

***Bite of the Mango* by Mariatu Kamara with Susan McClelland**

The English as a Second Language (ESL) program in Tasmania supports students from Sierra Leone, so I was glad of the chance to review *Bite of the Mango* in which Mariatu Kamara tells of her experiences in that country's civil war. This would be an opportunity for me to learn more about the sort of experiences our students have had.

The value of Mariatu's story lies in the fact that here is an account of a childhood lived in Africa. How different it is to our culture and the way we bring up our children! And yet Mariatu, because of her experiences, ended up living in Canada (and we now have students from Sierra Leone living in Tasmania). So this book can teach us that many refugees now living in Australia have cultural experiences quite different from our own.

Then we have the effect of the civil war. When the rebels come to Mariatu's village she survives, but has her hands cut off. (Unbelievably, this was a reasonably common occurrence.) At the time Mariatu was twelve, so her childhood experiences are even more removed from those of Australian teenagers. Mariatu's story lends itself to discussions on all sorts of issues such as education, democracy, relationships, beliefs, female genital mutilation, disability, refugees, resilience, loss and grief.

Because the story is true it tells things that a fictional account might well avoid, and teachers need to consider carefully what classes and age groups they would use the story with. The story itself is straightforward, well-written, easy-to-read and one that *everyone should read*.

Recommended.

Mary Blake, Elizabeth College, Tas

The first thing to capture the reader's interest is the cover. The soulful face of a beautiful African woman looks hopefully upward inviting the reader to learn more. A quick flick through the book to the end or a Google search reveals that Sierra Leonean woman Mariatu Kamara is indeed this young woman on the front of the book, instantly personalising the story and encouraging the reader to immerse themselves in the life and story of this remarkable person.

Mariatu Kamara has a story to tell, and does she tell it well. Living through the war in Sierra Leone, losing her hands at the mercy of the rebels, losing loved ones, seeing sights no-one should ever have to see including being raped and losing a child, it would be very easy to write this story off as one of obscene horrors that is distasteful to the audience. But : Mariatu Kamara isn't asking for our pity. Mariatu is telling us her story so that we might learn from her experiences, that she might help others and that she might bring global awareness about the horrors that many many people, from different cultures live with every day. An awareness that we, as Australians living in a safe and peaceful country can act upon and make sense of.

The tone of the book is one of hope. After finding refugee status in Canada Mariatu made great strides with her learning, education and pro-active stance, helping others in similar situations. This book is one that would be best used in a Social Studies/English classroom. It is easy to read and would prove a useful tool for students to disseminate and discuss. Most suitable for students over around 14 years plus- mainly because of the slightly more graphic content and issues...this book would be a fantastic learning tool for learners who have refugee children in their own school...offering an opportunity to gain understanding, perspective and knowledge about a lifestyle never imagined here in Australia.

This book is a fantastic resource and used sensitively would enhance the learning of any student reading it.

Francesca Ann Massey, Tas

This is an outstanding book that I have now put in my top recommended reads for young adults. As my 16 year old daughter said, 'Everyone should read this book, Mum!' *Bite of the Mango* is a true story written by the main character Mariatu Kamara with assistance from Canadian journalist Susan McClelland.

This is a story of war told graphically through Mariatu's innocent 12 year old eyes. The setting is Sierra Leone, simple village life is changed forever when war breaks out. Nothing makes sense, rebel boy soldiers terrorise the countryside wielding machetes and showing no remorse as they murder, maim and intimidate. Mariatu's village is in the middle of this violence and the villagers flee to the hills to escape however when Mariatu goes on a food finding expedition she is attacked by the rebels. She is dismembered in the most shocking way having both her hands amputated. This is not easy reading as you are left gob smacked at the brutality of the action. There is no comfort in this story as it is all true and it happened to thousands of innocent women, children and men.

Miraculously Mariatu is able to find her way to safety and with assistance she ends up in Freetown where she is re-united with her family. Her sanity is further challenged upon realising that she is pregnant to a village man who raped her just prior to the attack of the rebels. She has a son but he dies at 10 months old. Mariatu is riddled with guilt as she is convinced that it was her lack of

bonding and love that killed him. She sinks into deep depression and is tempted to end it all but the support of her family keeps her on track and able to cope.

She is an inspirational character who survives against all odds. The love of her extended family and her resilience enable her to find a pathway to the future, a pathway that leads to England then Canada where she learns English; attends college and creates her own foundation.

The book questions many beliefs that we westerners have about warfare, life in Africa, incomprehensible violence and ultimately survival. The notion of family is shown in a new light and it demonstrates sharply the difference in our customs and attitudes. It leaves the reader with a deeper understanding of life in a war torn African country and the capacity of those most brutalised to find a way to create a better life. It is a must read and I will include it in our Literature Circles collection.

