



**Son of a Gun**

Written by Anne de Graaf  
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*Son of a gun.  
On the run.  
No way it's fun.  
You won't know 'til you're the one.*  
(Lucky, 36)

Told from two points of view in alternating voices, *Son of a Gun* is the story of eight-year-old Lucky and his ten-year-old sister Nopi who are kidnapped to serve as child soldiers in the Liberian civil war. Taken from their school by rebel forces, Lucky, Nopi, and their classmates learn to follow orders through intimidation. After they prove themselves, they earn an AK-47, a weapon light enough for a child to carry.

Soon after their capture, Nopi, in a brave and sisterly act of defending Lucky from evil Sergeant Saint, becomes deaf after being hit in the face and kicked while down on the ground. She earns a reputation for charging into battle—"we do stuff grown-ups are too smart and afraid to try" (p. 15). Nopi's experience of war and soldiering is changed by not hearing loud blasts of gunfire, terrifying screams, or the constant threats from her older peers and adult soldiers who bully and abuse the younger soldiers.

The trauma of war erases many of Lucky's happiest memories of family and home. "I had never seen anyone shot dead like that before. And it rips something right out of your heart to see the life leave a body" (p. 22). Nopi tells Lucky stories to keep up his spirits. She secures the needed gun they use as collateral to join a group of boys who escape and travel back to the capital Monrovia. On that road, Lucky and Nopi hope to find their village and reunite with their family.

Instead, they discover their village has been burned and looted and dead bodies stacked up. They find the strength to go on to Monrovia, locate their grandmother's house, and reunite with their parents. But shortly, they are separated from family again and eventually separated from each other. Nopi ends up the third wife of a colonel in the rebel forces. Eventually, she escapes via boat and joins refugees who are fleeing from several war-torn African countries. Lucky fights on for five years. He discovers his childhood best friend James fighting in the same battle—for the other side. "Yes, I was forced to kill, but I've chosen to stay. The army, this regiment, these other boys, they are my family now. The gun is my god" (p. 82).

In this “kill or be killed” reality, readers see the terrors of war through the eyes of two children whose constant fears for their lives continue long after escaping the grips of their captors or turning in their guns. This brief book is realistically and powerfully written. For readers who have not personally experienced war, it will be shocking to know how war has devastated the childhoods of so many.

Author Anne de Graaf visited Liberia to hear child soldiers’ horrific stories. In her author’s note, de Graaf talks about the “dark places” of childhood—including war, death, divorce, and pain. She questions the wisdom of keeping the dark places out of children’s literature. Instead, she sheds light on these realities and invites readers to consider how we can realize our dreams for peace and justice for the world’s children—our collective future.

The end of the book is devoted to photographs and facts about present-day life in Liberia and information about its political history. Election posters and front page newspaper headlines introduce the section about the fourteen-year civil war in which one quarter of a million people were killed. There is also a section about child soldiers worldwide. One fact that jumped off the page was: “An AK-47 costs the same as one chicken” (p. 112). The author notes that many child soldiers have never gone to school, are not literate, and have no job skills to support themselves after they turn in their guns. *Son of a Gun* concludes on a hopeful note with a letter written by a former child soldier who sees a better future for himself and his country. There are also several pages of drawings by refugee camp children.

Forcing or enticing children into fighting in war is sadly not uncommon throughout history and around the world. During the U.S. Civil War, many children were conscripted and some fought against their brothers and friends as Lucky and James do. *The Boy’s War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk about the Civil War* by Jim Murphy (1990), *When Johnny Went Marching: Young Americans Fight the Civil War* by G. Clifton Wisler (2001), and *Children of the Civil War* by Candice F. Ransom (1998) are three books on the topic of child soldiers in the U.S.

While *Son of a Gun* may be shared with middle school students, both of the following titles about African child soldiers may be most appropriate for high school or adult readers. *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah (2007) is the author’s first-hand experience (ages 12 – 16) of fighting with the rebel and government armies in his native Sierra Leone. Beah’s memoir shows how an innocent child can become a ruthless killer and details the horrific acts he committed. The book ends with his rescue and with how the support he received from United Nations peacekeepers showed him a way out. Today, Beah is an advocate for peace. Similarly, Jal Emmanuel spent almost ten years of his childhood as a soldier in the Christian Sudanese Liberation Army. His memoir, *War Child: A Child Soldier’s Story* (2009), is equally shocking and also ends on a hopeful note with Emmanuel’s rescue and activism for nonviolence through music. He has become a best-selling hip-hop artist in Kenya.

Anne de Graaf currently lives in Ireland and the Netherlands. She travels often to Africa and posts to a blog “International-Intrigue-Injustice” where she continues to share her thoughts and concerns for the struggles of African children.

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