

## Exemplar Read-Aloud Informational Texts – 14 Cows for America

**Deedy, Carmen Agra. *14 Cows for America*. In collaboration with Wilson Kimeli Naiyomah. Illustrated by Thomas Gonzalez. Atlanta: Peachtree, 2009. (2009)**

The remote village waits for a story to be told. News travels slowly to this corner of Kenya. As Kimeli nears his village, he watches a herd of bull giraffes cross the open grassland. He smiles. He has been away a long time.

A girl sitting under a guava tree sees him first and cries out to the others. The children run to him with the speed and grace of cheetahs. He greets them with a gentle touch on his head, a warrior's blessing.

The rest of the tribe soon surrounds Kimeli. These are his people. These are the Maasai.

Once they were feared warriors. Now they live peaceably as nomadic cattle herders. They treat their cows as kindly as they do their children. They sign to them. They give them names. They shelter the young ones in their homes. Without the herd, the tribe might starve. To the Maasai, the cow is life.

"Súpa. Hello," Kimeli hears again and again. Everyone wants to greet him. His eyes find his mother across the enkáng, the ring of huts with their roofs of sun-baked dung. She spreads her arms and calls to him, "Aakúa. Welcome, my son." Kimeli sighs. He is home.

This is sweeter and sadder because he cannot stay. He must return to the faraway country where he is learning to be a doctor. He thinks of New York then. He remembers September.

A child asks if he has brought any stories. Kimeli nods. He has brought with him one story. It has burned a hole in his heart.

But first he must speak with the elders.

Later, in a tradition as old as the Maasai, the rest of the tribe gathers under an acacia tree to hear the story. There is a terrible stillness in the air as the tale unfolds. With growing disbelief, men, women, and children listen. Buildings so tall they can touch the sky? Fires so hot they can melt iron? Smoke and dust so thick they can block out the sun?

The story ends. More than three thousand souls are lost. A great silence falls over the Maasai. Kimeli waits. He knows his people. They are fierce when provoked, but easily moved to kindness when they hear of suffering or injustice.

At last, an elder speaks. He is shaken, but above all, he is sad. "What can we do for these poor

people?” Nearby, a cow lows. Heads turn toward the herd. “To the Maasai,” Kimeli says softly, “the cow is life.”

Turning to the elders, Kimeli offers his only cow, Enkarûs. He asks for their blessing. They give it gladly. But they want to offer something more.

The tribe sends word to the United States Embassy in Nairobi. In response, the embassy sends a diplomat. His jeep jounces along the dusty, rugged roads. He is hot and tired. He thinks he is going to meet with Maasai elders. He cannot be more wrong. As the jeep nears the edge of the village the man sits up. Clearly, this is no ordinary diplomatic visit. This is...

...a ceremony. Hundreds of Maasai greet the American in full tribal splendor. At the sight of the brilliant blood-red tunics and spectacular beaded collars, he can only marvel.

It is a day of sacred ritual. Young warriors dance, leaping into the air like fish from a stream. Women sing mournful songs. Children fill their bellies with milk. Speeches are exchanged. And now it is time.

Kimeli and his people gather on a sacred knoll, far from the village. The only sound is the gentle chiming of cowbells. The elders chant a blessing in Maa as the Maasai people of Kenya present...

...fourteen cows for America.

Because there is no nation so powerful it cannot be wounded, nor a people so small they cannot offer mighty comfort.