No text book could tell so emotionally and heartbreakingly the state of things in Sierra Leone.

Sharon Marchingo, Crusoe Secondary College, Vic

Mariatu Kumara's story is confronting and haunting, uplifting and inspiring. The honest words of a poor village girl from Sierra Leone, describes the horrors of civil war and the brutality of rebels seeking to send a clear messages to the Government. The text is a simply written, making it accessible for a range of classes but best suited thematically to Stage 5 and above. The story explores a range of themes and issues certain to challenge the hearts and minds of secondary students – human rights, politics, war, violence, family, journeys, pain, cultural traditions, illness, poverty and suffering.

Mariatu deals with many atrocities as a young girl, more than any human being should ever have to endure. Already dealing with the hardships of rural village life, Mariatu loses both of her hands to rebels wielding machetes and using innocent villagers as political weighting to send a strong message to the government – '*Go to the president and show him what we did to you*'. Students may find this act of violence confronting, along with other events in the book including Mariatu's rape by another villager (also her prospective husband), the death of her young son from malnutrition and her concern that she may have contracted HIV. However, each event is carefully described by Kumara to educate others about the struggles of the people of Sierra Leone rather than overtly shock. The book also highlights the strength, courage and hope of the people amidst such hardship.

Mariatu was lucky to be given passage to a new life in Canada, offering her a chance for an education and lifestyle not possible at the time in her native land. It did make me wonder however, how many children in Sierra Leone don't get the same opportunity. Teenagers often take for granted the lifestyle they have here in Australia and this book offers some perspective for them to reinforce how blessed a country they do have – far from the violence, bloodshed, illness and poverty many African countries are stricken with. This text could be used in a close study unit or as a related text for a range of Areas of Study such as journey, conflict, family or war. Specific chapters could also be used in isolation if time is an issue, but if time permits read the entire text. Personally I would use the text as part of a wider unit incorporating related websites such as www.warchild.org which explores child soldiers (like those who were responsible for cutting off Mariatu's hands) and Mariatu's own website at www.mariatufoundation.com. Overall, a valuable non-fiction text certain to interest students and teachers.

Emma Stevenson, Port Hacking High School, NSW

I loved *Bite of the Mango*. It is by far the best modern book I have reviewed this year. I was deeply moved by this astounding story and both saddened and encouraged by the accounts of human nature. Mariatu Kamara recounts her horrific ordeal in Sierra Leone with incredible honesty and integrity. She recalls her village life before the rebels came, the rebel attacks and the attack on her at the age of twelve where lost both her hands. We follow her story of survival, escape and recovery. I am amazed at the strength of character that Mariatu has.

Susan McClelland, I believe has honestly and accurately retold Mariatu's story and I am not at all surprised that she is the recipient of the 2008 and 2005 Amnesty International Canada Media Awards for excellence in human rights reporting.

To both Mariatu and Susan, well done. I have been motivated and inspired by your book and look forward to the documentary about child victims of war.

I recommend this book to any high school student, although they should be aware that it contains some upsetting truths. I think that our twelve year olds should know how others live and what some people have to do to survive. I would like to see more books like this available in schools, rather than protecting our children from these realities.

I found the book easy to read – I couldn't put it down.

Fantastic! Ten out of ten! Educational, interesting and relevant! Awesome!

Linda Searby, Mountain District Christian School, Vic

Bite of the Mango is a poignant memoir about Mariatu Kamara's experiences growing up in a poor village of Sierra Leone. Her life of extreme poverty in the rural countryside is tempered with the rich support she felt as a member of an extended family network. Mariatu's life changes one day forever, when the rebels invade her village. For a while the rebels were only a distant rumour in a life untouched by war. The day the rebels came brought chaos and despair as Mariatu and her family are involved in a war they know little about and even less understand. Many of the villagers are tortured and killed with Mariatu suffering extreme agony when both her hands are cut off. Mariatu then embarks on an incredible journey from her village to Freetown where the hospital helps her recover from her trauma. There are many moments when Mariatu felt completely alone in the world and almost gave up hope but somehow she finds the inner strength to continue. Eventually she ends up living in an amputee camp and survives by begging in the streets of Freetown. Through pure luck she first ends up going to London to help her gain prosthetic hands and then ends up in Canada where she creates a new life for herself. It is not till six years later that she returns to Sierra Leone, to see her country in its attempts to recover the horrors of war. During this time, Mariatu has forged herself a new life in Canada, not only learning English but gaining an education that gives her the opportunity of forging a bright new future. Despite this she still yearns for what she has lost in her homeland of Sierra Leone in a classic situation of divided identity between her homeland and the country that has served as her refuge.

