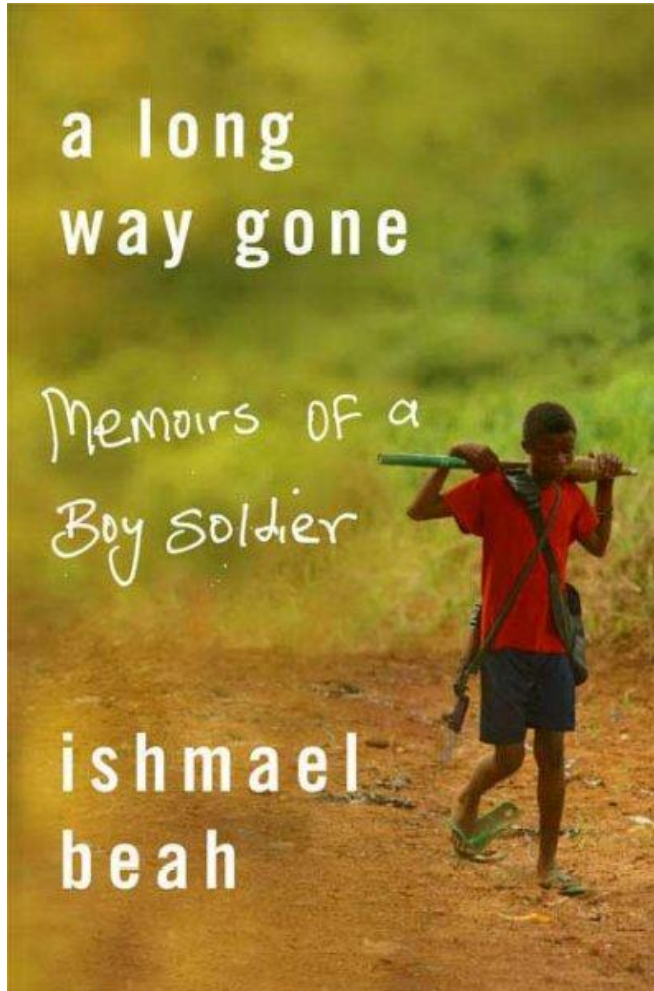


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

About the Book



In a heart-wrenching, candid autobiography, a human rights activist offers a firsthand account of war from the perspective of a former child soldier, detailing the violent civil war that wracked his native Sierra Leone and the government forces that transformed a gentle young boy into a killer as a member of the army.

About the Author



Ishmael Beah was born in Sierra Leone in 1980. He moved to the United States in 1998 and finished his last two years of high school at the United Nations International School in New York. In 2004 he graduated from Oberlin College with a B.A. in political science. He is a member of the Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Division Advisory Committee and has spoken before the United Nations, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO) at the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, and many other NGO panels on children affected by the war. His work has appeared in *VespertinePress* and *LIT* magazine. He lives in New York City.

Awards

A Long Way Gone received the following awards: 2008 Alex Awards - Best Adult Books For Teenagers (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/alex>); 2008 ALA Best Books For Young Adults; 2007 *Booklist* Editors' Choice: Adult Books for Young Adults (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklistsawards/booklistsbook>).

Reviews

Kirkus Reviews

The survivor of a dirty war in starkest Africa recounts his transition from 12-year-old orphan to killing machine. To emerge from Sierra Leone's malignant civil conflict and eventually graduate from college in the U.S. marks Beah as very unusual, if not unique. His memoir seeks to illuminate the process that created, and continues to create, one of the most pitiable yet universally feared products of modern warfare: the boy soldier. It illustrates how, in African nations under the stress of open civil war, youthful males cluster in packs for self-protection, fleeing the military forces of all sides, distrusted and persecuted by strangers they encounter, until they are killed or commandeered as recruits. Nearly half the text deals with Beah's life as a fugitive after marauding rebel troops ravaged his home village. He fled with several other boys, but they were separated during another attack and he was forced to spend several weeks alone in the bush; the loneliness there instilled a craving for human companionship of any type. The regular military finally snared Beah and some new companions, telling them they must train as soldiers or die. The rebels, they were assured, were responsible for killing their families and destroying their homes; as soldiers, they would exact manly revenge and serve the nation. Cocaine, marijuana and painkillers became the boys' mind-numbing daily diet. They were indoctrinated by

practicing mayhem on tethered prisoners and became willing experts at lying in ambush with their aging AK-47 rifles. For them, killing human beings had replaced ordinary child's play. Beah's halting narrative has confusing time shifts, but it's hideously effective in conveying the essential horror of his experiences.

