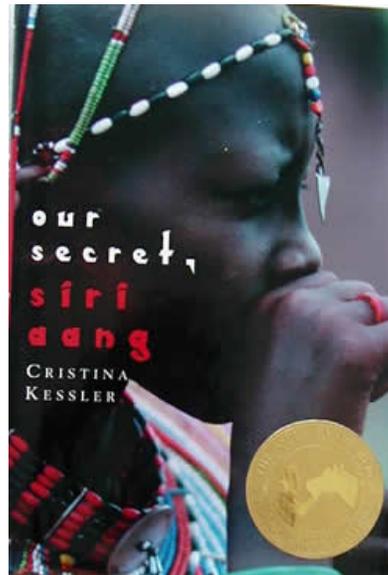
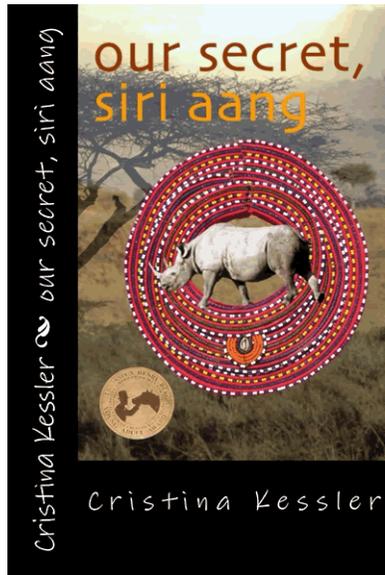




Cristina Kessler
Learning with the Books
Our secret, siri aang



Parent-Teacher Guide

OUR SECRET, SIRI AANG

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Re-reading OUR SECRET, SIRI AANG took me back to many different memories. My husband Joe and I were Peace Corps Volunteers in Kenya in 1975 - 76, many moons ago. It was a formative experience on many different levels, where I ran an orphanage and Joe was an engineer building farm to market roads. We traveled extensively throughout the country, from Lake Turkana to Lamu, Masai Mara Game Reserve to the Serengeti. My parents visited us there, as well as many friends. In 200, I took a group from St. John in the Virgin Islands on safari in Kenya.

While there we visited a Masaai village, called Merrueshi, home to Kakuta, a Maasai that I brought to St. John with help from the local Rotary from his studies at Evergreen College in Washington state. We first met when I searched for someone to be what I call my “culture cop” to keep me from imparting misinformation, while providing details about Masaai life, and finally proofing the manuscript to make sure I didn’t give my readers the wrong info.

I was also very interested in showing a nomadic culture that was under threat by encroaching farmers and growing tourism. A culture threatened by its younger generation losing interest in traditional life, embracing change that many elders were/are disturbed by. A culture facing the same challenges as the Tuareg in Niger in ONE NIGHT; A STORY OF THE DESERT, nomadic people who were forced into settling down.

There is another common theme in this book with NO CONDITION IS PERMANENT – cultural changes have to come from within the community, and not from outsiders imposing them.

Namelok-ai is like Khadi in NO CONDITION, Aisha in TROUBLE IN TIMBUKTU, Fatima in MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER’S GOURD, and Almaz in THE BEST BEEKEEPER OF LALIBELA, all strong young women who are the main character, hopefully inspiring my readers that girls can be strong and focused and successful.

The animal encounters in the book, come directly from my journals. I have been charged by an elephant and stood my ground during a fake charge. I



have faced down a lion, walking backwards slowly and freezing in place for more than an hour with my best friend Paulette before the lioness let us leave. I have also had the amazing experience of watching an orphaned baby rhino being adopted by a matriarch rhino in the wild,

One unusual spinoff of this book is that the kids at Julius E. Sprauve Elementary School in Cruz Bay and students at Guy Benjamin Elementary School in Coral Bay on St. John joined forces to raise money to help build the Merrueshi Primary School in an African village half a world away. We held bake sales; field days where kids had sponsors for various events that paid a dollar a piece for completing challenges; put on a variety show for the community and learned how to do a Maasai dance from the visiting warrior I brought here twice. We also provided funds for the well and pump that brought fresh, safe drinking water to the village.

And most importantly, the kids here learned the power of knowing that we can all make a difference. Empowering kids is a lifelong gift, and goal of mine.

1. Black rhino facts:

- The black rhino lives in Africa, primarily in grasslands, savannahs, and tropical bush lands.
- There are three black rhino sub-species
- Black rhinos are browsers. Their prehensile upper lip is adapted for grasping and holding leaves and branches of shrubs and trees.
- Black rhinos can live to be 35 – 40 years in the wild.
- Gestation lasts approximately 15 – 16 months, and mothers give birth to one calf every 2.5 – 3 years.



