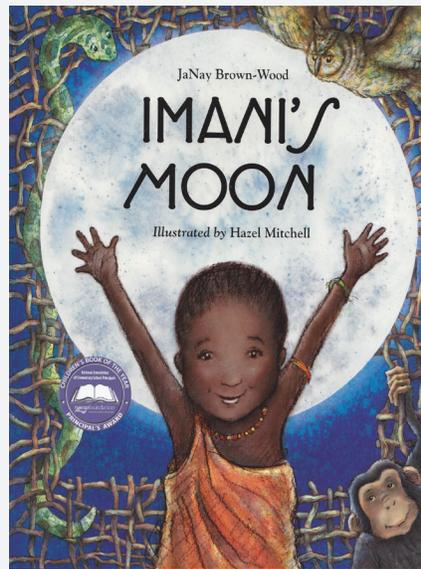


First Opinion: Reach for the Moon

Brown-Wood, JaNay. *Imani's Moon*. Illus. Hazel Mitchell.
Watertown, MA: Mackinac Island Press, 2014. Print.

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Imani's Moon, written by JaNay Brown-Wood and illustrated by Hazel Mitchell, models the power of perseverance, stories, and cultural traditions through an intrepid Maasai girl named Imani. The reader is encouraged to identify with Imani as she succeeds at gaining her improbable dreams against all odds with the help of her own role models.

Brown-Wood's imaginative Maasai tale first introduces little Imani, absorbing the bullying words of her peers. Just as the reader meets her, Imani comes to believe that she will never accomplish anything because she is the smallest child in her village. The author deftly introduces her reader to African folk heroes and culture as Imani's mother begins to weave traditional stories in her stories for Imani. Mitchell's illustrations establish the children's Maasai clothing and traditional short hair. Later scenes also depict the small village, day-to-day activities, and include subtle details of ritual and celebration.

In the wake of her bullying, Imani's confidence is revitalized by her mama's nighttime stories. These stories are couched in soothing evening spreads that encourage the reader to linger and get cozy with Imani in her mama's lap. Her mama's stories play out in the constellations that shine down over them both, connecting Imani to nature and foreshadowing her own

meeting with a nature spirit. The sweeping full-bleed illustrations, rendered in soft watercolor and graphite, fill the pages with the cool night sky and comfort the reader with shadowy, soft lines. There is no fear of the dark in this book. In fact, many of the daytime spreads offer contrasting, mid-page illustrations that float isolated on white backgrounds. These daytime illustrations, often representing Imani's tormenters, mirror Imani's feelings of difference and distance from her peers.

Imani becomes a role model for the reader about how to dream and persevere with the help of her own role models. From mama's stories, Imani picks a role model for herself: the moon goddess, Olapa, who won against the sun. In her dreams, "Imani stood tall and brave on the moon with Olapa beside her" (unpaged). Imani takes this supportive presence into her waking life and determines that she will touch the moon herself.

As she reaches ever higher, though, her failures give her pause. "Maybe I won't touch the moon," she sighs after her first attempt (unpaged). "I give up," she says after her second miss (unpaged). Even the local animals, who freely speak to Imani in true fairy tale form, mock and discourage her attempts. There is something satisfying in the way that Imani tries several, very different creative solutions. She may not succeed with each try, but her failures bring her closer to the moon nonetheless. Mitchell's paintings reveal the moon looming ever larger with each attempt, hinting at Imani's imminent success.

Finally, Imani discovers inspiration from her own culture while watching the Maasai tribe's famous *udumu* jumping dance. By embracing her tribe's warriors as additional role models, Imani reaches her highest dreams. In the end she becomes the storyteller and sets Imani the Great on the same stage as her mama's mythical heroes and her tribe's best jumping warriors.

Imani struggles against the taunts of her peers and wild animals, as well as her own failures and self-doubt. The seamless integration of universal problems and unfamiliar magical elements does nothing to dampen the transferability of this book's small but inspiring protagonist. Unlike many similar stories in which protagonists must fight against customs and family to achieve unlikely heights, *Imani's Moon* celebrates the goals and solutions made possible by culture and family.

Imani's Moon features a determined and worthy role model, and her success shows how stories and traditions can offer us models for our wildest dreams. Teachers will find the Live Oak Media package of four paperbacks and one audio CD useful for small groups to share. The narrator and sound effects give the entire production authenticity and effectively capture the story's mood.

Works Cited

Brown-Wood, JaNay. *Imani's Moon*. Illus. Hazel Mitchell. Read by MaameYaa Boafo. Pine Plains, NY: Live Oak Media, 2015. CD. <<http://www.liveoakmedia.com/productdetails.cfm?sku=18992>>.

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