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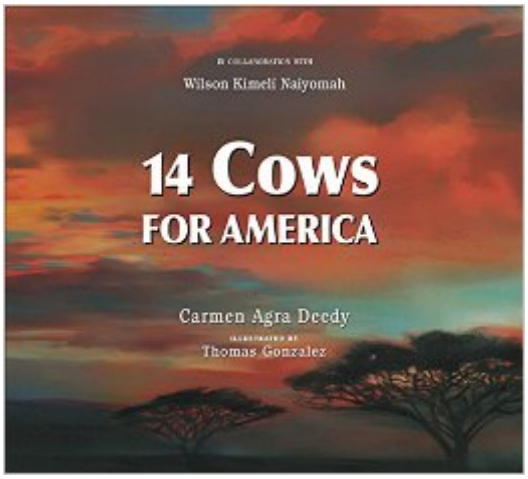
14 Cows For America



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Synopsis

In June of 2002, a very unusual ceremony begins in a far-flung village in western Kenya. An American diplomat is surrounded by hundreds of Maasai people. A gift is about to be bestowed upon the American men, women, and children, and he is there to accept it. The gift is as unexpected as it is extraordinary.A mere nine months have passed since the September 11 attacks, and hearts are raw. Tears flow freely from American and Maasai as these legendary warriors offer their gift to a grieving people half a world away.Word of the gift will travel newswires around the globe. Many will be profoundly touched, but for Americans, this selfless gesture will have deeper meaning still. For a heartsick nation, the gift of fourteen cows emerges from the choking dust and darkness as a soft light of hope and friendship.

Book Information

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Age Range: 4 - 8 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 3

Customer Reviews

As with any tragedy, in the years following the wake of September 11th a spate of books came out discussing, dissecting, and generally trying to make sense of what occurred. In this the children's literary world and the adult literary world were very much alike. Picture books in particular took a great deal of interest in making the events palatable to young impressionable minds. The results were mixed. The general consensus was to write titles that focused on the human moments that surrounded the tragedy. That adorable little fireboat that helped put out the blazes in Maira

Kalman’s almost too cuteÂ Fireboat. The women who could not deliver their roses, and so created an impromptu memorial in Jeannette Winter’sÂ September Roses. Best of these was Mordecai Gerstein’sÂ The Man Who Walked Between the Towers, the tragedy was merely tangential to the real story. These books all came out within a few years of one another and then nothing. It was as if people didn’t feel inclined or capable of coming up with something new. Then comes 14 Cows for America. By rights, this book should not work. That it succeeds as magnificently as it does is a credit to each one of its three creators.One day a young man named Kimeli returns to the village where he grew up. Kimeli is Maasai and he has been studying in New York to become a doctor. However, the events of September 11th are still with him, and later he tells his people the story of that horror of that particular day. Kimeli tells the elders that he will offer his cow to the people of America. The elders agree, but invite a diplomat from the United States Embassy in Nairobi to visit the village. When the diplomat comes he is greeted with a full ceremony and is presented with not one, but fourteen cows. A Note from Kimeli himself at the end explains how all this came to be, and says that "These sacred, healing cows can never be slaughtered," and will be kept under Maasai care in Kenya.Carmen Agra Deedy has done a remarkable job with the text. Now, I will admit that I walked into this book skeptical, because I was not the world’s biggest fan of herÂ The Yellow Star. That was a book that took a myth and turned it into a story that, to those not reading closely, could have been interpreted as fact. To take this true story and give it the right tone and temper . . . well, to be perfectly frank I wasn’t sure what to expect. As it turned out, I needn’t have worried. This isn’t a book where an author heard a story, thought it would make a great picture book, and then wrote the tale entirely on her own with minimal input from the people directly involved. Deedy collaborated directly with the book’s protagonist, Wilson Kimeli Naiyomah to give this story its factual background. In the Spring of 2002 Deedy picked up her copy of The New York Times and read this story about the Maasai. Over the years she continued to collect information and eventually she got in touch with Naiyomah. They emailed back and forth and result is the book we have today.The remarkable thing about the storytelling is that the little human facts make it interesting, but without ever sounding condescending. It would be all too easy to turn this into a story where the Maasai come off looking like magical saintly people who do this grand deed because they are not of this world. Deedy strives instead to make them infinitely human and relatable. To do this, she first needs to make it perfectly clear what the cow represents to them, so the term "the cow is life" is invoked. Kimeli is the detail that sets the book apart, of course. He is the tie that binds. Without him, this would be like any other story told about an insular group by an outsider. With Kimeli you are inside the story with the Maasai, and you are given a deeper understanding of a symbolic gesture. Deedy

