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Jane Kurtz. *Saba: Under the Hyena's Foot.* Middleton: Pleasant Company Publications, 2004. 224 pp. $15.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58485-829-4; $7.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58485-747-1.

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An Ethiopian Girl's Adventures

Saba is a twelve-year-old peasant girl in rural Ethiopia during the 1840s. Her story begins on a note of mystery and fear, and soon Saba and her brother Mesfin are kidnapped and taken to the Emperor's palace in Gondar. There, she learns the truth about her family and herself, which is that she is descended from a former Emperor and thus from the legendary Queen of Sheba (Saba) herself. At a time when the power structure in Ethiopia is in considerable flux–a period that historians refer to as the "Zamana Masafent," or the "era of the princess," when there was yet to emerge a clear central authority in the region[1]–Saba's position within that structure is precarious. With the help of a wise teacher and a courageous friend, Saba and Mesfin barely escape alive from Gondar. They leave in search of their father, who is himself in hiding, knowing that further challenges await them.

Packaged as "intermediate fiction," which in the world of children's literature means that it is geared for ages ten through twelve, *Saba* is a charming volume in many respects. The story line is strong if somewhat formulaic, and it offers a thoughtful and well-researched window into the cultural milieu of nineteenth-century Ethiopia. Above all, we can be grateful to the author for providing our daughters with a positive girl hero. Saba's greatest accomplishment is that she overcomes her own fears, and she learns that, despite what she has been raised to think, the Oromoo are not necessarily barbarians. As she meets the various challenges in her path, including escape from an arranged marriage, she realizes the truth of the aphorism that her grandmother has taught her, that even small people can achieve powerful results just as "when spiders unite, they can tie up a lion." In the end Saba takes a leading role, with other characters (even her teacher and her older brother) depending on her. The author pulls this off successfully, even as she makes it clear that Saba is unusual–in her place and time, life was difficult for most children, and certainly few girls would have received the education that Saba enjoys.

Another of the book's accomplishments–and clearly one of the author's motivations–is to enlighten readers about Ethiopian history and the cultural practices of the region. In addition to the political intrigue, there is a fascinating and realistic tension throughout between the Coptic and traditional religious practices. Among other

things, we learn about the *kinae* of the azmari poets, a sophisticated poetic form that offers both "wax" and "gold" meanings.[2] A lavishly illustrated postscript, along with a brief glossary, provides useful historical and social context.

Author Jane Kurtz (no relation to the present reviewer) has written numerous children's books, with a number of them set in Ethiopia, where she spent her childhood. *Saba* belongs to the Girls of Many Lands series that is a spin-off of the successful American Girl toy and media conglomerate (interested parties may purchase the Saba doll and other accessories from their website), and as a result it is attractively and professionally packaged. The story itself is well written and entertaining, both delightful and instructive.

Notes

[1]. See Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991).

[2]. For a discussion of this form, also transliterated as "Qine," see Getatchew Haile, "Highlighting Ethiopian Traditional Literature" in *Silence Is Not Golden: A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature*, ed. Taddesse Adera and Alie Jamir Ahmed (Lawrenceville, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1995), pp. 39-59.

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