

Makoona a heart-warming tale of interdependency
Night and Day July 6-July 9 2001

By Kathy Toohey
Staff Writer

This is a story about the search for balance and meaning in life. Morano tells his tale with parallel plots illustrating the interdependence of all life on earth. Although serious subjects are examined, a sense of humor and spirit of playfulness run through the work.

Makoona is a place that's alive. It's a coral reef and home to an amazing assortment of living creatures. One of the inhabitants is Binti, a female octopus who makes her home in a convenient crevice there. The octopus has a blowfish friend whose name is Hootie. Binti is on a mission. She's looking for something that she's not quite sure of.

Life on the reef is wonderful but it's also dangerous. The constant need to evade predators while finding food and a safe home is the overriding concern of all the many creatures that live there. On Makoona, a delicate balance exists within the coral reef community and life goes on as it has for millennia.

Kemar is sixteen and he's a Cambodian refugee who has escaped from the Khmer Rouge. He is one of the boatpeople who live on the seas and have no home. Kemar is a virtual slave because he must dive to net the reef fish for the boat's owner. Although he's lucky to be alive, he must do what he's told or die. He is one of thousands who have been deemed expendable.

One day while doing his part in the indiscriminate net fishing, Kemar has a strange encounter with an octopus. Some kind of unexplained understanding passes between the two and Kemar feels compelled to drop his end of the net. He realizes he will be punished for the act even as he's doing it but he is completely unprepared for the severity of the judgment. He doesn't just get a beating; he is abandoned in the middle of the ocean. Fortunately, two friends throw him an old cooler from the back of the retreating boat and perhaps now Kemar might have a chance to survive.

John Morano brings the reader right into the under sea life of an endangered coral reef. Swimming with Binti, the octopus who changes color to blend into her surroundings, we can feel the gentle currents and see the brilliant colors of the reef. We also feel the terror and confusion of the sea creatures when humans destroy life on the reef with explosives, poison, or drag nets the waste life so needlessly. Indescribable beauty and a fragile balance exist in the ecosystem that embraces a coral reef. Thousands of years of nature's construction of coral are defenseless in the face of human ignorance and greed.

Enlightenment is often found where we least expect it and Binti learns to find fulfillment with a male octopus that tells her, "She comes shining through rays of violet. She can wade in a drop of dew." This quote and others from the Grateful Dead spill from the mouth of the male octopus like ambiguous prophecies throughout the courtship. The reader is as enchanted as Binti, the female octopus, with the song lyrics and psychedelic display of the male suitor. He's just irresistible and he looks out for her welfare at the same time.

Kemar and the other human characters in this novel have compelling stories of their own. Each individual must find a meaningful reason to live and search for a safe place in this world. They must learn to co-exist with all the myriad living creatures that share this planet with us.