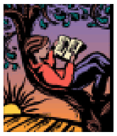

*NoveList* Book Discussion Guide
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*What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*
by
Dave Eggers
(San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006)

**Author:**
Born in 1971, Dave Eggers first drew the critics' attention with *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), a hyper-self-conscious memoir in which he recounts the loss of both parents to cancer in his senior year of college and his subsequent attempts to play surrogate parent to his eight-year-old brother Christopher (or Toph), while also founding (in 1994) and editing *Might*, a magazine for hip, disaffected middle-class twenty-somethings. The memoir was soon followed by a novel, entitled *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002). Dedicated to his sister Beth, who committed suicide in 2001, it is the story of two friends mourning the death of a third who decide to use a windfall of cash — $80,000 — to finance a week-long trip around the world and then simply to give the rest away. In 2004, Eggers published a collection of short stories, *How We Are Hungry*, and in 2006, a second novel, *What Is the What*, both of which are notably lacking in the almost obsessive self-referentialism that raised questions about authorial sincerity in the earlier work. In addition to writing, Eggers is also active as editor of *McSweeney's* (full name, *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*), a literary magazine and website that he founded in 1998.

In the past few years, Eggers seems to have outgrown the ironic post-postmodern stance that characterized his earlier work. Eggers has always been known to thumb his nose at the commercial publishing establishment. His second work, *Velocity*, for instance, was self-published, the first book to be published by McSweeney's Books, a publishing company that Eggers founded. He has also spoken disparagingly about stints with such periodicals as *Esquire* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Increasingly, however, critics note a greater seriousness in both the author and his characters. In *A Heartbreaking Work*, the earnest idealism of young political activists such as the founders of Teach for America or Lead or Leave is held up for ridicule. In the later works, this cynicism is more or less explicitly criticized. Moreover, Eggers has not just written or talked about making a difference, he has also acted. In 2002, with the proceeds from his first work, he founded 826 Valencia, a literacy tutoring and creative writing center in the Mission, a working-class Hispanic neighborhood in San Francisco. In recognition of this work — the project now boasts centers in seven cities — Eggers recently received the $250,000 Heinz Award.

Such engagement has prompted some critics to reconsider earlier reviews comparing Eggers's work (especially *Velocity*) to that of the Beats, such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. At least one critic has argued that such comparisons are based on serious misapprehensions. In an essay entitled "The Write Stuff: From Cult to Culture, Dave Eggers and Co. Are Taking Their Idealism to the Streets" in the February 2003 issue of American Prospect, for instance, Lorraine Adams suggests that Eggers's work should be compared, instead, to that of the Transcendentalists: "Today, the Beats are associated with revolutionary politics. But the Beats never wrote about racial segregation or the second-class status of women. Today, the Transcendentalists (who *did* write about abolishing slavery and women's rights) have been drained of their engagement, becoming in the popular imagination little more than nature lovers extolling the beauty of Walden Pond and renouncing society." For the loyal readers of his work and his magazine, Adams suggests, Eggers has managed to make social activism the height of hip and cool.

**Summary:**

In Atlanta, in the year 2006, Valentino Achak Deng, a twenty-eight-year-old Sudanese refugee, opens the door to his apartment to a woman claiming car troubles. Using this pretext, she and her partner force themselves into Valentino's apartment, beat him, and rob him. His friend, Achor Achor, returns home to find Valentino on the floor, bound and gagged. A call to the police draws the attention of a lone police officer, who seems largely uninterested in pursuing the investigation. A visit to the emergency room for treatment to his injuries proves equally unfruitful, as they are made to wait for hours for even the slightest attention.

Throughout the entire ordeal, Valentino tries to reach out to the people around him. First, out loud. Then, silently. Silently, he tells them, and thus tells us, his story:

In the 1980s, Valentino, called "Achak," grows up in Marial Bai, a village in the Bahr al-Ghazal region, in the northern part of southern Sudan. Although the village has no electricity, no running water, no paved roads, Achak is a happy child. His father, a prosperous businessman, with a general store in Marial Bai and a second shop in a neighboring village, has six wives and many children. Achak grows up in the midst of a warm and loving extended family. And there has been peace in the region, since the end of the civil war fought by his father's generation.

