

# Sankofa

## **One Hen: Sensitizing Children to Social Issues**

*Meena G. Khorana and Denise Jarrett*



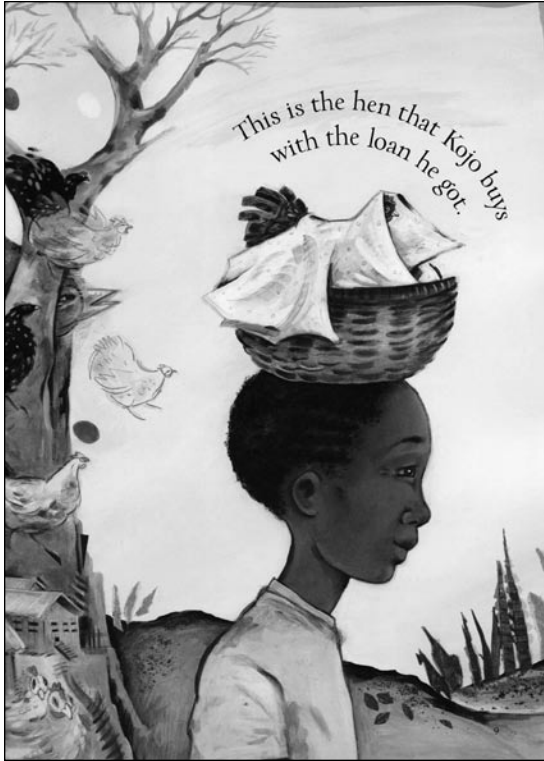
Eugenie Fernandes.



Katie Smith Milway.

**O**ne Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference is the winner of the 2009 Children’s Africana Book Award for Best Book for Young Children. Written by Katie Smith Milway and illustrated by Eugenie Fernandes, *One Hen* is a timely picture book that encourages hope in a disquieting global economy. Both text and illustrations transform this very “adult” topic into an inspirational book that will draw young readers into the story and empower them to action.

Published in 2008 by Kids Can Press (KCP), *One Hen* is part of KCP’s Citizen Kid series, which introduces children to stories that will sensitize them to world issues. When Kids Can Press approached Milway to contribute a book to the series, she chose the topic of microfinancing, which she considered to be “an ideal window into poverty alleviation for children, because any child who has run a lemonade stand can relate to micro-entrepreneurs,” and she was inspired by her “years of working in international development...and knowing that microfinance can be an effective intervention at giving the poor a hand up” (Email to Khorana). Moreover, she had heard Dr. Kwabena Darko, a successful Ghanaian businessman, activist for the poor, and ordained clergyman, speak at a microfinance conference in the United States in 2004, and was convinced that of all the stories she had encountered of microentrepreneurs, his would



resonate most with children because Dr. Darko had started his business when he was a young boy.<sup>1</sup>

Based on Dr. Darko's real-life experiences, *One Hen* is the story of Kojo, a young Ghanaian boy who invests in one hen after he receives a fraction of his mother's microloan. From this small beginning, Kojo becomes a successful chicken farmer and, as his business expands, his sense of social commitment and agency impact his entire community and nation.

Although this exemplary story could be considered didactic, Milway's inspiring prose and authentic portrayal of life in rural Ghana, together with Fernandes's magical and humorous illustrations, raise *One Hen* to the level of an aesthetically pleasing work of art. Furthermore, the attractive design and page layout make this picture book accessible to children at various reading levels. Fernandes's illustrations, juxtaposed with Milway's captions, serve as a complete story for

preschool and kindergarten children; while the main text, with details of Kojo's business venture and progress, is better suited for children in grades one through six.

### **Marrying One's Own Success to Giving Back**

*One Hen* is an exceptional book not only because it provides an accurate account of the efficacy of microfinancing at the village and global levels,<sup>2</sup> but because it stems from Milway's personal ideology, expertise, and experiences.

