



A Girl Called Problem

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Thirteen-year-old Shida, whose name means “problem” in Swahili, certainly has a lot of problems in her life — her father is dead, her depressed mother is rumored to be a witch, and everyone in her rural Tanzanian village expects her to marry rather than pursue her dream of becoming a healer. So when the village’s elders make a controversial decision to move their people to a nearby village, Shida welcomes the change. Surely the opportunity to go to school and learn from a nurse can only mean good things.

However, after a series of puzzling misfortunes plague the new village, Shida must prove to her people that moving was the right decision, and that they can have a better life in their new home.

A Girl Called Problem Details

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Author : Katie Quirk

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From Reader Review A Girl Called Problem for online ebook

Elise says

This was a great read! Enough detail to get a sense of location and culture, not too much to cross over into "adult" fiction.

I enjoyed my time with Shida and Grace.

Anna says

My sister-in-law's critically acclaimed YA debut! With a firecracker protagonist and a richly detailed and vivid Tanzanian setting, this is a great book selection for young readers interested in strong female characters and other cultures. My nine-year-old niece couldn't put it down, so that's the best review I can give!

Dina Tanners says

I was delighted at the high quality of this book--a well-developed plot, great character development, and great details made this book hard to put down. I learned a lot about the history and culture of some of the people in Tanzania after independence in the 1960s and some of the goals of its first president Nyerere.

But mainly the book shows the perseverance of a young girl who seems to have little going for her except the drive to learn and help others.

The book develops at a "normal" pace and doesn't have the instant action that many YA novels have. I very much appreciated the distinction. Quirk has written an amazing first novel that is not just for young teens but for all who are interested in the topic. Quirk lived in Tanzania for two years, so has knowledge of the area.

Lydia says

This book was so so so good. I felt like the first chapter was slow but I LOVED it! I read most of it on a field trip for a camp, and I was in the van, I started tearing up looking like a weirdo because it was so touching!

Paula Soper says

I love this book. It shows a girl and her tribe as they face the difficulties of pride in the tribe versus pride as Tanzanians. It shows the harmony that can exist between herbs and western medicine.

The book was well-written and the characters were rounded and unique.

Warnings:

Drugs - No (alcohol?)

Sex - No

R&R - Tanzania!

Violence - No

Language - Just English with a bit of Swahili

Betsy says

Who says that mystery novels for kids all have to include the same tropes and settings? I tell you, half the time when a kid comes up to a reference desk asking for a mystery they think what they want is the standard white kids in suburbia model perfected by Encyclopedia Brown and his ilk. They're wrong. What they really want is great writing and a good mystery with a twist they don't see coming. So I will hereby give grand kudos and heaping helpfules of praise to the librarian/bookseller/parent who hears a kid ask for a mystery and hands them Katie Quirk's *A Girl Called Problem*. This book is a trifecta of publishing rarities. A historical novel that is also a mystery set in a foreign country that just happens to be Tanzania. Trust me when I say your shelves aren't exactly filled to brimming with such books. Would that they were, or at the very least, would that you had as many good books as this one. Smart commentary, an honestly interesting storyline, and sharp writing from start to finish, Quirk quickly establishes herself as one author to watch.

The thing about Shida is that in spite of her name (in Swahili it would be "problem") you just can't get her down. Sure, her mom is considered a witch, and every day she seems to make Shida's life harder rather than easier. Still, Shida's got dreams. She hopes to someday train to be a healer in her village of Litongo, and maybe even a village nurse. In light of all this, when the opportunity arises for all of Litongo to pick up and move to a new location, Shida's on board with the plan. In Nija Panda she would be able to go to school and maybe even learn medicine firsthand. Her fellow villagers are wary but game. They seem to have more to gain than to lose from such a move. However, that's before things start to go terribly wrong. Escaped cattle. Disease. Even death seems to await them in Nija Panda. Is the village truly cursed, just unlucky, or is there someone causing all these troubles? Someone who doesn't want the people of Litongo there. Someone who will do anything at all to turn them back. It's certainly possible and it's up to Shida to figure out who the culprit might be.

The trouble with being an adult and reading a children's work of mystery fiction is that too often the answer feels like it's too obvious. Fortunately for me, I'm terrible at mysteries. I'll swallow every last red herring and every false clue used by the author to lead me astray. So while at first it seems perfectly obvious who the bad guys would be, I confess that when the switcheroo took place I didn't see it coming. It made perfect sense, of course, but I was as blindsided as our plucky heroine. I figure if I honestly as a 35-year-old adult can't figure out the good guys from the bad in a book for kids, at least a significant chunk of child readers will be in the same boat.

