

Literature of Social Justice
Book Reviews by Aimee Rogers
July 7, 2010

14 Cows for America by Carmen Agra Deedy and Wilson Kimeli Naiyomah, Thomas Gonzalez (illustrator). Peachtree. 36 pages. \$17.95. All ages. 978-1-56145-490-7

Although based upon the true events that united a giant nation and a small African tribe, *14 Cows for America* tells a story so touching it is difficult to believe in its truth. Wilson Kimeli Naiyomah is a son of the Kenyan Maasai tribe whose thirst for education takes him to study in the United States. During his studies in New York, Naiyomah witnesses the tragic events of September 11th, 2001 in person. Nine months later, when he returns for a visit to his Maasai family, he is still haunted by the images and experiences of that day. He tells his transfixed tribe about what he saw on September 11th. They are shocked by the events but more importantly understand the hurt experienced by the United States and immediately want to do something to ease the pain. Naiyomah's Maasai tribe donates 14 cows to the people of the United States. For the Maasai, a cow is life and their gift of 14 cows is incredibly generous and heartfelt. Readers of all ages can learn important lessons about healing, generosity, stereotypes and comfort.

Christmas in the Trenches by John McCutcheon, Henri Sorensen (illustrator). Peachtree. 36 pages. \$19.95. All ages. 978-1-56145-374-0

The brutal trench fighting of World War I is well known; however, what may be lesser known are the moments of humanity that happened in and between the trenches. McCutcheon succulently tells the story of the unofficial Christmas truce of 1914 between British and German soldiers. These bitter enemies are brought together in No Man's Land, the land that previously separated them in their trenches, to embrace the spirit of Christmas and to remember their humanity, if even for a short time. McCutcheon's story is perfectly accompanied by beautifully rendered illustrations by Sorensen. Although a picture book, this is a perfect book for all ages. The story will cause readers to pause and wonder at the insanity of war and reflect on the many commonalities of "enemies."

Song for Night by Chris Abani. Akashic Books. 167 pages. \$12.95. High School. 978-1-933354-31-6

The fifteen-year-old narrator of *Song for Night* literally has no physical voice to use when telling his story because before beginning his work as a mine detector his vocal cords were cut so others would not hear his death screams if, and when, he stepped on a land mine. A lyrical look at the brutal civil war in West Africa through the eyes of "My Luck," a child soldier whose regrets about his involvement in the war are only balanced by his perceived benefits of the war. Although the civil wars and ongoing genocide on the African continent are, unfortunately, not a new topic in literature Abani provides a

fresh perspective on a difficult issue. This novella would be an excellent starting point for a discussion about differences, genocide, and child soldiers.

Star in the Forest by Laura Resau. Delacorte Press. 149 pages. \$14.99. Intermediate. 978-0-385-73792-0

Zitlally, whose name means star in her Father's native language, is struggling with typical pre-teen issues; however, her struggles take on extra weight as her family are illegal immigrants who must watch everything they do for fear of being deported. When Zitlally's father is deported and then kidnapped by smugglers the family goes into a tailspin. Zitlally finds solace in a dog named Star and a new friend, Crystal. Resau covers many of the issues that are common in families with "illegal" members; however, she also sheds light on some possibly previously never considered topics, such as kidnapping by smugglers. *Star in the Forest* would provide a perfect place to begin the discussion of immigration issues with younger students.