Katie Smith Milway was born in New Milford, Connecticut. When she was four her family immigrated to Canada, followed by a two-year stay in Baltimore, Maryland, and then back to Canada, where she remained throughout her school years.<sup>3</sup> The Baltimore years (1967–69) were turbulent ones, filled with racial tension, neighborhood curfews, and uprisings in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination. Years later, as a freshman in college in the United States, she watched the film *From Montgomery to Memphis* and learned the fuller context of Dr. King's beliefs and struggle, and "found [her]self sobbing with understanding, finally, of the greater cause. That revelation served as one trigger for [her] subsequent dedication to cross-cultural understanding" (Email).

Milway gave practical shape to this understanding when, in the summer of 1984, she went to Bamako, Mali, to conduct research for her master's thesis (for the Free University of Brussels) on Malian Food Sector Strategies. That fall, she interned at the European Commission in Brussels and worked on assembling food aid to Ethiopian famine victims. Since then, she has worked in a dozen countries in Africa, including Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Chad in West Africa. With her background in sustainable development, she has worked with numerous international and community development organizations: consultant

with World Relief and World Vision, staffer for Food for the Hungry, and, currently, a partner at the Bridgespan Group, an organization that advises nonprofit organizations and philanthropic groups.

Milway began writing for children in 1998, when she was on maternity leave with her second child. She submitted a story to the Canadian Children's Fiction contest about a cow that loved the color "Bloooooo." The story was based on a character invented by her mother, Mary Ann Smith, when Katie was a child. The judges gave the co-authors constructive criticism, and the revised story captured the attention of Kids Can Press, and was published in 2002 as *Cappuccina Goes to Town*. "Since then," says Milway, "Kids Can Press has been a wonderful ally in encouraging me to draw on my background in cultural diversity and international development to craft books like *One Hen* and my forthcoming *The Good Garden*, which teaches children about food security" (Email).

In an interview with Aline Pereira, Milway explains that her rationale for writing *One Hen* was "to inspire kids to can-do and compassion; to expand their worldview about the role they could play in helping themselves and others." In addition, she wanted to present a multicultural forum, whereby young readers could learn about the culture of another country, Ghana, and the similarities of children's dreams, aspirations, and successes worldwide (see Pereira). She also explains that Kojo's story is universal, citing children in North America who employ the same micro self-help principle when setting up bake sales, car washes, and lemonade stands in their neighborhoods.

In *One Hen*, Milway creates an empowering tale about sharing and caring for each other by introducing children to microfinancing through the fictionalization of Kwabena Darko's real-life success story. It focuses on the daily lives and com-

mon occupations of a village in the Ashanti region of Ghana—raising small livestock, rural school, cash-crop farming, sewing, market day—and the savings club that the community devises "so that one family can [borrow money each month to] buy something important" (7). With her understanding of the culture, Milway explains that she deliberately allows Kojo's mother to receive the microloan first, because the vast majority of microentrepreneurs are women (Email).

The forward movement of *One Hen's* linear, uncomplicated plot is dependent on the protagonist's character development. There is social, economic, emotional, and psychological growth as Kojo's life changes when his mother gives him the small unspent amount from her microloan. Kojo starts his own business by investing in one hen, and then sells the eggs, saves profits, buys more hens, a pattern of initiative and enterprise that ultimately leads to the fulfillment of his educational and other life goals. As was the case with Kwabena Darko, Kojo has to help support his family when his father dies, later attends college to study poultry science, and expands his farm with a hard-won loan from a real bank, after initially being rejected for lack of collateral or credit history. Through his hard work Kojo, too, provides employment for people in his community and gives microloans to others interested in starting small businesses, thus leading his community to independence and prosperity (see "A Real Kojo").

This *Bildungsroman* shows that through the effort of one child, who makes the right choices and shares his good fortune, an entire community can move from poverty to self-sufficiency. By creating such a strong child character, Milway conveys to young readers the importance not only of making responsible decisions but also of being innovative, self-confident, and taking risks in order to achieve one's goals. Most importantly, she conveys the value of marrying one's own success to giving back.

