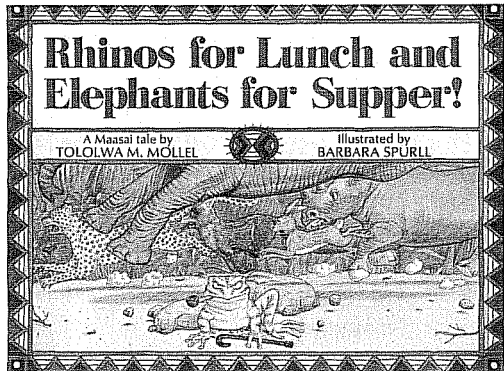


THE WISDOM OF OLD WOMEN

Muhla, the fair one. Linda Ghan. Illus. Elise Benoit. NuAge Editions, 1991. 40 pp., \$14.95 paper. ISBN 0-921833-30-X; **Rhinos for lunch and elephants for supper! A Maasai tale.** Tololwa M. Mollel. Illus. Barbara Spurll. Oxford University Press, 1991. \$14.95. ISBN 0-19-540832-2.

Although *Muhla, the fair one* and *Rhinos for lunch and elephants for supper!* are picture books directed at slightly different age groups, the books concur in drawing attention to the marginalization of old women and in challenging Western cultural clichés about their proper place. Both books are based on African folk tales, a fact made evident immediately in the subtitle to *Rhinos*, but only revealed to reviewers in the press release for *Muhla*. Linda Ghan acknowledges that *Muhla* was first commissioned by Black Theatre Workshop as children's theatre, but she says nothing about her sources. While the glossary and pronunciation guide are certainly welcome, a brief note on the sources informing her narrative would also be welcome, especially given the way her text foregrounds the importance of storytellers.

Rhinos for lunch and elephants for supper! is the second children's book written by Tololwa Mollel (his first, *The orphan boy*, won a Governor General's Award) and the first to be illustrated by Barbara Spurll. It is a comic animal story that will appeal to young children who share the heroine's fear of monsters in the dark. The



“little hare” is terrified when a voice calling itself “a monster” blasts out of her cave daring her to enter. We do not see the speaker, only the velocity of the voice's projection shooting out of the dark cave. The velocity, however, is not directed at us, for Spurll's decorative frame encloses the action and protects us. Thus protected, we can enjoy the hare's attempts to find a grown-up protector. She tries several: a fox that Spurll draws about to pick his teeth, a leopard wearing glasses and reading stories to his children, a dozing rhino, and an elephant. All are male, all are big, and all are unsuccessful, terrified by the “frightening voice in the cave.” Finally, their terror awakes a “little” bad-tempered frog who alone knows how to outwit the terrifying voice, even though no one ever considered asking her for help.

In her illustrations, Spurll gives the frog a pipe and cane, details that not only challenge our stereotype of the female but also contribute to my reading of the

frog as an old woman. In her penultimate illustration, Spurrll draws the other animals floating in laughter when they discover who the "monster" really is. In contrast, the final illustration shows the frog, still grouchy, leading the "monster" to find a place to continue their naps. In *Rhinos* laughter is for children; nonsense heroism is for old women who are wise enough not to believe everything that they are told, to know (without reading Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the other woman*) that caves may be typed as feminine spaces, but that does not necessarily mean that they contain monsters.

Muhla, the fair one is also a story about the wisdom of old women. Muhla is a thirteen-year-old left to look after her younger sister, Lungile, when their parents must leave the village to plant and hunt. When the parents leave, their mother cautions them not to open a big pot, no matter how much they are tempted. There is no explanation for this prohibition; the rule has been passed on from mother to mother. Muhla obeys, but her seven-year-old sister, angry that the story Muhla tells her does not have a proper ending, peeks in and inadvertently frees the evil spirit Izumi, which tries first to eat Lungile, and then to get revenge on Muhla.

In order to defeat the Izumi, Muhla must learn from the Old Woman who takes pity on her. The Old Woman not only helps Muhla discover the answer to a narrative riddle she had told her sister, but she helps Muhla trick the Izumi through recalling a story she was told as a child. The narrative makes clear that the Old Woman only remembers because Muhla is the first person in a long time to listen to her. The victory is a cooperative female one (its female focus further emphasized by the trick Muhla's elder sister recalls hearing their grandmother narrate). Instead of the usual Western fairytale ending in which the heroine marries a prince, Muhla does not marry the prince and her marriage is only a small part of the ending. In addition, the family she eventually has includes the Old Woman. It was the immature Lungile who only liked stories with endings. Muhla has learned that stories are indeed like riddles, never finally solved, only told over and over again by maternal voices, for if mothers pass on inexplicable prohibitions, they themselves become the elderly women telling stories that give the answers. The Old Woman, now integrated back into society, learns of her own wisdom through telling her new family "all of her stories." Muhla, herself, becomes a wise old woman telling stories to other generations of children, and in the process is renamed and remembered not as the fair one, but as "Muhla the Wise."

Adrienne Kertzer teaches fiction and children's literature at the University of Calgary.