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War Child: A Child Soldier's Story



Synopsis

In the mid-1980s, Emmanuel Jal was a seven year old Sudanese boy, living in a small village with his parents, aunts, uncles, and siblings. But as Sudan's civil war moved closer with the Islamic government seizing tribal lands for water, oil, and other resources Jal's family moved again and again, seeking peace. Then, on 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, and fought through two separate civil wars over nearly a decade. But, remarkably, Jal survived, and his life began to change when he was adopted by a British aid worker. He began the journey that would lead him to change his name and to music: recording and releasing his own album, which produced the number one hip-hop single in Kenya, and from there went on to perform with Moby, Bono, Peter Gabriel, and other international music stars. Shocking, inspiring, and finally hopeful, War Child is a memoir by a unique young man, who is determined to tell his story and in so doing bring peace to his homeland.

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Customer Reviews

There are few first person accounts from Sudanese refugees and none that I know of from former 'lost boy' who actually served in the SPLA. This frightening, honest, gritty, and often unsettling account of the events that shaped Jal's life is well worth reading. It is one of those books where the substance is so critically important that it overshadows any shortcomings in the writing. War Child is the autobiography of Emmanuel Jal and details his journey from Sudanese refugee to international

rapper. From the outset, we know the beginning and the end of the story as it is outlined in the first chapter. Jal's story begins as he is forced to flee with his family from village to village in order to escape civil war. At age 7 he is told that he is to go to school so that he can be part of Sudan's future. But given a turn of events he is 'educated' by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and becomes a child soldier. Eventually, he becomes a 'Lost Boy' adoptee of British aide worker, Emma McCune which leads him on a path to spiritual and emotional healing. The book leads up to the present day where he is a popular Christian rapper and social advocate for change in the Sudan. But this book is not an easy read. And it is not for the faint of heart. It deals with a young boy growing up in a brutal and unforgiving environment. He speaks of all the atrocities that occurred (and continue to occur) in Sudan. This includes the brutalities of war, cold blooded killing, rape, starvation, and death. Jal's survival is as much due to luck as it is due to his intelligence and his skill. Jal writes in short, punctuated chapters. The sparse prose may reflect the fact that English is his third language but also suits the subject matter well.

You may have heard of Emmanuel Jal before this. He is, after all, an international rapper. A famous person. So you may be surprised to find that he was also a boy soldier; a boy abandoned by his father; a boy whose one emotion for a very long time was hatred. Emmanuel was born in the Sudan to a father who is of the Nuer tribe and a mother who is half Nuer and half Dinka. He's not sure exactly when he was born but he thinks it was around 1980. He also says that for the first three years of his life there was peace in that troubled land. A peace he does not remember. This tribal identification is a very important part of the book. Sometimes, Emmanuel calls his people "pure Africans" and their enemies "African Arabs"; sometimes he talks of tribe; sometimes of religion (his people were Christian)). But, of course, you probably guessed that already. The Sudanese war (a war about race, tribe, religion and, most of all, oil) has been raging for years. Emmanuel's book then is one of those rare books that tells us what this heart-wrenching conflict is like on the ground. What a little boy sees. One of the first things he sees are Arabs beating his mother and uncle and stealing the family's meager rations. He remembers being taken from one village to the next, always with the promise that this (this next) village will be safer. (It never is; it is bombings, shootings, fire and rape--over and over and over again.) Finally his father leads an SPLA movement to get the boys to Ethiopia where there is no war; where there is food. The boys board a ship that sinks. Still, somehow, forty of the boys survive. Their parents come looking for them. But Emmanuel's father does not come. He is an SPLA big shot; he does not care about his son except as cannon fodder.

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