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## ABSTRACT

A descriptive study identified titles and features of children's books set in an African city. Data were collected from various reviews of children's literature for titles published since 1980. In addition, the Cooperative Children's Book Center's log list of acquired titles for Africa from 1990 to 1996 was reviewed. Results showed that authors set stories in such African cities as Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Banjul (Gambia); Cairo (Egypt), Cape Town (South Africa); Fez (Morocco); Freetown (Sierra Leone); Marrakech (Morocco); Harare (Zimbabwe), Johannesburg (South Africa), Lamu (Kenya), or Tangier (Morocco). On the basis of a demographic map, more than 100 cities stand out as potential sites for stories about city children in Africa. When cities are the setting for a story, authors most often selected one where English was the official language, such as Gambia or Zimbabwe. Certain books show great insights into African cities and the relationship among its inhabitants, but many have significant content problems. Authors tend to accentuate animism as an explanation of nature and to focus on minority populations to illustrate the exotic; they also concentrate on the achievements of the Afrikaaners even though they represent only 12% of the population of South Africa. Findings suggest that English language books on Africa do not do justice to the continent. Few North Americans would want African children to read only stories focused on the Amish or Mennonites from rural communities in Iowa or Pennsylvania, and yet this is essentially how most children's books represent Africa. (Contains 8 notes, a 44-item bibliography, and appendixes of 1980-1997 book titles and of biography titles.) (TB)

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CITY CHILDREN IN AFRICAN  
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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## CITY CHILDREN IN AFRICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In the United States, the history of popular children's literature about Africa dates to before the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> However, following the launch of the Soviet Union's satellite "Sputnik," U.S. politicians became concerned particularly with the scope of non-western content being taught in elementary and secondary schools. By recognizing a U.S. knowledge deficit in non-western regions, politicians enacted the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA). This act and its reauthorization, the Higher Education Act 1965 (HEA), allocated money for research universities to provide workshops for pre-collegiate teachers in designated area studies. African studies was one such area. Although outreach directors at African Studies Centers have spent over 25 years collaborating with educators and publishers, many of the books for children and young adults still promote stereotypes which the legislation attempted to eliminate.

This article explores the content describing cities in books about Africa. It identifies priorities in city selection, portrays the aspect of the city presented, and suggests content that promotes a representative view of the African continent. The research questions are as follows:

1. Which cities are presented in children's literature about Africa?
2. How do the contents from the books about African cities present African children?
3. Which authors write about city children in Africa?

4. Which publishers produce books about African city children?

### The Status of Pre-Collegiate Literature

The development of pre-collegiate literature has received support and direction from several sources including the United States government, the African American community, and the African studies profession.

#### Government Initiatives

To assure that pre-collegiate teachers benefitted from NDEA-government funding, institutional staff critiqued pre-collegiate curricula that focused on Africa. By reviewing the status of pre-collegiate literature about Africa, these educators built a data base to illustrate strengths and weaknesses in K-12 materials (Berry & Hicks, 1970; Bown, 1970; Hall, 1975, 1977; Rich, 1974, 1976; School Services, 1970; Schmidt, 1965, 1970, 1971). These leaders found that the stereotypes and misinformation about Africa were so great that the Office of education mandated subsequent funding to enable each center to hire an Africanist who was also an educator.

*Outreach mandate.* In the 1970s, Africanists (Kuntz, 1978; Schmidt, 1974, 1975b, 1977, 1979; Zekiros & Wiley, 1978) conducted surveys of available teaching materials revealed that many of these materials that were available to the public pre-dated research findings concerning the history, politics, and society of the continent. They found that stereotypes generated in North America and Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries prevailed in

textbooks and trade books of pre-collegiate readers. Misinformation about Africa was so pervasive that they had to spend most of their time countering stereotypes rather than administering other outreach services.

