



Reading Schedule

Monday/Tuesday	Wednesday/Thursday	Friday
April 8/9	April 10/11	April 12
Due: Read <i>A Small Place</i>	Due: <i>A Small Place Questions</i>	Due:
April 15/16	April 17/18	April 19
Due: Chapters 1-9		Due: Chapters 10-14
April 22/23	April 24/25	April 26
Due: Chapters 15-17	LAST TIMED WRITING!!!	Due: Chapters 18-21
April 29/30	May 1/2	May 3
Due: Chapters 22-23		Due: Chapters 24-26

NAMES OF CHARACTERS

Valentino Achak Deng

(aka Achak, Dominic Arou, Marialdit, "Gone Far," "Sleeper")

In and around Marial Bai

<i>Deng Arou</i>	father
<i>Samuel, Peter, Philip</i>	brothers
<i>William K</i>	best friend, teller of tall tales
<i>Moses</i>	best friend, the strong one
<i>Amath</i>	village girl, object of Valentino's affection
<i>Father Dominic Matong</i>	village priest
<i>Sadiq Aziz</i>	father's Arab business partner
<i>Michael Luol</i>	handless man
<i>Bol Dut</i>	member of national parliament, friend of Valentino's father in Aweil

On walk to Ethiopia

<i>Dut Majok</i>	teacher, leader of walking boys
<i>Kur Garang Kur</i>	second-oldest walking boy behind Dut
<i>Deng</i>	Valentino's first walking friend
<i>Desert Man</i>	old man, feeds Valentino

In and around Pinyudo

<i>Achor Achor</i>	best friend, resettles to Atlanta
<i>The Eleven</i>	Valentino's group
<i>Ajulo</i>	elderly Anyuak lady, feeds Valentino
<i>Mr. Kondit</i>	teacher
<i>Royal Girls</i>	Valentino's first romantic success
<i>Quiet Baby</i>	abandoned baby rescued after Gilo River massacre

In and around Kakuma

<i>Maria</i>	friend, saves Valentino's life on road to Kakuma
<i>Gop Chol Kolong</i>	father in Kakuma
<i>Ayen</i>	Gop's wife
<i>Abuk</i>	stepsister, messenger
<i>Miss Gladys</i>	teacher
<i>Tabitha</i>	girlfriend
<i>Noriyaki Takamura</i>	friend and boss
<i>Wakana</i>	Noriyaki's fiancée
<i>Deborah Agok</i>	midwife who visits Marial Bai
<i>Thomas</i>	man in Loki, helps Valentino get a ride during his recycling trip
<i>Abraham</i>	doctor at Lopiding Hospital
<i>Mike Mwaniki</i>	founder of Mavuno Drama Group, sponsor during trip to Nairobi
<i>Mr. CB</i>	Somali man, contacts Valentino's father by radio
<i>St. Josephine Bakhita</i>	enslaved Sudanese and Canossian Sister in Italy, later canonized

SPLA

<i>The Fist</i>	starving SPLA unit
<i>Mawein</i>	soldier, kills elephant that boys eat
<i>Tito</i>	soldier in Gumuro, talks to Valentino about death
<i>John Garang</i>	founder and chairman of SPLA
<i>Kerubino Bol</i>	early rebel, flees army to help Garang form SPLA
<i>Riek Machar</i>	rebel who forms SPLA-Nasir faction
<i>Commander Beltbuckle</i>	commander at Pinyudo
<i>Mr. Potential Food</i>	commander at Pinyudo
<i>Commander Secret</i>	commander at Pinyudo
<i>Giir Chuang</i>	high-ranking officer, executes men in front of refugees
<i>Kuku Kori Kuku</i>	old chief from Nuba at recruitment meeting in Kakuma