## Transforming Realism into Fantasy

Eugenie Fernandes's whimsical and imaginative illustrations transform the very realistic story of Kojo's business investment into a visual delight. She brings to this task her vast experience as an author and illustrator.

Fernandes is the celebrated illustrator of over eighty books, many of which she has authored herself, including *A Difficult Day* and *The Little Mouse* series. She was born in Huntington, Long Island, and lived for many years in the same house by the beach where she was born, roaming carefree and loving her environs. She was inspired to become an artist by her father, Creig Flessel, who was among the first comic book artists in the United States. She graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. She now lives by a lake in Canada with her family, all of whom are artists. She has collaborated with her husband on writing and illustrating children's books and animation for *Sesame Street*. Her daughter, Kim, also illustrates children's books, such as her three-dimensional pictures for *Just You and Me*, written by Fernandes, and *The Little Mouse* series; and her son, Matthew, designed and created an animated children's series entitled *Dex Hamilton*.<sup>4</sup>

Although Fernandes has never been to Africa, she conducted extensive research on the Ghanaian environment, people, clothing, houses, plants, animals, foods, and culture in order to ensure accuracy and cultural authenticity. In addition, she has traveled to the Caribbean and has studied African art.

Fernandes adapts her artistic style to each story that she illustrates, but she also introduces a unique approach. Like her pictures for *Earth Magic*, a collection of poems by Trinidadian author Dionne Brand, the pictures she did for *One Hen* create a dreamlike, magical atmosphere to balance the serious, earth-bound subject matter.

To her, it is like "letting go of gravity—allowing people to dance through the air—and bringing a more magical quality" to the story. Furthermore, she sees a magical element in African culture: "the earth and sky are together—the magic of life with the harsh reality of life—both an integral part of one another. When life becomes difficult, you need the magic to balance it" (Telephone interview).

To depict the hope of this rural society, Fernandes uses warm colors and shades of blue and yellow in the illustrations, although the color of the soil of Ghana is dominant. She employed a variety of artistic mediums and techniques—acrylics, collage, clay, sticks, cardboard, and even ground tea from tea bags (which looks like sand)—in order to convey the feel of the culture, lifestyle, and environment featured in *One Hen*.

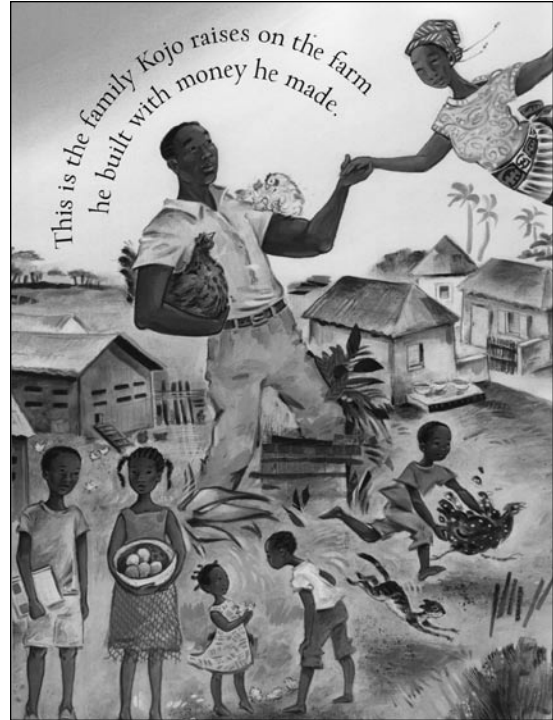
In portraying Kojo, Fernandes reaches into her own carefree childhood to reflect his contented and secure life. The illustrations accurately represent Kojo's growth from childhood to adulthood, from poverty to success and wealth, and his community's progress from village to town. This transformation is evident when one compares the first illustration with the later ones, where the Ashanti village becomes more affluent, with a developed infrastructure—and the chickens are everywhere, because they are the ones who make this success possible. Fernandes unifies the text and illustrations by making the first hen Kojo buys—the "plump brown hen with a bright red comb" (8)—a central figure in most of the illustrations, a constant symbol of hope. As Kojo grows older, Fernandes keeps him recognizable from page to page with his yellow shirt and distinctive hairstyle.

