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General

The Substitute Teacher
Samson Kamara Sr.
iUniverse
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One Star (out of Five)
(August 22, 2009)

Failing schools and racism are topics of interest and concern for all Americans today. In *The Substitute Teacher*, Samson Kamara connects these two issues as he presents the experience of an African immigrant in the United States.

Alpha, educated in Africa and the UK, finds it impossible to deal with the rude and disruptive students he meets as a substitute teacher in an unnamed city in the eastern United States. Teachers and administrators in the schools hinder rather than help him. In spite of his education and time spent on the job, he is passed over for full-time positions. Alpha concludes that he is the victim of social and institutional racism.

This should be a compelling story, but it is not. On the first page of his book, Kamara writes that a black African substitute teacher is subjected to racism “by every one with a light skin color, and even by non African black people.” He endlessly repeats this “fact” as the reason for his failure in the classroom. He also charges administrators and teachers with incompetence. Unions, he surmises, function to cover-up the inadequacies of their constituents. Although any of these charges may be true in part or at times, none of them can be true all the time as the author claims. This story very quickly deteriorates into a rant.

Alpha, a thin disguise for the author, is always sent to classrooms where students have been fed a string of substitutes or where the regular teacher has left inadequate materials. Extremely challenging situations like this certainly exist and may doom even the most experienced teacher to failure. However, Alpha's key response to every breach of classroom behavior is yelling over the chaos, pounding on the desk, or sending the offending student to the principal. He never changes or assesses his own reactions. After just a few tales "of a usual bad school day which he experienced nearly every school day," readers can't help but wonder why he continues to work as a substitute.

Kamara also observes that "people here believed…that an accent was equal to deficiency in English language." Sadly, this book reveals language deficiencies so numerous that in places it is difficult to read. An annoying and persistent error is the use of past tense when present tense is required, especially in dialogue. Kamara describes a student he meets in the shopping mall as "one female student who was fun of him in school."

The narrative ends without personal insight or resolution. Readers who make it through to the end will feel they deserve a better effort.

Geraldine A. Richards