One such stereotype that authors perpetuated in children's literature about Africa was that the continent comprises mostly rural communities with many wild animals. Adult books about Africa written by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary, Rudyard Kipling, Ryder Haggard, Graham Greene, and André Gide in the early 20th century perpetuated myths about Africans and gave misinformation (Chinweizu et al., 1983; Milbury-Steen, 1981). These descriptions of African countries seemed to influence the thinking of writers and publishers of children literature (Hall, 1978). Consequently, the majority of children's literature appear not to address city concerns.<sup>2</sup> Of the 55 countries attributed to Africa, over 300 communities meet a city criterion.<sup>3</sup>

*Strength Through Wisdom.* In an effort to articulate the role of the newly formed U.S. Department of Education, Africanists among other regional scholars met in 1979. The results of the recommendations culminated in the publication *Strength Through Wisdom*<sup>4</sup>. Scholars told legislators that language instruction had to be improved along with cultural knowledge. Moreover, the area knowledge goals established in 1958 had not been achieved. As a result of these findings, Africanists began to collaborate with state government and school of education professors to revise pre-collegiate education syllabus including those of social studies,

language arts, and reading (Gunnar, 1984; Randolph, 1984a/b, 1987; Schmidt, 1990, 1981; Wiley, 1981).

### Multicultural Curricula

Similarly, African Americans promoted African-content literature as a means to celebrate their identity through the concept "Black is Beautiful" and civil rights. This focus on ethnicity was part of the grassroots demand for a multicultural approach to education (Kruse & Horning, 1988; Kurtz, 1996; Van Ausdall, 1988). Parents and teachers sought books that portrayed Africa from an African point of view rather than from the North American or European one. Several reviewers have prepared reference books for administrators, teachers, and parents with this an Afrocentric focus in mind (Aronson & Steel, 1995; Henderson & Ellerman 1996; Khorana, 1994; Randolph, 1986).

These curricula demand has resulted in multiple series of non-fiction formulaic books by country (Chelsea House, Children's Press, Franklin Watts, Garth Stevens, Lerner, Silver Burdett, Steck-Vaughn) [see Appendix B] and more recently by ethnic group (The Heritage Library of African People). Publishers were guaranteed large sales to school and public libraries for middle school social studies classes.

### African Studies Association - Children's Book Award

In 1990, Brenda Randolph, a public school librarian, conceived the idea of an award for children's books about Africa.<sup>5</sup> This award would assist teachers, librarians, publishers, and parents to identify quality reading about Africa. Randolph strategized that

by awarding writers and illustrators for excellence in presenting African content, she and her committee could influence the portrayal of African content for young readers. At the 1991 African Studies Association meeting, she identified Africanists comprising scholars, librarians, and pre-collegiate teachers who would review books available in the United States about Africa for elementary and secondary school students. Members of the award committee launch a renewed effort to educate children's book editors (Brown, 1996) and state textbook selection committees (Brown, 1994; Brown et al., 1996; Kuntz, 1992a/b; Randolph, 1993, 1994, 1995; Randolph et al., 1991; Schmidt, 1990).

Despite all the reviews and surveys of pre-collegiate books, no one has examined the collection of books about Africa in terms of city portrayal. As most countries in Africa celebrate over 35 years of independence from European colonization, this study highlights how North American authors and publishers portray African people and their cities.

#### Method

This descriptive study identified titles and features for books set in an African city. Data were collected from various reviews of children's literature for titles published since 1980 (Henderson & Ellerman 1996; Khorana, 1994; Kruse & Horning, 1988; Kuntz, 1992a/b; Kurtz, 1996; Randolph, 1994, 1993).

In addition, this author reviewed the Cooperative Children's Book Center's log list of acquired titles for Africa from 1990 to

1996.<sup>6</sup> During each of these years, North American publishers have marketed between 20 and 60 titles about Africa for pre-collegiate readers. After reading the books about Africa that contained references to cities, this author used descriptors to identify themes and types of characters. These descriptors included topics such as education (school, non-formal institutions), society (family, adolescent relationships), political (colonial governments, apartheid, and economy (work)).

