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A Long Way Gone

Memoirs of a Boy Soldier

by

Ishmael Beah

2007



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Diane Clapsaddle

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A LONG WAY GONE

KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Sierra Leone, 1993-1997

New York City, 1998

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Ishmael Beah - The narrator of this true story, Ishmael, is a boy soldier who finds a way to escape the horrors of war and go on to counsel others who are only looking for a way to live in peace.

Esther - She is a nurse at Benin House where Ishmael is taken for rehabilitation. She befriends him and helps him to find himself again.

Alhaji - He is a young man whom Ishmael befriends when they are both part of the soldiers fighting the rebels. He is as strong and cold as Ishmael in battle, but just as in need of re-finding his childhood.

Uncle Tommy - He takes Ishmael in after he is found in Freetown. Ishmael cannot stay.....
Additional characters are outlined in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist is Ishmael and he is central to understanding the horrors of war in Sierra Leone, because he became a boy soldier.

Antagonist - The antagonists at first are the rebels who bring horror and death to civilians for reasons Ishmael can never discern. Later, the antagonist becomes Ishmael himself when he very nearly.....

Climax - The climax occurs when Ishmael realizes he will never escape war and.....

Outcome - After a long and harrowing journey, Ishmael finds his way out of Sierra Leone and into Guinea. From there, with the help of Laura Simms, he travels to New York City, finishes

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

This true story involves the life of Ishmael Beah who lives a fairly happy life in Sierra Leone until civil war breaks out. Then, like other civilians, he is forced to run for his life, becoming separated from his family and later losing them to murder by the rebels. He later finds a way to be rehabilitated and.....

THEMES

The first and most important theme is: **War is Hell**. Although this is an overworked phrase, it fits this narrative perfectly. The horrors and tragedy that Ishmael relates to the reader are almost unbelievable. The atrocities committed against innocent civilians give new meaning to the idea of war as well.

The second theme is: **There is always.....**

Additional themes are outlined in the complete study guide.

MOOD

The mood is mostly one of horror and fear throughout as Ishmael makes his way through war. However, it becomes uplifting and hopeful when he is successful in finding peace.

Ishmael Beah - BIOGRAPHY

Ishmael Beah was born in Sierra Leone on November 23, 1980. He moved to the United States in 1998 and finished his last two years of high school at the United Nations International School in New York. He graduated from Oberlin College in 2004 with a degree in Politics. He is a member of the Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Division Advisory Committee and has spoken before the Council on Foreign Relations, the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO) at the Marine

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

NEW YORK, 1998

Summary

This opening vignette shows the narrator as he has arrived in the United States after his lost boyhood in Sierra Leone. He is attending high school there and his fellow students question him over and over about his life in his homeland. He observes that they haven't begun to suspect his full story. Their inquisitiveness is ironic, because they think that his being in country at war is cool. He can only smile a little and say that he will tell them about it sometime.

Notes

This quasi-conversation opens the door to what becomes Ishmael's "telling" of his not so cool experiences in Sierra Leone.

CHAPTER ONE

Summary

Ishmael and his family and friends have very little connection to the war that is taking place in their homeland until refugees begin passing through. There are families that have walked hundreds of miles to escape the fighting and atrocities and as they walk by, Ishmael is most impacted by the fact that the children would not even look at them. They jump at the slightest sound and they are tired and malnourished. It is evident that they have seen things that so plague their minds that if they explained it, Ishmael and his friends would refuse to accept it. He is only ten years old at this point and his imagination doesn't have the capacity to understand what these children have witnessed.

The first time Ishmael is actually touched by the war, he is twelve. It is January, 1993, and he, his brother, Junior, and their friend Talloi decide that they will go to the town of Mattru Jong to participate in a talent show. They had organized a rap group when he was just eight and had been rapping together ever since. They had first seen that kind of music on television and met every other weekend to study it. They didn't even know for a long time what it was called, but were impressed with the fact that black fellows knew how to speak English really fact and to the beat. Later on, Junior had gone to secondary school where other boys had taught him more about foreign music and dance. This is how they came to know about hip-hop. As a result, the phrases from this music began to pepper their everyday conversation as well.

On the morning they left for Mattru Jong, they loaded their backpacks with their cassettes and lyrics they are working on as well as several layers of clothes on their bodies for the days they would be gone. They have no idea that this unusual way of dressing will benefit them later. They also never say goodbye or tell anyone where they are going, because they have no idea they are leaving, never to return. They decide to walk the sixteen miles from their village of Mogbwemo to save money and stop halfway at Kabati, his grandmother's village. Her name is Mamie Kpana and his grandfather is known as Kamor, or teacher, because he is a well-known Arabic scholar and healer. She keeps asking the boys all kinds of questions about their father and their eating habits and everything that a grandmother would worry about. They put her off and refuse to spend the night. Ironically, she waves them off, as they start off again, with her right hand, a sign of good luck.