America

<i>Tonya</i>	thief
<i>Powder</i>	thief, assailant
<i>Michael ("TV Boy")</i>	young accomplice to thieves
<i>Edgardo</i>	neighbor
<i>Julian</i>	receptionist at hospital
<i>Lino</i>	Sudanese friend, visits Valentino at hospital
<i>Duluma</i>	Tabitha's ex-boyfriend in Seattle
<i>Mary Williams</i>	founder of the Lost Boys Foundation
<i>Phil Mays</i>	sponsor
<i>Bobby Neumyer</i>	movie producer, Valentino's friend
<i>Gerald & Anne Newton</i>	friends in Atlanta
<i>Allison Newton</i>	the Newtons' twelve-year-old daughter

NOTABLE PLACE NAMES

<i>Marial Bai</i>	Valentino's hometown
<i>Aweil</i>	larger city near Marial Bai
<i>Pinyudo</i>	refugee camp in Ethiopia
<i>Gilo River</i>	site of massacre on Ethiopian border
<i>Golkur</i>	refugee camp in southern Sudan
<i>Lokichoggio</i>	staging ground for international aid in Kenya
<i>Kakuma</i>	refugee camp in Kenya

NOTABLE TERMS

<i>monyjang</i>	in Dinka folklore, the early chosen people
<i>murabaleen</i>	Arab militiamen (literally "nomad")
<i>janjaweed</i>	Arab militiamen in Darfur (literally "hordes")
<i>jaysb al-amar</i>	SPLA's term for Red Army (child soldiers)
<i>antonov</i>	large military aircraft
<i>Allab Akbar</i>	Arabic expression (literally "God is great")

BRIEF TIMELINE OF MODERN SUDANESE HISTORY

"They can come in different shapes and guises, but always wars come in increments. I am convinced there are steps, and that once these events are set in motion, they are virtually impossible to reverse."

—Valentino to Michael (TV Boy)

The conflicts between northern and southern Sudan are often understood through their historical roots: centuries of exploitation and slave-raiding by the "Arab" north against the "African" south, followed by Britain and Egypt's imperialist meddling.

Arab tribes first arrived in Sudan from Upper Egypt and across the Red Sea during the Middle Ages, and colonial occupation began in the nineteenth century. However, it is impossible to explain Sudan's recent conflicts from any single angle or with any simple terms. While religion, race, economic exploitation, and colonialism are all major elements in the crisis, none of these factors fully explains the situation.

The following brief timeline lays out the most recent phase in Sudan's history, beginning with imperialist intervention.

- 1820: Egypt conquers northern parts of Sudan, developing ivory and slave trades.
- 1880s: Nationalist revolts begin to form in opposition to Egyptian and British rule (at the time, Egypt was under British occupation). Khartoum falls to rebels in 1885, when British General Charles Gordon is killed.
- 1890s: Britain regains control of Sudan with military campaigns led by Lord Kitchener. In 1899, Egypt and Britain agree on joint government of Sudan.
- 1930: The British Civil Secretary in Khartoum declares the "Southern Policy," officially stating what had always been in practice: the north and south, because of their many cultural and religious differences, are governed as two separate regions.
- 1946: Britain and Khartoum (by this time, Egypt is effectively out of the picture) abruptly decide to merge north and south into a single administrative region. Arabic is made the official language in the south, and northerners begin to hold positions there.
- January 1, 1956: Independence is granted to Sudan as a single unified nation.

FIRST CIVIL WAR, 1955–1972

- 1955: Anticipating independence and fearing domination by the north, southern insurgents mutiny in Torit. These early rebels develop a large secessionist movement in the south, called the Anyanya (Snake Poison). Valentino's father, along with many southern Sudanese men of his generation, was a member of the Anyanya. The Anyanya struggled with a lot of internal factionalism and instability, much like the SPLA would deal with in the second civil war.
- 1972: All rebel factions gather under the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) to negotiate a peace agreement with the Sudanese government. The Addis Ababa Agreement is signed, granting the south considerable autonomy and a share of natural resources. A ten-year hiatus in the conflict follows.
- 1970s: As Sudan gains legitimacy in peacetime, Western countries begin supplying the government with arms. The United States sells Sudan a great deal of equipment, hoping to counteract Soviet support of Marxist Ethiopians and Libyans.