- Females and sub-adults generally are social, but bulls are typically solitary.
- Adult female black rhinos have overlapping ranges and are not really as solitary as often portrayed. Males are generally solitary and may be territorial.
- Black rhinos are not black. The species probably derives its name as a distinction from the white rhino and/or from the dark-colored local soil that covers its skin after wallowing in mud.
- The upper lip of the black rhino is adapted for feeding from trees and shrubs.

2. Black rhino physical characteristics:

- Weight: 1,750 – 3,000 lbs (800 – 1,350 kg)
- Height: 4.5 – 5.5 ft (1.4 – 1.7 m) tall at shoulder
- Length: 10- 12.5 ft (3.0-3.8m) length of head and body
- Black rhinos have two horns.
- The front horn is larger and measures 20 – 55 inches (0.5 – 1.3 m).
- The rear horn is smaller and measures up to 22 inches (55 cm) long.
- Rhinos are poached for their horns, which are made of keratin, just like our nails and hair.
- Asia is the main market, mainly China and Viet Nam.
- They believe they have medicinal powers for a variety of things, like curing cancer or longevity. They don't have any medicinal properties.



3. Possible discussion topics:

- Tradition is very important to Namelok-ai and her community. What are Namelok-ai's biggest mistakes in her reactions to tradition?
- What traditions does she want to avoid? Emuratare (circumcision) is a tradition she is opposed to. Why? What changes will it bring to her life?
- Have you ever tried to fight tradition?
- Do your grandparents have different beliefs from you? Do you respect your elders? If yes, why and if no, why not?
- Do you think traditions help or hinder life?
- Is there a favorite family tradition you plan to carry on to your children one day?
- Do you think your country has a strong connection to tradition?
- Namelok-ai and her father are very close. What is the basis of the special bond?
- What does her name mean? Why did they choose it for her?
- Why did Namelok-ai choose the names she did for the rhinos?
- Why was Reteti so happy when his daughter asked him to tell the story of the Maasai and what makes them so special?
- Were you surprised to learn that the Maasai God, Enkai, is a woman? If so, why?
- Why does Namelok-ai become so determined to go to school?
- What treasure does she keep in her waistband?
- Can you remember when you saw your name written for the first time? How old were you?
- Are you glad you get to go to school?
- Did her declaration to not be circumcised and to go to school show disrespect to her mother and all the elders?
- Why does her mother make her apologize to all the women?
- What is "a conversation of one"?
- Do you ever talk to yourself? Does it help?
- Do your parents have ambitions for you?



- Are you all working for the same goals in life?
- Do you feel your ambitions match the ones your parents have for you?
- How do you balance things if you aren't totally on the same page with your parents' goals for you?
- When are we old enough to diverge from parental guidance or demands?
- Have you ever ignored advice and followed your own decision?
- How did that work out for you?

4. Courage is a major theme in this book:

- What radio program did everyone hear at the shop one day? How did the woman speaking impact Namelok-ai? Did she give Namelok-ai courage on her decision to avoid her circumcision?
- Did it take courage for Namelok-ai to spend two nights alone in the bush?
- What made her do that?
- How did Namelok-ai form such a special bond with two wild rhinos?
- Have you ever felt an animal connection that was so strong?
- Was Namelok-ai smart heading into the bush every day when no one knew where she was going? Do you think it was dangerous? Why?
- Why did Namelok-ai deceive everyone about her first bleeding? How long did she keep the secret?

5. Growing up:

- What did Namelok-ai and her father see (independently) that upset them both so much?
- When Namelok-ai spotted the circling vultures what terrible discovery did she make?
- Did her discovery upset you too?



- Shock and despair overwhelm Namelok-ai until she spots the footprints. What name does she give the person wearing the sandal?
- Which unexpected discovery was most shocking - finding the dead Yieyio Emuny Narok? Or discovering who the Beast was?
- Reteti tells Namelok-ai his story and ends it with a shudder. What is he feeling the most about what he has done?
- Even with the disgust and anger in her heart Namelok-ai fixes a medicine to put on her father's wound. Is that a healing moment for both of them?
- Namelok-ai tells her father that they need a plan for Siri Aang. What does her father promise her?

6. Final outcomes:

- Could you feel Reteti's shock and despair when Namelok-ai discovers him?
- Was Namelok-ai right to be as cold and angry as she was with her father?
- What physical shape was her father in?
- What did Loitipitip do that drove Father to do take such a desperate action?
- What did he want to do with the money the poachers would pay him?
- What was the moment Namelok-ai's anger subsided?
- What is the thing that finally sets them free to resume a happy life?
- Do you think Namelok-ai learned anything about herself? Have you ever had an experience that taught you something new about yourself?
- Do you care to share it?
- Have you ever forgiven someone? Did that make you feel better?
- Have you ever wanted to be forgiven for a mistake?
- To forgive is to be charitable. Could you forgive someone for an action they did that really upset you?



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- Why is the title OUR SECRET, SIRI AANG important? What does Namelok-ai tell her father at the end of the book?
- Did you think this book had a happy ending?

