

## Mother and daughter author team write a book about healing.

“Koko, where your curls at?” written by Koko and Letty Twine is their first mother and daughter storytelling collaboration. Six-year-old Koko is as cute in person as she is in the drawings in the book. When we met, she wore a pretty pink turban. Covers can oftentimes tell the reader a lot about the book to entice us to buy it and invite us to read it. Illustrated by Hatice Bayramoglu, we see a cute little round faced, bald, girl with big brown eyes wearing a pink dress, looking in the mirror at herself with long, full wavy hair. We can guess that she is going to lose her hair or has lost her hair, but we don't know why.

We start our journey with Koko, the narrator, telling us her nickname used to be “curly top” and everyone loved her curly-wavy hair except her. She didn't like getting her hair combed because it was wavy, and the comb would pull her hair. It was not smooth like her sisters' hair. The illustrator does a wonderful job showing us Koko's growing bald patches leading up to the doctor's alopecia diagnosis. It never occurred to me that children got alopecia. I thought it was something that only some older men and women got. Whenever I have seen a child without hair, I assumed it was due to cancer treatment. I have a lot to learn, and I am in perfect company to be schooled.

Letty and Koko inform me that one child out of a thousand has alopecia, and they went on to realize that the ratio was true from what they observed at her school. The National Alopecia Areata Foundation (NAAF) has mentorship programs where a child is paired with an adult with the condition. There is a support group for children to help put things in perspective. It's not about the hair, it is about being at peace and learning how to manage the hurt that can come from the stigma of not having hair. According to Letty, “There are a lot of books that explain the condition, the different types of alopecia, and there are books that address gaining confidence, but she couldn't find a book on how to have faith, hope and joy... nothing that spoke to matters of the heart.” In the words of Toni Morrison, “If there is a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.” With Koko's help they were able to tell a story at an appropriate reading level for young children.

The story is effective at revealing how she is impacted socially and emotionally by her hair loss and how Koko begins to withdraw. In a Psychology Today article, “How to Use Stories to Heal”. George Michelsen Foy discusses narrative therapy. It views the person as someone not sick or dependent, but rather as an expert in the problem s/he is fighting... In the narrative, the person is separate from the problem and is able to tell the story. Creating the book allowed Koko agency and made her feel good knowing she was able to help get the story out. It was a family team effort. Koko worked closely with the illustrator and pictures were only included when she approved them.

One day at school a student pulled Koko's turban off. Letty is a vigilant mother who works closely with the school counselor. Mom called the school and wanted to have the book read to the class. Koko was hesitant at first and didn't want to draw attention to herself. This was a significant turning point. I would have loved to have seen this scenario in the book. It would teach both parents and children one possible way to handle such a crisis, but you will have to read the book to find out how Koko resolves her conflict.

On Mother's Day 2023, the release date for the book, the Facebook support group of mothers and children gathered to have a hair pizza party. Koko is an ambassador for childhood alopecia. This is not an official title, but this is how I see such a brave girl. People ask for Koko's

autograph at events. Letty, a Christian minister, has a nonprofit and a website [polkadotohands.org](http://polkadotohands.org). She believes the book helps children experience a “healing of the heart.”

According to one of the fathers of narrative therapy, Wilhelm Schapp, “The entire existence of humans and their world consists of stories they tell themselves, both stories of what happened in the past and stories of what they plan for the future.” I ask Koko if she wants to be a writer and she admits she does. She says her next book will be, “How Koko got her curls back.”

Romaine Washington is the editor of “These Black Bodies Are... A Blacklandia Anthology” and the author of “Purgatory Has an Address” and “Sirens in Her Belly.”