Slowly, this peace falls apart. First, the return of a villager who lost his hand for stealing in Khartoum announces the imposition of sharia in the north. Then, when Achak is six, soldiers from the rebel army, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), seize supplies from Achak's father's store. When his father protests, they beat him and threaten to kill him. Next, government soldiers come and punish any who are suspected of sympathizing with the rebels. Finally, the murahaleen, government-armed militia, sweep through on horses, setting fire to the villages, killing the men, and abducting the women and children. During one such raid, when Achak is about ten years old, maybe a little younger, his mother tells him that he must run, run without looking back. And so he does.

Eventually, Achak joins up with a group of boys being led to Ethiopia by a young man named Dut Majok, Marial Bai's schoolteacher. But Ethiopia is on Sudan's eastern border, while Marial Bai is near the western border. The boys must cross the width of the country, barely clothed, often going without food or water for days, sleeping in the open, hunted by wild animals in the night, bombed and shot at by government and militia forces during the day. After months of seeing others die, and barely managing to survive himself, Valentino arrives with his group in Ethiopia, where they are joined by tens of thousands of other Sudanese refugees.

At Pinyudo, a camp is eventually established with the assistance of the United Nations and other aid organizations. Amid difficult conditions — the native Anyuak resent them, the camp is run in militant fashion by the SPLA, and the boys are assigned exhausting and sometimes life-endangering physical tasks — Achak enjoys a semblance of normal life. He begins school, becomes friends with Achor Achor, and receives the attention of the Royal Girls, the enchanting nieces of his schoolmaster. This three-year "idyll" comes to an abrupt end, however, with the overthrow of Ethiopian President Mengistu. One day, the refugees are sent fleeing under gunfire back across the border, back into Sudan.

Once in Sudan, the refugees head south to Kenya and endure another terrible journey. At Kakuma, the semi-permanent refugee city set up by aid organizations in a barren region in northern Kenya, Achak finds a measure of safety and stability. There, he (now at times called "Dominic," at others "Valentino") grows from a boy to a young man. He joins the family of a man from his village; he has a surrogate father, mother, sisters, and brothers. He goes to school; he becomes a camp youth leader; he has a girlfriend, Tabitha Duany Aker; he even has a paying job, as aid to Noriyaki Takamura, the head of a Japanese non-profit group for youth. And, finally, after ten years, he seizes the chance offered to the Lost Boys to resettle in the United States.

Once he arrives in the United States, Valentino is befriended by many: Mary Williams, the founder of the Lost Boys Foundation; Anne, Gerald, and Allison Newton, who come to him after he speaks at their Episcopal church; Phil Mays, his sponsor, who helps him buy a car, find a job, and begin classes at a community college; Bobby Newmyer, a Hollywood film producer, with whose family Valentino stays for a summer. Yet, while he is grateful for their assistance, he is also frustrated by his circumstances. He has a job, but it barely covers his living expenses and the cost of tuition. He has applied to colleges, but he receives only evasive replies from the admissions officers. And although he is reunited with Tabitha, who has been attending college in Seattle, he is subsequently devastated by her death at the hands of her unhinged former lover. In his telling, Valentino seeks to come to terms with all that he has experienced.

## Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

### What is the significance of the title?

The title clearly refers to the Dinka folk tale, a tale of creation, that Achak's father relates to his Arab guests after dinner on market day. According to the tale, God first created the Dinka, or as they call themselves, the monyjang. After creating the first man and woman, he gave them a choice: They could have the creature called a cow or they could have the What. When the first man asked God to identify "the What," God replied that the choice must be made without knowing (p. 62). The man chose the cow.

After he relates the tale, Achak's father offers an interpretation of it. He explains, "God was testing the man. He was testing the man, to see if he could appreciate what he had been given, if he could take pleasure in the bounty before him, rather than trade it for the unknown" (p. 63). And, according to Achak's father, "God has proven that this was the correct decision" (p. 63). The What, then, clearly symbolizes the unknown. More importantly, the unknown is given a negative valuation. This remains true for most of the novel. It is true, for instance, of a slightly different version, which Achak's father chooses not to share with his Arab guests. In this version, Achak explains, "God had given the What to the Arabs, and this was why the Arabs were inferior" (p. 63). Eventually, the What, or the unknown, comes to be associated not with the Arabs, but with the Dinka. But it retains its negative associations. This can be seen in the following exchange: Dut explains, "Khartoum wants to ruin Dinkaland, to make it uninhabitable. Then we'll need them to restore order, we'll need them for everything." Achak concludes, "So that is the What" (p. 126). Again, the What symbolizes the unknown (specifically, here, the loss of the familiar), but more importantly a position of inferiority.

