



The *Paka Mdogo* Series and the Common Core State Standards

The *Paka Mdogo* stories were not devised and written as 'school books': they are first and foremost pieces of quality children's literature in their own right. They nevertheless provide endless opportunities to apply best practice in the teaching of Language Arts in all of its dimensions, and they and their accompanying teaching and learning resources support the objectives underpinning the Common Core State Standards within a wide grade band...4 to 8.

The resources are aligned with the UK National Curriculum, but place particular emphasis on many of the CCS Standards for those grade levels, as below:

Reading Standards

Key Ideas and Details

Craft and Structure

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Writing Standards

Text Types and Purposes

Production and Distribution of Writing

Speaking and Listening Standards

Comprehension and Collaboration

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

Language Standards

Conventions of Standard English

Knowledge of Language

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

A special note about informational text:

The *Paka Mdogo* stories are fiction, but they are thoroughly researched and highly informative: *"This series of books is creative, clever, and fact-filled."* Eileen Granfors, Amazon 'Vine Voice' Reviewer

The associated teaching and learning resources therefore exercise and help develop students' ability to understand and interpret informational as well as narrative and descriptive text.



The *Paka Mdogo* Series: Grade and Reading Level Appropriateness

Grade Level Appropriateness (Language)

The overall thrust of the books (and the resources) is to entertain and at the same time challenge the most able young readers ('top-end' students) in their respective grades.

Judged simply on their Lexile® measures (averaging 885 across all three books*), therefore, these would appear to be quite demanding texts for developing readers (particularly those in Grades 4 and 5). However, a counterbalancing factor is the high interest level of the storylines and illustrations, which carry such readers through text that they might otherwise find daunting, so that they emerge with increased confidence in their ability to decode new words and understand longer sentences. See Appendix A for some comments about and by a 'struggling' reader.

Older students (Grades 6, 7 and 8) will appreciate the liveliness and sophistication of the language, and will enjoy the ongoing wordplay in both the narrative and the dialogue; and they, too, will have their vocabulary extended and their grasp of complex sentence structures enhanced. See Appendix B for a review of 'The Meerkat Wars' by a 9th Grade homeschooler.

*Based on an analysis of five extended passages from each book

Grade Level Appropriateness (Content)

The textual characteristics of the series are constant, but the maturity level of the content increases from the first book to the second, and the second to the third, which is why we recommend that each of the three is assigned to a different grade. The list of issues raised in the books (further below) will give some idea of that progression.

Across all grade and ability levels, additionally, students will find that their thinking skills are constantly put to the test, and ultimately strengthened. The central character in all three books is Paka Mdogo, a 'cat for all seasons' but also a *thinking* cat, who perpetually questions what is happening to and around her, and who takes the reader on a journey not only through parts of Africa but also into the world of ideas.

Less Advanced Readers

The series, as we have noted above, is challenging for less advanced readers. Our thinking, however, is very much in line with that underlying the *Publishers' Criteria* developed by two of the lead authors of the Common Core State Standards and to be found at http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Publishers_Criteria_for_3-12.pdf, in particular in such statements as:

'Far too often, students who have fallen behind are only given less complex texts rather than the support they need to read texts at the appropriate level of complexity. Complex text is a rich repository of ideas, information, and experience which all readers should learn how to access.

‘Curriculum materials should provide extensive opportunities for all students in a classroom to engage with complex text. Students who need additional assistance...must not miss out on essential practice and instruction their classmates are receiving to help them read closely, think deeply about texts, participate in thoughtful discussions, and gain knowledge of both words and the world.’

More Advanced Readers

See Appendix B again!



The *Paka Mdogo* Series: Themes and Issues

(of a kind with those identified in the independently-developed Common Core Curriculum Mapping Project: <http://commoncore.org/maps/>)

The following themes and issues arise naturally within the stories, are dealt with sensitively, and are a rich source of material for teachers who organise their Language Arts work around topics.

Common to all three books

- Animal (and human) nature
- Animals as characters in a story
- Courage
- Belonging
- Cruelty and kindness
- Death and dying
- Families, and how family members interact
- Friendship
- How societies organise themselves
- How we think
- Humour
- Interdependence
- Parenthood
- Personal and group identity
- Promises
- Responsibility for our actions
- Rituals
- Teamwork and leadership
- The importance (and fun) of language
- Understanding our world
- Wisdom

+ (in *Paka Mdogo*)

- Adventure and risk-taking
- How older members of a community are treated
- Ingenuity
- Journeys
- Knowing ourselves
- Loyalty and affection

- Revenge
- Survival

+ (in *The Gradual Elephant*)

