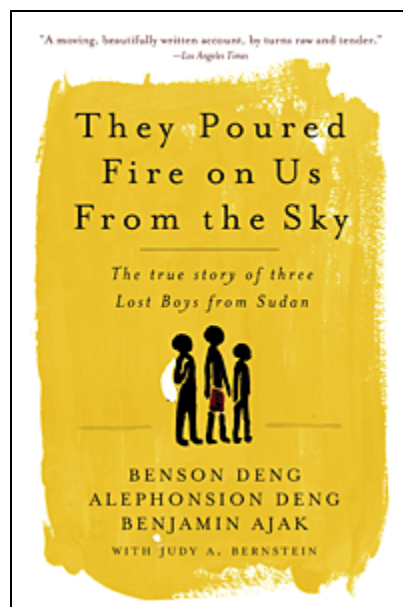


“[I] read *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* and I have to say it was probably one of the best books I’ve read in a very long time. I believe that it would be an amazing piece of literature to add to any high school curriculum. Because the book was written by young people, I think that high school students would appreciate its content and tend to listen to the message more readily.”

—Mamie Lish, Teacher, Roxana Junior High School, Roxana, IL

“I am using *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky* in my war unit, for a child's perspective of war. It’s a great example of what war does to innocent people. The book is wonderful.”—Jayshree McKechnie, Von Steuben Metropolitan Science High School, Chicago, IL

“This is an incredible book/memoir.”—Ruth Johnson, Beechwood High School, Ft. Mitchell, KY



TEACHER’S GUIDE

THEY POURED FIRE ON US FROM THE SKY

The true story of three Lost Boys from Sudan

Written by Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, and Benjamin Ajak with Judy A. Bernstein

About the Book

Benjamin, Alepho, and Benson were raised among the Dinka tribe of Sudan. Theirs was an insulated, close-knit world of grass-roofed cottages, cattle herders, and tribal councils. The lions and pythons that prowled beyond the village fences were the greatest threat they knew.

All that changed the night the government-armed Murahiliin began attacking their villages. Amid the chaos, screams, conflagration, and gunfire, five-year-old Benson and seven-year-old Benjamin fled into the dark night. Two years later, Alepho, age seven, was forced to do the same. Between 1987 and 1989, thousands of other young Sudanese boys did likewise, joining this stream of child refugees that became known as the Lost Boys. 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. The refugee camps they eventually filtered through offered little respite from the brutality they were fleeing.

In *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky*, Benson, Alepho, and Benjamin, by turn, recount their experiences along this unthinkable journey. This is a captivating memoir of Sudan and a powerful portrait of war as seen through the eyes of children. And it is, in the end, an inspiring and unforgettable tale of three young boys who, cast against all elements, had the will, the tenacity, and the very good luck to survive.

TEACHING AND READING GUIDE

In the Classroom

This disarmingly intimate memoir delves beyond headlines to bring readers deep into the heart of the Sudanese conflict – and into the flight of three children determined to escape it. It deciphers Sudan’s struggle from the inside. Who is fighting it? Why? Who are the victims? How did these boys survive without food, without family, for so long?

At the same time, the journey of Benson, Alepho, and Benjamin over these many years and these thousand miles reveals how small minds comprehend and process the violence of war. Their story also begs the question: Can and should the international community intervene? What can be done?

Pre-Reading Activity

Have students bring in recent news articles and clippings regarding developments in Sudan. Try to piece together the conflict from these accounts and clippings. Discuss the history of Sudan’s war. How do the students feel about the conflict? What do they think it is like to grow up during wartime? You may also invite them to bring in articles regarding intervention or immigration. Do they think intervention important? How do they feel about refugees, like the Lost Boys, seeking asylum in this country?

USING THIS GUIDE

To the Teacher:

Reading and Understanding the Story examines the reader’s comprehension and retention of the book itself, and of the war as Benson, Alepho, and Benjamin relate it. Students should refer to the narrative to answer these questions. **Themes and Context** encourages students to use the book as a lens into larger ideas, events, and issues. These questions encourage students to think freely and independently on the war in Sudan and the broader moral and political debates

stemming from it. **Teaching Ideas** offers course-specific projects, essays, and discussion questions for classes: English/Language Arts, Geography, History, Science, and Social Studies.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE STORY

Definitions

Ask students to define the following terms with reference to the book: Dinka; SPLA; refugee; jihad; genocide; Murahiliin; UNHCR.