Toward the end of the novel, however, while the symbolism does not change, the associations do. First, there is the radio conversation between Valentino and his father. In his first conversation with his parents since fleeing Marial Bai, he tells his father that he thinks he should return now that he is old enough and he knows that they are alive. His father forbids it, telling him to go to the United States with these words: "Yes, the What. Right. Get it. This is it. Go" (p. 456). Here, the unknown is presented as something desirable. Soon thereafter, this new valuation of the unknown is repeated. As Valentino waits in Goal, outside Nairobi, for the flight that will take him to the United States, he speaks words of encouragement to the other anxious Sudanese: "I told them that the mistakes of the Dinka before us were errors of timidity, of choosing what was before us over what might be. Our people, I said, had been punished for centuries for our errors, but now we were being given a chance to rectify all that" (p. 471). In this passage, we get a complete resignifying, an inversion almost of his father's earlier interpretation of the folk tale. In earlier versions, the What was the mark of inferiority; to be dissatisfied with what one had was a sign of failure. Now, the What is the mark of superiority; to embrace the unknown is to reject complacency, stagnation, and ultimately obsolescence.

**Why does Valentino consider telling his story, or story telling in general, to be so important?**

People are constantly telling stories in the novel, folk tales, personal histories, national histories, and so on. In part, this is because the novel reflects a mostly oral culture and a world without regular media outlets and transmissions, where sharing stories is simply the best and only means of communicating information.

More importantly, to tell one's story is to refuse to be silenced, to assert one's existence and one's self-worth. To tell one's story to another forces that other to acknowledge one as a being with a history, who has loved and hated, known joy and suffering, a creature like the other. Thus, Valentino often finds himself relating his story, even if only silently and to himself, to precisely those who would treat him as less than themselves, as less than human, such as Michael, the boy left to guard Valentino overnight. To Michael, Valentino is an object without voice, or vermin whose voice can be squashed. When Valentino tries to speak to Michael, the boy is "disbelieving, as if he noticed the couch itself talking" (p. 51). Finally, the boy drops a phone book on his head. Valentino observes, painfully, "This boy thinks I am not of his species, that I am some other kind of creature, one that can be crushed under the weight of a phone book" (p. 52).

Storytelling is important not only for the teller, but also for the listener. At Pinyudo, Father Matong explains why he chose to baptize Achak with the name "Valentino." Saint Valentino prayed with a blind prison-keeper's daughter and the next day she could see. Father Matong concludes, "I think you will have the power to make people see. . . . I think you will remember what it was like to be here, you will see the lessons here. And someday you will find your own jailer's daughter, and to her you will bring light" (p. 260). Thus, Valentino is telling stories to make his listeners see. For his listeners, to come to see Valentino's humanity is to have their eyes opened to the much larger world around them, a world filled with people just like themselves. There is another way in which the listener gains from listening. This aspect is brought up in the last pages:

Whatever I do, however I find a way to live, I will tell these stories. I have spoken to every person I have encountered these last difficult days . . . because to do anything else would be something less than human. . . . How blessed are we to have each other? I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words. . . . How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist. (pp. 474-475)

To tell stories is not only to ask for recognition from one's listeners, it is also to grant recognition to them. After all, one would not talk but to other humans, others like oneself. In other words, telling and listening are acts of mutual acknowledgment.

**What does the story say about Sudanese national and cultural identity in particular and about national and cultural identity in general?**

The novel raises questions about the meaning of being Sudanese, and in so doing it also manages — intentionally or not — to raise questions about the meaning of the very ideas of national and cultural identity. On one hand, there is no question that Valentino is Sudanese, and that he identifies himself as such. When Tabitha proposes that they steal away from the refugee camp and make their lives in Nairobi, for instance, he refuses, saying, "I'll always be Sudanese" (p. 413). At such moments, he seems to have no doubts that he is Sudanese and none about what that means. At other moments, however, he admits to confusion. He confesses, for instance, "I pretend I know who I am now but I simply don't. I'm not an American and it seems difficult now to call myself Sudanese" (p. 449).