### Results and Discussion

This study by no means includes every title published about cities in Africa since 1980. However, base on the average number of new titles published each year for this 16-year period (320), this author found that only 28 titles (9%) were situated in an African city. (Appendix A - Titles) The majority of books for children deal with folktales, animals, and general country information (social studies series). The results from these research questions indicate trends.

1. Which cities are presented in children's literature about Africa?

The data show that authors set stories in Addis Ababa, Banjul, Cairo, Cape Town, Fez, Freetown, Marrakech, Harare, Johannesburg, Lamu, or Tangier. On the basis of a demographic map of Africa, over 100 cities stand out as potential sites for stories about city children in Africa. Many other major cities have very long histories of existence such as Alexandria, Kumasi, Luxor, Tunis



(Carthage), Dar es Salaam, Mombasa, Kano, Timbuktu, Zanzibar City, and Khartoum while other villages grew into cities as a result of European colonization. These cities include Dakar, Lagos, Freetown, Monrovia, Maputo, N'Djamena, Kinshasa, Entebbe, Ibadan, Abidjan, Nairobi, Harare, Windhoek, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Durban, Lusaka, Accra, and Libreville. However, among the African literature for children, few stories are situated in cities.

When cities are the setting for a story, authors selected most often ones where English was an official language. For instance, authors frequently target The Gambia, South African, or Zimbabwean from where the British governed colonies. Perhaps, anglophone African cities receive the most number of books since most children's books are distributed to children in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

2. How do the contents from the books about African cities present African children?

*Young children.* Books that address issues of young children often present non-confrontational situations. Two books deal with a child going on a short trip with a grandparent (Daly, 1986; Sisulu, 1996). Others describe the daily life in a city (Anderson, 1986; Dawson, 1996; Stewart, 1985).

*Young adult.* For the most part, authors of young adult books about cities of Southern Africa describe male and female characters of the same age as those of the expected readers. Books situated in South Africa include situations that reveal the devastation of the apartheid system of racial segregation. Harare, the capital of

Zimbabwe, is another location for books. Although apartheid was not officially implemented there, characters in these novels reveal the racial and economic struggles between European immigrants and indigenous Africans.

*General population.* Some titles address the topic of a city, but the author does not specify a particular city. These books about African cities are written generally for older children (Dawson, 1996). In contrast, several of the non-fiction books that deal with a city, do not portray activities of children but rather those of adults written for a middle school reader (Lowis, 1996; Stein, 1996).

Certain books show great insights into African cities and the relationships among its inhabitants. Such books are ones that children should read (Daly, 1988; Hoffman, 1995; Naidoo, 1997; Sandoval, 1996; Sisulu, 1996; Temple, 1996). (Appendix - Titles) Some books (Dawson, 1996; Farmer, 1994) have significant content problems even if the readability is acceptable. Authors tend to accentuate animism as an explanation of nature and to focus on minority populations to illustrate the exotic. In addition, some Southern African writers concentrate on the achievements of Afrikaaners or English descendants even though these people represent only 12% of the population.

### 3. Which authors write about city children in Africa?

Authors of pre-collegiate books about cities in Africa comprise several groups of writers. The vast majority of writers are people who lived or are still living in an African country,

often the city that they describe in their book. This situation is particularly noticeable among writers from South Africa and Zimbabwe. These writers include Daly (1986), Dickinson (1988, 1990), Farmer (1994), Jones (1980, 1986), Magubane (1982), Naidoo (1985), and Sisulu (1996).

A second group of writers are those Europeans or North Americans who have travelled to an African country for employment as adults or lived in Africa during their adolescence. This group often comprises former Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, spouses of foreign service officials, or consultants to non-governmental organizations.

A third group of writers are individuals who have researched information about a city and submitted a manuscript to a publisher. Often, publishers request writers known for their writing skill to prepare a book for pre-collegiate readers. Writers in this group, such as Stein (1996) or Temple (1996), depend on their own research and their subject-area consultants to verify facts and situations. The African Studies outreach directors most often collaborate with this group.

