

A Leaf for Bongani: A Novelette

Claire Ishi Ayetoro

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In the allegorical novella A Leaf for Bongani, a young giraffe and his traveling herd work to sustain their hope, even as they meet with obstacles.

The migration of a Congolese giraffe herd inspires a motivational allegory in Claire Ishi Ayetoro's spiritual novella *A Leaf for Bongani*.

Bongani, a young bull, is part of a dwindling herd of seven giraffes. They head north, toward the land of acacias. In the course of this traveling come instances of introspection in which the giraffes convey their concerns and hopes. They escape from hyenas, graze, have a brush with humans, and mate. Their daily travels result in lessons about staying together. There are also stories told by elders about creation, animal fables, and poetic summaries. It becomes clear that the giraffes' pilgrimage parallels the stages of human life.

The book's prose is spare and elegant. It delivers wisdom, as about existence being more than "mere survival." It follows as the giraffes meet and evade danger and find that the world around them provides for them. Messages about how all creatures are cared for, and about how fears and worries can be resolved via hope, are implied. The giraffes work to boost each other's morale, and they warn others about dangers. A sung refrain about the promised land spurs them onward, and becomes poignant in the face of tragedy.

In spirit, this is a familiar allegory about enduring hardship and finding respite. Its animal characters distinguish it from similar tales. Bongani is a curious lead who heeds his elder's advice, and who explores within set boundaries. Other giraffes also display exemplary traits, like focus and optimism. Their communal bond is used to mirror aspects of Ubuntu philosophy. And activism is implied by brief references to offenses, as with the mention of an elephant who was harmed by poachers. Still, the text seldom moves beyond these glancing nods to big issues.

Skillful pen illustrations in between the book's chapters depict the giraffes and the African animals they meet, while colored swathes resembling paint strokes are used to suggest skylines, water, and sun. A soothing palette of pinks, greens, blues, and yellows enhances the book's gentle tone. The short poems that accompany the illustrations, however, lean in to predictable rhymes too much, reiterating the text's messages rather than deepening them.

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KAREN RIGBY (March 15, 2022)

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