In part, Valentino has a hard time deciding whether or not he is Sudanese because it is hard to say exactly what it means to be Sudanese. After all, national identity is usually tied to a piece of land, but the displaced refugees have not set foot in Sudan for many, many years. And the land they do inhabit, Kakuma — which Valentino tell us means "nowhere" in Kenyan (p. 334) — is described as "a kind of vacuum created in the absence of any nation" (p. 397). One might argue that it is possible to maintain cultural identity without land, so long as a group of people continue to uphold certain beliefs and practices, such as the diasporic Jews did for so long before the founding of the nation-state of Israel. Yet, as a result of the civil war, the numbers of those who call themselves Sudanese have been radically reduced and their ability to continue in their customary beliefs and practices diminished. Yes, the remnants of the group try to maintain past practices, with such events as Refugee Day at Kakuma, where each ethnic group displayed their traditional food and arts (p. 393). But, slowly, those practices are being discarded or transformed. At one point, for instance, Achak defies his tribe's traditional reverence for the elephant. "I didn't care anymore what my ancestors would think. We were the Red Army and needed to eat" (p. 143). Even further-reaching changes take place at Kakuma: "Sudanese customs were bent and broken at Kakuma with more frequency than they would have been had there been no war, had eighty thousand people not been in a refugee camp run by a progressive-minded international consortium" (p. 392). What does it mean, then, to be Sudanese when that idea itself is undergoing rapid change?

In a way, the questions Valentino asks himself about national and cultural identity are ones that many others struggle with in the early twenty-first century. Most people have not been displaced by war; rather, they have chosen to migrate in search for jobs, education, or simply pleasure. But, like the refugees, they find that older ideas of national and cultural identity are proving more and more difficult to maintain in the face of the constant movement of peoples from one corner of the globe to another.

## In what ways can the novel be read as a coming-of-age story?

Most obviously, the novel deserves this description because it relates Achak's growth. On his journey across the deserts and the wilds of Sudan from one place of refuge to another, the child becomes a man. He begins the journey as a boy of less than ten years. When he finally leaves Kakuma, he is around twenty-three years old. He grows from a bewildered child to a reasonably well-educated young man, who has responsibility for other children.

There is another way of seeing this as a coming-of-age story. It has to do with Valentino's relationship to aid organizations. After all, in many ways, the aid recipient, regardless of age, is put in a position of a child, dependent upon the aid organization for the fulfillment of almost all needs. Valentino recognizes this dependence and it makes him uncomfortable: "Do you think it was lost on us that the Kenyans and every international body that monitors or provides for the displaced, customarily places its refugees in the least desirable regions on earth. There we become utterly dependent — unable to grow our own food, to tend our own livestock, to live in any sustainable way" (p. 404). Thus, one might argue that Valentino has not truly come of age until he has freed himself of this dependence.

This independence is not easily achieved. In some ways, the refugees resemble traumatized children in their relations to their aid donors. Like such children, the refugees alternate between being overly demanding on one hand and asking for too little on the other. During the drama group's trip to Nairobi, Valentino dares to think of asking his hosts, Mike and Grace, to take him in, to sponsor him. At the same time, he knows he is asking too much. "If my mother knew I was even contemplating imposing on someone in such a way, she would be so ashamed" (p. 415). Similarly, Valentino thinks at first to visit the Newtons and recover with them from the ordeal of being beaten and robbed. He stops himself down the street from their house. "This is the refugee way — not knowing the limits of our hosts' generosity. I am going to knock on their door at nearly five in the morning? I have lost my head" (p. 319). The refugees' low self-esteem is often reflected in their questions about those who would help them. "It was a question I asked often, and the other Sudanese often asked it, too: what is wrong with these people that they want to spend so much time helping us?" (p. 150). He asks this of Mary Williams, the founder of the Lost Boys Foundation, as well as of Noriyaki, who is head of the Wakachiai Project (a Japanese nonprofit) and who becomes his good friend.

By the end of the novel, Valentino resolves to break out of this cycle, one moment asking too much of others, the next expecting too little. He seems to come to this resolution as he serves his shift at the front desk of the health club: "The truth is that I do not like hanging in there. I was born, I believe, to do more. . . . I have a low opinion of this expression, Hang in there" (p. 448). For him, the expression "hang in there" represents the refugee mindset, being grateful merely to survive on handouts from one day to the next. Valentino resolves to expect more for and from himself, to think himself both worthy and capable of higher achievements.

