

Book Review:

African Violets by Reinhild Raistrick

Reviewed for AVSA by Dr. Bill Price

What a pleasure it was to have been asked to review this book! The author, Ms. Reinhild Raistrick, is a botanical artist specializing in painting wild flowers from around the world in their natural habitats. Many of her paintings are now in the permanent collection at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew.

This is not a lengthy book, having only 140 pages. In the first two chapters, the author summarizes her own background growing up in Tanzania and describes the areas she explored searching for violets growing in the wild. In doing so, she also draws attention to the ongoing loss of critical habitat that is occurring due to human activity with logging and the destruction of forests for agricultural purposes. Included are several lovely photographs of typical jungle habitats plus maps of the region.

The format for the next 60 or so pages is a usual one for botanical illustrations with a description and discussion on the left page, and on the right, a full-sized color reproduction of her watercolor painting. Many of her paintings were done from plants in the wild while others were from plants in British and European collections, or herbarium specimens.

The quality of the reproductions is excellent, and she is very skilled in portraying the esthetic charm of these beautiful plants. In the simple elegance of these paintings, it is easy to see why these plants have captured and main-

tained their appeal for so many years. Any of these would look great framed on a wall!

Although she uses the species nomenclature that we have used until recently, she does include comments reflecting Dr. Darbyshire's new research. In addition to the

species we are familiar with, she tantalizes us with illustrations of several species or variants that are not yet available to hobbyist growers.

A couple of the descriptions don't quite match the plants we grow as such, but I am unsure where the error lies. For example, the description for *S. velutina* flowers more closely resembles what we call *S. velutina* 'Lite'.

In the last forty or so pages, the author presents paintings of other flowering plants from the Usambara rainforest. A couple of these are of some *Streptocarpus* species, our African violet's closest relatives within the Gesneriad family. My only minor

criticism of this section is that since the main focus is on the genus *Saintpaulia*, it would have been more interesting to have included more close gesneriad relatives.

In conclusion, I feel this is a book that will be appealing not only for those more seriously interested in *Saintpaulia* species, but for all who would enjoy the beauty of these lovely watercolor paintings.

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