



War Brothers

Written by Sharon E. McKay
Penguin Group, 2008, 241 pp.
ISBN: 978-0670067848

Your friend will die no matter what you do. He is injured. He is of no use. You will lose an arm and he will die, or you will not lose an arm and he will die. Here, we are fair. Here, we allow you to decide your own fate. (p.95)

This contemporary realistic fiction tells the story of three Ugandan boys' enforced journey of entering and

escaping the world of child soldiers in the guerrilla group, LRA (Lord's Resistance Army). The story starts and ends with notes from the protagonist, Jacob, to readers. In the first opening letter, Jacob briefly and as matter-of-factly introduces himself. He was born in Gulu, a city of 110,000 people in north of Uganda and he is from the Acholi tribe. After his seemingly universal personal introduction, the information of the guerrilla group, LRA, is noted. "Kony, the leader of an army of abducted children. He and his LRA gang of rebels steal boys and girls from rural farms, villages, schools, and buses" (p. xii). Soon the letter makes a confession that he was one of those abducted children who became "a child soldier in Kony army" (p. xiii), emphasizing the trueness of the stories he is about to tell.

The two main boy protagonists, Jacob and Oteka, are destined to be mates through different encounters with chance and eventually they reunite as child soldiers at the LRA camp. Oteka is an orphan who lost his parents to AIDS and became a family with an old woman, Adaa, who also lost her family through the LRA. Adaa dies and Oteka takes off on a journey after a medicine man conducts a spiritual ceremony for him. Oteka receives a cue, "Kony", for what he is to do from the departed spirit of his mother. In contrast, Jacob is from a wealthy father. His high socio-economic status is represented through his big house, servants, guesthouse, and education. Jacob starts his school dormitory life at the privileged school, George Jones Seminary for Boys, excited to be with his good friends, Tony and Paul. Tony is to be a Catholic priest and recipient of many of scholarships. Paul is a city boy from a capital city, Kampala and has traveled to the U.S. due to his father's job.

One night, LRA invades the school and abducts boys even though Jacob's father, for the safety for his son and the school, hired more guards. The majority of boys at school are abducted and placed under other LRA soldiers' surveillance. Jacob finds out that many of those soldiers are children and some are even younger than Jacob. Oteka and Jacob reunite after their accidental encounter in Gulu. The main method of controlling child soldiers that the Kony army employs is the manipulation of their fear of being killed or to

a victim of atrocity. Minimal food and water supplies also amplify their suffering and pain. They witness cruel atrocity and are often asked to be the torturing tool. If not, they fail to save their own lives or normal body form. The future priest, Tony is forced to kill one of his mates from school and gradually loses his mind and personality as he suffers from trauma.

“You go first.” The commander motioned toward Tony. Not Tony. Tony who wants to be a priest. Dear God, help us in our hour of need... Tears ran down Jacob’s cheeks. He closed his eyes. “Why do you close your eyes? You look away again you will be punished by death.” Lizard, standing in front of Jacob, pointed his gun between Jacob’s eyes. (p.85)

Kony’s army makes the boys walk continuously so as not to be caught by the government troops and severe starvation and dehydration from long walks bring extreme challenges to boys. Eventually Jacob and Paul decide to escape with Oteka and another girl victim whose ears were removed by the Kony. Jacob invites Tony, but his changed personality resulting from mental trauma makes it hard to communicate with and trust Tony. The journey of escaping Kony’s army is described in rich language about the ecological contexts in Uganda. During the journey, teen dynamics and their desperation to protect each other illustrate powerful universal themes of friendship, hope, vision, justice, and dream in spite of harsh realities, haunting fear, trauma, and self-serving roles for protection. In the end, Jacob shares his closing note about what happens to his fellow teens who joined the journey of escape, fighting for their lives and human rights.