In some cases, the writer's background knowledge of adolescents in a given African city is not clear. Many books about Africa are published by alternative presses. For a variety of reasons, the writer's African credentials often are not listed on the book jacket of these publications. In addition, the biodata of authors of African-content books frequently are not included in bibliographies of children's writers. This practice makes it

difficult for librarians and teachers who are not familiar with Africa to select books about Africa.

4. Which publishers distribute books about African city children?

The publishers of pre-collegiate books about children in African cities appear limited. Only three major publishing companies have produced several books about African cities. Children's Press has begun a series on major cities of the world. Orchard Books markets books about children and young adults in several African cities. Finally, Lippincott/Harper-Collins has published most of the young adult books.

Alternative presses publish the remaining books about children in African cities. Unfortunately, major companies are purchasing these alternative presses and then changing the scope of their subsidiary's service. Case in point is Simon and Schuster's purchase of Cobblestone Press, which produced a magazine called *Faces*. The current editor has halted "all book projects until the entire program can be reviewed."<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

Few North Americans would want African children to read only stories that focused on the Amish, Mennonites, and Hutterites from rural communities in Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Ohio or on Brer Rabbit and Paul Bunyan. Yet, North American authors and publishers rarely question the equivalent African sources for young readers. By describing animals, animal tales (oral narratives) or rural communities, authors continue to perpetuate stereotypes about the

continent of Africa and its citizens. Few writers address issues of African children and young adults as do writers such as Judy Blume, Sharon Creech, or Azi.

Africanist, librarians, and pre-collegiate educators must continue to take a proactive role in the publishing industry for books about Africa. Publishers might systematically hire Africanists with K-12 teaching experience to collaborate with writers. Prior to publications, all consultants could verify African content and cultural sensitivity. In addition, certification requirements for teachers of languages and social studies might include an African-content course. Also, Africanist educators at the pre-collegiate and tertiary levels could develop action research projects concerning literature with in-class teachers. Finally, Africanists might participate in professional subject-area organizations (NCSS, ACTFL, NCTE, AERA, ALA, ChLA) in lieu of regional-area organizations.<sup>8</sup>

After 35 years of NDEA/HEA funding to improve the knowledge-base of U.S. citizens about Africa, this study illustrates that we educators have a long way to go. Content about African city children also needs to be included in multicultural instruction. The void of literature about city children in Africa is glaring.

## Notes

The following people provided information for this paper:  
Kathleen Horning, Ginny Kruse, Brenda Randolph, Megan Schliesman.

1. Students from the pre-school age to grade nine (elementary school, middle/junior high school) or people up to age 15.

2. City is an inhabited place of populations greater than 25,000 people and is a government municipality.

3. See: Ramsay, F.J. (1995). *Africa* (6th ed.). Guilford, CT: Dushkin Publishing Group.

4. Perkins, J. (Ed.) (1979). *President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. See also: Simon, P. (1980). *The tongue-tied America*. New York, NY: Continuum.

5. The following books have received the ASA Children's Book Award:

1992 - Anderson, David (1991). *The Origin of Life on Earth: An African Creation Myth*. (Kathleen Wilson Sights Productions) [Children]

## Notable Book

(1991). *Apartheid: Calibrations of Color*. (Rosen)  
1993 - Wisniewski, David (1992). *Sundiata: Lion King of Mali*. (Clarion) [Children]

1994 - No Award Given (nothing noteworthy)

1995 - Hansen, Joyce (1994). *The Captive*. (Scholastic) [Young Adults]

Cowen-Fletcher, Jane (1994). *It Takes a Village*. (Scholastic) [Children]

## Notable Books

McKissack, Patricia & Frederick (1994). *The Royal Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay*. (Henry Holt)  
Rupert, Janet (1994). *The African Mask*. (Clarion)

1966 - Feelings, Tom (1995). *Middle Passage*. (Dial/Penguin) [Young Adult]

Rappaport, Doreen (1995). *The New King*. (E.B. Lewis) [Children]

## Notable Books

Hoffman, Mary (1995). *Boundless Grace*. (Dial/Penguin)

Mollel, Tololwa (1995). *Big Boy*. (Clarion)

Few of these award-winning books address children in an African city.