## How does the novel portray women?

At first glance, the novel is overwhelmingly positive in its portrayal of women. Achak's life is full of strong, intelligent, loving, and well-loved women. There is, for instance, his mother, his father's first wife, an extremely competent midwife, who dresses in bold colors. He tells us, "She is taller than most women, at least six feet, and though she is as thin as any woman in the village, she is as strong as any man" (p. 38). There are also the Royal Nieces of Pinyudo, the girl Maria (who keeps an almost-blind Achak walking the last torturous miles to Kakuma), and Tabitha, girls and women of strength, beauty, and intelligence. It is clear that Achak has much respect, even a certain degree of reverence, for these women.

At the same time, Valentino describes the inequities in village and camp life between boys and girls, men and women in a matter-of-fact fashion, as things that either cannot or should not be changed. He tells us, for instance, that most girls were not allowed to attend classes at the camps. "Every year they were removed from school in order to work at home and prepare themselves to be married off." And that camp life was mostly miserable for the girls: "it was not a good life for a girl at Kakuma. Girls were worked to the bone, were raped if they left the camp looking for firewood" (p. 106). Interestingly, the rape of these girls draws little of the outrage that we hear when he describes the rape of the Dinka boys enslaved by the murahaleen. "Boys tended livestock and were often raped, too. This, I have to tell you, is one of the gravest offenses of the Arabs. . . . Sodomy, particularly the forced sodomy upon innocent boys, has fueled the war as much as any other crime committed by the murahaleen" (pp. 130-131). The absence of anger over the abuse of enslaved girls in Arab households, or the supposedly free girls in the refugee camps, would appear to signal the inferior place of women in Sudanese society.

And should the women attempt to change their status, as a number have attempted in the United States, Valentino's narration would seem to suggest that the women invite their own destruction. After telling us about Tabitha's death at the hands of her enraged former lover, he tells us of another tragedy. A Sudanese woman visited her family against her husband's wishes. Upon her return, he killed her, their daughter, and then himself. Valentino is stunned. "In Sudan, it is unheard of for a young man to kill a woman" (p. 329). He blames the United States, or at least the strains of living here. "The pressures of life here have changed us. Things are being lost" (p. 329). But it is not clear what exactly is being lost, nor why such a loss should be mourned. He does tell us, "in traditional Sudanese society, the husband does not need a reason why; held over the woman's head is the possibility of a beating, perhaps months of beatings" (p. 329). Are these arbitrary and abusive practices, then, part of the "things . . . being lost"? He tries to draw a line between what happens to women in Sudan and what has happened to them in the United States. "In southern Sudan, too many men abuse their wives; wives are beaten, wives are abandoned. But never this sort of thing" (p. 330). What the narrator fails to acknowledge, however, is that the two are of a piece. In both cases, the men feel similarly entitled; they demand submission from women. Valentino even goes so far as to raise the possibility that women are to blame: "Some say it is the fault of the women here, the clash of their new ideas and the old habits of men unwilling to adapt" (p. 330). Curiously, he never dismisses this possibility. He does not, for instance, argue that it is the fault of the men. Instead, he simply starts to talk about the Sudanese way of confirming that brides are virgins. Thus, while there is respect for women, individually, there is no or very little questioning of the social rules that keep them subordinate to men.

