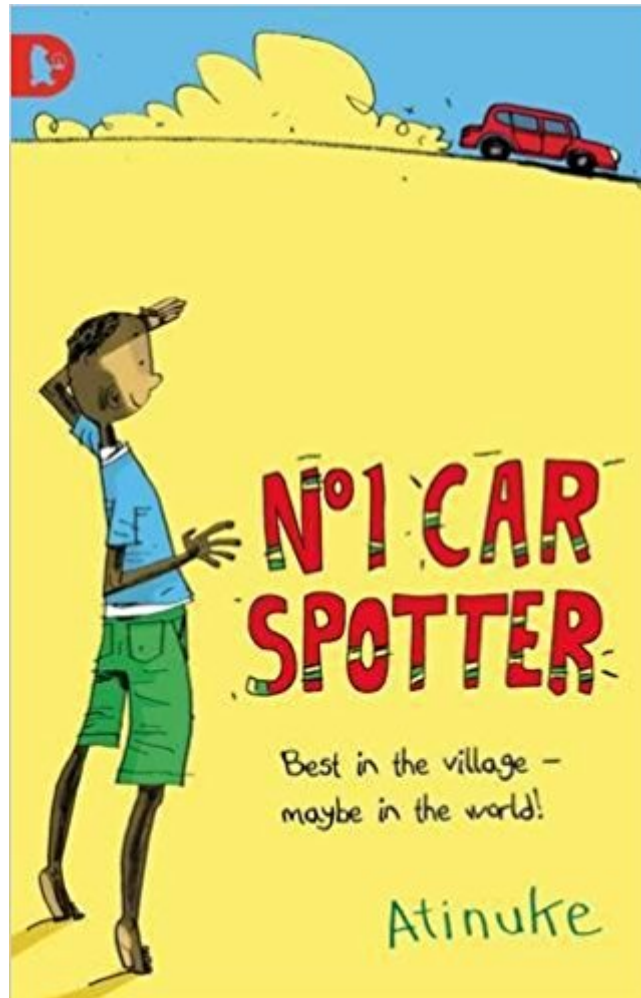


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The No. 1 Car Spotter (Walker Racing Reads)



Synopsis

Oluwalase Babatunde Benson is No. 1. He's the No. 1 car spotter in his village. The No. 1 car spotter in the world! The start of an exciting new series about the irresistible No. 1, whose hobby is car spotting but who is good at solving all sorts of problems for his village. When the family's cart breaks down and there's no way of bringing goods to market, it's No. 1 who devises the Toyota Cow-rolla and saves the day. He runs errands for his family and helps Mama Coca-Cola feed the busloads of people who stop for her delicious fried akara. No. 1 even helps Grandmother get to the medical centre when she can't afford treatment. No. 1 is bright and plucky and resourceful - a fantastic new character in what will undoubtedly prove to be a brilliant series!

Book Information

Series: Walker Racing Reads

Paperback: 112 pages

Publisher: Walker Books Ltd (September 6, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1406320773

ISBN-13: 978-1406320770

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.3 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #441,188 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #215 in Books > Children's Books > Geography & Cultures > Explore the World > Africa #574 in Books > Children's Books > Cars, Trains & Things That Go > Cars & Trucks #592 in Books > Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Short Story Collections

Customer Reviews

Born in Nigeria, Atinuke grew up in both Africa and the UK, and is now a professional storyteller living in Wales. Her first book, *Anna Hibiscus*, was published in October 2007, and was inspired by the Africa of her childhood.

This book is delightful. It is edu-tainment at its finest. I love the way that the protagonist--named Oluwalase Babatunde Benson, or simply Number 1-- comes up with artful solutions to problems that people in rural areas confront. The way that he manipulates language is also a testament to his nimble brain. For instance one of his inventions a cast-off Corolla is dubbed Cow-rolla after being

re-purposed. I like the intergenerational aspect of the book and how Number 1 relates to elders and the extended family/community. I appreciate the way that the author shows Africans blending traditional with modern and how she shows that Africa contains quiet villages as well as thriving towns and bustling cities. The spare, yet well done illustrations add charm to the story. Also good is the way that one story flows nicely into the next. What I especially enjoy about Atinuke's work is the voice, humor, authenticity and intent of her writing. No. 1 Car Spotter is a good selection for parents who want to encourage their children (especially boys) to think creatively and who want to teach their children about cooperative living, family values. Like the children's version of *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, this book inspires children not only to dream, but to put their dreams to good use.

When I discovered the amazing, remarkable, one-of-a-kind, never before seen "Anna Hibiscus" books by Atinuke last year I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. It just didn't seem possible. A contemporary early chapter book set on the continent of Africa? To understand how rare this was visit your local library sometime. Ask for fiction about Africa that takes place today for early readers. Specify that you'd rather not take out a work of older fiction that's deadly serious, but rather something light and fun. And while you're at it, why don't you ask for the moon as well since you're just as likely to get that as what I've just described unless it's "Anna Hibiscus" (in America anyway). Now "Anna" is joined by yet another Atinuke character. No. 1 lives in a rural village with his family and friends and his stories, like those of Anna Hibiscus, linger in your brain long after you've read them. Meet No. 1. He's what you might call a car spotter. If there's a car driving past his village, you can be sure he'll not only spot it but identify it and long before anyone else. Life in No. 1's village isn't easy, of course. If a cart breaks down then everyone's got to figure out how to get the produce to the market (it's No. 1 who comes up with a brilliant solution). If a woman wants to get lipstick at the market she sometimes will have to send a boy (No. 1 ends up doing the right thing entirely by accident then too). If people need chores done they have to rely on the kids (a problem when No. 1 wants to only help the auntie who makes the best food). And if someone gets seriously sick... well, sometimes it's not always No. 1 who comes up with the solutions to problems. But he's always around to help out. I adore Atinuke's ear for language. This book just begs to be read aloud as you go through it. Pitch perfect bedtime reading fare, that's what you have here. You get such magnificent lines out of it too. For example, there's the section where No. 1 aids a single particular mama in the hopes of getting some of her delicious akara. At one point the author just writes, "As I was an able-bodied boy in the vicinity of a shouting mama I started to run around as well."