*Library Journal *Starred Review**

A painful yet riveting memoir, this book recounts Beah's haunting experiences as a child soldier in Sierra Leone, Africa. Just 11 years old when rebels attacked and a civil war began, he was an innocent boy enthralled by hip-hop and Western culture. After losing his family and narrowly avoiding death at the hands of rebel soldiers, he was eventually taken in by the government army. While there was some level of security in this forced assignment, Beah's life still became consumed by violence, guns, death, and drugs. Rescued by UNICEF at the age of 16, Beah entered rehab, regained his life and spirit, moved to the United States, graduated from Oberlin College, and became a public speaker and an advocate for human rights, all before his 26th birthday. Beah's narrative, which is accessible, conversational, visual, and utterly absorbing. Highly recommended and suitable for all nonfiction and biography collections in school (upper level), academic, and public libraries.

*Publishers Weekly *Starred Review**

This absorbing account by a young man who, as a boy of 12, gets swept up in Sierra Leone's civil war goes beyond even the best journalistic efforts in revealing the life and mind of a child abducted into the horrors of warfare. Beah's harrowing journey transforms him overnight from a child enthralled by American hip-hop music and dance to an internal refugee bereft of family, wandering from village to village in a country grown deeply divided by the indiscriminate atrocities of unruly, sociopathic rebel and army forces. Beah then finds himself in the army, in a drug-filled life of casual mass slaughter that lasts until he is 15, when he's brought to a rehabilitation center sponsored by UNICEF and partnering NGOs. The process marks out Beah as a gifted spokesman for the center's work after his "repatriation" to civilian life in the capital, where he lives with his family and a distant uncle. When the war finally engulfs the capital, it sends 17-year-old Beah fleeing again, this time to the U.S., where he now lives. (Beah graduated from Oberlin College in 2004.) Told in clear, accessible language by a young writer with a gifted literary voice, this memoir seems destined to become a classic firsthand account of war and the ongoing plight of child soldiers in conflicts worldwide.

VOYA Reviews

This remarkable firsthand account shows how civil strife destroys lives. Ishmael Beah was twelve years old in 1993 when insurrection tore apart his native country of Sierra Leone. Separated from his family, Ishmael joined up with other traumatized young boys wandering the countryside, looking for family, food, and shelter. Often they were cruelly treated by frightened villagers, but occasionally they encountered selfless kindness. Day after day, they witnessed atrocities and narrowly escaped death. Months later, the starving thirteen-year-old was recruited into a government militia, and for the next two years, fought alongside other child soldiers. Equipped with an AK-47 and morally anaesthetized with hard drugs, Beah became a remorseless killer. The horrors he saw or perpetrated still haunt him and will be difficult for the reader to forget. By great good fortune, he was rescued by a UNICEF team and slowly rehabilitated in a group home for child soldiers. A lucky visit to the United States to address a UN committee gave him a friend in New York and an eventual refuge when Sierra Leone was again wracked by a military coup in 1997. Beah writes his story with painful honesty, horrifying detail, and touches of remarkable lyricism. This young writer has a bright future. Unfortunately his second-language English is still sometimes clumsy and syntactically awkward; more skillful editing might have made the book a classic. As children fight on in dreadful wars around the globe, Beah's story is a must for every school collection.

School Library Journal *Starred Review*

Adult/High School— This gripping story by a children's-rights advocate recounts his experiences as a boy growing up in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, during one of the most brutal and violent civil wars in recent history. Beah, a boy equally thrilled by causing mischief as by memorizing passages from Shakespeare and dance moves from hip-hop videos, was a typical precocious 12-year-old. But rebel forces destroyed his childhood innocence when they hit his village, driving him to leave his home and travel the arid deserts and jungles of Africa. After several months of struggle, he was recruited by the national army, made a full soldier and learned to shoot an AK-47, and hated everyone who came up against the rebels. The first two thirds of his memoir are frightening: how easy it is for a normal boy to transform into someone as addicted to killing as he is to the cocaine that the army makes readily available. But an abrupt change occurred a few years later when agents from the United Nations pulled him out of the army and placed him in a rehabilitation center. Anger and hate slowly faded away, and readers see the first glimmers of Beah's work as an advocate. Told in a conversational, accessible style, this powerful record of war ends as a beacon to all teens experiencing violence around them by showing them that there are other ways to survive than by adding to the chaos.

Literary Criticism

Emotional truth

Last week was not a great week for journalists or book people. For those of us who fancy ourselves a bit of both, it was particularly trying. An Australian newspaper several stories questioning some facts in the bestselling boy-soldier memoir, *A Long Way Gone*: according to the paper, sources in Sierra Leone dispute some of the key dates in the memoir, which suggests that author Ishmael Beah may have misrepresented the time he spent as a boy soldier. Beah issued a statement in which he passionately stood by his story and pointed to two Sierra Leonean sources who vouched for his chronology and character. Beah and one of his supporters have suggested that the Australian newspaper has an "agenda," and that when an earlier claim that Beah's father was still alive, investigated by the paper, turned up false, the reporters looked for other discrepancies. The Australian has countered that Beah and his publisher have been evasive and that their explanations have introduced "several further errors" and do not acknowledge that his account is "seriously flawed."

