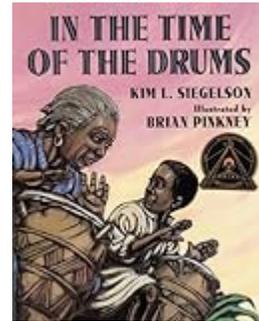


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kim L. Siegelson. *In The Time of the Drums.* New York: Hyperion Press, 1999. 31 pp. \$15.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7868-0436-8.



Reviewed by Toyin Falola (The University of Texas at Austin)

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This picture book makes for enjoyable reading. The opening vividly captures the events narrated in the book and the story is beautifully illustrated. The author shows that drums, music, and folklore (telling stories) are a way of life among African-Americans. The engaging tale is narrated in children's language, employing colorful words that appeal to sight and sound. The author captures the readers' imaginations as they learn a moralistic story without being preached to. The book is enlightening, brilliantly presented, and reinforces the importance of conveying the past to children.

The main story is drawn from a popular folktale among African-American communities in the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina. The author originally heard the story from her grandfather and adds her own modifications while retaining the theme of supernatural powers and freedom from slavery. The idea in the original story as well as in the one retold here, is that a suffering people can magically empower themselves. They can choose physical death over slavery and begin a journey to freedom. The story ends with enslaved African-Americans magically obtaining the power to walk beneath the water of the Atlantic ocean and return to Africa as free citizens.

Set in the context of slavery in the United States, the book tells how slaves were so demoralized their thoughts

were only concerned with picking cotton, eating and sleeping. They had forgotten how to live, and turned to stories to recreate life, to communicate with one another and to talk about future generations. Indeed, one way for them to be happy was to tell stories. The author goes on to tell one of their favorites.

In this story, we have two leading characters: a wise old woman by the name of Twi, and a young boy named Mentu. Twi taught Mentu the wisdom of Africans, and it was Mentu's responsibility to pass on the stories and wise sayings to his own children and later generations. A strong black woman, Twi was feared not only because of her magical powers but because she kept alive African tradition. She did not succumb to the overwhelming slave owners' influences and detrimental, laborious work. Nurturing Mentu since birth, Twi showed him the ways that others had forgotten and relinquished. Mentu developed the need to be strong, in a physical way, but Twi taught him that being strong meant having an emotional and spiritual connection to the past and future heritage. As Mentu grew older, his bonding and affection for Twi became stronger. Both of them eventually connected to each other to keep alive their African memories.

In the end, Twi used her magical power to transport herself and a group of new slaves back to Africa. She did

not take the old slaves with her because they already accepted their brutal existence and made the mistake of forgetting about Africa. As Twi disappears from the story, Mentu becomes a mature older person, keeping the traditions of old, and telling stories “so rich that they wondered if he had lived in Africa himself.”

The themes and moral lessons are clear: never forget where you come from; pass on traditional ways to your

children; and keep Africa alive in your hearts. This is a great book to read, especially for African-American children.

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