Comprehension

Look at a map of Africa. Locate Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Kenya. Identify the Nile River. Find Sudan's capital city, Khartoum. Try to locate Bhar al Ghazal (the region where the Dinka live).

Before this phase of the Sudanese war, a treaty had brokered peace between northern and southern Sudan. What was the name of this treaty? (See Judy Bernstein's introduction.)

Describe the landscape in which the authors grew up. What was their village life like?

Benson recalls first learning of the war around village fires. What does he learn from the tribe elders?

For much of his journey, Benson wears red shorts. Where did he get these? They are almost ruined one night. What happens to them? Why does he treasure these shorts so much?

Along their journey, Benson, Benjamin, and Alepho meet many kind family and friends. Who is Monyde? Who is Yier? Why are they important in this story?

Despite their clear desperation and young age, time and again the boys find villages turning them away, denying them food, and directing them back into enemy hands. Why do the villages do this?

Yier recalls the government storming Wau Wau University. "We were led to the dorms and questioned: Do you know the leader of the rebels, _____?" What was the name of this leader?

As the refugee camp takes shape at Panyido, the UN begins sending food relief. What do they send? How does this diet differ from the usual Dinka diet? What are some of its mis-intended consequences? (see p. 92)

Benson writes "I have many bad memories that I will never erase from my brain" but of these, the flight from Panyido stands out. Why were the Sudanese forced to leave Panyido (Ethiopia)? The refugees had only one means back into Sudan. What was it? What were the perils of this flight?

Who was Mr. Hyena? Why did the refugees call him that?

Name two positive aspects of Kakuma life for the Lost Boys. Name two negative aspects of it.

At Kakuma, refugees receive food in the form of grain rations. Though the rations are small, many still end up selling some portion of these at the market. Why do they do this? What are the consequences when the camp learns of this underground grain market?

The journey through the refugee camps and finally, to America introduces the Lost Boys to a new language (words like “dessert” and “because”), a new culture, and many new things. Recall two episodes where the authors encounter new objects or concepts. Describe their initial reaction in each instance.

BROADER THEMES AND QUESTIONS

FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIP. Robert E. Lee once said “What a cruel thing is war...to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbors.” After reading this book, do you think this is always the case? How does war impact families? How does it shape friendships? What qualities does it bring out in people throughout the story?

RITES AND INITIATIONS. “My mother wore the radiating scarification mark on her forehead as a sign of her bravery” remembers Benson. Rites and initiations are important aspects of the Dinka culture. Explain two different cultural initiations common to the Dinka. What is the role of such rites in a culture? Do you know of any such rites, initiations, and/or identifying marks in your own family or culture?

GROWING UP. Though torn from their homes and their families, the Lost Boys were still very much children. From their early childhood in the village to their adolescence in the refugee camps, we watch them grow up in this story. Can you relate to any of their experiences growing up? What about the games they play? How do they view and interact with the opposite sex? How do their views of education relate to your own? How do their perceptions of adults and authority figures change through the story?

THE “OTHER”. Benson’s father attempts to describe the enemy to his children. He explains: “The government troops are Arabs and call themselves Muslims. The Arabs wear a long white dress with a large handkerchief tied on their ears...They speak a strange language that we cannot understand.” But when he continues he says: “You must beware. Some of the Muslims are traitors from Dinka tribes; they speak the way we do.” Imagine Benson’s confusion. Are friends and allies easily distinguished in war? Consider how we try to describe and define people “other” than our peers and ourselves. Do physical traits define who we are and who we are not? Link this idea to recent other conflicts and wars: Rwanda; Vietnam; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

LIFE AS A REFUGEE. Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya is the light at the end of a long and dark journey for the Lost Boys. They risk everything and endure unspeakable pain, hunger and thirst, just to enter the camp. Yet the camp presents them with its own menaces and challenges. After several years in the camp Benson decides he hates it than “more than anyplace.” What makes him say is this? How do the Kenyans and the camp administrators treat the refugees? What is life like as a refugee?

SPIN. Joseph Goebbels, the Propaganda Minister in Nazi Germany, once declared: “We have made the Reich by propaganda.” Throughout *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*, we see government and rebel forces alike manipulating facts and media to their own ends. Consider the role of propaganda in the book. How and why do you think leaders use propaganda? What is its purpose? What is its impact? Have you ever heard of or encountered propaganda in your own media? What about in the government?

GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURE. When the Sudanese government institutes Sharia law over all of Sudan, the Dinka tribes grow angry. Benson recalls the village elders complaining: “We have too much to do with our cattle, our plantations and hunting....” What is Sharia Law? What are some of the reasons the southerners resist it? What role do you think physical and geographic constraints play in determining the ideals and traditions of a community?

TEACHING IDEAS

English/Language Arts

Ask students if they know of any immigrants, in their family or community, who came to the US from another country? Have them interview these individuals about their journey and present that person’s story to the class. Allow students to decide the medium for their presentation. For example, they can create a video-audio montage, enact it before the class, or rewrite that person’s story as a first-person narrative.

Immigration and interventionism make major news headlines these days. Have students select one of these issues and research both sides of the debate. Then have them select a position, write a position statement on the issue, and then team up to “debate” the issue in class.

Have students create a Kakuma Camp newspaper. Possible sections could include: Arts and Leisure, Sports, International News, Op-Eds, Marketplace (which could include articles on food rations or the state of trading in the Kenyan marketplace).

Geography

Make a map of Sudan. Have students chart out the major cities, rivers, mountains, and deserts. Have them demarcate the northern/southern divide and indicate the primary religion, resources, and activities of each region.

“Piecing together Africa”. As the boys recall the landscapes they cross in their journey, they reveal Africa to be a land of rich and varied terrain – far more so than American students sometimes think. Create a large outline map of Africa. Cut out the countries and divide these among the students. After researching their country(s), students should report back with their cutout clearly indicating the major physical and geographic traits of that area. Now reassemble the map (preferably on a large surface). Have the students examine the reassembled map and try to understand the great geographic differences and divides of this continent.

The southern tribes resist Sharia Law because, in part, as farmers and cattle-herders: “We don’t have time to pray five times a day.” Have students research Islamic countries and report back on the major geographic features of these countries. What are the major resources, commodities, and products of these nations? Does physical geography correlate to cultural geography? Ask them what role they think geography played in shaping traits of their own communities.

History

Colonization, violence, and civil war represent only a part of Sudan’s history. Create a Sudanese cultural timeline around the classroom. Assign students to specific periods in Sudanese history and ask them to research major events and cultural elements in that era. Have them create posters

and/or dioramas replete with images and any objects they might find that illuminate their portion of the Sudanese timeline.

History is always being created, and sometimes revised, by its sources. In August of 2005, John Garang died in a plane crash in Sudan. Have students locate accounts of this plane crash. Be sure they consult a variety of news media publications: left, right, American, British, African, Sudanese. Have them read the different accounts out loud to the class. Do these vary at all in facts or in tone? Discuss the importance of noting, and cross-referencing, sources in historical research.

Science

“We were all heads and hipbones.” Along the journey, the boys describe unimaginable hunger, such that they become like “stoneheads” teetering along. Investigate the impact of hunger on the human body. What are the caloric needs of the body? How does hunger impact body functions? How does it affect mental capacity? Have students consider their own diets and create caloric scales. Balance their daily intake of calories versus those the boys received (through their rations) at Kakuma.

Have students identify the major illnesses and diseases that appear in this story (e.g. dehydration, snake bite, yellow fever, dysentery). Have them create a medical chart of these diseases. What are the causes? What are the symptoms? What is the treatment?

Social Studies

The UN is a large and complex organization. Have the students research and create an organizational chart of the UN system. How is it organized? How is it governed? How is funded? Where do groups like the UNHRC fit in this scheme? How are such subsidiary bodies programs administered, funded, and maintained?

Have students read the UN Convention on the Crime of Genocide. What organizations report on instances of genocide today? Find examples of such reports in recent times. Distribute a template to the students and have them complete a rights report on one of these recent crises.

Though governments, and economists, dislike them, underground economies can be necessities – at least to the producers and consumers within them. Why do the Kakuma refugees sell some of their precious rations? Why does the UN consider this wrong? Have students consider the case of Kakuma trading and set up a mock trial/debate that argues the social and economic consequences of such markets within aid-dependent economies.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND READING

Websites

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/su.html>

CIA Factbook: Sudan

<http://www.state.gov/p/af/ci/su/>

USA State Department: Sudan

www.unhcr.org	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
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

Films and Video

POV – Lost Boys of Sudan <http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2004/lostboysofsudan/> (2004)

The New Americans <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans/> (2003)

Hotel Rwanda (2005)

Books

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Basic Books 2002

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

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

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

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

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

Scroggins, Deborah. *Emma's War: An aid worker, a warlord, radical Islam and the politics of oil – A true story of love and death in Sudan* Pantheon Books 2002