- Animals and people in competition with each other
- Becoming whatever we want to be
- Competitions and rules
- Conservation
- Growing Up
- Names
- Peer pressure
- Prejudice and individual differences
- Tests and challenges

+ (in *The Meerkat Wars*)

- Beliefs and their impact on how we behave
- Divided loyalties
- Economic principles
- History, the past and the future
- How conflict arises between groups
- Militarism
- Negotiations and agreements
- Reconciliation
- Territoriality

Appendix A



Emily Reviews <http://www.emilyreviews.com> - *The Meerkat Wars*

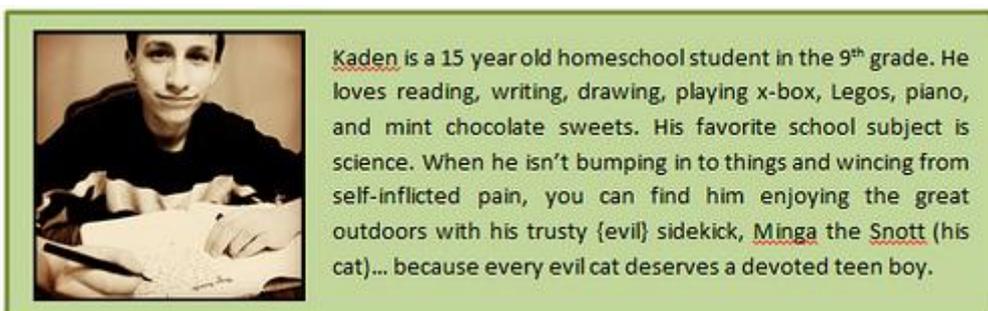
(Extract) I found when I left this book laying on the dining room table one evening that it mysteriously disappeared. Now while it would not surprise me to find my ten year old, who is an avid reader, sitting on his bed reading it, I was very surprised when it was my eleven year old who had picked it up to read. This is the child that will find anything possible to do but read, because it is difficult for him. This is what he had to say: *I really liked that there was not only words but some nice pictures to go along with it. I was able to picture what the cat and meerkats were doing and what they might look like. It has some tough topics like getting hurt and dying but I thought that it was cool that the cat was willing to help to bring all the meerkats together. I don't know if most animals would do that. I think that this is a book that some of my friends might like.* This is a pretty high compliment coming from a kid who really struggles to make it through the simplest of books.

Appendix B

The Homeschool Post

Encouraging, Informing, and Connecting the Homeschool Community

The Homeschool Post <http://hsbapost.com/>



If you have any animal lovers in your house, *The Meerkat Wars* by H.S. Toshack is the perfect book for you. It follows the exploits of a clever and witty cat named Sheena as she stows away (not for the first time) on her family's Land Rover headed to the African Savannah. On her journey through the Baragandiri National Park, she meets many of the local inhabitants, friendly or otherwise. Nearly every chapter introduces a new species by their African name. The book familiarizes the reader with the animals encountered; meerkats most of all. Children from elementary up will delight in learning about African animals in this captivating story of safari adventure.

The story begins when Sheena is out exploring and comes across a pair of meerkats foraging for grubs. The younger of the two finds a scorpion and tries to capture it, only to be painfully stung on the cheek. Quickly, the other meerkat and Sheena carry him back to "Deepden", the home of the Duwara Meerkat Tribe. She is beginning to make friends within the tribe when she learns that they are at war with their neighbors, the Utongo Meerkats. She sets off on a journey to persuade them both that their reasons for fighting are silly. To reach the Utongo she must travel through The Gorge; a deep chasm filled with undergrowth that separates the rivals. Crossing this, however, is perilous. Sheena selflessly braves the danger in hopes of helping her friends find peace.

This 250 page book came to me as a free review item, but it has found a home on our shelf and I have taken it down to read it several times over. The book contains scattered black and white sketched illustrations that are enjoyable (and an added bonus for the younger reader or elementary child being read to). Each chapter begins with a witty rhyme about a different animal they encounter along their quest; for example, the poem from chapter twelve:

Mbogo

Broad in the head,
Flat in the nose,
Curved in the horn,
Split in the toes.

We snort and stamp,
And you'd better take heed:
That's, oh, more than a bluff -
We also stampede.

The Meerkat Wars is one of three stories about Sheena's secret safaris while her owners are camping nearby. As the author writes them, he maps, in the front of the book, the location of the journey in the Baragandiri National Park for the reader to visualize along with landforms, landmarks and Range Rover 'tracks'. He covers different African animals in each adventure, so you'll (like me) want to read them all. For sure the third book, The Meerkat Wars, was a great read. By using metaphor and story to teach character-building life lessons, H.S. Toshack has created a tale that will appeal to parents and children alike.

Kaden