Now I've a pet peeve regarding books set in Africa, particularly historical Africa, and I was keen to see whether or not Ms. Quirk would indulge it. You see, the story of a girl in a historical setting who wants to be a healer but can't because of her gender is not a particularly new trope. We've seen it before, to a certain extent. What chaps my hide is when the author starts implying that tribal medicines and healing techniques are superstitious and outdated while modern medicine is significantly superior. Usually the heroine will fight

against society's prejudices, something will happen late in the game, and the villagers will see that she was right all along and that she'll soon be able to use Western medicine to cure all ills. There's something particularly galling about storylines of this sort, so imagine my surprise when I discovered that Quirk was not going to fall into that more than vaguely insulting mindset. Here is an author unafraid to pay some respect to the religion of the villagers. It never dismisses curses but acknowledges them alongside standard diseases. Example: "Though Shida was certain Furaha should take medicine for malaria, she was equally certain she should guard the spirit house that night. Parasites were responsible for some sicknesses and curses for others, and in this case, they needed to protect against both."

Quirk is also quite adept at using the middle grade chapter book format to tackle some pretty complex issues. To an adult reading this book it might be clear that Shida's mother suffers from a severe form of depression. There's no way the village would be prepared to handle this diagnosis, and Shida herself just grows angry with the woman who stays inside all the time. You could get a very interesting book discussion going with child readers about whether or not Shida should really blame her mother as vehemently as she does. On the one hand, you can see her point. On the other, her mother is clearly in pain. Similarly well done is the final discussion of witches. Quirk brings up a very sophisticated conversation wherein Shida comes to understand that accused witches are very often widows who must work to keep themselves alive and that, through these efforts, acquire supposedly witchy attributes. Quirk never hits you over the head with these thoughts. She just lets her heroine's assumptions fall in the face of close and careful observation.

All this could be true, but without caring about the characters it wouldn't be worth much. I think part of the reason I like the book as much as I do is that everyone has three dimensions (with the occasional rare exception). Even the revealed villain turns out to have a backstory that explains their impetus, though it doesn't excuse their actions. As for Shida herself, she may be positive but she's no Pollyanna. Depression hits her hard sometimes too, but through it all she uses her brain. Because she is able to apply what she learns in school to the real world, she's capable of following the clues and tracking down the real culprit behind everyone's troubles. Passive protagonists have no place in *A Girl Called Problem*. No place at all.

Finally, in an era of Common Core Standards I cannot help but notice how much a kid can learn about Tanzania from this book. Historical Tanzania at that! A Glossary at the back does a very good job of explaining everything from flamboyant trees to n'gombe to President Julius Nyerere's plan for Tanzania. There are also photographs mixed into the Glossary that do a good job of giving a contemporary spin on a historical work.

Windows and mirrors. That's the phrase used by children's literature professionals to explain what we look for in books for kids. We want them to have books that reflect their own experiences and observations (mirrors) and we also want them to have books that reflect the experiences and observations of kids living in very different circumstances (windows). Mirror books can be a lot easier to recommend to kids than window books, but that just means you need to try harder. So next time a 9-12 year-old comes to you begging for a mystery, upset their expectations. Hand them *A Girl Called Problem* and bet them they won't be able to guess the bad guy. In the process, you might just be able to introduce that kid to their latest favorite book.

For ages 9-12.

♦ Krithika ♦ says

This book is about a vivacious, curious, dreamer of a girl named Shida, which is the word for problem in

Swahili. She was given this name by a "curse" placed upon her by her own grandmother when she was born. Shida wants to be a healer and she hopes that moving to a new village can make that possible. But with many curses and action that make it seem like they must go back. Will she pursue her dream of going to school and becoming a healer? I recommend this book for ages 10-14. Anyone can read this book and enjoy learning about a new culture and a girl pursuing her dream.

Joann says

I enjoyed the Swahili & Tanzanian references.

Edward Sullivan says

A thirteen-year-old comes of age in a rural village in a newly independent Tanzania in the early 1960s.

Barb Middleton says

In college I had to read the adult book, "Things Fall Apart," by Chinua Achebe that tackled the theme of modern changes clashing with traditional Nigerian customs. The main character lost his high status within the traditional culture as the villagers embraced western ideas. His identity was so dependent on traditions that he "fell apart" as the world he knew changed around him. "A Girl Called Problem," also deals with changes in traditions except the villagers are not influenced by western culture; instead the President of Tanzania who defeated white colonists wants them to join other villages and practice collective farming. When the villagers of Litonga are asked to be the first to merge with the Nija Panda village, the elders decide it will be good to have education and medicine. Shida's grandfather, Babu, is the most respected elder and speaks to the villagers about it stressing that their President asked them to lead this "revolution." When Shida hears of this change she wants to embrace it for her family is an outcast in the village. Her widowed mother is considered a curse because her husband died young and she suffers from depression. Shida wants to be a nurse except girls are expected to marry. She knows that going to the new village will give her the opportunity to have a career as a healer.