- 1978: Chevron finds large oil fields in the Upper Nile and southern Kordofan regions. Shortly after, oil is discovered throughout southern Sudan.
- 1980: Khartoum attempts to redraw the boundaries of southern Sudan, transferring oilfields to the north. When this fails, Khartoum begins taking the territory by force. In *What Is the What*, Valentino tells the story of his friend Lino, whose family was driven from their home in the Muglad Basin around this time. The Muglad Basin is an area near the north-south border that was claimed by Khartoum and renamed, using the Arabic word for unity.

SECOND CIVIL WAR, 1983–2005

- late 1970s: Repeated violations of the Addis Ababa Agreement by the north lead to increased unrest in the south.
- May 1983: Battalion 105, stationed at Bor and composed mostly of ex-Anyanya troops, is attacked after refusing to transfer to the north. Led by Kerubino Bol, the battalion flees to Ethiopia.
- June 1983: The Sudanese government officially abolishes the Addis Ababa Agreement and divides the south into three regions. Southern regional government is dissolved. President Nimeiry institutes a bold Islamicization campaign, transforming Sudan into a Muslim Arab state. Mutinies occur throughout the south and rebel forces grow.
- July 1983: The Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) forms in Ethiopia, led by John Garang.
- September 1983: Nimeiry issues a set of decrees, known as the September Laws, imposing sharia throughout the country. In Valentino's story, these laws are realized by the appearance of a handless man, punished for stealing in Khartoum, "who in 1983 brought the first portents of war to our village."
- mid 1980s: Civil war rages through the south. The SPLA battles government forces and attempts to gain control. Murahaleen raids reach their peak. Villages throughout the south are repeatedly attacked and destroyed. Slavery becomes widespread. As villages are ransacked and survivors flee, the Lost Boys begin their walks.
- late 1980s: President Nimeiry is deposed and Sadiq al-Mahdi rises to power. Various peace negotiation attempts between al-Mahdi and the SPLA fail as the conflict worsens.
- 1989: As al-Mahdi moves toward signing certain peace agreements, he is ousted in a coup and Omar al-Bashir seizes power. Al-Bashir is supported by the fundamentalist National Islamic Front (NIF), headed by Hassan Turabi. The new government fiercely enforces Islamic code throughout Sudan, banning trade unions, political parties, and other "non-religious" institutions.
- 1989: The Sudanese government begins deploying army militiamen notoriously known as the People's Defense Forces to raid villages in the south alongside the murahaleen. As Dur Majok lectures Valentino and Deng, "The strategy is to send all they can to destroy the Dinka. Have you heard the expression, *Drain a pond to catch a fish?*"
- August 1991: Valentino and all refugees at Pinyudo are forced to leave Ethiopia when that country's dictator, Mengitsu, is overthrown. Around the same time, the Nasir faction of SPLA splits off; a second rebel faction forms in 1992, followed by a third in 1993. Eventually, the dissident rebel factions unite in a coalition called SPLA-United.
- 1992: The UNHCR Kakuma Refugee Camp begins accepting Sudanese refugees.

- 1993: A peace initiative for Sudan is pursued by Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya, under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), but has little effect. Conflicts in Sudan continue to worsen.
- 1998: After embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the United States launches a missile attack on a pharmaceutical factory outside Khartoum, believing that it is producing chemical weapons for terrorist groups.
- 1999: Almost 4,000 Sudanese refugee boys are approved for resettlement to the United States.
- 2001: Famine affects three million Sudanese.
- September 2001: former U.S. Senator John Danforth is designated Presidential Envoy for Peace in the Sudan. Valentino is approved to resettle in Atlanta.
- 2002: The U.S. government accuses Sudan of genocide. A ceasefire is established under the guidance of IGAD.
- February 2003: The Darfur conflict begins.
- January 9, 2005: Peace is finally brokered between southern rebels and the government. The Nairobi Comprehensive Peace Agreement is signed, granting autonomy to the south for a six-year trial period, after which the south will vote to secede if they wish. The agreement calls for a permanent ceasefire and sharing of oil revenues. Islamic law remains in effect in the north, while its use in the south is decided regionally.
- August 1, 2005: John Garang dies in a helicopter crash three weeks after being sworn in as co-president of the south. Riots result, but peace continues.