It might be impossible to determine whether Beah's horrific story began in 1993, as he claims, or in 1995, as the Australian's sources contend. "A lot of us do not know our own childhoods," another boy soldier told the Australian, perhaps undercutting his own doubts about Beah's chronology. "We were fed drugs all the time and we were very, very young ... when you lose your family there is nobody to tell you things like your age."

The Beah controversy.

Obviously, this is distressing on every level. On the one hand, I can't help championing the right of journalists to search for "the truth." On the other hand--and I say this not because I have close personal relationships with Beah's publisher Crichton and his agent, Ira Silverberg--*A Long Way Gone* is likely not the result of some collusion or misrepresentation. At worst, Crichton, who has worked as a co-writer on such complicated tales as Marianne Pearl's *A Mighty Heart*, took as true the word of a boy whose experience is not in doubt: even the Australian's reporters have been careful to say they're not questioning the essential truths of Beah's time as a brainwashed, drugged-out killer and eventual refugee.

In this country, it's commonly known in the publishing industry that memoirs--even post--James Frey--are not stringently fact-checked; at most, they're submitted to legal departments looking for libel. Writers are

responsible for their facts, and editors for probing their writers' hearts and souls and memories. In the case of *A Long Way Gone*, however, an excerpt (including the now-disputed dates) was fact-checked by the New York Times last January. "The fact-checking, as often happens, turned up a few discrepancies that were resolved without undermining the plausibility of his account," Times spokesperson Diane C. McNulty said in an e-mail.

There are questions to be asked, again, about the nature of memoir and the responsibility of a publisher. Because no single person's memory can ever be completely verified, it might do for publishers to routinely issue disclaimers about character or chronology conflation. But I can't help noting what the controversy swirling around *A Long Way Gone* says about the competitive relationship between the book business and journalism and the essential purpose of "the truth." Whether Beah was 13 or 15 when his story began, his work has opened the world's eyes to horrifying truths that no one--publisher, newspaper, reader--can ever dispute.

Source: Nelson, Sara. "Emotional truth." *Publishers Weekly* 255.4 (2008): 6. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions

1. How familiar were you with the civil wars of Sierra Leone prior to reading *A Long Way Gone*? How has Ishmael's story changed your perception of this history, and of current wars in general?
2. Chapter seven begins with the story of the imam's death, followed by Ishmael's recollections of his father and an elder blessing their home when they first moved to Mogbwemo. How do the concepts of faith and hope shift throughout this memoir? What sustains Ishmael emotionally and spiritually?
3. Chapter eight closes with the image of villagers running fearfully from Ishmael and his friends, believing that the seven boys are rebels. How do they overcome these negative assumptions in communities that have begun to associate the boys' appearance with evil? What lessons could world leaders learn from them about overcoming distrust, and the importance of judging others individually rather than as stereotypes?
4. What did Ishmael's parents teach him about being a man? How did he define manhood once he began his long walk west? What general life lessons were his parents able to teach him that sustained him during his brutal passage from boyhood, and that he carries with him to this day?

5. Discuss the role of American hip-hop culture in creating a “soundtrack” for Ishmael’s life. Why are rappers so appealing to him?
6. The boys’ discovery of the Atlantic Ocean and their encounter with a cheerful fisherman who heals and feeds them is followed by the tragedy of Saidu’s death after a bird falls ominously from the sky. Discuss Ishmael’s relationship with the natural world. In what way is he guided by the constancy of the earth and sky?
7. When Ishmael arrives at the fortified village of Yele in chapter twelve, what do you discover about the way he began his military career? Was his service, and that of his equally young friends, necessary? What made his conscription different from that of drafted American soldiers serving in previous wars?
8. Ishmael tells us that some of the boys who had been rehabilitated with him later became soldiers again. What factors ensured that he could remain a civilian?
9. Storytelling is a powerful force in Ishmael’s life, even providing a connection to his future mother, Laura Simms. What traits make Ishmael a memorable and unique storyteller? How does his perspective compare to the perspectives of filmmakers, reporters, or other authors who have recently tried to portray Africa’s civil wars?
10. Ishmael describes his use of Krio and many tribal languages to communicate, as well as his ability to quote Shakespeare’s Elizabethan English. What communities and empires are represented in his many speech styles? In which “villages,” from the relatively new UN to the centuries-old Mende and Temne settlements, does the greatest wisdom lie?
11. How does Ishmael’s concept of family change throughout the memoir, from his early life in Mattru Jong, to the uncle with whom he is reunited, to his American family with Laura?
12. It takes many weeks before Ishmael feels comfortable with the relief workers’ refrain that these events are not his fault. What destructive beliefs had he become addicted to? What states of deprivation and euphoria had his body become addicted to?
13. What universal truths does Ishmael teach us about surviving loss and hunger, and overcoming isolation?