Bite of the Mango serves as a powerful story about the triumph of the individual over immense odds. The engaging style of the memoir makes us feel as though we are sitting and personally listening to Mariatu tell the story. We are taken with ease into her life and feel as though she is telling us her long-held traumatic secrets. The memoir also importantly tells us of the horrifying situation of one of the poorest countries on earth. As a non-fiction text, the story would be most suitable for the upper grades of High School in the study of a topic on Journeys as a powerful non-fiction text to help students engage with and understand different cultural experiences.

Gersha Shteyman, Kesser Torah College, NSW

This is a most horrendous story, told with such simplicity. Whilst it is true that Mariatu does finally triumph over all the horrors she endures in her early years, the reader is left with two feelings: sorrow that anyone has to endure what she has experienced and joy at the ending to her story. The first person narration and the simple English with which the novel opens vividly draw a picture of a peaceful yet poor community in Sierra Leone (the inclusion of the line-drawn maps clearly shows the reader where the story begins). The narrator's voice is soft and gentle with a touch of humour. Her explanations of her way of life show both her acceptance of it and her understanding of it from her home in Canada. Susan McClelland's voice does not seem to intrude at all.

"But then the rebels invaded our lives, and everything changed." With such a simple introduction does Mariatu embark on the most terrifying part of her story. War does, indeed, change everything. Although the villagers attempt to remain in their regular lives they are rudely shocked from it. Through the loss of her hands and her hospitalisation Mariatu fights with her bitterness and her fears; the realisation of her pregnancy, adds further weight to her sorrows but gradually Mariatu learns to accept what has happened to her. Family and friends are her life blood and as those are gradually returned to her she becomes happier.

War is cruel and vicious. The innocent are affected as badly as the soldiers who fight. Civil war is, in so many ways, even worse as all elements within a country fight for survival and the land itself is torn up and destroyed. Mariatu's story is the story of the way in which a country, though destroyed, can strive to grow again because of the people who live in and love it.

Mariatu's story is also a story of hope. The life lived by the refugees is indescribable but her simple words and her almost casual acceptance of so much that happens around her show the reader a picture of human devastation and human hope that is compelling.

Living in a safe and secure western nation we cannot really understand what motivates the refugees who flood to our shores. Mariatu enlightens us as she longs for a journey to Canada. Her time in England prepares her for the differences between here world and ours but it is in Canada that she finds salvation and a purpose to her life.

The characters are well-drawn and the narrative is controlled by the chronology it unfolds. The language is simple and unsophisticated and the descriptions of scenes vivid. To me, however, and to my year 9 students who are reading the autobiography what are the most compelling aspects of the story are the picture it draws of the plight of the refugee, the horror of war it unfolds and the way in which the human spirit can rise above all the vicissitudes of life.

Mariatu's story is a story of resilience; it should be read by as many of our complacent teenagers as possible, not only because of what it reveals about the human spirit and its ability to rise to the challenges but also because it reveals to them the motivations behind a refugee's desire for safety.

Robyne Ridge, Kinross Wolaroi School, NSW

‘Whenever you dream of palm oil, blood will spill by the end of the day.’

With this sense of foreboding, so begins this heartbreaking yet truly inspirational story of twelve year old civil war victim, Mariatu Kamara, as shared with journalist, Susan McClelland. It is a powerful and chilling memoir of suffering and sickening cruelty for Mariatu. Forced from her village of Magborou in Sierra Leone when she was only eleven, she and cousins Adamsay, Mohamed and Ibrahim are attacked by rebel ‘boy soldiers’, no older than Mariatu herself. Their barbaric acts are too horrific to imagine; they burn and pillage, and nearly one hundred are killed.

Held hostage for ten hours, the rebels butcher Mariatu, cutting off her hands, this shocking act of inhumanity celebrated by their ‘High 5s’. Believing everyone has a spirit watching over him or her, “You WILL live”, the positive self-talk which gives Mariatu a will to survive as she escapes from her captors, on the run until she is taken by truck to Freetown. There she is hospitalised and finally reunited with her three cousins, also victims of the rebels’ atrocities and facing a life without hands, needing constant help for personal care and the added indignity of begging their only possible livelihood. The living nightmare continues; raped and confirmed pregnant, Mariatu falls into depression, her bitterness and overwhelming desperation even more unbearable with the birth of her son, Abdul. “Take me Allah. Take my baby and me. I want to die. There are times when silence is louder than any voice. I have no future”.

