

BOOK REVIEW: A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier

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In today's global society, human rights are becoming a much more important issue to people all over the world. From genocide in developing nations to gay rights in the United States, people everywhere are fighting against human rights violations of all magnitudes. All too often, however, we fail to see what is really going on when these violations happen. In *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, former child soldier Ishmael Beah attempts to describe the atrocities he experienced and show how truly terrible some of these violations can be. This example is particularly disturbing because it involves children. The point of view Beah offers is one of true horror, and he does a marvelous job of examining the civil war in Sierra Leone from his own perspective. The words themselves are easy to read and comprehend, but the message being conveyed is both haunting and disturbing. Human rights violations run rampant throughout, but this powerful work provides honest and eye-opening accounts from a unique first-hand perspective.

Beah's story begins when he was born in Mogbwemo, Sierra Leone. This town was one that, for a while at least, avoided the terrors of the civil war between the Sierra Leone government and revolutionary rebels. As the war began to spread, however, Beah and members of his community started to see the effects of the war. When Beah was only 12 years old, fighting reached Mogbwemo. This forced him and several of his friends to run away. After continuing to run away from the rebels, the boys were eventually pulled into the fight by the government. From there they participated in acts of

war while only children. This is the reason Beah wrote this memoir, and the resulting pages can lead to a great sense of disbelief.

The memoir begins through a bit of an anecdote, with a reflective Beah telling us his friends often ask about his past. We then begin to learn the Beah was actually a member of the child army used by Sierra Leone's government. This is what makes the book so interesting and difficult; understanding that everything you read is a direct account of an event that actually occurred only makes the story more haunting. The stories are told from Beah's perspective today, which means he is able to give a more mature account of what happened. Now living in the United States, Beah is thousands of miles away of where he once served as a child soldier. However, even he admits that the stories continue to bother him today. These haunting accounts give readers a small glimpse of what Beah experienced, but also give an incredible first-hand perspective of the life of a child soldier. Many stories involving the killing of others are shared and Beah eventually explains how he got out of the war. This book is not for the faint of heart, but it does an unbelievable job of portraying the terror that people face when civil war strikes and the true horrors those fighting can experience.

While never outlined specifically as human rights violations, there are a number of rights issues discussed throughout the book. There are two overarching issues that need to be addressed in order to understand the human rights that are being violated. First, a civil war that pits rebels against government forces often results in the unjustified killing of civilians. In the case of Sierra Leone, a lack of government involvement at the beginning of the conflict meant that civilians were not given adequate protection and lost the rights to life, human security, and other bare minimum protections. Second, rights issues also occur when the government *does* get involved. Often, government forces wage war in the same irresponsible ways; in essence, they are just doing the exact same thing the rebels are. While force is obviously necessary in order to stop the violent rebels from killing more people, mercilessly killing rebel fighters goes over the line and violates the rights of enemy combatants. Even though the

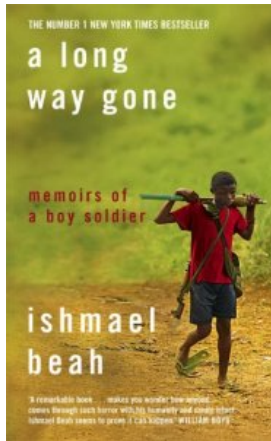
rebels harmed civilians, they still had the right to life and freedom from torture, for example. It's easy to say that this doesn't apply to the rebels due to their destructive nature, but we must remember that human rights are inalienable. The argument could also be made that the government was simply trying to stop the rebels from killing more people. However, there were multiple occasions when Beah describes particularly horrid and relentless killing of the rebels. The absolute largest problem with the government intervention, however, was their use of children to fight against the rebels – children like Beah and his friends.

While human rights apply to people of all ages, the fact that the war in Sierra Leone involved the rights violations of children is particularly troubling. War is the absolute worst thing you could make a child participate in. The innocence and respectable childhood they could have had is destroyed, which often leads to emotional problems later on in life; Beah even admits this early on in the book. The in-depth accounts of events that unfolded while Beah "served" as a child soldier show that he wants people to know the atrocities that he encountered and committed. These are not limited to just the murders the children committed, however; later in the book, Beah describes life after the children were "freed" from the army. This is where the effects of the war can be seen; since they were all children, they were incredibly impressionable. Even after the war was over, they continued to act very violently towards each other and the people trying to help them. Seeing first-hand the destruction of the children's innocence is sickening.

While it would have been easy to make a film that shared the same information, Beah decided to write down his experiences. Perhaps most interesting is the way in which Beah presented the stories and allowed the readers to visualize what was going on. The problem, though, is that almost no one could possibly imagine how horrific his experiences truly were. The accounts given are thorough, which is a testament to Beah's ability to convey his ideas. The book reads very easily, with the exception that the subject matter can be difficult to swallow. Perhaps that was intentional. Being easy to read gives the

reader the ability to focus more of their attention of the issues at hand, rather than trying to understand what's actually happening. It can be easy to get lost in the fact that all of this did actually happen; once you remember that this actually happened, it only becomes more horrifying. Ultimately, the writing is outstanding and haunting, which allows Beah to get his strong message across. On top of that, it's a new perspective that most people in the Western world have never been able to see. So often we hear about civil wars going on in other countries, but reading a true account of events is certainly eye-opening. This is why this book has become so popular; it's powerful and important, and it gives readers something they've never seen before.

Every personal account that Beah gives seems to illustrate one human rights violation or another. The awareness created by the book seems to be what has made it so popular, which in essence is shining light on a human rights issue. Allowing the readers such an interesting perspective gives them a much better understanding of why these people were doing the things they were doing. This understanding can help prevent conflicts similar to this from happening again, but can also help the international community intervene and subdue conflicts that are happening currently. This knowledge is an incredibly valuable tool in today's human rights fight, which is the reason this book is relevant in human rights advocacy and protection. However, Beah does not attempt to offer any perspective on what can be done to solve the problem. Perhaps, though, that was the point of Beah's story; many times we are bombarded with horror stories and then given a sales pitch from an organization trying to help the problem. The pure portrayal of events gives readers a much more resonant message, which is ultimately the goal of the book. For readers looking to open their eyes with the atrocities happening around the world, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, is a must-read that will leave you heartbroken and longing for justice.



Book Information

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Ishmael Beah (2008)

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