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Popo and Fifina.

OUP oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195138832.001.0001/acref-9780195138832-e-466

A juvenile novel by Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes with illustrations by E. Simms Campbell, *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti* was published in 1932. Papa Jean and Mamma Anna, peasant farmers grown tired of farming on the hillsides of Haiti, decide to pursue Papa Jean's dream to own a fishing boat, a decision that means moving the family from the interior to the coast. The story opens with a procession wending its way to the port village of Cape Haiti, parents leading the way with baby Pensia, followed by two burros laden with the family possessions, ten-year-old Fifina, and eight-year-old Popo.

Their new home is a single-room, windowless shack with a tin roof and a rickety door in a yard that includes fruit trees and fuel for cooking at their fingertips. Papa Jean secures work as a fisherman right away, and he is at sea over the succeeding days, but the reader-spectator is accorded a cultural excursion through home and village by accompanying Mamma Anna and the eager-eyed children through their daily routines.

Before the appeal of newness in Cape Haiti wears thin for the children, Mamma Anna is overtaken with homesickness for her birthplace, and the children join her for a holiday in the hills with Grandma Tercilia and other relatives, providing a brief view of the country Creole culture the family left behind. For Popo the high point of this visit occurs when he steals from his bed one evening, lured by the drums, to follow his young grown-up cousin André to the dance of the Congo.

Back at Cape Haiti, Fifina and Popo are thrilled one afternoon by the sight of a sky full of kites with long tails and singing strings in the hands of children like themselves. Owning a kite becomes their dream, and Fifina suggests a plan to gain their parents' approval. The strategy succeeds, and for several days the children are solely preoccupied with the joy of flying. But just as Fifina predicts, their parents eventually determine that the children are neglecting their other responsibilities. They must set aside the kite so that Fifina can help Mamma Anna at home and Popo can become an apprentice in Uncle Jacques's woodworking shop.

Besides Uncle Jacques, Papa Jean's older brother, the small wood shop employs old Durand, his helper, and cousin Marcel, his youngest son, who is near Popo's age. In no time, Popo focuses approval on a beautiful tray cousin Marcel is fashioning and, because he longs to craft one of his own, wonders if it is not modeled after an established pattern. The surprising knowledge that each tray is of a singular design provokes Popo's difficult question: How can anybody make a design without a pattern? His wonder about the sources of imagination prompts old Durand to observe the "riddle" that you have to put yourself

into the design. Popo discovers both the pleasure and the pain of the act as he works his own tray, accompanied by the sad tale of the great King Christophe related by Uncle Jacques.

Later, when the two families picnic together along the coast, a more sober Popo climbs the steep cliffs to visit the lighthouse with Papa Jean, Uncle Jacques, Fifina, and Marcel. En route they pass several abandoned forts that remind Popo of the sad history of Christophe. The perspective from the lighthouse resonates in Popo's and Fifina's first approach to Cape Haiti, but now there are intimations that they are more grown up.

This juvenile narrative once represented a new genre in African American writing, and it was unanimously praised for its simple charm, its attention to informative details, and its poetic style. It was translated into many languages and remained in print for twenty years.

Bibliography

Violet J. Harris, "From *Little Black Sambo* to *Popo and Fifina*: Arna Bontemps and the Creation of African-American Children's Literature," *The Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children's Literature* 14 (June 1990): 108-127.

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