From hospital, Mariatu is moved to Aberdeen, the camp for displaced amputees, where she lived for two years. Imagine over 400 without hands and 1,600 to look after them, forced into a space the size of a soccer stadium, in horrifying conditions. She reaches a turning point in her very young life, invited to join Victor’s theatre troupe – a therapeutic confidence boost and a focus for healing and her own personal growth and recovery through endurance.

Now, seemingly ready to ‘do battle with the world’, and wanting to go to the United States, the ever-resilient Mariatu’s situation is reported in the press, as people in the West became interested in Sierra Leone through foreign non-profit groups offering humanitarian aid and adoption programs in other countries. Her life is about to turn around, from one of fear to one of possibility and hope.

Written to dispel myths about her background, and in response to meeting a former child soldier, Ishmael, in 2007, Mariatu first considered the title, *Never Give Up On Your Dreams*. Indeed, this is a miraculous and haunting survival story of incredible courage and recovery, a moving memoir, highly recommended for inclusion in the secondary school library collection as a must-read for staff and students alike, as we appreciate once again our blessing of freedom and peace here in this country. Both graphic and gut-wrenching, yet hopeful and heart-warming, and written with honesty and compassion, readers will be overcome by Mariatu’s wartime experiences and then immersed in her rescue and the amazing physical and personal journey beyond the pain, ‘moving on’ through intense emotional and psychological issues, to the young woman she is today.

We read of her ‘new’ life in Toronto, arriving as a landed immigrant on humanitarian grounds; with no hands but a sharp mind, learning English and graduating from ESL class; the school benefit concert held to buy her improved prosthetic hands; and of the college student, Mariatu, becoming a UNICEF Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflicts; and of her current work in Sierra Leone (www.mariatufoundation.com).

On a curriculum level, as an eye-opening, thought-provoking awareness raiser, *Bite of the Mango* provides valuable background material for Global Conflicts studies within the History Curriculum at Year 10-12 level, as we learn of the history and cultural background of Sierra Leone and the costs of this shocking civil war. As an easy-to-read shared class text within the English curriculum, *Bite of the Mango* provides excellent extension writing and discussion starter opportunities for students aged 15+, exploring complex, conscience-raising issues of family and relationships, kindness and distrust, disability, survival and courage, truth and forgiveness, death and grieving, politics and power, justice, revenge and punishment, violence and war, female genital mutilation, refugees and human rights.

In sensitivity, admiration and awe, we look to Mariatu, such a determined, extraordinary young woman, who through her devastating ordeal can have her final act of forgiving those rebels as punishment enough for them. “Don’t look back, Mariatu. If you look back, you will live your life with regrets and with what-could-have-beens. Always look forward”.

Alison Cassell, Qld

This is a wonderful book. The story is at once, tragic, sincere, brutal and inspiring. Mariatu has told us simply and gently her horrific story of growing up in war torn Sierra Leone. The reader can taste the simplicity and beauty of her life as a child in a rural village in Sierra Leone. This is until her village is attacked brutally by rebels and her way of life is destroyed forever, in fact the way of life for all the villagers is irrevocably lost. From that time on death, disfigurement, uncertainty and bewilderment are the order of the day.

For Mariatu her life is changed dramatically forever. The savagery of the rebel soldiers is hard for the reader to accept, so one can only admire the acceptance and maturity from 12 year old Mariatu. The reader is dragged through her story trying to cope with her plight, the awful journey just to get medical help and the inadequacy of the hospitals. The discovery of her pregnancy is almost too much to bear, her absolute innocence and confusion is awful to behold.

Mariatu's description of the camps and the horrific conditions that these gentle accepting people had to endure were all but palatable to the reader. Her journey out of Sierre Leone was fraught with even more difficulties and the reader almost breathed a sigh of relief when her future was established. This book should be read. The ugliness of war is exposed and the corruption of government but the heart of the story is the resilience of the human spirit in the overwhelming face of adversity.

Rachel Froude, Galen College, Vic

“Never judge a book by its cover.”

What a true reinforcement of that statement is this novel!

The front cover shows a bright, beautiful, innocent young woman, and although Mariatu is all of those things, this story was far more horrific than I imagined just from looking at the cover. It is the heartbreaking story of a young girl, Mariatu who grew up in Sierra Leone during the civil war. She and her loved ones were attacked, some raped, and some killed. Mariatu's hands were both cut off. The story follows her journey to a better life and instills hope and an “if she can survive that, I surely cannot complain about my privileged life” type attitude in the reader. It is definitely worth reading for anyone! It is easy to read and fires up great conversations however, I do recommend it for 16 years old plus, due to the violence and graphic images that one gets whilst reading it. Teachers could use the book to springboard discussions on refugees, lifestyles, and war.

Carolyn Hicks, Vic