Fernandes extends the buoyant mood of the text by creating a fantasy world that will appeal to the imaginations of children. She introduces complexity into the plot by inventing characters that have their own visual life. The dream-world

motif begins when Kojo buys the brown hen, and then visualizes the humorous “hen tree” (8–9). She alters size and perspective, features larger-than-life objects, and presents simultaneous action. A whimsical and humorous atmosphere is evoked through the personification of animal characters and natural elements. In the opening illustration, the enormous sun wears an African mask; there are three anthropomorphized hens engaged in daily activities in the hectic market day scene; miniature children attend class on the pages of a supersized book, perhaps to emphasize the importance of education; and the hens show support—and concern—as they anxiously watch (through what appears to be a crystal ball) Kojo’s interview with the bank president for a loan.

“One constant element in my stories,” says Fernandes, “is that the main character, usually a child or an animal, pushes out from its safe place to explore, and then returns to the safe place.” Yet, not all characters have a physical safe place, because the theme is resilience or turning to one’s inner core in order to feel secure enough to hope and explore (Telephone interview). Sometimes, as in *One Hen*, circumstances compel one to explore. Hence, Kojo has to face difficulties, but he can always return to the safety of his family and community. According to Fernandes, “giving people the opportunity to help themselves is akin to moving out of the safe place, and I believe that if most people are given the chance, they will take it” (Telephone interview).

*One Hen* is an exceptional book because both text and illustrations convey the message of exploration, hope, and community values. In addition to the 2009 Children’s Africana Book Award, the story and its interactive Web site, <<http://www.onehen.org>>, have won numerous other awards in 2009, including the Massachusetts Book Award, United States Board on Books for Young People’s Outstanding International Book List, Bank Street College Best Children’s



Illustrations from *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference*, written by Katie Smith Milway and illustrated by Eugenie Fernandes, used by permission of Kids Can Press Ltd., Toronto. Illustrations copyright © 2008 Eugenie Fernandes.

Book List, International Reading Association Global Society Book List, Canadian Children’s Book Centre Nominee for the Norma Fleck Award for Canadian Children’s Non-Fiction, and Computerworld 21st Century Achievement Award. In addition to entertaining, the book is impacting the lives of children through *One Hen, Inc.* educational curricula. The Web site, <<http://www.onehen.org>>, describes *One Hen* as moving from an “inspirational story, to a service-learning tool” that integrates text with technology. The book and the Web site’s downloadable curriculum in math, language arts, and social studies, interactive games, and virtual entrepreneurs market is used widely in schools across the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and in some African countries, and draws visitors from 116 countries around the world (Milway, Email). *One Hen* has gone beyond the classroom as well,

with Milway using it to present microfinancing to employees and their children at "Take Your Child to Work" days at large corporations like Morgan Stanley.

*One Hen* is successful in presenting a "grown up" topic to children of all cultures in a child-oriented, practical manner. Above all, the book empowers children by demonstrating that in our uncertain global economy even children can realize the need for self-sufficiency, taking responsibility, and, most importantly, giving back to the community.

### Notes

1. Milway has met Dr. Darko several times since then, and had the privilege of speaking at his 2008 award ceremony for lifetime achievement with Opportunity International, a global microfinance non-profit organization, where he served for years on the board of directors (Email).

2. Dr. Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh and his micro-lending organization, Grameen Bank, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.

3. All biographical information is based on Katie Smith Milway's email interview with Meena Khorana.

4. All biographical information is based on Eugenie Fernandes's telephone interview with Denise Jarrett.

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