

**BOOK REVIEW: WHAT IS THE WHAT. BY DAVE EGGERS**

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Valentino Achak Deng, a refugee of the Sudanese civil war, opens the door of his Atlanta apartment to find himself mugged and beaten by his latest tormentors. Pistol whipped and bound with telephone cord, he begins silently to tell his life story to one of his captors. “*You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen,*” he whispers through duct tape. “The stories emanate from me all the time I am awake and breathing, and I want everyone to hear them.”

Part-autobiography, part-novel, “What is the What” is Dave Eggers’ “soulful account” of Valentino Achak Deng’s flight from a civil war that tore through Sudan in the 1980s and 90s, and whose current strain is raging in Darfur today. A collaborative project based on years of interviews following a meeting through the Lost Boys Foundation, Eggers’ newest novel chronicles Deng’s life. The story begins from the time Deng flees southern Sudan after the Murahaleen (Muslim militias armed by the government in Khartoum) attacked his village to punish activities of the SPLA rebels until his resettlement in the US, along with 4,000 other Sudanese. Joining the estimated 17,000 other “Lost Boys” (and girls) in the thousand-mile trek across Sudan, Deng searches for sanctuary in the refugee camps of Ethiopia, then Kenya for thirteen years until he is finally able to immigrate to the US and begin a different kind of perilous journey.

Although subjects of war and displacement make it all too easy for an author to launch into a script of political outrage, Eggers’ beautifully written narrative imbues dignity,

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humor, and even elegance, creating a work much greater than a diatribe or an enumeration of injustices. Having dug a grave in secret for his small friend along the walk to Ethiopia, Deng observes “It was a broken world, I knew then, that would allow a boy such as me to bury a boy such as William K.” Yet, in as much as Deng’s account bears witness to the suffering of some of the two and a half million Sudanese who perished in the civil war, at its core “What is the What” remains a life-affirming testament to trust, faith, humility, and compassion in a time of immense human suffering.

While not intended as a journalistic or historical account, Eggers’ novel skillfully brings to light the atrocities committed by many successive governments of Sudan before and during the civil war, helping the reader understand the roots of the conflict in Darfur while illuminating the incomprehensible human suffering it leaves in its wake. The curious choice of genre for Eggers’ “novelization” has received some criticism for its unwillingness to separate truth from fiction. Yet, the novel effectively makes sense of news reports to illuminate the heartbreaking experiences of real people, whose real human suffering has been all too easy for the world to ignore.

As Deng lays on the floor of his Atlanta apartment, banging the floor for his Christian neighbors to come to his aid, he proclaims “Where are these people? I know that people are hearing me. It is not possible that they are not hearing me... that no one would come to this door.” Deng is not looking for pity; he demands a world in which the powerful accept it as a moral duty to aid the powerless. In his final words to reader, Deng implores "How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist."