Beyond the Mango Tree Short Guide

Beyond the Mango Tree by Amy Bronwen Zemser

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Overview

Beyond the Mango Tree is a story narrated in first-person by twelve-year-old Sarina, an American girl from Boston who has moved to Liberia with her family. Sarina is trapped—emotionally and physically—in an unhappy home. Her father is most often away working in the bush, and her mother— severely ill with diabetes—is wildly fearful of losing her daughter. Sarina is never allowed outside the family's yard alone, and when her mother is having a bad day, she even ties Sarina to the mango tree in their front yard.

One day a local boy, Boima, cuts her free of the mango tree. In the following weeks, Sarina and Boima become fast friends, hiding in the mango tree, and sometimes stealing away to see a bit of the world outside Sarina's yard. Sarina cherishes their secret friendship until she learns that Boima has been taking food stolen from her house by their housekeeper, Te Te. Sarina angrily denounces her friendship with Boima, unable to understand what he has done.

When her anger cools, Sarina wants to make amends with Boima, but he is nowhere to be found. After searching for him for days, Sarina learns that he is near death from yellow fever. In spite of her desperate efforts to get him medical help, Sarina cannot save her friend's life. Despite her grief, Sarina learns what it means to believe in another person, and learns as well that her way of life is not necessarily a universal one. Sarina can release her grief in the comforting embrace of Te Te, the housekeeper whom she had hated. As Sarina prepares to leave Africa, she and Te Te plant an orange seed in Boima's memory, hoping that the seedling will grow fast and "may even grow beyond the mango tree."

About the Author

Born and raised in the United States, Amy Bronwen Zemser moved to Liberia with her family when she was eleven years old. The three years she lived in that African country proved to be grist for her writer's mill years later.

Always an avid reader, Zemser knew she wanted to be a writer even when she was a child. But, as she disclosed in a Publishers Weekly interview, "I wanted to be a lot of other things—a cowgirl, for instance."

At Simmons College she discovered a keen interest in writing children's literature. However, her first attempt at producing a book for children never got beyond the manuscript stage. Thanks to her determination, her next attempt was a winner. It became one of the top ten entries in the 1997 Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators competition and went on to be published as her first novel, Beyond the Mango Tree.

The book has garnered several awards, including the 1999-2000 Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award and the 1999 Booklist Editors' Choice Award.

Zemser now teaches English as a second language to adults at City College in San Francisco, California.

Setting

The setting in Beyond the Mango Tree is a critical element of the story. Because Sarina's family is in a foreign land, Sarina's mother severely restricts Sarina's movement, rarely allowing her to go off the grounds of their home.

Liberia represents everything foreign and exotic to Sarina; Sarina's first-person narrative sensitively captures the sights and smells of the various places she visits there. When she first goes to the big market, called Joe Bar, she describes it in such a way that the reader is swirling around with Sarina, catching glimpses of tables and wares but never stopping.

Joe Bar looks nothing like I imagined. It is huge and teeming with activity, a great circular construction with a corrugated tin roof flimsily held up by thick wooden poles. Inside it is filled with loud voices and unappealing smells.... Liberian women sit alongside their wares in a strange mix of assorted goods, squirming children and bare feet. The air is moist and still, redolent of milk left too long in the sun, fish left too long out of the ocean. I am uncomfortable here but eager to find Boima. I follow closely behind Te Te, almost but not quite touching her as the throngs of marketgoers push us along in a damp wave of heat and moving bodies. We pass many tables, some brightly adorned with piles of candies in pinks and greens and blues, others offering a mix of goods, such as leather bracelets, shoe polish, cheap plastic sandals, and hair oil. When We reach the fruit tables, Te Te silently hands me the shopping list and I read it out to her.

The exotic qualities of Liberia alternately thrill and frighten Sarina. Her mother is simply terrified of the place; there is no joy in her mother's experience of living in a strange land, struggling with diabetes and having her husband gone. Thus, the pulsing rhythms of Liberia clash with those of Sarina and her mother, and provide an impetus for the clashes between mother and daughter.

Social Sensitivity

Diabetes is an important factor in Sarina's life. Her mother is stricken with a severe form of the disease, and since they live in a foreign country, and Sarina's father is absent most of the time, Sarina must look after her mother. She must try to figure out on her own what the disease means and how to protect both her mother and herself from the ramifications of diabetes attacks.

Another issue dealt with in this novel is the notion of what it means to be a family.

In many ways, Te Te and Oldman Jacob serve as part of Sarina's family. Oldman plays the traditional role of protector by standing guard as watchman every night, and Te Te does the washing and cleaning and generally ensures that Sarina is doing her homework and behaving. Sarina's mother, in fact, is largely absent in any parental capacity, and in fact, Sarina and her mother's traditional roles are reversed. More often than not, Sarina is taking care of her mother, making sure she is taking in enough fruit and juice to ward off a diabetic attack, making sure her mother is not hurting herself or the servants, soothing her through the days. The. only time Sarina's mother plays the parental role is when she punishes Sarina, and even in this, she acts irrationally, scolding and punishing for imagined fears that she projects onto Sarina.

