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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

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These are attractive books which aim to introduce the lives of children in developing nations to children in the developed world. It's an enterprise which has its problems. How different is life for children in Vietnam or Peru, and where does the difference lie? Is it a question of wealth and opportunity, of religion, of culture? These books leave the question of wealth and opportunity largely to one side. Intended for children of 5 to 10 years old, they set themselves firmly on the common ground of family and school life, encouraging the child reader to empathise with their subjects.

Each follows a day in the life of their subjects, in the form of a photo diary, which, although apparently informal, is carefully arranged to illuminate differences in food, dress, customs, worship and play. These are children that the reader

might very well like to visit, and their portraits smile out invitingly on the covers. The books are beautifully produced invitations in landscape format, with intricately decorated borders to the pages and photographs, which themselves include cultural echoes. They are written and photographed by authors who, for the most part, live in the countries they are describing. The text describes not only the life of an individual family but also offers additional information in italics in the main body of the book, sections at the back on history and language, and a glossary of unfamiliar terms.

The children's lives that are shown are very similar. There are perhaps two reasons for this. First, all the families are relatively prosperous and all, except Iina-Marja's, live in cities. Their school and home environments would give little cause for comment to a middle-class child in Britain. Secondly, for such urban middle-class families, cultural differences are being eroded by a global culture that makes Harry Potter and Disney as certain a presence in a Peruvian childhood as in a South African one. This development is most apparent in Iina-Marja's day in Lapland, where the life of reindeer herders in the Arctic Circle is in a state of transition and semi-preservation exemplified by the traditional reindeer skin tent (goahti). This is now erected in the garden of Iina-Marja's grandmother's more solid brick-built house. It is a reminder of a nomadic way of life that is disappearing.

These families are not typical of most children's lives in their countries. Bongani in South Africa is brought up in a multi-racial family in a multi-racial suburb and goes to a multi-racial school. But the search for a typical family is probably futile, and this is as good a place for younger children to start as any. It relies on teachers and parents to fill in the bigger picture.

Running Order:

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