**In what ways does the book challenge the notion of racial identity?**

While the notion of race has come into some disrepute, especially after geneticists have shown that it has little biological basis, many still continue to see it as a useful cultural classification. The novel would seem to suggest that it has only limited, if any, usefulness, even as a cultural classification. It does so by showing the divisions and differences among those who just happen to share the color of their skin. First, the novel shows us there is no love lost between African and American blacks. While Mary Williams is black, as are the Newtons, the reception Valentino receives from most blacks in the United States is fairly hostile. Powder calls Valentino "brother," but Powder is also in the process of robbing him and beating him (p. 11). The Sudanese are often the victims of crimes committed by poor American blacks, and subject to their taunts. Valentino tells of one encounter, with a young man who accused him, or at least Valentino's ancestors, of enslaving other Africans, "you're one those Africans who sold us out," and then told him to go back to Africa (p. 23). Neither do black Africans embrace African-Americans. Valentino tells of African prejudices against African-Americans: "We watch American films and we come to this country assuming that African-Americans are drug dealers and bank robbers" (p. 23). Second, Valentino highlights the divisions within Dinka society itself. At one point on the trek to Ethiopia, soldiers escorting "important people" (mostly families of SPLA officers and others) drive Achak's group from a deserted village where they had taken refuge for the night. As he runs, he realizes that "there were castes within the displaced. And we occupied the lowest rung on the ladder. We were utterly dispensible [sic] to all — to the government, to the murahaleen, to the rebels, to the better-situated refugees" (p. 205). He also names other divisions, such as "the petty prejudices between clans, between regions" (p. 281). Third, and perhaps most surprising, he tells us that in appearance the northern and southern Sudanese are equally dark-skinned. "Have you seen the president of Sudan, Omar el-Bashir? His skin is almost as dark as mine. But he and his Islamicist predecessors look down on the Dinka and Nuer" (p. 131). The Arabs who hunt down and enslave the Dinka are just as "black" as their victims. What good, then, is skin color, in distinguishing one group of people from another?

**In what ways is the novel an exploration of religious faith?**

The novel foregrounds a question that confronts any religious group professing belief in a God who is not only all-powerful and all-knowing, but also good and just. Namely, why is there seemingly indiscriminate suffering? Why do good things happen to bad people? Why do some suffer horribly, while others are spared? Valentino is Catholic, baptized as a young boy, converted to the faith by his aunt and uncle, and thus these questions haunt him.

One way to answer the question is to deny that the suffering is indiscriminate. Those who suffer somehow deserve it. This is how Achak tries to make sense of why some boys survived while others did not. "Perhaps [the dead boys] had eaten the wrong leaves. Perhaps they were lazy. Perhaps they were not as strong as me, not as fast. It was possible that it was not random, that God was taking the weak from the group. Perhaps only the strongest were meant to make it to Ethiopia" (p. 182). But if those boys somehow deserved their deaths, then he has also somehow deserved his own losses, not the loss of his life, but the loss of many loved ones. "I am inclined to think that I have done so much wrong, for otherwise I would not have been punished so many times, and He would not have seen fit to harm so many of those I love" (p. 284).

At other times, Achak resorts to a prospective instead of a retrospective explanation for his sufferings. His suffering is not punishment for past sins, but rather a trial to see if he deserves future rewards. This is how he makes sense of his good fortune in being befriended by the Royal Nieces of Pinyudo, Agar, Akon, Agum, and Yar Akech: "Why should I be so fortunate? It seemed, then, that God had had a plan. God had separated me from my home and family and had sent me to this wretched place, but now there seemed to be a reason for it all. There was suffering, I thought, and then there was light. . . . God was good and God was just" (p. 271). Such attempts to make sense of essentially senseless, random, acts of violence make it possible for the victims to think it within their power to stop the suffering, to change the course of events.

But in the end, such attempts do not withstand close scrutiny. Neither at ten nor at twenty years of age does Valentino seem to have committed any "sin" worthy of the terrible experiences he has endured. And since all the Lost Boys have suffered, why should only he enjoy the favor of the Royal Girls? In the end, Valentino himself admits to the futility of his attempts to make sense of things. He resolves, "I will not guess His motivations" (p. 331). Insofar as he finds an answer, of sorts, he does so in the words of Mother Teresa: "Suffering, if it is accepted together, borne together, is joy" (p. 322). It is neither the identification of past sins nor the anticipation of future rewards that makes suffering bearable, but rather the comfort and the strength to be drawn from the company of others.

### What is the effect of the novel's narrative structure?

Valentino's story is broken up into three strands, the first dealing with his journey from Marial Bai to Kakuma, the second with this first five to six years in the United States, and the third and last with the robbery and day after. Yet, these stories are told more or less concurrently, interwoven together. We move back and forth between far past, recent past, and present. The most obvious effect of this narrative structure is to underline the differences between life in east Africa, in Marial Bai and in the refugee camps, and that in the United States. On one hand, there is the technological gap. In Marial Bai, water is drawn from the river; in Kakuma, there is no or very little electricity. In the United States, no one waits in line for hours to draw water, and a life without electricity would be simply unimaginable for most. It also highlights the gap in material wealth between the two regions. In Atlanta, like most Americans, Valentino owns a television and a microwave. He even owns a car, a cell phone, and a laptop. In Kakuma, he was happy to own an extra pair of pants. Such comparisons highlight what appears to be the superiority of the United States.