They arrive in Mattru Jong a few hours later and meet up with their friends, Gibrilla, Kaloko, and Khalilou. The next day, they stay at Khalilou's home and wait for their friends to return home from school. The three boys from this village come home early from school, because they heard the rebels had attacked Ishmael's village of Mogbwemo. School in Mattru Jong had been cancelled indefinitely. According to the teachers, the rebels had attacked the mining areas first which caused people in their homes to run for their lives. It was mass chaos and people just ran, giving up on finding their loved ones. Gibrilla declares that Mattru Jong will be next.

Ishmael, Junior, and their friends from their village leave for the wharf to see if people of their village are arriving there. They sit there for three hours, but none of the boys sees anyone of their families. Talloi declares that they must go back and see if they can find their families before it's too late. Ishmael is reminded that the last time he had seen his father was three days before when he was coming home from work in the mines. He and his father had not been close for a while, because another stepmother had destroyed their relationship. He and Junior had been on their way to see their mother in the next town three miles away. Just as his father was about to say something to him, the stepmother had come in and his father had closed his mouth and gone into the parlor with her. When his father had still been paying for their schooling, they had only seen her on weekends and holidays. However, now his father was refusing to pay anymore, so they were able to see her every two or three days along with their little brother, Ibrahim. His mother feels very sad and guilty, because she doesn't have enough money to pay for their school, but she declares that she is working on it. She also always asks how his father is and tells the two boys that he is a good man who loves them very much. His problem is that he picks the wrong stepmothers. They went to Ibrahim's school to pick him up and all the way home, he holds Ishmael's hand and throws himself on them in excitement. Two days after that visit, the brothers left for Mattru Jong. All these memories overwhelm Ishmael as he visualizes his father running from work and his mother weeping and running to his little brother's school. A sinking feeling overcomes him as he thinks about them.

The two boys eventually begin to question the refugees from their village, and amidst the cries of women and children, an old woman tells them too much blood had been spilled where they are going and that even the good spirits have fled that place. Nonetheless, the boys begin their journey home and finally come to Kabati, their grandmother's village. It is completely deserted, including their grandmother's house. They sit on her verandah questioning whether they should go on when suddenly a Volkswagen van comes roaring in front of their grandmother's home. Everyone runs for the bushes, but Ishmael doesn't quite make it. He sees the driver, with a bleeding arm, vomit up blood and when the door on the other side opens, a woman leaning against it falls to the ground. Inside are three dead bodies, two girls and a boy, and their blood is spattered all over the inside of the van. A woman in the streets steps forward and embraces the bleeding man who then explains that even though the rebels had murdered his entire family, he had taken their bodies with him so he could bury them and know where their graves were.

This van is followed by a continuous stream of wounded, crying people, including a woman who carries her dead baby on her back. The child had been shot dead as she fled from the rebels. The woman stops and rocks her baby, in too much shock to even weep. The baby's body has so many bullets that they are protruding from its body and it is clear to Ishmael, by the eyes of the baby, that all has been lost.

At this point in his narrative, Ishmael remembers his father talking about the Independence of 1961 when there were so many changes in power and everything was "rotten politics." He remembers now an adult saying about the war is presently running from is another war of independence, this time a liberation of the people from a corrupt government. However, Ishmael wonders what kind of liberation movement shoots innocent civilians and children. That night, after their return to Mattru Jong, Ishmael has a night mare that he is shot in the side, tries to run to safety, but ends up with someone standing over him with a gun pointed right at him. He wakes up and hesitantly touches his side, no longer able to tell the difference between dream and reality.

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Every morning in Mattru Jong, they go down to the wharf, hoping for news from home. However, the stream of refugees from that direction ceases and the news dries up. Government troops are deployed to the village and soldiers guard it at various checkpoints. The boys continue to tell themselves that the war is just a passing phase that will be over in less than three months. They listen to rap music to pass the time, but Ishmael can't help but remember the images from Kabati. He remembers life in Kabati when he would visit his grandparents. An old man would say that "we must strive to be like the moon." When Ishmael asked his grandmother what the old man meant, she said it was an adage that served to remind people to always be on their best behavior and to be good to others. People complain when there is too much sun and the again when it is too cold. However, no one grumbles when the moon shines, because a lot of happy things happened in the moonlight. After that, Ishmael took it upon himself to observe the moon and he saw many faces and other images in the moon. Now, he still observes the moon and looks for the same images he saw as a six year old. In this way, he is pleased to realize that part of his childhood has not disappeared.

Notes

This chapter is the first taste of war for Ishmael and it leaves him with only his brother by his side. The fate of the remainder of his family is unknown. It is also the beginning of the end of his childhood and the peaceful memories he has always known. Horror has now become a part of his existence.