In 2011, southern Sudan is scheduled to vote on permanent secession from the north. But as Valentino says: “Whether the National Islamic Front or Omar al-Bashir actually allows this to occur remains to be seen.” Pressure from the United States and the international community on Khartoum will help — for more information on what you personally can do, please see the list of Ten Things You Can Do for Sudan included in this packet.

Southern Sudan awaits their historic opportunity for peace and autonomy, after a twenty-year conflict that purportedly killed two million people. Meanwhile, in Darfur, the number of dead and displaced continues to grow, as the conflict rages on with no clear end in sight.

THE SOUTHERN SUDAN QUESTION

"Your fate, all of our fates, were sealed fifty years ago by a small group of people from England."

—Dut Majok to Valentino and William K

Since the beginning of its colonial intervention, Britain administered southern and northern Sudan as separate regions. The predominantly Arab and Muslim north was seen as similar to Arabic-speaking Egypt, while the predominantly black and Christian or Animist south was compared to other regions of east Africa. In 1930, the Southern Policy was officially instituted by the Civil Secretary in Khartoum. The Southern Policy assumed that southern Sudan would never be fused with the north, that it would likely be linked to countries in British East Africa (the colonies which became Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania) rather than to northern Sudan and the Middle East.

In practice, the Southern Policy was labeled "Native Administration." Islamic law and codes like sharia were only used in the north. Indigenous laws and customs were preserved in the south, under the authority of local chiefs (supervised by the British). Islamic customs were actually discouraged, in order to uphold tribal culture.

The Closed District Ordinance, established in the mid-1920s, forbid most movement across the border between northern and southern Sudan. It was designed to help abolish the slave trade, and to curb the spread of Islam into non-Islamic districts.

In the mid-1940s, Britain suddenly decided to abandon their colonial interests in Sudan, and the Southern Sudan Question emerged. Would the south be included in a new independent Sudan? In *What Is the What*, Dut lectures Valentino and William K on this subject. He quotes a British document which is actually a secret Khartoum Dispatch from 1945:

The approved policy of the Government is to act upon the fact that the people of the southern Sudan are distinctly African and Negroid, and that our obvious duty to them is therefore to push ahead as far as we can with their economic development on African and Negroid lines, and not upon Middle-Eastern Arab lines of progress which are suitable for the northern Sudan. It is only by economic and educational development that these people can be equipped to stand up for themselves in the future, whether their lot be eventually cast with the northern Sudan or with eastern Africa, or partly with each.

In December 1946, however, the Civil Secretary officially reversed the Southern Policy. In response to political pressure by the Islamic-fundamentalist government in Khartoum, the statement was changed to read:

The peoples of the Southern Sudan are distinctively African and Negroid, but geography and economics combine (so far as can be foreseen at the present time) to render them inextricably bound for future development to the Middle-Eastern and Arabised Northern Sudan.

After many years of relative autonomy, southern Sudan was fused with the north. Strong tensions surfaced between the two regions when Britain announced plans to grant independence to Sudan. The south feared domination by the politically powerful north. In 1955, mutinies erupted in Torit and other southern towns, and the Anyanya rebel army formed. When Sudan was granted independence on January 1, 1956, the new nation quickly became embroiled in civil war.