However, we do not hear the mother's side of the story, since the story is told only from Sarina's point of view.

Cross-cultural differences, particularly racism, are also addressed in the novel. At one point, Sarina gets a severe rash, and when her mother and her mother's attendant, a Liberian named Thomas Scott, take Sarina to the American Embassy, the embassy will not allow Thomas Scott to enter.

Sarina's mother tries to explain that he is like family, but because he is African and not seen as equal, he is not allowed entry, despite Sarina's mother's obvious medical need for him. The fact that Sarina is preoccupied with this incident points to her sense of justice.

Also, when Sarina visits Katrina, another foreigner, she watches in horror as Katrina plays harshly with the monkey her parents gave her. Sarina then takes it upon herself to "trick" Katrina into treating the monkey better, and later, she and Boima together place a "juju" on Katrina that will make Katrina nicer. The fact that Liberians go through rituals to try to create kindness in others is a completely foreign notion to Sarina, but one she embraces immediately.

Literary Qualities

Zemser uses the approach of story-within-a-story to amplify the cultural differences between Sarina and Boima. Boima tells Sarina not to climb the mango tree— their secret meeting place—by herself. He explains by telling Sarina a story about a boy called Tuesday, who climbed the mango tree to get food for his village, and then was bitten by the poisonous snake who lived there. The boy knew he was going to die, but he grabbed the snake by the neck and squeezed it to death, thereby saving the other people of his village from its poison.

The villagers all gathered around the tree, where the dead boy and the dead snake hung from its limbs. Tuesday's mother cried, and his father chopped the snake's head off and buried it in the ground. Sarina stops Boima to ask him about the story, curious about what happened to the village and whether Tuesday came back to life. Boima responds to her question by informing her that "When you die .. . you ain' never comin' back. Ehn't you know?" When Sarina insists that this resolution cannot "be the end of the story," and laments the sadness of the tale, Boima suggests that "that boy Tuesday, he do something good for he people. Now everybody free to eat the mango."

From Boima's perspective, the moral of the tale is this: "Never climb the mango tree by you one. Snake who live in the mango tree never forget he brother."

For an American child, these tales do not make sense. Generally, and up to a certain age, American children's stories end with happy conclusions, much as the telling of the American Dream concludes on a triumphant note—that is, if one diligently pursues one's dreams, he will meet with unbridled success, prosperity will ensue, and his community will admire him. This, of course, does not necessarily reflect real life, and the telling of stories like the one above offers children a chance to understand their place in a community, and the role that death plays in life. Having grown up in an individualistic society, Sarina finds it difficult to understand the allegory of the boy sacrificing himself for the whole of his community. Sarina listens to the story, interrupting Boima all along the way. But after she understands that she should not go up the mango tree alone, she dismisses the tale by asking Boima to tell her about something happier, to wipe away the unpleasant thoughts.

In this novel Zemser achieves a distinctive narrative style by using not only Sarina'sqperson point of view, but also casting it in the present tense. As a result, the reader seems to be one with Sarina at the moment of the action with Sarina. Although the first-person narration does not allow the reader to get an objective perspective on the characters, seeing the story unfold through the eyes of a young girl actually tells the reader a great deal about both the narrator and her family and friends. Once the reader adjusts to Sarina's mix of sophistication and naivete, it becomes possible to flesh out the full-bodied personalities of the other characters. At first, all the characters appear one-dimensional: a mother who is tormented by disease and takes her frustration out on her daughter, a father who places the responsibility for his wife's care on his young daughter, servants who do their duties, a young friend who embodies the freedom

Sarina desires. But soon into the novel, and to varying extents, the other characters begin to come to life, as much through what Sarina does not say about them as through what she does say. For instance, when Sarina first meets Boima, she (and the reader) see a boy who has all the freedom to explore and play that she so deeply desires. However, through Sarina and Boima's conversations, the reader sees what Sarina cannot see—that Boima carries the responsibility for making baskets and selling them for his family, that he is poor, and that he often goes hungry. "I the one," Boima informs Sarina after she asks him who is responsible for weaving the baskets.

"I sellin' fo' my ma," Boima goes on to tell her. "Every mornin', sellin'. Money fo' rice, money fo' groun' pea." As their conversation progresses, Sarina learns that Boima must help support his family because of his father's death. Sarina, uncertain of how to respond to this news, says simply "1 don't have any brothers or sisters." Boima nods and smiles again, the same easy smile that filled [her] with warmth the day before.