CHAPTER TWO

Summary

The chapter opens with Ishmael once again fighting a dream. This time, it isn't something his mind imagines, but an actual memory mixed up with his imagination. He is pushing a wheelbarrow with a dead body in it, and there are other bodies bleeding and dying all around him. He doesn't know why he is taking this particular body to the cemetery, but he pushes on, oblivious to the cries of the dying. The body is wrapped in a white bed sheet and after Ishmael pulls it to the ground, he begins to unwrap it, noting that there are bullets all the way from his feet to his neck. He lifts the cloth and sees his own face. When he forces himself awake, he realizes he is in New York City where he is starting his new life. However, he can't keep his waking mind from drifting back to Sierra Leone where he remembers carrying an AK-47 and walking with a squad of many boys and a few adults. They were on their way to attack a small town that had ammunition and food. They engage an enemy squad in a firefight and kill them all. This squad had consisted of young boys like them, but they didn't care. They gave each other high fives and took the ammunition from the bodies. Then, they sat down on the bodies and ate their food while fresh blood leaked out all around them.

Ishmael gets up off the floor where he had been sleeping, determined to stay awake so as not to dream again. He knows the dreams are an important part of what his life is and who he is now. However, he wishes he could wash them away. He stays awake all night, waiting for daylight. He wants to return to his new life where he has a joy that stays inside him even when life itself becomes a burden. He feels he lives in three worlds now: his dreams, the experiences of his new life, and the memories from the past.

Notes

The imagery in this chapter is a jarring contrast to chapter one when Ishmael played music and went to school and had a loving family. It is filled with memories and dream imagery that are horrifying to both Ishmael and the reader.

CHAPTER THREE

Summary

Ishmael and his brother stay in Mattru Jong longer than they anticipate. They don't know where else to go or what else to do except wait for news of their families. They hear through rumors that the rebels are in Sumbaya, a town twenty miles or so north of Mattru Jong. The rumors are replaced by letters sent by survivors of the

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massacre there. They simply say that the rebels are coming and wish to be welcomed since they are fighting for them. Then, they send a messenger who frightens the people, because he is a young boy who has branded with the letters RUF (Revolutionary United Front) and who had had all but his thumbs amputated in imitation of how people before the war using a thumbs up to express to each other "one love." It is a.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Ishmael Beah - Ishmael is a wonderful young man who becomes a victim of a devastating civil war in Sierra Leone. Like most other civilians, he is a victim of a terror campaign on the part of both sides of the war. Millions of civilians die in this conflict and in that way, Ishmael is lucky, because he lives. However, he comes out of the experience as a boy soldier badly damaged. He has lost his family to the rebel atrocities just before he has the chance to be reunited. He sees friends and comrades die the most horrible deaths before his eyes, he lives in horrible conditions day in and day out, and most of the time, he sees little hope that his existence will ever change.

Fortunately, he is taken away to a rehabilitation center by UNICEF staffers who work with him relentlessly to help him find the true child he left behind. Of course, it is his own inner desire to be something more, to overcome the barriers placed in front of him that ultimately means the.....

Esther - She is the young nurse who works at Benin House where Ishmael enters rehabilitation. She sees something worth saving in all the boys who come there, but she sees something even more in Ishmael. She gradually works on him to become her friend and

Alhaji - Although he is a war comrade, he becomes Ishmael's family while they experience the horrors of the civil war together. He thinks of himself as Rambo and fights in.....

Uncle Tommy - Although Ishmael never met his father's brother; the man never hesitates when Ishmael needs a home after Benin House to open his door to his young nephew. He is always smiling and.....

The Lieutenant - Even though he is almost an evil character, this man had an obvious impact on Ishmael's life. He motivated him to fight the rebels, and through his own bloodthirsty example, he showed.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

This is a nonfiction work. As such the story is described in a largely chronological and normal order. The narrative opens with Ishmael in high school in the United States speaking to fellow students who really want him to relate his experiences in war. He tells them he might do that.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The first and most important theme is: **War is Hell**. The sheer horror of the images Ishmael relates reinforces this theme. Civilians became the victims of rebel soldiers who were attempting to create the ultimate fear through unbelievable atrocities. What makes the theme even more poignant, however, is the....

The second theme is: **There is always.....**

AUTHOR'S STYLE

The style is very straightforward and graphic. Ishmael leaves nothing to the imagination about the atrocities of the civil war and his own bloodthirsty behavior. However, he also relates.....

RIISING ACTION

The rising action begins in 1993 when we meet Ishmael and his.....

FALLING ACTION

The falling action involves Ishmael's long and harrowing journey out

POINT OF VIEW

The point of view is first person throughout the narrative as it is told from.....

