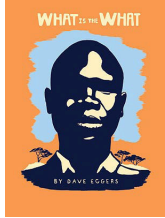


Opportunities to Affect: In Reading Groups

By: Melissa Browning

What Is the What?

Dave Eggers



For Group Reflection and Discussion

What Is the What? is the story of Valentino Achak Deng, a “Lost Boy” from Sudan who survives the civil war and immigrates to America. The book uses terrific detail to describe Deng’s life in refugee camps and then in Atlanta, Georgia, after he migrates to the U.S.

NOTE: The first chapter of this book has particularly bad language as the author attempts to stay true to the subject’s narration of the events. However, this language does not continue throughout the book, so hang in there. The book is worth the read!

The War in Sudan

1. In the book’s preface, written by Valentino Deng, we learn that all of the major events are true as far as he can remember them. And while Valentino’s story feels exceptional, we know that approximately 20,000 Dinka and Nuer boys traveled similar journeys. Why do you think these boys found so little help in the midst of this humanitarian crisis?
2. Do you think the term “Lost Boys” is an appropriate name? Why or why not?
3. The war Valentino talks about was Sudan’s second civil war, which took place between 1983 and 2005 (though conflict still continued in Darfur and other regions after the official end of the war). Do you remember hearing about the war in Sudan as it was happening? If not, why do you think it missed your attention?
4. On July 9, 2011, South Sudan (officially the Republic of South Sudan) finally became an independent state. Looking back on the struggle, do you think Sudanese refugees like Valentino would feel the struggle was worth it? Reflecting on Valentino’s story, how might independence have been achieved through better, more ethical means?
5. When Valentino was working at Kakuma, a man came to see his Japanese colleague, complaining about the Chinese support of Sudan’s government. Valentino says,

“The more we understood how we were connected to so many problems of the world, the more we understood the web of money and power and oil that made our suffering possible” (p. 438). In reflecting on this comment, do you believe our country’s connectedness to the world brings with it a moral obligation to do justice?

The Refugee Journey

1. Valentino begins his journey as a refugee and then learns that many of the boys he was walking with were being recruited to be child soldiers for the SPLA. Has the church given enough attention to child soldiering? What more should be done to prevent children being used as pawns of wars?
2. When the journey became tough, Dut told the boys to create in their mind the “best of days” in order to help themselves sleep (p. 33). What does this teach us about the role of imagination as a tool for survival?
3. Valentino tells the story of the “What”—this mysterious unknown, the thing God gave Arabs that was inferior to the cattle God gave the Dinka. Yet, when Valentino is forced to leave his home, he feels as if he may have been given the “What” rather than the blessing. How do you feel about his frustration toward God (p. 314)? How did you react to his forgiving God for taking so many people he loved (p. 533)?
4. Along the journey, Valentino and Achor Achor find a baby trying to nurse from its mother who had been killed. Even though they are running, they decide to take the “Quiet Baby” with them (pp. 342–44). Do you think it would be hard to have compassion on someone weaker than yourself when you are fighting for your own survival? Why or why not?

Living in the Camps

1. When the boys reach Pinyudo in Ethiopia, Valentino realizes it is no promised land (p. 227). How does he adapt to this absurd place?
2. Valentino holds many jobs in the camp from “burial boy” to working with a nonprofit. How do these jobs shape his view of himself?

3. Kakuma, the final refugee camp in Kenya, is described as a place no one else would want (p. 373). It is an arid place where the local Turkana people compete with refugees for meager resources. Why do you think refugee camps end up in places no one else wants, as Valentino suggests?
4. Valentino suggests that life in the camps was not really living at all (pp. 373ff). Do you agree with him?
5. Valentino notes that Gop (his adopted father) and his family stayed in Kakuma since the U.S. and other countries were not as likely to resettle complete families (p. 517). Do you think this is fair?
6. Even today, nearly 20 years after it was opened, Kakuma still hosts around 70,000 refugees from all over East and Central Africa. Many of these refugees have been there more than a decade with little chance of resettlement or returning home. Do you think this is fair—for refugees to live in such poor conditions, dependent on foreign aid, for such a long period of time (pp. 373–74)?

Resettling in Atlanta

1. When we meet Valentino in this book, we find him in a vulnerable situation, the victim of a robbery. Soon we hear the story of his life and how time after time he and those around him have been victims of bad luck. Why do you think some people experience so much hardship in life while others experience so little?
2. During the robbery, Valentino feels compassion for “Michael TV boy” (chaps. 5–6). How are their situations similar? How does Valentino’s story of suffering remind us of those closer to home who are displaced due to neglect or abuse?
3. While Valentino is tied up, he cries out to his “Christian neighbors,” hoping they will hear him (pp. 139ff). Do you think this is a metaphor for the way Christians are called to respond to suffering in our world?
4. Valentino’s “Christian neighbors” are concerned about certain things, like the slave trade in Sudan, but less concerned with other things, like the story of Valentino’s life (p. 140). Do you think we are more ready to respond with compassion to extreme stories than everyday suffering? Do you think this is why Valentino says the Lost Boys exaggerate when they tell about their journeys?

5. Valentino calls the U.S. a “miserable and glorious place” (p. 351). Do you think refugees ever really feel at home in their adopted country?
6. Throughout the book, Valentino is telling his story to those he meets (p. 29). How can listening to someone’s story be part of being the presence of Christ?

Ministry Connections

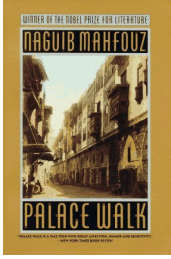
1. Today, refugees from war-torn regions are still placed throughout the U.S. Do refugees live in your community? If so, do you know of ministries that seek to assist them as they resettle?
2. In Uganda, CBF field personnel Jade and Shelah Acker work with refugees from Sudan and other countries, many who fled as boys like Valentino. How does this story help you better understand their work?
3. When Valentino is robbed, he needs help but doesn’t know where to turn. He says, “This is the refugee way—not knowing the limits of our hosts’ generosity” (p. 355). Do you think other refugees feel this way toward churches and individuals who help them resettle?
4. In the final paragraph of the book, Valentino talks again about the importance of telling his story. He tells his listeners: “How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist” (p. 535). Before reading this book, would it have been possible for you to imagine refugees like Valentino did not exist?
5. In reading this story, do you feel better able to assist refugees as they resettle in your community?

Learn More

You can learn more about CBF’s ministry with Sudanese refugees in Uganda by learning about the Ackers’ work. You can view the video, *Ministry Among Former Child Soldiers*, at this link: http://youtu.be/_x23EVa4waA.

Melissa Browning is adjunct instructor in Christian ethics at Lexington Theological Seminary, Lexington, Kentucky.

next month:



In *Palace Walk*, Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz invites readers to follow a Muslim family through their daily life in post-World War I Egypt. The characters come to life through rich and provocative descriptions of their lives.