

The girls we pray for

It is the rare Church of the Brethren congregation that hasn't heard of Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) or the Chibok girls, many of them from EYN families, who were abducted from their boarding school by the militant group Boko Haram on April 14, 2014. Brethren congregations were each given the name of a Chibok girl, Christian and Muslim alike, for whom to pray. As we lifted our Chibok girls up in prayer, we could only wonder what they were experiencing.



PEGGY REIFF MILLER

Now, through *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, we have our answer. Nigerian writer and journalist Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani has given a gift to the Brethren.

Dedicated to raising awareness of the plight of children affected by war, Nwaubani and Italian journalist Viviana Mazza interviewed numerous girls who had escaped and their parents. Nwaubani also traveled to Chibok to learn what she could there.

"Despite the challenges," Mazza says, "we followed developments closely every day for years, getting to know the parents and hoping for the girls' return." They learned of the daily life in the villages, the hopes and aspirations of the girls, and the trauma they experienced. And together, through Nwaubani's fictional story and Mazza's nonfiction afterword that includes stories of some of the actual girls and families, as well as mention of the Church of the Brethren, they have woven together this wonderful book that gives flesh and blood to the news reports we've all been reading.

The story is told from the point of view of an unnamed character whose dream of what education can do for her is interrupted. In a *Publisher's Weekly* interview, Nwaubani says, "I wanted my protagonist to represent every single one of the thousands of girls who have been kidnapped by Boko Haram terrorists," not only the more famous Chibok girls. Each one "had a life and a future that was brutally snatched from her by Boko Haram."

Although written for young adults, *Buried Beneath the*


Baobab Tree will also appeal to older readers. The short chapters, some as short as one or two sentences, move the story along quickly. One chapter introduces the baobab tree as the "Tree of Life" with its many uses from food, to medicine, to a gathering place. Mentioned throughout the book, the tree takes on new significance near the end.

Nwaubani seamlessly weaves in details that give the reader a picture of life in a Nigerian village—from the pile of fresh green leaves the teacher uses to wipe chalk off the blackboard to "the plastic cover for the deep hole in the ground" that is the toilet, hidden behind a corrugated iron partition. The book is "very African," says Jay Wittmeyer, executive director of Global Mission and Service for the Church of the Brethren, who travels often to Nigeria.

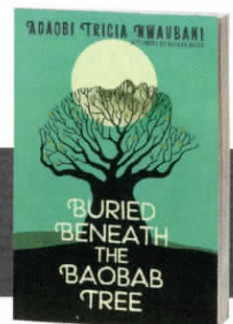
Chapters titled "The Voice on Papa's Radio" anchor the story in time, with BBC Hausa news reports on topics ranging from the inane (Disney's top-grossing animated film *Frozen*) to the frightening (Boko Haram attacks, which get increasingly closer to home).

I have to admit, this is a book I was not looking forward to reading. I expected it to be heavy, which it is in places. But it is well written and a fast read with a satisfying conclusion. I am grateful to have read it. The book gives us not only an inside look at life in a Nigerian village, but also an inside look at Boko Haram. We see Christians and Muslims living peacefully in the same village and the effect Boko Haram has on both traditions.

With the author's skillful use of the tremendous amount of research that went into the book, we can be assured of the story's accuracy. "I was careful," Nwaubani says, "to not include any information in the story that did not exist in the actual narratives I'd heard from victims. So, everything you read in the book . . . represents reality. Sticking to the facts while still keeping the plot interesting was the most challenging aspect of writing *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*."

Well done, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani. Thank you for this wonderful gift. 

Peggy Reiff Miller is a writer and historian living in Englewood, Ohio. Author of *The Seagoing Cowboy*, she is currently working on a book about the first decade of Heifer Project.



ABOUT THE BOOK

Title: *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*. **Author:** Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani. **Publisher:** Katherine Tegen Books (an imprint of HarperCollins), September 2018. Available from Brethren Press.