

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**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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*Saba: Under The Hyena's Foot*, recommended for grades 6-8, is a story of twelve-year-old Saba who, in 1846, finds herself plunged into a fierce struggle for the throne of Ethiopia during the tumultuous era of the princes. The story opens with Saba, supposedly an orphan, living a rather simple life with her grandmother, Emama, and her brother, Mesfin, soon after her grandfather's death. A series of unexplained accidents take place which lead to Saba and her brother's abduction. At first Saba is bewildered and frightened but is persuaded to remain calm by Mesfin who reminds her that "[t]his is the time to be brave" (p. 56). Upon their arrival to the ancient city state of Gondar and the reigning Emperor Yohannes III, Saba declares that nothing would have prepared her for the "wonder that was Gondar" (p. 59) Even as she is awestruck by the riches and lavishness of the palace, she remains alert. By piecing together clues from those around her, Sabu discovers her royal identity and the mystery surrounding her parents' disappearance.

Before long Saba discovers that she is a descendant "of the blood of Makeda, the mighty Queen of Sheba," to whom a legitimate ruler must trace his heritage (p. 85). She is exuberant at her newfound legacy but along the way learns the treacheries of court life and the danger royal heritage poses to her and her brother. Saba is soon disillusioned with the dynastic house of Solomon as she

realizes that her uncle, although a direct descendant of Makeda, was merely a puppet doing the bidding of Empress Menen and General Ali. When given a choice between remaining at court and embarking on a search for the father she thought dead Saba chooses the unknown. Saba compares the relationship between Empress Menen and her son General Ali as "wild animals ready to claw and bite each other to death" and decided that the "hyena life" was not for her (pg.192).

The heart of the story is one of self-awareness, family, loyalty, and friendships, which everyone can relate to, regardless of cultural background. When we first meet Saba, she is a restless young girl haunted by the mysterious disappearance of her parents and the recent death of her grandfather. As the story evolves, Saba slowly begins to develop her personal identity as she discovers her royal heritage and gains awareness of her role in the larger history of the country. She gradually begins to overcome her fears as she learns that "fear was not fought in the stomach but simply one stumbling step when it was needed" (p. 194). Ultimately, she is transformed from an uncertain young girl to one determined to reunite her family. Her journey of self-discovery is finally realized when she proclaims, "I have the blood and name of the Queen of Sheba, and I am not afraid" (p. 193).

Although the story takes place in 1846, the book in-

cludes a brief section entitled “Then and Now” to place Ethiopia within the contemporary world. This section also does an excellent job of placing not only the main character but also other cultural and traditional practices mentioned in the book within modern-day Ethiopia. There is also an author’s note, which provides a brief account of her experience in Ethiopia and her approach to the novel.

Jane Kurtz spent most of her childhood in Ethiopia where she was able to pick up various facets of Ethiopian culture and the monarchy in Ethiopia. That experience is apparent in her inclusion of lesser-known Ethiopian customs and the ease with which she uses Amharic phrasing. The dialogue is rich in traditional Ethiopian proverbs and the characters convey important lessons through story telling. The illustration of Saba, found on the cover and inside page, is remarkably true and rich in details. Other images are used to place items and locations referenced in the novel within contemporary Ethiopia.

The book’s value largely lies in the author’s ability to tell a story, fused with history, against a rich cultural tapestry. The author conducted extensive research to use as the background of the novel, which is apparent in her use of a relatively complicated and involved period in Ethiopian history. In doing so, the author avoids many of the common mistakes one finds in books on and about Africa, such as gross generalizations and statements that show obvious western bias. Indeed, the novel with its attention to details and local color dispel many notions

about African society and culture.

Some aspects of the novel that might require more effort from the reader are the same features that enrich and enhance the novel. The use of local vernacular, while serving to create an unmistakable sense of place, might distract some readers from the tale; however, a complete glossary with definition and pronunciation is provided. Likewise, the heavy lacing of aphorisms, which go a long way in situating the novel, might prove to be challenging at the outset. Though it is not required, it might be helpful to have some basic background and understanding of Ethiopia for an easier read. However, those with little or no background will be able to follow the story and might later consider doing further reading in Ethiopian history.

The novel is a well-executed, strong, first-person narrative with a wealth of historical facts and wonderful insight into the social, cultural, and political life of nineteenth-century Ethiopia. The author draws a vibrant picture of the daily life of peasants, soldiers, and royalty that provides readers with a glimpse of the cultural diversity and social composition of society. While Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity is dominant in the novel, Islam, Judaism, and indigenous religion are also placed within social context. Similarly, there is a sensitive handling of ethnicity as the novel presents the complexity and fluidity of ethnicity in Ethiopia. Overall, *Saba* is a captivating read and can be employed either as a learning tool in a classroom setting or as leisure reading.

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