

'A Different Sun' weaves cultural irony

By LINDA C. BRINSON
Special to the News & Record

Growing up in Georgia before the Civil War, Emma Davis — the young protagonist of a "A Different Sun" — is a serious, sensitive, impressionable little girl. She believes she's the smarter daughter, the "chosen one" whom her father recognizes as having special worth, even if she isn't as socially adept as her older sister.

Her closest companion is "Uncle" Eli, an African slave who has a cabin and garden in her backyard. Though he is a lowly slave, Uncle Eli looks out for Emma and teaches her many things. When her father cruelly mutilates Uncle Eli in what he considers an action necessary to maintain control over his slaves, Emma has one of many crises of conscience. How much responsibility does she, a child, have for what her family does? Her upbringing in the Baptist faith deepens her inner struggles.

Late one night when she is a student at Georgia Female College, having just heard a dramatic lecture by a female missionary to Burma, Emma reads Isaiah 6:8: "Then I heard the voice

WANT TO READ IT?

"A Different Sun" by Elaine Neil Orr (Berkley Books, 383 pages, \$16)

of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? And I said, Here am I. Send me." She believes that God is calling her to be a missionary.

So when the Rev. Henry Bowman, a handsome, noted missionary to Africa who is well into his 30s, makes a preaching tour through Georgia, 17-year-old Emma soon becomes convinced that God wants her to be his wife and help meet the needs in Africa.

The reality of what she finds among the Yoruba people of West Africa, however, is very different from what the headstrong young woman had envisioned. Neither her husband nor her marriage is quite as perfect as she first thought. The Africans with whom she interacts are hardly simple, benighted savages waiting for her and Henry to enlighten them. And, even more than the wild animals she imagined, the climate and diseases pose threats to herself and those she loves.

Elaine Neil Orr, who was born and spent her childhood in the part of Nigeria where Emma faces her challenges, has written a beautiful, insightful novel.

Her descriptions of Nigeria — the wilderness, the villages, the wildlife, the weather — are wonderfully detailed and evocative.

Emma's story is dramatic, believable and gripping. The pampered young woman discovers both strengths and weaknesses she never knew she had as she struggles to deal with her marriage, her mission and the African people who are the only others in her new life. Early on, she must question her husband's motivation and, with it, her own reason for being in Africa.

The story is told largely from Emma's point of view, but at times Orr lets the reader see into the mind of Henry and that of Jacob, a former slave who is key to keeping the Bowmans' mission from failing. Their viewpoints give further context to what Emma faces and how she grows in courage, humility and understanding.

Perhaps the greatest achievement in this powerful novel is Orr's deft balancing of the complexity of the interaction of two

cultures and two religions. She makes her points so subtly and matter-of-factly, through the characters' actions and thoughts, that the reader almost doesn't realize she's making them. But by book's end, we are well aware of the irony involved when American Southerners come to Africa to spread their religion of love, compassion and salvation while their friends and relatives back home keep captured African people as slaves. And we see that the Yoruba people have a well-developed faith of their own, that they are perhaps more comfortable dealing with God than either Henry or Emma is.

To her credit, Orr does not write in terms of uncomplicated good and evil. She respects Emma's faith and the conversion of Jacob and others to Christianity. She writes about both the Americans who have come to Africa and the Africans whom they find there as what they all are: Human beings who are sometimes good, and sometimes, if not bad, at least petty and selfish. They are all working in their own ways to understand life, and the Africans have at least as much as the missionaries to teach about happiness and redemption.