Britain's failure to ensure southern Sudan's autonomy on the eve of independence sowed the seeds for conflict. It was certainly not the only contributing factor, but the decades of civil war, and the atrocities that occurred in villages like Marial Bai during the 1980s can in many ways be seen as consequences of their response to the Southern Sudan Question.

MELISSA BLOCK INTERVIEWING VALENTINO ACHAK DENG
AND DAVE EGGERS

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, NPR, NOVEMBER 1, 2006

Audio of this interview is available at www.npr.org.

MELISSA BLOCK: They're called the Lost Boys of Sudan: tens of thousands of children who fled the civil war of the 1980s when Arab militias attacked their villages. They walked on a terrifying journey towards safety — hundreds of miles — and many children died from starvation, disease, and further attacks. Those who survived made it to refugee camps in Ethiopia. One of those children was Valentino Achak Deng. When his village was burned he couldn't find his parents. He was about six years old.

VALENTINO ACHAK DENG: Early on, when I left, I thought the journey would end in two weeks. And two weeks was a month, and one month was another month, and I grew tired. I thought about my family, and the fear grew. I would spend the night not knowing whether the sun would rise tomorrow. And when the sun rose, I got confused.

MB: Valentino is twenty-five now. He's a student at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, and his story is the basis of a novel, written by Dave Eggers. It's a blend of fact and imagination called *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*. Deng and Eggers came by our studio to talk about their collaboration, and about the many traumas the Lost Boys of Sudan endured.

VAD: We found people who had been eaten by wild animals. We find hands, we find heads and legs, something that I could not comprehend. I remember one of the elders pulling me and showing me a dead person, and he said: "You must have hope, you must have faith that you will go through this. If you don't have that hope, if you lose that faith, you will be like this person." And then, from there, I said "I don't want to die. Somehow, I must do something to keep on going always."

MB: Dave Eggers, when you write of this march of these Lost Boys, there's a point at which hope is disappearing fast. And I wonder if you could read one of these sections for us.

DAVE EGGERS: "In the group there were many boys who became strange. One boy would not sleep, at night or during the day. He refused to sleep for many days, because he wanted always to see what was coming, to see any threats that might befall us. Eventually he was left in a village, in the care of a woman who held him in her lap, and within minutes he was asleep. There was another boy who dragged a stick behind him, making a line in the dirt so he would know his way home. He did this for two days until one of the older boys took his stick and broke it over his head."

MB: Dave, when you were writing that, was that drawn from stories you had heard from Valentino? This is an autobiography, but it's also a novel. How did that collaboration work?

DE: We set out to write a purely nonfictional book, but it was really restricting. For one thing, Valentino was very young when this all began, six or seven years old, and there were big gaps of what he could remember of a given day, or a given period. So, to fill in some of these things, and some of the days or periods — a time like that, that's based on my imagining, and other reports, and maybe a human-rights report or another Lost Boy's account. A mixture of things. Then I would call Valentino and say, "Well, does this sound about right?" The freedom to be able to do that enabled the book to get finished.

MB: Valentino, does that passage ring true to you? Are those things that you remember?

VAD: It does. It resonates with the event that took place. This was a journey that involved children, and many of us couldn't bear with the situation. And many of those who couldn't bear with the situation, they didn't make it.

MB: There are descriptions in the book of several of the boys who you became very close to — one of whom was from your village — of them dying, and your watching them die.

VAD: This was a friend of mine, and his name was Deng. He was very smart. As we got closer to Ethiopia, he started complaining a lot about his mother, and his brothers and sisters, and one day he stopped eating. One night we went to bed and when we woke up in the morning Deng wasn't alive, but I didn't know that Deng was dead. I tried to wake him up and he was stiff. And what was so unusual too, and horrific, was that we could not bury him, because we had to leave. There was news that certain groups were going to attack us. So Deng was moved into the bush and, as a tradition, we all were asked to drop leaves on him. We had to get leaves off the trees and place them on him and left him there.