Shida is persecuted at school by some of the boys and one of the teachers for being a girl and wanting to be educated. She's a strong character who knows when to stand up to a peer or seek an adult for help. This type of storyline is always great for tension and emotion. I was swept up in Shida's struggles and the author does a nice job of having the grandfather mentor them through their difficulties. While Shida can be in-your-face, she has the gentleness that makes her excellent at healing others. She soothes scared children and talks them through having shots or taking bad-tasting medicine. When she has to deal with a death of a patient she treated, the reader grieves with her.

I'm not sure I buy the villagers patriotic reasons for leaving their village. If there had been a crisis of some sort I would have believed it more - not that I need a Boston Tea Party. I reread the beginning because I thought maybe the villagers needed medicine because too many were dying of fever. Nope. Not the case. They do die of fever but there is no malaria epidemic. I thought maybe their water hole dried up and they needed water. Or their crops failed. Again, nope and nope. The main reason is patriotism; the President asked them to move their village to another, to educate their children, improve their health, and farm collectively.

Their President freed them from white colonizers and the population of Tanzania worships him; therefore, him asking them to move was powerful enough for the village to uproot themselves. Babu assures the villagers that they can bring their traditions. They complain, but they go. This didn't sink in on my first read. I needed more emphasis on their President as a symbol of worship. Or I needed to slow down with my reading.

I kept thinking of the book, "A Long Walk to Water," that shows the impact of building a well and how it draws villages together in Sudan and allows children the opportunity to go to school. That book explains how the boys watch the cattle and the girls spend the entire day walking to the watering hole. A pump eliminates the long walk to water letting them go to school. A pump is mentioned in Shida's new village but I'm not sure about how they got water in their previous village. It seemed different in Tanzania. I couldn't get a picture in my head of what work the children did versus the adults. Shida seemed to do it all - work in the fields and get water - because her mother had depression. All I gathered was that the adults worked more to pick up the slack of the children being in school and the collective farming made it possible. Either I read too fast and missed the details, which is quite likely since I read the book while tooling on an elliptical machine with music blasting in the gym or maybe my background Sudanese knowledge was messing me up. Or maybe there needed to be more historical background given. I'm not a careful reader so take this as you will. And do not let my meandering thoughts keep you from reading this book with its terrific characters and unpredictable plot. Make no mistake it is a great read.

Quick does a great job working religion into the storyline in a way that supports what Babu says about them keeping their traditions. The villagers and protagonist believe strongly in witches and curses. They try to balance their beliefs with medicine and the new knowledge they have gained. This made me think of how people balance the scientific facts of evolution and Christian religion in a way that is acceptable to them. Shida begins to realize how others call women witches as a way to treat them unfairly and make them as outcasts in society. The villain uses these superstitions to his advantage and she thinks about how public opinions are manipulated as a result. This would make for great discussions on unfair treatment of minorities. These themes add authenticity, depth, and believability of characters. This is an emotional story and so many of my students love this type of book. The ending has a satisfying resolution and the struggle to adjust to changes in life is a timeless message that all can relate to in any culture.

Samuel says

Colonialism was a pretty bad deal for the entire continent of Africa, but all of the problems didn't end when the European powers gave up direct control of their former colonies. *A Girl Called Problem* is set in Tanzania in the 1960s, as the new nation was trying to find its feet. Shida, the 13-year-old eponymous protagonist of the book (her name is the word for "problem" in Swahili), is in a similar position. Her entire settlement has relocated to one of President Julius Nyerere's communal ujamaa villages, and while this gives Shida the opportunity to attend school and work as an apprentice nurse, it also stirs discontent among the community. Unfortunate events pile up on each other until the entire future of Shida's family and friends hangs in the balance.

The setting is probably the book's biggest strength. It's one that's likely to be unfamiliar to most of its audience, and yet as I was reading, I found myself easily able to visualize the dust, scrub, and oppressive heat, and the skyline dominated by enormous, oddly-shaped boulders. Katie Quirk actually lived in Tanzania for a couple years, and her direct personal experience comes through in her writing.