OTHER ELEMENTS

FORESHADOWING

There are several literary devices that pop up at various times in the story. One of the most prevalent ones is **foreshadowing**, which frequently presents clues of something that will happen later in the novel. Some examples of foreshadowing include:

1. Ishmael is only ten years old at beginning, and his imagination doesn't have the capacity to understand what refugee children have witnessed. This foreshadows his own haunted and desolate look after war invades his life.
2. Ishmael and his friends loaded their backpacks with their cassettes and lyrics they were working on as well as several layers of clothes on their bodies for the days they would be gone. They had no idea that this unusual way of dressing would benefit them later. They also.....

IRONY

Another important element is **irony** – when something happens, or is seen, or is heard that we may know, but the characters do not, or that appears opposite of what is expected. Some examples of irony include:

1. She keeps asking the boys all kinds of questions about their father and their eating habits and everything that a grandmother would worry about. They put her off and refuse to spend the night. Ironically, she waves them off, as they start off again, with her right hand, a sign of good luck.
2. He remembers now an adult saying about the war is presently running from is another war of independence, this time a liberation of the people from a corrupt.....

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS – QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

The following quotations are important at various points of the story (Sarah Crichton Books, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007):

1. *“We must strive to be like the moon.”*

(pg. 16; When Ishmael asked his grandmother what the old man meant by this quote, she said it was an adage that served to remind people to always be on their best behavior and to be good to others. People complain when there is too much sun and the again when it is too cold. However, no one grumbles when the moon shines, because a lot of happy things happened in the moonlight.

2. *“This is one of the consequences of the civil war. People stop trusting each other, and every stranger becomes an enemy.”*

(pg. 37; Here Ishmael emphasizes how relationships with other people became corrupted as the result of war.)

3. *“Is there an end to this madness, and is there any future for him beyond the bushes?”*

(pg. 45; Ishmael asks himself this question as he faces the horrors of

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / METAPHORS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

Other elements that are present in this novel include **symbols, metaphors, and imagery**. **Symbols** are the use of some unrelated idea to represent something else. **Metaphors** are direct comparisons made between characters and ideas. **Imagery** is the use of figures of speech or vivid description in writing to produce mental pictures.

There are many of these used by the author such as these METAPHORS:

1. The chapter opens with Ishmael once again fighting a dream. This time, it isn't something his mind imagines, but an actual memory mixed up with his imagination. He is pushing a wheelbarrow with a dead body in it, and there are other bodies bleeding and dying all around him. He doesn't know why he is taking this particular body to the cemetery, but he pushes on, oblivious to the cries of the dying. The body is wrapped in a white bed sheet and after Ishmael pulls it to the ground, he begins to unwrap it, noting that there are bullets all the way from his feet to his neck. He lifts the cloth and sees his own face. The dream is a metaphor for his fears for himself.
2. A boy playing with a stone reminds Ishmael of the.....

These are examples of SYMBOLISM:

1. The physical presence of people and their spirits symbolize the life of a town for Ishmael.
2. If captured, they will be branded and recruited into the rebel forces. What's worse, the brand will mark them to government soldiers as the.....

These are examples of IMAGERY:

1. This van is followed by a continuous stream of wounded, crying people, including a woman who carries her dead baby on her back. The child had been shot dead as she fled from the rebels. The woman stops and rocks her baby, in too much shock to even weep. The baby's body has so many bullets that they are protruding from its body and it is clear to Ishmael, by the eyes of the baby, that all has been lost.
2. Ishmael once again fighting a dream. This time, it

KEY FACTS

Title: *A Long Way Gone – Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*

Author: Ishmael Beah

Date Published: 2007

Meaning of the Title: It refers to the actual and emotional distance Ishmael travels from being a lost soul as a boy soldier to a young man who can function and contribute to society.

Setting: Sierra Leone, 1993-1997 and New York City, 1998

Protagonist: Ishmael Beah

Antagonist: Ishmael's inner.....

STUDY QUESTIONS – MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. When war reaches their village, Ishmael is
 - a.) traveling to the next village.
 - b.) terribly wounded.
 - c.) Taken prisoner by the RUF.
2. At the beginning, Ishmael is only
 - a.) twelve years old.
 - b.) ten years old.
 - c.) eleven years old.....
 - c.) he fears he'll be returned to the rebels.

ANSWER KEY

1.) a 2.) b 3.) c 4.) b 5.) b 6.) b 7.) a 8.) c 9.) c 10.) a 11.) a 12.) b 13.) b 14.) a 15.) a

ESSAY TOPICS – BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Explain the meaning of the title.
2. It seems as if Ishmael is often lucky in how he survives. Mention a few instances where this luck appears and how Ishmael escapes once again.
3. Ishmael often questions why he is the only one in his family to live. Explain why you believe this is so.
4. The rebels commit terrible atrocities on civilians and.....

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