



They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky The true story of three Lost Boys from Sudan

Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, Benjamin Ajak with Judy A. Bernstein

“In this tender and lyrical story, the world of some of Africa's most desperate children is vividly evoked. The result is one of the most riveting stories ever told of African childhoods -- and a stirring tale of courage.” **Emily Wax, Washington Post**

Introduction:

Benjamin, Alepho and Benson were raised among the Dinka tribe of Southern Sudan. Their world was an insulated, close-knit community of grass-roofed cottages, cattle herders, and tribal councils. All that changed the night the government-armed Murahiliin began attacking their villages. Amid the chaos, screams, conflagration, and gunfire, five-year-old Benjamin and seven-year-old Benson fled into the dark night. Two years later, Alepho, age seven, was forced to do the same.

Their journey would take them over one thousand miles across a war-ravaged country, through landmine-sown paths, crocodile-infested waters, and grotesque extremes of hunger, thirst, and disease.

In *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky*, Alepho, Benson, and Benjamin, by turn, recount their experiences along this unthinkable journey. They vividly recall the family, friends, and tribal world they left far behind them and their desperate efforts to keep track of one another. Their memoir is a powerful portrait of war as seen through the eyes of children and a tribute to the tenacity of even the youngest human spirits.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What do Judy Bernstein (who introduces the book) and her son find most striking about Benson, Alepho, and Benjamin when they arrive in San Diego? What would be your own reaction if you were meeting the boys during their first few days in America? Would you find it frustrating? Exciting? What advice would you give the boys' for adapting to American society?
- 2) What did you find most troubling about the boys' experiences? Which moments struck you as particularly emotionally moving? Why?
- 3) How do the voices of Benson, Alepho, and Benjamin differ? How are they similar? Do they have distinguishing characteristics? Was there a writer who you felt most connected to?

- 4) Benson asserts that hunger “makes you like a wild animal.” While enduring years of starvation, how do the boys maintain their humanity? If you were involved in a similarly desperate situation, what would you do to preserve your compassion?
- 5) Why was education so important to the boys—especially to Benson? How does the boys’ desire to learn compare to young people in America who you know?
- 6) Benson and Alepho have heard some outlandish rumors about America. What were they, and what perhaps inspired their formation? Are there countries or cultures that we make similarly misinformed judgments about today?
- 7) What are the boys’ attitudes toward women? Compare their perceptions of African women to our perceptions of American women.
- 8) During their journeys, Benson, Alepho, and Benjamin each meet many people—some fellow refugees and some not. Which of these secondary characters have the most influence on the writers’ stories? Which leave the strongest impressions on you?
- 9) How do you think the boys’ age and lack of guardians affected their travels? Was it always to their detriment? How might their experiences have been different had the boys been older?
- 10) How do the refugees help each other despite living in confining environments of absolute poverty? How do they manage to assert some control over their own lives?
- 11) Why do you think there so few “Lost Girls”?
- 12) The efforts of aid groups like the UN are sometimes a mixed blessing to the refugees. Why is this? What do you think could be done so that their influence would be wholly helpful?

Recommended Reading:

Scroggins, Deborah. *Emma’s War* Pantheon Books 2002

Nazer, Mende and Lewis, Damien. *Slave: My True Story* Public Affairs 2003

Deng, Francis Mading. *The Dinka of Sudan* Waveland Press, Inc. 1972

Bok, Francis with Edward Tivnan. *Escape from Slavery* St. Martin’s Press 2003

Jok, Madut Jok. *War and Slavery in Sudan* University of Pennsylvania Press 2001

Bixler, Mark *The Lost Boys of Sudan* University of Georgia Press 2005

Eggers, Dave *What is the What* McSweeney’s Press 2007

Related Websites:

www.PassionofthePresent.org Sudan: Passion of the Present

www.GenocideInterventionFund.org Genocide Intervention Fund

www.SaveDarfur.org Save Darfur

www.TheIRC.org The International Rescue Committee

www.CrisisGroup.org International Crisis Group

www.hrw.org Human Rights Watch