grounds her tale in the real world, then finds just the right words. It takes a real author to know how to finish a tale of this sort perfectly, but Deedy's last sentence takes the cake. "Because there is no nation so powerful it cannot be wounded, nor a people so small they cannot offer mighty comfort."Like Deedy, Gonzalez is also originally from Cuba, a fact that I found particularly interesting. In her Author blurb, Deedy says of herself "she came to the United States as a refugee and like most immigrants sees the world from multiple perspectives." Gonzalez does not discuss his perspective in his blurb, but it's clear that with this book he has debuted with something remarkably strong. His background is in graphic design and art direction and as a Georgia resident it's just remarkably lucky that he happened to be near the Atlanta-based Peachtree publisher. Now he has a picture book to his name that is far and away one of the most beautiful out there. The illustrations you find here are created in pastel, colored pencil, and airbrush. The result are these rich, full colors that transition beautifully between the early morning gloom of a jeep headed to a village on one page and the full-throttle reds and vibrant colors of a ritual on the next.The artist also eschews stereotype and the easy way out. His images have the feel of a documentary, as well as a work of art. Like Deedy, Gonzalez acknowledges that these are warriors we're talking about. In one two-page spread you see just the heads of two men, one of them with their face in shadow, just the eyes looking steadily at the reader. These aren't people you mess with but, as the text says, "They are fierce when provoked, but easily moved to kindness when they hear of suffering or injustice."Gonzalez is at his cleverest when he must invoke the feel of September 11th without actually showing it. This is something picture books about 9/11 have to do on a regular basis, but none of the books about that day have been quite so clever about presenting the incident visually. When Kimeli tells his story the reader is on the same level as the village children, looking up. Most of the two-page spread consists of the sky above with Kimeli lifting his arms in the telling of his tale. Above him, the sky is gray with streaks of red and orange. For anyone familiar with the images of September 11th, such colors are instantly recognizable. Gonzalez has taken a day, reduced it to color alone, and then placed it harmlessly in an African sky where it illustrates a terrible tale. It is the smartest illustration choice I have seen in a very long time. For that image alone, the book should win some awards. Of course, there is one shot of the towers burning in the eyes of a Maasai child at the end of the book, but that picture is far less powerful than the preceding image and, in fact, feels a bit superfluous in comparison.I did hear one criticism of this book that I thought was fairly on point. Non-fiction books for kids walk a tricky line between telling their stories for their child audiences and telling stories for the adults who are actually buying these books in the first place. To bridge this gap, many times an author will tell their story for the kids at the start, then follow up their story in the