Something about the construction of that sentence just pleases me to no end. Later No. 1 explains to Coca-Cola that he can't risk helping him out anymore because he might end up with a name like 7Up. Coca-Cola, visibly upset, points out that his own nickname is from a soft drink. I love No. 1's method of comforting his friend. "That... is because Coca-Cola is the number one soft drink. Some people prefer Fanta. It is true. And some people prefer Sprite. Some people don't touch Coca-Cola. But Coca-Cola is still number one." As pep talks go, I've never heard one entirely based on pop. I love that.

"Anna Hibiscus" was great, taking place as it did in a middle class compound in the middle of a big city. One of the joys of the books, in fact, is that the author is not afraid to show that Anna is a relatively privileged girl who has to come to terms with the fact that just outside the walls of her home live children with significantly less. No. 1, in contrast, lives a very poor life in a village. It is exceedingly difficult to write about poor characters without being either horribly depressing or too happy-go-lucky for your own good. Atinuke strikes precisely the right balance here. First off, you have a child character who doesn't go to school, so that's amazing right then and there. Additionally, three of the four stories acknowledge the difficulty of No. 1's life but these problems appear as challenges to overcome. Then the author has the guts to write a story where the hero's can-do spirit faces the simple facts of his situation. His grandmother is sick and there's apparently nothing anyone can do since they haven't the money to pay a doctor. It's a gutsy move on Atinuke's part to include a tale this serious, happy ending or no. When people read early chapter fiction they expect giggles and good times entirely in the "Horrid Henry" vein. Meaning and reality are unexpected and, as it happens, entirely welcome.

One of the criticisms lobbed at "Anna Hibiscus" was the fact that Atinuke mentions Africa but not the country in which the story takes place. Here in America we have a bit of a time convincing kids (and some adults) that Africa is a continent, not a country. It was pointed out to me that Atinuke is a storyteller and her mentions of Africa (glorious Africa) were made very much in the storytelling tradition. Be that as it may be, "The No. 1 Car Spotter" begins in a slightly different fashion. "On the continent of Africa, you will find my country." Still no mention of what that country is, but it appeases those adult readers worried that Atinuke's books reinforce unfortunate assumptions. Besides, the fact that the characters eat akara (a Nigerian fried bean cake) is sort of a give away right there. One objection that was lobbed at "No. 1" worth mentioning was the fact that no one in the boy's village seems to have their own name. No. 1 says right off the bat that his real name is Oluwalase Babatunde Benson but that's about the only real name we see. Everyone is Coca-Cola, Nike, Uncle Go-Easy, Auntie Fine-Fine, etc. Traditional names are few and far between. While this is true to a certain extent (though the small children Beke, Bisi, and Bola are mentioned) I wasn't particularly perturbed by it. Nicknames are clearly a part of this village's culture

and while it would be nice to see a couple real names thrown in there once in a while, I didn't feel that the book lacked any for the loss. Warwick Johnson Cadwell is the illustrator for this book, and his contributions prove to be just as important as those of Atinuke herself. A Brit, his style is hard to pin down. All I can say is that his pen and inks in this book have a life of their own. There's energy and movement to this man's style. More than that, the art is better than the usual fare we see. Cadwell seems to have a fondness for a kind of Picasso-esque style where you see the two eyes of a person's face at once, even though their cheek might be facing you. You also sometimes get the feeling that he's reluctant to lift his pen from the page. It's enough to make me suspect that the Etch-a-Sketch inadvertently influenced many a budding artist back in the day since the people in this book often look as though they've been instructed from a single sinuous line. A village where most of the men go off to work in the city and the women are left home to tend to the crops is a village I can believe in. Kids will believe in it too, but just as importantly they'll want to know more about it. That's the thing about Atinuke. It isn't just that she writes about places and people that no one else does. It's that she makes them interesting and fun. No. 1 is the kind of guy kids are going to want to know more about. Good thing he has more adventures in the pipeline. A great, almost necessary book and one that you'll be delighted to discover. For ages 7-11.

Oluwalase Babatunde Benson lives in a small African village in between the forest and the river and a No. 1 road into the city. Everyone calls him No. 1 because he can spot and identify cars coming toward the village before anyone else can. The women of the village believe that spotting cars does not have much value, so they put No. 1 to work in a variety of other tasks such as collecting firewood, hoeing the fields, sweeping the compound, and herding the cows and goats. Like most other men in the village, No. 1's father works in the city and sends money home, so much work remains to be done in the village. No. 1 is reliable, but he is also spontaneous and a quick thinker. These traits come in handy when the village routine is interrupted by some unexpected events, including the collapse of the wood cart that No. 1's family uses to take their food items to sell at the market. Not only does No. 1 come up with an innovative solution for transporting their wares to the market, he also manages to provide his Auntie Fine-Fine with a small beauty makeover and help his ailing grandmother get the medicine she needs. Penned by gifted story-teller Atinuke, this collection of short stories offers readers an engaging glimpse of a small rural African community at work and at play. The stories are built around themes related to family relations, social networks, markets, and the division of labor within the home. While the text touches upon the hardships of living in a poor village, the stories emphasize the small victories, humor, and touching moments that add new

meaning to the characters' daily way of life.

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