

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

By Ishmael Beah

Synopsis

THIS IS HOW TOO MANY WARS ARE FOUGHT NOW: by children, hopped up on drugs and wielding AK-47s. It is one of the great evils of our time, this arming of children. But we know little about it, because most of the young soldiers—hundreds of thousands of them—are swallowed up in their wars, never to be heard from again.

But Ishmael Beah, who is now twenty-six, made it back from hell. And in *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, he provides a rare and mesmerizing account of what it is like to be thirteen years old and living a life where, it seems, you have only two options: “to kill or be killed.” Equally important, he shows us that children who have been traumatized by war—and turned into the most soulless of killers—can also, with help, have their humanity restored. Ishmael Beah is living proof, and his memoir is already being hailed as a classic.

His story begins in 1993, in Sierra Leone, on the western coast of Africa. Ishmael, his older brother Junior, and a friend set out from home to enter a talent show in a nearby village, Mattru Jong. They may not have TVs, but they’ve still managed to pick up a passion for American hip-hop—LL Cool J, Run-DMC, Naughty by Nature: cassettes of their albums are the boys’ prized possessions, and in their spare time they memorize songs and dance moves. They’re eager to show them off.

But when they arrive in Matru Jong, the boys learn that rebel soldiers, part of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), have attacked their home village, and are now headed in their direction. Being young men, Ishmael and his friends are in particular jeopardy because both the rebels and the Sierra Leone Armed Forces, the government army, are known to force boys to join them. And if the boys resist? They kill them on the spot.

So the boys flee into the forest, not knowing what has happened to their families back home and not sure where to go. Ishmael is twelve years old. As they run, the boys are confronted with terrible scenes of brutality. The dead and dying litter the countryside. The full force of war hits Ishmael when he sees a woman carrying her dead child upon her back. He writes, "I didn't want to go back to where that woman was from; it was clear in the eyes of the baby that all had been lost." In the time before his flight, he "had heard from adults that this was a revolutionary war, a liberation of the people from corrupt government. But what kind of liberation movement shoots innocent civilians, children, that little girl? There wasn't anyone to answer these questions, and my head felt heavy with the images that it contained."

Reeling with confusion and horror, Ishmael and his friends try to drown out the chords of catastrophe by memorizing more hip-hop lyrics and working on their act while they seek news of their families. Ishmael tries to think optimistically about their predicament. He recalls an old man telling him, "We must strive to be like the moon," because "no one grumbles when the moon shines." But as the boys wander the countryside, they notice that "the moon wasn't in the sky; the air was stiff, as if nature itself was afraid of what was happening."

Though the boys are constantly on the verge of starvation and exhaustion, the hope that their families are safe keeps the group from giving up. However, each time they are taken in and cared for by villagers, violence finds them and they are forced to flee once more. In one narrow escape, Ishmael runs into the bush without looking back. He doesn't have time to find his brother, Junior. He will never see him again.

Suddenly, Ishmael is utterly alone. He roams the forest, desperately searching for food, stealing fruit from the birds, evading the wild pigs. Oppressed by terrible solitude, he remembers his father's words: "If you are alive, there is hope for a better day and something good to happen."

After wandering in the forest for a month, he finally encounters some boys he recognizes from his old school. They are heading toward the village of Yele, rumored to be safe because it is occupied by government troops. Ishmael joins them, relieved to have company.

One night, something seems off in the forest: a dead bird falls out of the sky; there are no stars, and the darkness feels as thick as a blanket. Suddenly, a ghostly trio crosses the boys' path, forcing them to hide. During the frightening ordeal, Ishmael's friend Saidu inexplicably faints. The boys carry him to the next village to get help. There, Ishmael finally receives word that his family is safe and in a nearby village. But his happiness is quickly shattered by Saidu's sudden, strange death. It seems as if Saidu's earlier words have come true: "Every time people come at us with the intention of killing us, I close my eyes and wait for death . . . Very soon I will completely die and all that will be left is my empty body walking with you."

The boys sadly bury their friend, but with the belief that a much hoped-for joy is just around the corner. They meet a man, Gasemu, whom Ishmael recognizes from home. Gasemu tells him that his family is just over the next hill. But when the group finally mounts the rise, they look down to see fires raging through the village. The air erupts with the sounds of gunshots and screams. The rebels have gotten there first.