There are no words for the children to bridge the language of death, and thus, a silence ensues after Boima tells of his father's passing. They have not yet learned the rituals of consolation so readily used by adults. The only thing that Sarina can finally say is something about herself, a comment about being a single child. Their disjointed conversation reflects the open and truthful way they deal with each other.

They speak the truth to one another upon their first meeting, but with adults, each exercises a veiled caution.

Zemser's use of language is often very poetic. She uses descriptive language to imbue Liberia with a richness of color and taste and smell. The opening paragraph is a prime example: The earth is red in Africa. It is rainy season, and water rushes in streams, rapidly filling the hollow dips along the rust-colored roads, causing them to overflow.

These are not like the shallow rain puddles I am accustomed to in Boston. These are African rain puddles, deep and soaked with mud the color of crumbled bricks.

These pools of water frighten me because, in the face of steady rain, they have no time to empty.

Zemser employs alliteration—note the emphasis on "r" sounds—to create a sense of flow. Also, the vowel sounds—"colored roads" and "deep and soaked"—are elongated, much as the earth in Africa stretches out endlessly and puddles over with water.

Within the paragraph, consonants also add to the rhythm of the words. "Crumbled bricks" and "time to empty" click along the tongue with a measured beat, adding to the fluidity of Zemser's lines, creating a lyrical world of red and water and fear.

Perhaps one of the most striking elements of Beyond the Mango Tree is the use of colloquial language. The Liberian people all speak English with a heavy dialect, most of which is discernible to the reader. Sarina sometimes explains what a word means in her narration, or the author has another character explain through conversation, but much of the dialect stands alone, without explanation. In effect, the author gives the reader a

more active role in the story, letting the reader take more responsibility for understanding what is going on in the story.

Themes and Characters

The protagonist of Beyond the Mango Tree is Sarina, a twelve-year-old American girl whose family moved to Liberia for her father's job. She is strong-willed, a fact which both helps and hinders her as she tries to survive in a foreign country with her diabetic, frenzied mother. She is an interesting mix of sophistication and naivete. On the one hand, she uses poetic, adult language to describe her feelings and her surroundings. However, when she is dealing with the other characters, she sees the world very narrowly, and makes assumptions about them. For instance, when describing her mother, Sarina never explains why her mother may have cause to be the way she is.

She hints at morsels of understanding, but mostly she is resentful and aloof, treating her mother and her mother's diabetes and attending rages with disdain. To some extent, the disdain is a natural reaction that a twelve-year-old child might have when she is forced to be in charge of something which she cannot fully comprehend and has no adult help to guide her. Sarina's frustration and anger with her mother's condition becomes evident during a confrontation over one of her mother's rules: "Mom, please," I say. Something flares inside me, and I do not notice that my mother's sugar levels are falling, that her behavior is now becoming odd, exaggerated.

"No," she says. "No. No friends in the yard." She stands up and flies toward me, like a viper. Her fingers clamp my forearm.

"Let go of me, Mom," I say, because her grip hurts. She can be very strong when she is having a reaction.

"No," she says. "I will never let you go.

Never."

"Mom, please, your sugar is low."

In this example, mother and child have switched roles, except that Sarina does not have the wisdom that stems from growing up and becoming a mother, and she resents her caretaking. The mother does not fulfill the traditional role of mother, and Sarina's father is almost always absent from her life—and never emotionally connected to Sarina. Thus, Sarina is left alone in the world. The fact that her mother refuses to allow her to make friends furthers her sense of isolation. It seems natural that Sarina rebels and finds a way to build a friendship with Boima, a Liberian boy.

Boima represents the "other." He is from a different cultural background as than Sarina, and the gaps in their understanding of one another open the way for Sarina to grow. Boima tells Sarina stories about his life, about his homeland, and about the way he sees the world. Sarina questions him about his stories, but he rarely answers, letting the stories speak for themselves. As the novel progresses, Sarina begins to unravel some of these tales, and her eyes open to see how the tales relate to her life. Because she

listens to Boima's stories, and does not refute the fantastical tales as simple fairy tales, she begins to bridge the gap between them. However, when she goes to meet Boima's family, and discovers some stolen food items from her house there, she rashly lashes out at Boima and denounces their friendship entirely.

"You and Te Te stole from us and that's just the same as lying. . . . How could you be on Te Te's side when you know how much I hate her!"

"Sarina," Boima repeats," I not choosin' to one side o' the other. Ehn't you know it jes' my gut was empty same time my heart was full up. That hongry make a boy do all kind o' something."

"You can't be friends with both of us," I say looking at him through eyes of cold blue glass. "It's either one or the other, so who are you going to choose?"