14. Ishmael's dramatic escape during the later waves of revolution concludes with the riddle of the monkey. Is his dream of obliterating the monkey—and its violent endgames—closer to being fulfilled in these early years of the twenty-first century? What would it take for all of humanity to adopt Ishmael's rejection of vengeance?

15. Ishmael gives credit to relief workers such as Esther, in conjunction with organizations such as UNICEF, for rescuing him. He has dedicated his life to their cause, studying political science and speaking before a broad variety of groups, ranging from the Council on Foreign Relations to the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities at the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory. What steps has he inspired you to take to help end the use of child soldiers? How can each of us join Ishmael's cause?

16. After reading the chronology of Sierra Leone's history, what reasons can you propose for the coups in Ishmael's homeland? Did the arrival of Portuguese slave traders, or the later colonization by the British, contribute to Sierra Leone's twentieth century woes? What did you discover about the motivations of the army soldiers versus those of the rebels? In your opinion, what made the leaders of the RUF so ruthless for so long?

Multimedia

Ishmael Beah- Excerpt From 'A Long Way Gone' (Video Clip)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p30cYVQ9o3o>

Author and Sierra Leone war refugee Ishmael Beah reads an excerpt from his book, "*A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*."

Further Reading

War Child: A Child Soldier's Story by Emmanuel Jal

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1327881>

(Call number: 962.404 Ja)

In the mid-1980s, Emmanuel Jal was a seven-year-old Sudanese boy, living in a small village. But as Sudan's civil war moved closer, his family moved again and again, seeking peace. Then, one terrible day, Jal was separated from his mother, and later learned she had been killed; his father Simon rose to become a powerful commander in the Christian Sudanese Liberation Army, fighting for the freedom of Sudan. Soon, Jal was conscripted into that army, one of 10,000 child soldiers.

First Kill Your Family: Child Soldiers of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army by Peter H. Eichstaedt

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1326984>

(Call number: 303.64 Ei)

For more than twenty years, beginning in the mid-1980s, the Lord's Resistance Army has ravaged northern Uganda. Tens of thousands have been slaughtered, and thousands more mutilated and traumatized. At least 1.5 million people have been driven from a pastoral existence into the squalor of refugee camps. The leader of the rebel army is the rarely seen Joseph Kony, a former witchdoctor and self-professed spirit medium who continues to evade justice and wield power from somewhere near the Congo~Sudan border. Kony claims he not only can predict the future but also can control the minds of his fighters. And control them he does: the Lord's Resistance Army consists of children who are abducted from their homes under cover of night.

They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children: The Global Quest to Eradicate the Use of Child Soldiers by Romeo Dallaire

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1388996>

(Call number: 967.571 Da)

As the leader of the ill-fated United Nations peacekeeping force in Rwanda, Lieutenant-General Dallaire came face-to-face with the horrifying reality of child soldiers during the genocide of 1994. He offers intellectually daring and enlightened approaches to the child-soldier phenomenon, and insightful, empowering solutions to eradicate it.

Author's official website

<http://www.alongwaygone.com/>

Information about the author and his cause.

Read-Alikes

Beasts of No Nation by Uzodinma Iweala

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1250303>

(Call number: Fiction Iweala)

The preteen protagonist is molded into a fighting man by his demented guerrilla leader and, after witnessing his father's savage slaying, by an inchoate need to belong to some kind of family, no matter how depraved. He becomes a killer, gripped by a muddled sense of revenge as he butchers a mother and daughter when his ragtag unit raids a defenseless village; starved for both food and affection, he is sodomized by his commandant and rewarded with extra food scraps and a dry place to sleep.

Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak by Jean Hatzfeld

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1245827>

(Call number: 967.571 Ha)

In April-May 1994, 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis were massacred by their Hutu fellow citizens--about 10,000 a day, mostly being hacked to death by machete. In *Machete Season*, the veteran foreign correspondent Jean Hatzfeld reports on the results of his interviews with nine of the Hutu killers. They were all friends who came from a single region where they helped to kill 50,000 out of their 59,000 Tutsi neighbors, and all of them are now in prison, some awaiting execution. It is usually presumed that killers will not tell the truth about their brutal actions, but Hatzfeld elicited extraordinary testimony from these men about the genocide they had perpetrated.

Children at War by P.W. Singer

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1235734>

(Call number: 355.088 Si)

An internationally recognized expert on 21st-century warfare looks at the use of children as soldiers in more than three-quarters of the world's conflicts, describing how children are indoctrinated and trained as soldiers, and how it can be stopped.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

