

The Advocacy
by Gillian Stead Eilersen

The Advocacy is both an engrossing and disturbing tale of the complex workings of inter-cultural contact in a rural area of Africa. Its point of focus is a small group of villages in southern Ghana whose traditional life style has been impacted by the establishment of a multinational gold mining concern which has brought some prosperity but also much disruption to the villagers.

The text begins in medias res and is presented as a detailed account of the daily activities of a young Peace Corps volunteer, Louisa Lehmann. She is the coordinator of a small group of dedicated people forming the Water, Sanitation and Health Advocacy, designed to ensure the villagers these amenities.

The protagonist, Lou, is a civil engineer, making her a 'woman in a man's world.' Though the feminist theme is frequently present, it is never allowed to dominate. This is a feature of the text as a whole: warmth, empathy, and the author's penetrating gaze permeate every page, and issues, important ones, are allowed to emerge out of the tenor of everyday activities in which the Advocacy team, especially Lou, are involved.

There are two other levels on which the text moves: flashbacks into Lou's youth, her family relationships and her friendships, and frequent insights into Lou's inner world of ambitions, agonies, and obsessive thinking.

As Lou sees it, the world of the engineer is a world that can be measured and predicted. She needs maps to 'triangulate her location' (p.18). Supporting the text are a series of structures intended to cast extra light on the narrative form. There are detailed maps of the Adansi West District and the town of Obuasi; there is a three-page list of the large number of characters involved in this process; there is a comprehensive glossary of phrases in the Twi language, used widely in the text. The energetic reader is thus in a position, with constant cross-referencing, to establish a sense of identity with the environment being depicted, whether by becoming familiar with the positioning of the physical locations that Lou frequents, or by opening up to the language of a foreign culture, while at the same time recognizing the inadequacy of the progress made. In this way, the fluidity of the text is given an external tautness, a system requiring alert and concentrated reader participation.

Although much of this process is central to the unfolding of the narrative, it can become both too detailed and repetitive, especially in the first half of the text. However, the section entitled 'Gyimiso Kakraba' is brilliant and moving, and in every way achieves the climax to which all events have been working. Though the rituals, so sensitively unfolded, can be inexplicable and dense, the reader is guided through with as much care as the guard priest guides Lou through the ceremony. The symbolic transcending of gender, an 'honoring of the non-static' (p.344) and a transformation for Lou into 'one who moves in the duality' (p.365) all provide optimistic pointers towards the possibility of a transcendence of inter-cultural conflicts.

Considering the care and detail given to portraying the characters with whom Lou has her daily contact, and who are, with few exceptions male, it is slightly surprising that the female characters – Lou’s mother, her best friend Carol, even Lynn, Lou’s predecessor – remain mere sketches. Their importance, however, in giving Lou her courageous backbone, is never doubted, as it is also quite clear that the visual support that she receives from her two posters of Bessie Head and Barbara McClintock helps to strengthen her resolve.

This is a long, dense text. Because of the unusual degree of reader involvement required, it could be considered too long. The section entitled ‘Accra’ could, for example, be shortened, and simplified, perhaps with occasional authorial comment. Likewise, the number of references to the reality of the civil engineer’s life could be reduced. Another minor point which puzzled this reader: considering the great number of ritual attempts Lou makes to modify her female gender by shaving her hair off, the sentence ‘I rake my fingers through my wet hair’ (p.323) is surprising.

One of the reviewers called *The Advocacy* a ‘novel of the intellect,’ words of praise but also a reminder that in this text serious issues are treated in a serious way. In *The Advocacy* these issues never remain of academic interest only. It indicates forcefully that it is possible to embrace the intellect and move on from there to emotional and even spiritual levels. This is the solution offered here for inter-cultural understanding.

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