

## Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters

**John Steptoe**

Live Oak Media (December 2001)

Unknown \$16.95 (pp)

978-0-87499-655-5

The articulate accented and rhythmic narration of Robin Miles brings a new dimension to this read-along version of a beloved classic African tale of greed and pride, a variation of Charles Perrault's fairy tale about "The Unkind Sister." The drums, chanting, singing, and jungle sounds on the tape capture the essence of Africa but may remind children too much of Disney's *The Lion King*.

Kind Nyasha sings as she works and does not trouble her father Mufaro with the cruel treatment she often receives from her jealous and ill-tempered sister Manyara. Nyasha is sympathetic to the creatures of nature and protects and befriends Little Nyoka, a small garden snake. When a message arrives inviting the daughters to appear before The Great King so he can choose a queen, Manyara steals away in the night to gain the advantage. Along the way, she rejects the pleas of a hungry child and the advice of an old woman. She laughs at the trees and refuses to speak to the man with his head tucked under his arm.

Nyasha exhibits her characteristic gentleness of action and spirit when she faces the same trials. She offers her lunch of a yam to the unfortunate boy and gives the helpful woman a gift of sunflower seeds. Nature seems to embrace and welcome her. The author/illustrator uses shadow and light to reinforce the theme of good versus evil in his exploration of the two sisters. He backlights Nyasha's robe as she looks upon the kingdom and experiences its breathtaking beauty. Darkness surrounds Manyara, who warns her sister about the five-headed snake who knows all her faults, and whom she displeased.

Unafraid, Nyasha opens the gates and sees Little Nyoka transform into the king. "I am also the hungry boy," he says "and the old woman. Because I have been all these, I know you to be the Most Worthy and Most Beautiful Daughter in the Land. It would make me very happy if you would be my wife." Mufaro glows with pride, the Queen and King reign with kindness and humanity, and Manyara becomes a servant to Nyasha in this satisfying fairy-tale ending. Compare this tale with Cinderella variants and versions of *Toads and Diamonds*.

PEGGY BECK (October 16, 2001)

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