The main focus of this contemporary child soldiers’ story is indeed the victims, both young and old, from civil wars and violence of mutated armed groups who claim to fight for justice—such groups as the LRA in Uganda. The story also illustrates African humanity and universal connections beyond our socially limited knowledge about Uganda. Rich cultural diversity in race, language, religion, class, immigration, politics, and social attitudes is experienced through different characters without enhancing, romanticizing or marginalizing Uganda. For instance, Jacob is from a wealthy family yet he is motherless and from a village. Meanwhile, Paul is from the capital city but his mother is from the Gulu area and his father has a business with the United States. Linguistic diversity also reflects historical background through not only French and English, but also indigenous language such as Acholi and Langi. Contemporary Ugandan childhood is reflected through their passion in soccer with strong fan support of Manchester United and their interest in math as well as specific dreams for the future. In addition, humorous conversations among Jacob, Tony, and Paul invite readers to reverse their perspectives through the three Ugandan boys’ curiosity and limited knowledge of Americans. “Do they [Americans] all smell sweet?” Despite his amazement Tony could not stop his questions. “Even the black people in America smell white!” laughed Paul” (p. 61). Such global perspectives may briefly sketch their awareness in a global world that differs from old documentary films like “The Bushman.” This film shows Africa as isolated like an unreachable island disconnected from the rest of the world. For a long time, depictions of Africa have focused on primitive/ barbaric places and such unbalanced romanticized perspectives have been problematic with insufficient portrayal of contemporary and diverse humanity experiences (Yenika-Agbaw, 2008).

Throughout the story, indigenous language enriches Ugandan contexts. The Canadian author, McKay, uses code switching to engage the audience and also to add an authentic vibe in the story. McKay's recent books tend to focus on areas of global conflict and most of all our western society's perspectives and gaze toward tensions in global communities. In the glossary section, McKay lists not only Ugandan indigenous words but also English words that are understood differently from American English like football and soccer. Words that evolved from political contexts in Uganda are also defined in the glossary.

The author, Sharon E McKay, studied LRA army and Ugandan cultures through a wide range of sources like Ugandan Canadians and Ugandans and the reliability of her research sources is evident. She notes in her Acknowledgments that the Law Society of Upper Canada licenses her Ugandan Canadian source as a barrister and solicitor. Her Ugandan sources are specifically from Gulu in Northern Uganda instead of general sources as people from Uganda. McKay's effort to have authentic reflections of Gulu is shown through a range of Ugandan people who have different backgrounds, including a school principal, a Ph.D. student in Canada, a student in Gulu, and a former lieutenant brigade administrator officer. Adrian Bradbury, the founder and director of the campaign of Athletes for Africa called Guluwalk, offers a testimonial statement in the Afterword to support the accuracy and authenticity of the stories in *War Brothers*, stating, "*War Brothers* is fiction. The war in northern Uganda is not" (p.233).

Child soldier stories appear in *Bitter Chocolate* (Sally Grindley, 2010), *The Bite of the Mango* (Mariatu Kamara with Susan McClelland, 2008), *Son of a Gun* (Anne de Graaf, 2006), and *Chanda's Wars* (Allan Stratton, 2008). Settings in these books are in different nations and regions in Africa like Liberia, Seirra Leone, and West Africa, among others. Child soldier experiences are illustrated differently and similarly across these books. Sometimes child soldiers are the centering voices and sometimes they are characters who pass quickly by, yet leave unforgettable impressions. Overarching and superficial themes may be civil wars, child victims, and child soldiers in Africa. On a deeper level, discussions around the meaning of fighting for our rights and lives and the lives of others will bring rich dialogue. Child soldier themes can be explored with various subthemes—physical abuse, child labor, friendship, and child as material. *Iqbal* (Francesco D' Adamo, 2005), *Boys without Names* (Kashmira Sheth, 2010), and *No Ordinary Day* (Deborah Ellis, 2011) specifically illustrate global child labor and child abuse issues. Lastly, *War Brothers* can be read alongside *Red Scarf Girl* (Ji-li Jian, 1997), *Hitler Youth: Growing up in Hitler's Shadow* (Susan Campbell Bartoletti, 2005), *Daniel Half Human* (David Chotjewitz, 2006), and *When My Name Was Keoko* (Linda Sue Park, 2002) to avoid stereotypes of child soldiers as only associated with African nations. These books help to explore the power of collective ideological controls and the importance of thinking critically through historical examples about the role of young people as targets when society experiences chaos. In these books, young people's internal conflicts and external pressure are thoughtfully depicted.

Yoo Kyung Sung, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

© 2012 Yoo Kyung Sung



WOW Review, Volume V, Issue 2 by World of Words is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Based on work by Yoo Kyung Sung at <https://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/review/wow-review-volume-v-issue-2/11/>