At the same time, there are several striking similarities between Valentino's experiences in east Africa and those he has in the United States. Near the end of the novel, Valentino tells us of one man's angry words as the group waited for their flight to the United States to be rescheduled after the September 11th bombings. The man warns, "It'll be no better! . . . You thought you'd have no problems? Just different problems, stupid boys!" (p. 469). But we do not need this man's words at the end of the novel to tell us that there are problems in America. The entire book up to that point has made it clear. Moreover, while the man warns of "different problems," actually Valentino ends up encountering very similar problems. In both places, he experiences the loss of possessions and the death of loved ones. In both east Africa and the United States, he is made to feel unwanted. In the Pinyudo camp, the refugees face the hostility of the Anyuak river people, who do not want the refugees as "permanent guests." In Kakuma, they experience the same from the Turkana, who resent having suddenly to share the desert region they have wandered for centuries alone. In the United States, the Sudanese refugees are told to go back to Africa by angry young black men. In both places, Valentino encounters indifference. In Sudan, many people in the villages that have not yet been attacked by the murahaleen refuse to aid the wandering groups of Lost Boys. In Atlanta, Valentino's downstairs neighbors do not respond to his cries for help. Neither group sees helping him as their business. Such troubling parallels make it difficult to agree without qualifications to any claims regarding the United States' purported superiority over the developing world.

## Further Reading:

Fiction:
Christopher Abani, *Song for Night* (2007)
In this novel, Nigerian novelist and poet Abani gives us the story of My Luck, a fifteen-year-old minesweeper caught up in an unspecified African conflict. At the age of twelve, when he volunteered for service, his vocal cords were cut so that should he step on a mine, his death screams would not give the rest of the group away. After one explosion, he awakens alone, and as he searches for his platoon, he shares with readers his thoughts and memories, moments of both horror and tenderness.

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958)
Achebe's first novel explores the question of the impact of the outside world upon traditional African society. In *Things Fall Apart*, the agents of change are not murderous soldiers, but rather peaceful Christian missionaries and bureaucratic-minded colonial government officials. Set in Nigeria in the 1890s, the novel gives us the story of Okonkwo, an Igbo (Ibo) leader who is banished for accidentally killing a tribesman. Okonkwo's character and fate symbolize both the strengths and weaknesses of an unquestioning adherence to age-old tribal customs and beliefs when confronted with the forces of modernization.

Sefi Atta, *Everything Good Will Come* (2007)
In her first novel, Nigerian-born Atta gives us the story of a young Yoruba woman, Enitan Taiwo, who grows up in Lagos, Nigeria, in the years after the Biafran War, during which conflict members of the Igbo (Ibo) minority attempted to establish an independent

country in Nigeria's eastern provinces. Gradually, Enitan becomes both more politically active and more willing to challenge traditional expectations about a woman's place. Like Tabitha, Enitan is a strong-willed, intelligent woman having to make her way in a society that expects women to submit to men.

Philip Caputo, *Acts of Faith* (2005)
This novel from Caputo, an award-winning journalist, provides what one might call an outsider's perspective. It suggests possible answers to the question of what would bring aid workers like Noriyaki to serve in a place so far from home. Caputo's novel is set against the background of the civil war in the Sudan, between Arab Muslims and southern Sudanese. It focuses on those who join the conflict from outside, the pilots, aid workers, and missionaries who are drawn in and find their original principles increasingly compromised.

Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (2005)
This novel by Aboulela — raised in Khartoum, she now lives in Dubai and Aberdeen — tells the story of Nawja, a Khartoum university student whose upper-class family is forced into exile after the 1985 military coup and the subsequent execution of her father. In London, Nawja, who finds work as a nanny for a wealthy Arab family, loses her mother to illness and death and her brother to drugs and prison. For strength and solace, she turns to Islam and a stricter observance of traditional Muslim practices. This novel complements Deng's portrayal of south Sudanese society, by showing us the divisions and differences among north Sudanese groups.

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*This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Teresa Younga Chung, who holds a PhD in Literature from Duke University and teaches in the English Department at Harper College.*

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