Boima speaks volumes to Sarina, but in her anger and sense of betrayal, she can only see the act, and not the problems and thoughts and emotions that went into Boima's taking the food from Sarina's family. It takes Boima's illness, and finally, his death, to make Sarina see that the bond bonds of friendship surpass any single act, and that actions themselves are never without reasons that are worth exploring and trying to understand. It is also through Sarina's loss of Boima that she recognizes Te Te for what she is: a wise Liberian woman who is in a constant struggle to keep her job with the foreigners—as Sarina's family's housekeeper—and to provide for her people. Sarina was not able to see the huge discrepancy between what she can afford, and what the poor Liberian villagers can afford. The more she opens her ears to the words that Boima and Te Te and Sarina's night watchman, Oldman Jacob, say to her, the more Sarina opens her eyes to a larger world perspective. She is maturing, and though it takes tragedy to shake her into a deeper understanding of the complication that life holds, she does, indeed, begin to break out of her tunnel vision and see the world around her.

Acceptance is perhaps the central theme threading through all the relationships in Beyond the Mango Tree. Coming from disparate cultures, the American characters and the Liberian characters all harbor resentment and distrust toward one another, and it takes a fairly severe set of circumstances to bring the two sides together. It is not until they encounter illness (Thomas Scott's devoted attention to the diabetic needs of Sarina's mother), and a theft (Sarina and Te Te's shared secret of the stolen food) that the characters can see beyond their onedimensional view of one another. Again, the reader has only Sarina's point of view from which to glean the whole picture, but her distance from the other characters indicates a reciprocal distance kept by them, as well.

Friendship is another major theme, and it relates directly to the idea of accepting what is different in another person. For each of Sarina's friendships—with Oldman Jacob, with her mother, with Te Te, with Thomas Scott, and with Boima—the characters must peel through layers of differences to find how they relate to one another. Zemser underscores this issue by integrating the struggle to make friends, and the struggle to learn to be a good friend, throughout the conflict of the novel.

For example, friendships are tested on every level when one of the servants discovers that food has been stolen from Sarina's home. When Sarina discovers Te Te took the food for Boima, she renounces their friendship. Later she regrets her decision and longs to renew their friendship, only to discover that Boima is dangerously ill.

Folklore is an important element in Beyond the Mango Tree. It is through tales that the children learn to understand both their place in the world and their relationship to one another. Because the story is set in Liberia, most of the folklore is of African origin, although the general themes of American folklore—success through hard work and desire, fear of the unknown, and the importance of the individual—are echoed in Sarina's reactions to the Liberian folk stories.

Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss Boima and Sarina's friendship.

Is it a conventional friendship? Do you have any friendships like theirs?

2. Discuss the importance of understanding illness. What does it mean to be informed about the effects of a disease?

Why is it important to understand a disease's impact on a person and his or her family?

3. Discuss diabetes. What are the symptoms of diabetes? Have you known anyone with diabetes?

4. Discuss what it is or might be like to move to a foreign place. What does "foreign" mean?

5. Why does Sarina's mother not want her to have any friends?

6. What is a traditional family? Who would you say comprises makes up a family in this story?

7. What are the consequences of stealing? Is it ever right to steal?

8. Do you know anyone from a foreign country? Have you learned anything from him or her that is completely different from what you have learned before?

9. Discuss the relationship between Te Te and Sarina. Why do you think that there is so much tension between them?

10. What is Oldman Jacob's role in the story? How does he make the story easier or more difficult for you to understand?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research diabetes. What causes diabetes? Can it be cured? How can you tell if you might have diabetes?

2. Research Liberia. What is the climate like? What do the inhabitants do for work? For play?

3. How do you learn to write in dialectic form?

4. The book places a lot of emphasis on trees. How many different kinds of trees live in your neighborhood?

5. How do trees help humans to live? 6. Research the customs of a foreign country. How do they differ from customs of the United States?

7. What is a folk tale? Make up a folk tale.

For Further Reference

Review of Beyond the Mango Tree. Publishers Weekly (October 1998).

Review of Beyond the Mango Tree. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books. (November 1998).

Rochman, Hazel. Review of Beyond the Mango Tree. Booklist (November 1,1998).

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Related Titles/Adaptations

For young adults who enjoy this novel, the following books may also be of interest.

Claire Murphy's To the Summit tells the story of Sarah, a seventeen-year-old who, in going on a climbing expedition to the top of Denali with her father, takes a journey of discovery deep within herself. John Marsden's So Much to Tell You offers the first-person story of Marina, who communicates her life by writing in her diary. Directly relevant to Beyond the Mango Tree is Betty Bates's Tough Beans, which tells the story of Nat, a fourthgrader who comes to terms with his diabetes and a bully named Jasper through the help of his best friend, Cassie.

Finally, teachers or librarians may want to recommend Judy Miller's Grilled Cheese at Four O'Clock in the Morning, the story of Scott as he learns to cope with the fears and frustrations of having diabetes.

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