MB: There's a stunning moment in this book where, Dave, as you write what Valentino's thinking, it's that he could easily imagine that he had only been born in these tall grasses on this walk, knowing nothing but fear, never having a notion of what it would be like to go to bed and feel safe.

DE: Yeah, I think that was based pretty closely on a conversation that we had, because as a kid, they would become accustomed to it. They're malleable in that way, for better or for worse, and they can adjust to the most horrific contexts. And I know that for Valentino at a certain point it became harder and harder to imagine, "Now who was I before this? Was there a time when I slept in the same bed every day? And I would sit in my mother's lap, or eat food that was cooked by her, and play?" And it was that limbo point where you didn't know if it would ever happen again, or if it would just be walking for the rest of his life. After a while, that seemed just as plausible as going back. It was the way that they were living.

MB: Valentino, how many years did you spend in the refugee camps?

VAD: I spent eleven years

MB: And you came to this country in 2001?

VAD: Yeah.

MB: A lot of the book is told from your perspective, here, in the United States, and there's a fair amount of disillusionment. Things don't happen as quickly as you had thought they would. There was this expectation of great promise, and great fulfillment, and that didn't necessarily work out the way you had thought it would.

VAD: It didn't. We didn't think that life could be challenging. So when we came here, it was a cultural shock.

DE: Right when we met, I expected that Valentino would be in college within six months. Why not, you know? He's brilliant, and why wouldn't any college want him immediately? It slowly dawned on us that they required x amount of things — his transcript from Kakuma refugee camp was not acceptable for college admission, and he needed community-college credits, and had to prove himself there, and on and on. And now five years later, Valentino just started college this fall. That was quite a lot of struggle, and dedication, and work on his part, but it was not easy — and he's in the minority of

these thousands of Lost Boys that were resettled. So the promise has been dimmed a little bit for a lot of them, in terms of what their expectations were. Not that their lives are uniformly bleak, they certainly aren't; but there's definitely a gap between some of their expectations and what ended up being.

In December of 2003, Valentino returned to Marial Bai to look for his family, accompanied by Dave Eggers. To the best of their knowledge, it was the first time a Lost Boy living in America returned to Sudan. In a series of articles entitled "It Was Just Boys Walking" and published in The Believer during spring of 2004, Eggers recounted the story of their journey. We've included an excerpt of "It Was Just Boys Walking" in this packet. The following is a bit of Melissa Block's conversation with Valentino and Dave about their return to Africa.

VAD: A moment before we landed, Dave asked me, "Is there anything you remember?" And I say, "It doesn't look like my home." We landed, and my parents were there, my mom, my dad, and my siblings — I have many siblings — and the neighbors. And they were calling my name. My dad was there, looking at me, not saying anything, and my mom was there, but I couldn't identify who among the people was my mom or my dad. They had aged so quickly, and I understand why that had happened. And I came back not the same little boy they knew — I was somebody taller than them.

MB: Well, they hadn't seen you since you were six years old.

VAD: They hadn't seen me for sixteen years. And I was completely taken aback by the view of the area, and the people, and I immediately figured out that I haven't suffered as much as these people who have faced the atrocities for the last sixteen years. So at some point people would say hello to me and I would say hi and I could only smile and hardly say anything. It was dramatic.

MB: What was it like for you to be there, Dave?

DE: It was incredible, because this was at a really interesting time, too. It was shortly after the Darfur conflict began, and it began in a somewhat similar way as the conflict in southern Sudan, with a rebel group attacking an army base and stealing arms, and protesting the government's treatment of the region. Their indifference to the region, and their lack of representation in the government. As a result, the Khartoum government came down with everything they had on the region, and tried to punish all the people who had tacitly supported all these rebels.