6. The Cooperative Children's Book Center is funded by the State of Wisconsin and is sponsored by the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, (608) 262-9503. <ccbcinfo@mail.soemadison.wisc.edu> [www.soemadison.wisc.edu/ccbc/]

7. Correspondence with Denise Babcock (Cobblestone Publishing, Inc.) 20 September 1996.

8. African Studies Association - Christopher Koch, Ex. Dir.  
Emory University, Credit Union Bldg., Atlanta GA 30322  
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Middle East Studies Association -  
University of Arizona, P.O. Box 210410, 1543 East Helen St.  
Tucson, AZ 85721 (520) 621-5850 Fx (520) 321-7752  
<mesa@ccit.arizona.edu>

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General

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- Schmidt, N.J. (1990). *African as primary actors in their own lives and lands: Validating African curriculum materials*. Baltimore, MD: African Studies Association, Proceedings.
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Van Ausdall, B.W. (1988). Images of Africa for American students. *English Journal* (September): 37-39.

#### Textbooks

Hall, S.J. (1978). What do textbooks teach our children about Africa? *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* 9/3:3-10.

Randolph, B. (1984a). The Depiction of South Africa in U.S. Textbooks. *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, 15/7&8. [The Education Digest, 1/2 (October) 1985].

Zekiros, A. & Wiley, M. [Crofts]. (1978). *Africa in social studies textbooks*. Madison, WI: Department of Public Instruction or East Lansing, MI: Department of Education.

#### Trade Books

Bown, L. (1970). Children's books about Africa. *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, 2/4:1, 4-7.

Brown, B. (1996). *Separating the gold from the dross: Selecting multicultural literature*. Boston, MA: Boston University, African Studies Center.

Chinweizu, Jemie, O., & Madubuike, I. (1983). *Toward the decolonization of African literature*. Washington, DC: Howard University Press.

Gunner, E. (1984). *A handbook for teaching African literature*. London: Heinemann.

Hall, S.J. (1978). Tarzan lives! A study of the new children's books about Africa. *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* 9/1:3-7.

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Khorana, M. (1994). *Africa in literature for children and young adults: an annotated bibliography of English-language books*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

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- Kuntz, P.S. & Miller-Lachmann, L. (1992b). South Africa. In L. Miller-Lachmann (ed.) *Our family, our friends, our world*. New Providence, NJ: Bowker.
- Kuntz, P.S. (1978). *Books about Africa for adolescents and youth*. Madison, WI: Department of Public Instruction. (ERIC ED 188 986)
- Kurtz, J. (1996). Multicultural Children's Books: The Subtle Tug of War. *School Library Journal* 42/2.
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- Randolph, B. (1995). Africa. In L. Miller-Lachmann (ed), *Global voices, global visions: A core collection of multicultural books*. New Providence, NJ: Bowker.
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Schmidt, N.J. (1965). Children's literature about Africa. *African Studies Bulletin*, 8/3: 61-70.

## APPENDIX A

## Titles 1980 to 1997

1997

- Ethiopia (Addis Ababa)  
Kurtz, J. & C. *Only a Pigeon*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- South Africa (Johannesburg)  
Naidoo, B. *No turning back*. New York: Harper/Collins. (YA)

1996

- Egypt (Cairo)  
Stein, R.C. *Cairo*. New York: Children's Press. (YA)
- Morocco (Fez)  
Temple, F. *The beduins' gazelle*. New York: Orchard Books. (YA)
- Sierra Leone (Freetown)  
Sandoval, D. *Be patient Abdul*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books/Simon & Schuster. (C)
- South Africa (Cape Town/Johannesburg)  
Dawson, Z. *South Africa*. Austin: Stecker-Vaughn. (C)  
Lowis, P. *South Africa: Free at last*. Austin: Stecker-Vaughn. (YA)  
Sisulu, E.B. *The day Gogo went to vote: South Africa April 1994*. Boston: Little, Brown. (C)

1995

- Gambia (Banjul)  
Hoffman, M. *Boundless Grace*. New York: Dial.

1994

- Zimbabwe (Harare)  
Farmer, N. *The ear, the eye and the arm*. New York: Orchard Books. (YA)

1993

1992

1991

- South Africa (Cape Town)  
Case, D. *Love, David*. New York: Lodestar/Penguin. (YA)

1990

- South Africa  
Gordon, S. *The Middle of somewhere: A story of South Africa*. New York: Bantam/Skylark. (YA)  
Stock, C. *Armen's fishing trip*. New York: Morrow Books. (C)
- Zambia  
Dickenson, P. *AK*. New York: Delcourt. (YA)

## APPENDIX B

## Biographies

## EGYPT

- Gamal Nasser (1)  
DeChancee, J. (1988). *Gamal Abdel Nasser*. New York: Chelsea House.
- Anwar Sadat (2)  
Finke, B.F. (1986). *Anwar Sadat: Egyptian Ruler and Peace Maker*. Charlotteville, New York: SamHar Press.  
Rosen, D.N. (1986). *Anwar el-Sadat: Middle East Peacemaker*. New York: Childrens Press.

## ETHIOPIA

- Haile Selassie (1)  
Negacsh, A. (1989). *Haile Selassie*. New York: Chelsea House.

## GHANA

- Kwame Nkrumah (1)  
Kellner, D. (1987). *Kwame Nkrumah*. New York: Chelsea House.

## KENYA

- Jomo Kenyatta (1)  
Wepman, D. (1985). *Jomo Kenyatta*. New York: Chelsea House.

## LIBYA

- Muammar Qaddafi (1)  
Kyle, B. (1987). *Muammar El-Qaddafi*. New York: Chelsea House.

## SOUTH AFRICA

- Stephen Biko (1)  
Sanservere-Dreher, D. (1991). *Stephen Biko*. New York: Bantam.

- Nelson Mandela (6)  
Cooper, F. (1996). *Mandela: From the Life of the South African Statesman*. New York: Putnam & Grosset.  
Denenberg, B. (1991). *Nelson Mandela: No Easy Walk to Freedom*. New York: Scholastic.  
Hargrove, J. *Nelson Mandela: South Africa's Silent Voice of Protest*. New York: Children's Press.  
Otfinoski, S. (1992). *Nelson Mandela*. New York: Millbrook.  
Steffoff, R. (1990). *Nelson Mandela: A Voice Set Free*. New York: Ballantine/Fawcett.  
Vail, J. (1989) *Nelson and Winnie Mandela*. New York: Chelsea House.

- Winnie Mandela (2)  
Meltzer, M. (1986) *Winnie Mandela: The Soul of South Africa*. New York: Viking.

1989

Africa

Drew, E. *Blue taxis stories about Africa*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions. (YA)

South Africa (Cape Town/Soweto)

Schernbrucker, R. *Charlie's house*. New York: Viking. (C)

Tessindorf, K.C. *Along the road to Soweto: A racial history of South Africa*. New York: Atheneum. (YA)

1988

South Africa

Griffiths, I. *The crisis in South Africa*. Rourke. (YA)

Zambia

Dickinson, P. *Eva*. New York: Delcourt. (YA)

1986

Kenya

(Lamu)

Anderson, J. *Juma and the magic jinn*. New York: Lothrop. (C)

South Africa (Cape Town/Johannesburg)

Daly, N. *Not so fast, Songololo*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books/Simon & Schuster. (C)

Jones, T. *Skindeep*. New York: Harper. (YA)

*Two dogs and freedom: Children of the townships speak out*. Johannesburg: Raven Press. (YA)

1985

Morocco

(Tangier)

Stewart, J. *A family in Morocco*. Minneapolis: Lerner. (C)

South Africa (Johannesburg)

Naidoo, B. *Journey to Jo'burg*. New York: Lippincott/Harper Collins. (YA)

1984

Morocco

(Marrakech)

Sales, F. *Ibrahim*. New York: Lippincott/Harper Collins. (YA)

1982

Egypt

(Cairo)

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