

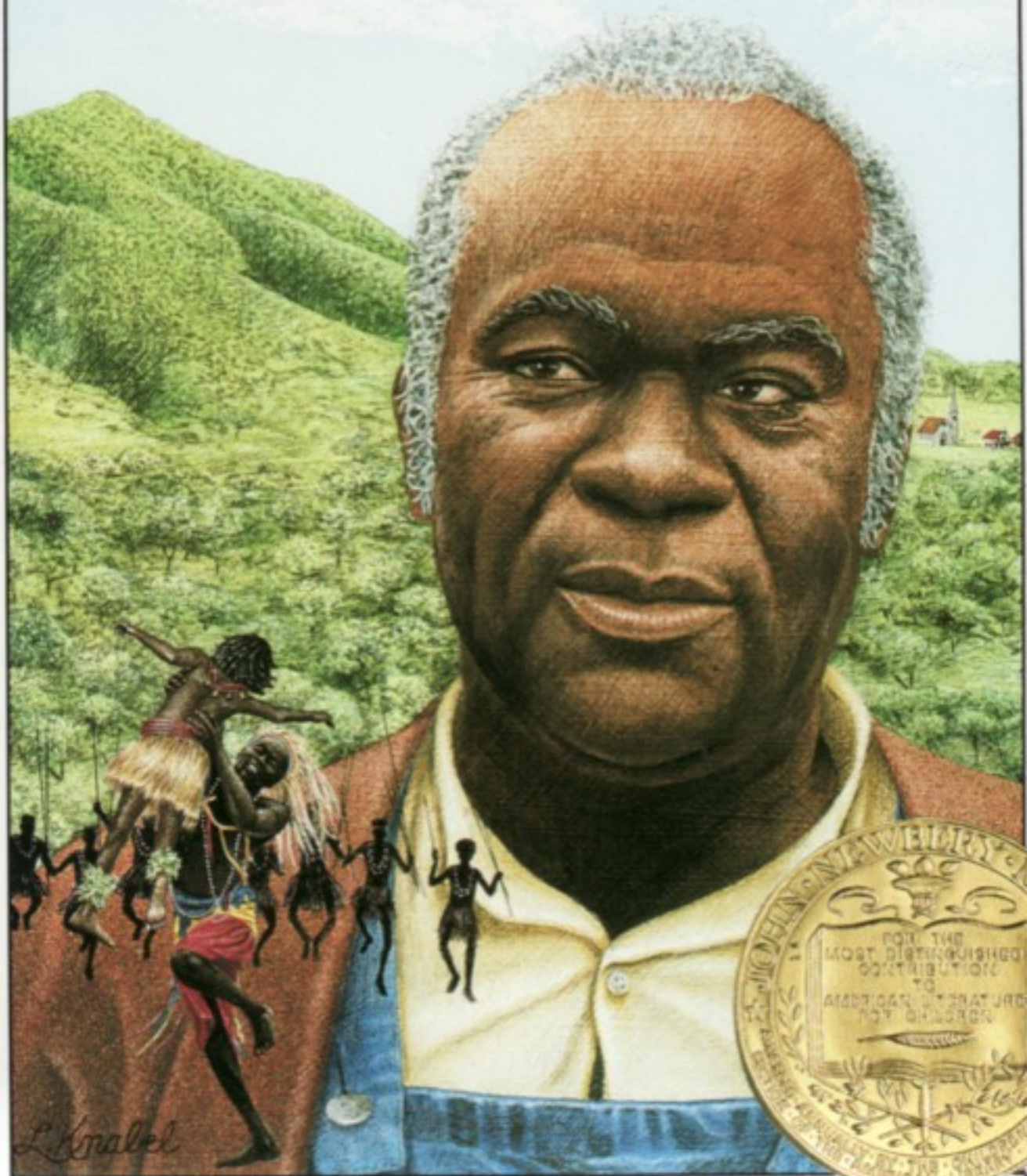


PUFFIN NEWBERY LIBRARY



AMOS FORTUNE

FREE MAN



ELIZABETH YATES



AFRICA 1725

E NIGHT CAME DOWN SWIFTLY over the equatorial forest. There was no lingering of daylight; but, after the snuffing out of the sun, darkness and the bright appearing of stars. No silence came with the darkness, for this was a night alive with song and movement. In the village of the At-mun-shi the people were gathering for their mystic dance that would welcome in the time of herbage, the time for the planting of corn.

Into the center of the clearing surrounded by small conical huts that was the village, a wooden drum had been brought. With solemn reverence Saala, the old wise man of the tribe, approached and began beating it. It was not long the only sound in the darkness. Soon smaller drums in distant parts of the clearing took up a beating. Then wooden flutes joined in from the outskirts of the village. Their sound was muted at first but it grew sharper and higher as the men blowing the flutes came nearer. Joined by the beaters on the drums, the sound quickened in pace and fervor as all gathered in a group around the great drum, coming into time with Saala's rhythmic beating. The moon rose high enough for the light to filter through the heavy foliage. It gleamed on the black bodies of the men, on the faces of the women and children who had been gathering in the clearing, summoned by the music and swaying with it like a field of tall grass before the wind.

When the flutes and the drums ceased, all the At-mun-shi turned and faced the same way, making obeisance to their chief who sat on a

raised platform at one end of the clearing, the moon full on him and his children standing beside him. At-mun, the young prince, was tall and powerfully built, though he had seen no more than fifteen summers. He carried his head high and his eyes flashed. Ath-mun, the twelve year old princess, smiled shyly at her tribespeople, then turned to whisper in her father's ear. She leaned against him, hoping to hide the deformed leg that—but for her father's love—would have caused her to have been drowned as an infant. Only the sacrifice of the imperfect to the God of Life could assure protection for the perfect. But the chief had gone against his tribal code and sacrificed his favorite dog to keep his infant daughter and thus far the God of Life had wreaked no vengeance on him. The At-mun-shi were as pagan as all the tribes in Africa, but they were peaceable and they were, as well, intense in their love of freedom.

The chief acknowledged the obeisance of his people and spread his hands before them, palms down, indicating that they might do their own pleasure for the next space of time. The people



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