I found the pacing, however, problematic at best. It's more than 60 pages into this 223-page novel before we're even through the blurb on the back of the jacket, while the ending seemed overly rushed. And while it's refreshing to see a character really and honestly struggling with serious depression (Shida's mother, in this case), I'm unconvinced by the direction the character takes at the end of the book.

There are very few English-language books for young readers dealing with postcolonial Africa, and so it's nice to see *A Girl Called Problem* filling that niche. I'm not, however, sold on the execution of the book.

A longer version of this review appears at abouttomock.blogspot.com

Meaghan says

I got this book free from LibraryThing's Early Reviewers program.

Set in a newly independent Tanzania in the early 1960s, this is an excellent coming-of-age story that will interest middle-school readers. Tanzania became a socialist republic under their first president, Julius Nyerere (something I knew already, because I did a report on the country back in the sixth grade) and he encouraged the people to try collective farming. Thus, young Shida's tribal village packed up and moved to another village nearby. They shared their fields and a new infirmary, and the children of the village began going to school for the first time in their lives.

But strange things started happening: the children's clothes were disappearing, someone let all the cows out of their corral, and the cotton crop inexplicably failed overnight. Some of the villagers believe their town is cursed and they ought to return to their old village, but Shida is convinced that a human is behind all these inexplicable events, someone who's trying to scare them into leaving. With help from her cousins, the local nurse and her benevolent grandfather Babu, she tries to figure out what's going on. Is it perhaps one of the schoolteachers, who's dead set against female education? Maybe the nasty boy at school, the son of a prominent member of the old village, who keeps bullying her? The strange old woman that many people call a witch? The author does a good job keeping up the suspense. I didn't guess who the perpetrator was, but when I found out I wasn't a bit surprised -- which is how it should be.

I'd recommend this book for any middle-school classroom, perhaps as part of a unit on Africa. The author includes a helpful glossary in the back and some photographs.

Danielle M says

This book was better than I thought it would be and I enjoyed going on a journey with the characters. I chose to read this book because it addressed African cultures and folklore. I have never read a book that addresses these things. I would recommend this book to students who have ever moved to a new place, students who are trying to find their identity, those who like African culture, or those who believe in spirits. I would also give this to a student who has ever felt bullied.

In school, this book could fit in to a unit on African culture. It would be good to use in literature circles and for discussing symbolism or themes in literature.

Drugs-yes
Sex-none
R&R-witchcraft
Language-none
Violence-yes

Elizabeth says

Quick young adult book, nice message and a good way to learn more about Tanzania. I liked the glossary at the end.

Sarah Williams says

"A Girl Called Problem" by Katie Quirk is a story about a young girl's bravery and perseverance. This story takes place in 1967 in Tanzania. Throughout the story, an entire village is moving to another location in order to create a 'ujamaa' village. At this time, President Nyerere had just been elected in 1964 and it was his dream that everyone moved to a village where they all shared farm work, a school, and a medical clinic. Ujamaa means familyhood in Swahili. This was a drastic change from the way of life before. The book begins with the controversial decision the Litongo village leaders are making concerning them moving to a new village. Shida is a 13 year old girl from the Litongo village. She has more struggles than the typical young girl from Tanzania. Her name means problem in Swahili. Her father died when she was born. Her mother is a depressed woman whose own life is not what she had pictured it would be. After the village moves to a new place, Shida is excited for the change and willing to do anything to go to school and help her mother with chores. There are some interesting things happening to the people from the Litongo village. The elders are blaming the ancestors for bringing on a curse because they moved. Their cows and clothes go missing, their crops fail, and the girls are being abused for going to school.

This book is a powerful story showing the culture of the African people. This is a story based off a friend of the authors. Girls like Shida are sadly most often forgotten about in Africa. This book shows just how valuable and hard working girls are to their family, village, and country. The author wanted people to know about the way of life in Tanzania. She spent some time there teaching writing and fell in love with the people. Anyone who reads this story can learn something about themselves and how to live life everyday as if it were a gift. Because, in reality, life is a gift.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Katie Quirk told the story of so many girls. This was especially meaningful to me because I have had the opportunity to meet some girls like that. I have not been to Tanzania, but I have spent some time in West Africa, and the stories of the women there will shock you. There are so many brave girls, young and old. They are inspiring. I am so glad that there is a book to show the world that. While reading this book, I found myself thinking back to when I was 13 years old and how different my life was. Shida's story is not all sunshine and roses. There are some hard things to read in this book, but it was written so well that I could barely put it down.

I think this would be a good book for 6th and 7th grade to read. The students in those grades would relate most to this story. There are so many things that they can learn from this book. Reading "A Girl Called Problem" would be a great way to start off a unit on other cultures and get the students interested in learning

about other people and nations.