So, the same thing had happened in Marial Bai. But what was amazing to me was the fact that, to this day, we see news reports and photos of Darfur and they're almost uniformly the same: they're very bleak, black-and-white pictures. You see only desert, you see a few figures in the distance, or maybe a corpse off to the side, or whatever it is. And we think, "Well, this is such a desolate land to begin with, why are people there? What is it? What was lost in the first place?" We don't see the life that was there. And so seeing Marial Bai, which, when we went there, was a bustling village. And it wasn't what it was when Valentino was growing up there, and it wasn't what it is now—it's been rebuilt, and it's getting better every day. But at that time, we met thousands of people over the course of our time there. We went to church, and there was a bustling marketplace, and we went to a movie night, where we watched a strange *Road Warrior* knockoff... with a hundred people in their movie house.

You notice at that point what's lost, what life was like there beforehand. It's very similar to as it would have been in Darfur. So, I think this is necessary. More people should know how complete life is there, and how it's not so different in terms of what the people there want, and the pleasures of life that they enjoy. All of that is lost when we allow the janjaweed, and these militias, and the government to go unchecked for years and years.

An excerpt of Eggers's Believer article is included at the end of this packet.

December 24, 2006

The Lost Boy

by Francine Prose

WHAT IS THE WHAT *The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel. By Dave Eggers. 475 pp. McSweeney's. \$26.*

When I'm asked about the differences between fiction and nonfiction, I often find myself attempting to answer this simultaneously impossible and obvious question by rattling on about "Huckleberry Finn." One distinction is that a masterpiece like Twain's can make us feel exactly what it was like to live at another time, in another culture; it's easier for the novel than for even the most incisive biography or historical study to make the reader experience the subject from the inside. The liberties and devices of fiction (dialogue, voice, characterization and so forth) enable the writer to take us into the mind and heart of a person not unlike ourselves who talks to us from a distant period and place, and so becomes our guide to its sights and sounds, its sorrows and satisfactions. One reason "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" remains so affecting and so profoundly threatening is that Huck shows us what it meant to grow up in a slave-holding society and learn to navigate its pathologies. Huck compels us to believe him, which means that we are obliged once again to acknowledge that we live in a country in which ordinary citizens actually bought and sold human beings like Jim.

Dave Eggers's "What Is the What" is, like "Huckleberry Finn," a picaresque novel of adolescence. But the injustices, horrors and follies that Huck encounters on his raft trip down the Mississippi would have seemed like glimpses of heaven to Eggers's hero, whose odyssey from his village in the southern Sudan to temporary shelter in Ethiopia to a vast refugee camp in Kenya and finally to Atlanta is a nightmare of chaos and carnage punctuated by periods of relative peace lasting just long enough for him to catch his breath.

The novel's subtitle, "The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng," refers to a real-life Sudanese refugee who informs us in a brief preface that "over the course of many years, I told my story orally to the author. He then concocted this novel, approximating my voice and using the basic events of my life as the foundation." We readers are the fortunate beneficiaries of this collaboration. Eggers's generous spirit and seemingly inexhaustible energy — some of the qualities that made his memoir, "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius," so popular — transform Valentino and the people he met on his journey into characters in a book with the imaginative sweep, the scope and, above all, the emotional power of an epic.

Intense, straightforward, lit by lightning flashes of humor, wisdom and charm, Valentino's story — novel, autobiography, whatever — is an account of what it was like to be one of the Lost Boys of Sudan. Ah, the Lost Boys of Sudan, we say. How sad. The phrase has instant name recognition for many Americans who, I suspect, might then need to pause to retrieve the details (if such a retrieval ever occurs) of how and why those boys got lost in the first place. In fact their diaspora began during the second Sudanese civil war, which lasted from 1983 to 2005 and displaced tens of thousand of children. Driven from their ruined villages, they wandered through a war zone to resettlement camps and, for the lucky ones, to safety. After having read "What Is the What," you no longer need to hesitate and wonder. You know precisely who the boys were because you have experienced their mass migration and the mass murder that occasioned it through the eyes, and in the compelling voice, of Valentino Achak Deng. By the time the members of Eggers's large and youthful fan base have repeatedly consulted the book's map of East Africa, tracing the Lost Boys' wanderings, they will be able to visualize the geographical positions of Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya with a clarity surpassing their possibly hazy recall of anything they might have memorized for a World Civilization class.

