look at Kenya, intended for ages four to eight, begins with a diagram of the map of Kenya, including its position on the world map. The author of the book moves on to describe the capital city, currency, and diverse geographical regions

among other features of the country, in a simple and comprehensible manner. The information presented is accompanied with many colorful photographs, making it easy for children to grasp the written material. The book opens with a large photograph of a Kenyan student, with whom a young reader can easily identify. The arrangement of the book is refreshing, since wildlife is not the initial detail with which the reader is presented, and its importance to the country is not overemphasized. There is broader coverage of different aspects that comprise the country Kenya as a whole.

Though the author mentions the different features of Kenya, the information is presented as isolated facts; the book thus has no basic storyline. Each page contains specific detail about Kenya, with little connecting one page to the next. The book could have contained more content on aspects of the country such as government or food that a young reader may be curious about. Nonetheless, *A Look at Kenya* provides accurate, diverse and interesting information about the country. We therefore recommend this book.

Another book, also intended for four to eight year olds, *Welcome to Kenya*, takes an entirely different approach in its description and detail of Kenya. The book contains a section of fun facts about the capital city, Swahili language, and

wildlife in Kenya. The fun facts presented are brief, and accompanied with pictures. Going through them is much like taking snapshots of the country. This type of arrangement makes reading the book more interesting for children.

However, *Welcome to Kenya* offers a contrast to the first book reviewed, opening not with a photograph of a girl but of an elephant. In so doing, *Welcome to Kenya* could be subtitled "Welcome to the World of the Wild." The book goes on to feature animals throughout, including using animals as border illustrations on all pages.

In a similar manner, a reader could easily be misled on the prevalence of the Masai in Kenya. On the first page of *Welcome to Kenya* is a picture of a Masai woman, leaving the reader to infer that the Masai form a majority in the country. Auch proceeds to include several pictures of rural Masai in traditional dress (not, say, wearing school uniforms). The impression left is that the majority of Kenyans are Masai cattle herders who wear wonderful jewelry.

Towards the end of the book, the author includes a Masai folk tale, "How Elephants Became Wild." Folk tales can be a wonderful way through which children worldwide may connect with other cultures. However, historically there has been an overemphasis on African folk tales, portraying them as though they were the only means through which Africans acquired education. In light of the fact that the book is heavily skewed toward the Masai and focuses almost exclusively on rural Kenya, the book is misleading and not recommended.

The Masai of Africa, for ages nine through twelve, focuses exclusively on this people. Why children need another book on an atypical group is not clear. However, it must be said that this book does not attempt to portray the Masai as representative of Kenya. The book gives a comprehensive account of their history and culture. In a rare bit of good history for children, the book shows how Masai life has been changing in the

last fifty years, moving, for instance, from pastoralism to an increasing amount of urban work. The author's portrayal of relationships within the community, particularly of women, is positive. The author connects the Masai with similar communities in East Africa, showing them more blended in with other people in the world instead of oddly peculiar and isolated, as so often portrayed in the West. However, based on the fact that the Masai are often portrayed in a manner to depict Kenya and the African continent as aloof or still very primitive, I believe that the author should have included more detail about modern day Masai or Masai in the city. For readers outside of the continent who do not have any knowledge about Africa, focusing only on rural Masai may be harmful. It may just reinforce already existing stereotypes.

Kenya, in the Country and Cultures series, gives an overview of Kenya: past and present with a brief look toward the future. The historical section is seriously marred by its depiction of coastal trade and Swahili history as mainly an Arab phenomenon. The colonial period is adequately covered, except for the unfortunate references to Kenyans as "native Africans." The author describes the birth of the modern nation with its struggle for independence and gives detail about Kenya today, her economy, people, and rural and urban areas.

Kenya in Pictures offers a similarly broad overview of the country. Its summary of Kenyan history suffers from similar problems: viewing Arabs and Europeans as the actors in Kenyan history while the Africans were those acted upon. In the section on the Mau Mau uprising, African participants are referred to as "terrorists." The more contemporary sections of the book do better with descriptions and helpful photographs of the economy, urban and rural life and politics. The author includes ideas and events important to Kenyans, such as the high value set on education.

A review of different books on the same topic offers the opportunity to look for common errors and to pinpoint successes. Most of the books reviewed here reinforce stereotypes of Kenya (and of Africa generally), of a place of wild animals and exotic people with little history of their own. The criteria for a good non-fiction book are not in fact difficult: accuracy and balance.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at [#uninitialized#](#)

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