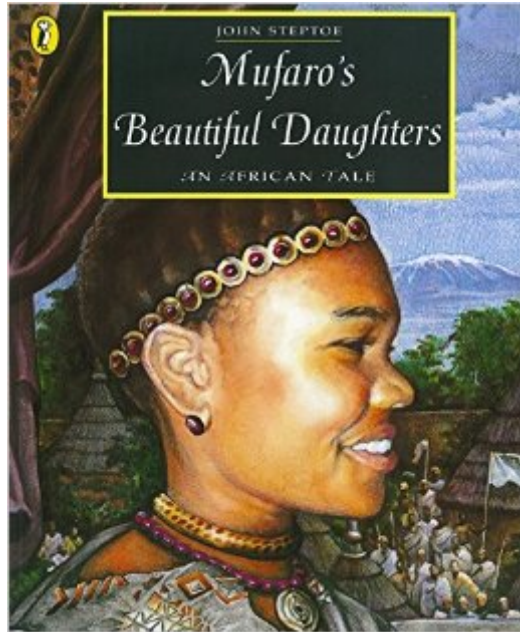


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Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale (Picture Puffin)



Synopsis

This is the tale of Mufaro's two daughters, two beautiful girls who react in different ways to the king's search for a wife - one is aggressive and selfish, the other kind and dignified. The king takes on disguises to learn the true nature of both girls and of course chooses Nyasha, the kind and generous daughter, to be his queen.

Book Information

Series: Picture Puffin

Paperback: 32 pages

Publisher: Puffin Bks; New Ed edition (July 1, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140559469

ISBN-13: 978-0140559460

Product Dimensions: 10.7 x 8.6 x 0.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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in Â Books > Children's Books > Fairy Tales, Folk Tales & Myths > Multicultural

Age Range: 4 and up

Grade Level: Preschool and up

Customer Reviews

I love how folktales around the world contain so many elements similar to one another. In John Steptoe's elegant, "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters", careful readers pick up echoes of such myths as Psyche & Cupid, Cinderella, and Roses & Pearls. Yet the story is inspired by an original folktale from 1895. Dedicating this book to the children of South Africa, Steptoe has created one of the most beautiful and eloquent picture books of our time. Once there was a man with two beautiful daughters. Both were equal in loveliness, but different in temperament. While Nyasha was kind and good, Manyara was vain and cruel. When the king announces that he would like to meet these two girls and decide, between the two of them, which one he shall wed, the sly Manyara does her darndest to become queen and make her sister her servant. The tale is vaguely disturbing in all the right ways. When Manyara sets out to get a jump on the king's affections by reaching the palace first, she comes across a series of odd sequences. A boy (with ears Spock himself would envy) is

denied food, laughing trees are laughed back at, and a man with his head under his arm is ignored callously. The moral of the story is, of course, that to be good and kind is far better than to be cold and mean. Steptoe's illustrations lift this tale from being merely good to extraordinary. There is a realism to the characters that leaves the reader with little doubt that they were fashioned on real people. Steptoe has likewise stayed faithful to the land of Zimbabwe, where this tale is set. He has been inspired by everything from the architecture to the flora and fauna. But what I liked best was the clothing. The garments and jewelry of this story encase the characters, making each person practically a member of royalty.

In Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters, John Steptoe combines stunning illustrations to create almost mystical surroundings for his characters, surroundings which serve to distinguish between the baser human characteristics, greed and pride, and those which we as humans must emulate, such as mercy and compassion. Steptoe creates the story's setting using the flora and fauna of an ancient ruin in Zimbabwe; the story itself is an English adaptation of a local African tale from today's indigenous inhabitants of the area. By encompassing a spiritual tale in realistic settings, Steptoe forces the reader to blur the line between reality and magic; however, this "magic" galvanizes to action by drawing distinctions between compassion and greed with which young readers can easily identify. This is the story of two sisters, Manyara and Nyasha, the beautiful daughters of Mufaro, two believably human girls who embody the characteristics of pride and humility. Children will quickly see that Manyara is selfish and ill tempered and that her promise to make her sister a servant in her house is based on jealousy. On the other hand, Nyasha is calm and kind; an aura of peace surrounds every action. Her singing, the villagers think, causes her garden to produce more bountifully than the others'. Even the animals find her friendly. She names and befriends a garden snake named Nyoka. The plot itself serves as a didactic tale with which children will identify. Themes of sibling rivalry and false appearances dominate the text. Steptoe mentions that the only person fooled into believing that Manyara is as kind as her sister is Mufaro, a theme that might resonate with children who endure the trials of living with siblings. The true test of character, however, comes when the King announces his search for a bride.

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