The book opens in Atlanta, where Valentino works at a health club and attends a community college — and where, in the first chapter, his apartment is broken into by thugs, thus confirming his

growing awareness that violence is not an exclusively East African problem. Bound and gagged, held captive by a boy not much older than he was when his peregrinations began, he recalls his tranquil childhood among the Dinka tribe in the village of Marial Bal. There his most serious quandary involved the question of when to remove the plastic wrapping from a new bicycle, and there too his father, who owned a shop, used to tell the story that gives the novel its title. After God created men and women, according to local legend, he gave them cattle, the source of “milk and meat and prosperity of every kind.” But God offered mankind a choice: “You can either have these cattle, as my gift to you, or you can have the What.”

The pacific Dinka wisely chose the cow. But others picked, and continue to seek, the mysterious, unnamable, destructive and possibly unattainable What. Soon the consequences of that mythic decision come crashing down on the unfortunate Dinka. Rebel soldiers arrive at the village and, while stealing sugar from the shop, severely beat our young hero’s father. Marial Bal becomes a battleground, fought over by government and rebel armies; the village is strafed by army helicopters, invaded, burned, occupied. And Achak (who will take the name Valentino only later in his tale) narrowly escapes: “I ran. But I was too loud. When I ran through the grass I seemed to be begging the world to notice me, to devour me. I tried to make my feet lighter but I could not see where I was placing them. It was black everywhere, there was no moon that night, and I had to run with my hands rigid in front of me.”

The lyricism, the detail and, most important, the absolute specificity of these sentences are what make “What Is the What” so persuasive. It’s a real high-wire act, yet Eggers manages to maintain this level of intensity throughout the book as Achak and the other Lost Boys encounter minefields and massacres, loneliness and fear, starvation, disease, predatory wild animals, the seemingly endless varieties of cruelty, the sustenance of fellowship and the surprising manifestations of instinctive human kindness. What’s remarkable is that, given its harrowing subject matter, the book isn’t simply horrifying or depressing. The considerable appeal of Valentino’s personality and the force of Eggers’s talent turn this eyewitness account of a terrible tragedy into a paradoxically pleasurable experience. As with any book we enjoy and admire, we keep turning the pages to find out if everything will turn out all right in the end. And just as in life — I don’t think I’m giving away any suspense-ruining plot points here — things do work out for some characters, if not, alas, for others.

Throughout, the narrative is sufficiently elastic to shift back and forth from present to past and sufficiently capacious to include a love story, a coming-of-age novel and Valentino’s unfailingly engaging musings on human nature, love and death, as well as the meaning of the eponymous and ominous “What.” There is also a good deal of African history, often ingeniously framed as dialogue or as a story shared by one of the boys, yet another effective deployment of fictional technique — in this case, to make us painlessly absorb a hefty dose of (in several senses of the word) hard information.

I suppose some merciless pruning could have reduced “What Is the What” by a few ounces, but by the time you reach its stunning and beautiful conclusion, you can’t help feeling that the resonant power of its last lines derives at least in part from the cumulative weight of every word that has gone before.

“Whatever I do,” Valentino assures us, “however I find a way to live, I will tell these stories... I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there.... I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words. I will fill today, tomorrow, every day until I am taken back to God. I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don’t want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run. All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist.”

Reading “What Is the What” does indeed make it impossible to pretend that Valentino Achak Deng and the other Lost Boys and all the men and women and children who have suffered, and continue to suffer, fates like his do not exist. Dave Eggers has made the outlines of the tragedy in East Africa — so vague to so many Americans — not only sharp and clear but indelible. An eloquent testimony to the power of storytelling, “What Is the What” is an extraordinary work of witness, and of art.