Afterword or Author’s Note at the end for the adults. This doesn’t have to happen, of course. InÂ The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain (Caldecott Honor Book)Â by Peter Sis, for example, the author cleverly created two narratives, one old and one young, so that kids of different ages and reading levels could all get something out of the material. The argument has been made that in the case of 14 Cows for America there are facts mentioned in the "Note from Kimeli Naiyomah" that should really have been in the text. Facts like what eventually happened to the cows (they are in Kenya "under the guidance of the revered elder Mzee Ole-Yiampoi"), which a lot of kids will be wondering when they finish this book. The kids will probably believe that when the Maasai "give" their cows to America they are physically sending the cows there, just as the King of Siam meant to sent President Lincoln elephants for the Civil War. The fact that this giving is a symbolic gesture could be better explained. And I agree that the cows’ fate would have been nice to mention in the text, but I don’t think the choice of including it at the end hurts the book too badly. I’ve read far too many non-fiction picture books where there ISN’T an Afterword or Author’s Note of any sort, so at least this one is present. Should this information have been in the story? Sure. But if kids ask "What happened to the cows?" parents at least will be able to the Note and read their children what it says at the back. The option is there.If I were to pair this book with any other, I think I might go so far as to suggest that people read 14 Cows for America alongside Lynn Barasch’s rather fascinatingÂ First Come the Zebra. While Deedy’s book examines the Maasai from within their own community, showing how they work with one another, Barasch’s book then displays them alongside the Kikuyu and offers hope in the face of prejudice. Zebra shows that not everything is easy for the Maasai. Cows shows their concern and care for the rest of the world in spite of this.On paper, this book shouldn’t work. There are so many elements that could go horribly wrong. The story could be too treacly. The pictures too self-serving or patronizing. The writing too pandering. I’m the first person to view a book of this sort with a skeptical, even over-critical eye, but what I find here is a remarkable melding of three different people, coming together to tell a single true story. Fourteen Cows ends with the sentence, "The Maasai wish is that every time Americans hear this simple story of fourteen cows, they will find a measure of comfort and peace." With this book, that is now possible.

As a former teacher, I think this would be a wonderful book to use early in the school year, around 9/11, for 3rd-12th grades. It’s a wonderful way to help students look at an event through the eyes of other people. It is also a subtle, but effective, way to dispell stereotypes that some may have about people living in Africa - the main character is going to college at Stanford to prepare for medical

school!

This incredible story relates the response of the a Maasai tribe to the September 11th tragedy. When one of their members, who is studying in the US, relates the events of 9/11, the tribe responds with compassion. The illustrations and the poetic language work together to create an amazingly beautiful book. I highly recommend it!

As an elementary teacher, I spend most of my Barnes and Noble visits in the children's book section of the store. On my last visit I saw this title and grabbed it off the shelf to flip through. I was embarrassed because I began to weep in the middle of the bookstore as I read the story. I would flip a page, pause to collect myself, and then tear up again as I resumed my reading. What a powerful story, and how empowering for the Masai. The best part is that there is no heavy-handed metaphor, or blatant trumpeting of a moral - the storytellers let the story tell itself. It is exquisite, and a great read aloud for children as young as first grade.

This is a beautifully illustrated, wonderful book based on a true story. Author Carmen Deedy is a delightful person. I had the opportunity to hear her speak, and her account of the writing of this book is very moving. I also had the opportunity to take a group of my high school students to hear Wilson Kimeli Naiyomah whose story is the subject of the book. My students were in awe! Although this is a children's book, it truly is a book for all ages.

I ordered "14 Cows for America" from Jensen Books. I was very touched by this story and glad to have a way to share it with my students. Jensen Book shipped it carefully, quickly, and the description was accurate for the great condition of the book. I would buy from Jensen Books again anytime

The illustrations are very nice, but overall I was quite disappointed. When I see a book with stellar 5-star reviews across the board I expect it to really impress me and want to make me buy more copies to give as gifts. I own 1,000s of childrens books and consider myself open-minded, but have to admit I missed the appeal of this book. It's not a bad book, but it's definitely overrated.

This is a lovely book about the aftermath of 9/11 as told by a Maasai warrior who happened to be visiting the United Nations when the planes started hitting the World Trade Center. Kimeli goes back

to his Kenya village and tells his tribe what has happened. The village elders decide to gift the U.S. with their most precious of possessions--a gift of 14 cows. Although the cows remained with the Maasai where they and their off spring are branded with a little twin towers--the gift of compassion, of love, of caring is the true message.In 36 pages, the author has managed to convey the culture of the Maasai and relives some of the horror of that day. The illustrations are also a lovely accompaniment to the story. The 14 Cows website, ([...]) has additional information on the Maasai, the cows, and the book which will enhance the reading to your children.

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