Everywhere there are bodies, burnt or riddled with bullets. The soil of the town is red with blood. Ishmael runs from body to body, looking for something he doesn't want to see. Gasemu points out the house where his family was staying—it is a blackened husk. Devastated, Ishmael punches the still-smoldering walls in rage and despair. There is no chance that his family has survived.

Ishmael begins to be plagued by migraines and nightmares: “In my mind’s eye I would see sparks of flame, flashes of scenes I had witnessed, and the agonizing voices of children and women would come alive in my head. I cried quietly while my head beat like the clapper of a bell.”

The boys seek safety in Yele, where the government troops are headquartered. One day, Lieutenant Jabati lines up all the boys and announces, “This is your time to revenge the death of your families and to make sure more children do not lose their families.” Each boy—ranging in age from seven to seventeen (Ishmael is now thirteen)—is handed an AK-47 and their training as soldiers begins. They are told that the rebels “have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country.” The boys practice stabbing banana

trees while a corporal chants, “visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you.”

Ishmael’s first battle takes place shortly thereafter. He watches Josiah, who at eleven can barely lift his gun, die from wounds inflicted by a rocket-propelled grenade. Anger takes over his body: “I raised my gun and pulled the trigger, and I killed a man. Suddenly, as if someone was shooting them inside my brain, all the massacres I had seen since the day I was touched by war began flashing in my head. Every time I stopped shooting to change magazines and saw my lifeless friends, I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people.”

Over the next two years, Ishmael and the other boys who survive will spend their time watching Rambo movies, sniffing *brown brown* (cocaine mixed with gunpowder), and committing casual mass slaughter. As Ishmael writes, “My squad was my family, my gun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed.”

One day, four UNICEF workers pull up in a truck. After they meet with Lieutenant Jabati, the lieutenant orders Ishmael and a few other boys to climb into the truck with the UNICEF workers. Good soldiers, they do as they’re ordered, but they’re also confused and angered. The boys see themselves as soldiers; they want nothing to do with these civilians.

The truck takes them to a rehabilitation center near Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, where they are ushered into a dining room. There they meet other teenage soldiers who have been rescued from the militia. The problem is this: the other boys are from the rebel camp. Naively, the UNICEF workers thought that if they separated the boys from the violence of the war, all would be well. The truth is harsher. The boys have

been so steeped in a culture of violence that they are incapable of behaving in a peaceful manner. A battle erupts in the rehabilitation center, Ishmael tosses a grenade he has smuggled in, and within minutes, six boys lie dead.

Ishmael is relocated to a separate rehabilitation center, where he suffers withdrawal from the drugs and violence that have become his addictions. A nurse's compassion helps him let go of these demons. Over and over she tells him, "it's not your fault. It's not your fault." As a gift, the nurse, Esther, brings Ishmael a Walkman and a tape of Bob Marley, reigniting his passion for music and performance, which further reconnects the boy to his lost childhood.

Ishmael makes great progress. He begins writing music again, and puts on shows for the rest of the boys at the center. The program locates Ishmael's uncle, and finally, after many months, the staff allows him to leave the center to join his uncle's family. The rehabilitation center nominates him for a special United Nations project to bring two Sierra Leonean children to the United States to speak about the war under the aegis of Children Associated with War (CAW) in order to raise awareness about the plight of child soldiers.

It is snowing when Ishmael lands in New York. He's only known "the word 'winter' from Shakespeare's texts," and the only snow he's seen has been in Christmas movies he watched back in Sierra Leone. He thinks to himself, "It must be Christmas here every day."

At the United Nations First International Children's Parliament, Ishmael meets Laura Simms, a facilitator who is a professional storyteller. Ishmael is impressed that this white woman from New York City knows many of the stories told by his people. "When

she became my mother years later,” he says, “she and I would always talk about whether it was destined or coincidental that I came from a very storytelling-oriented culture to live with a mother in New York who is a storyteller.”

Ishmael is mesmerized by Times Square and is deeply moved by his experience at the UN, speaking to the convocation and listening while the other children testify. He writes, “We left New York City on November 15, 1996. My sixteenth birthday was eight days away and throughout the flight back home I still felt as if I was dreaming, a dream that I didn’t want to wake up from. I was sad to leave, but I was also pleased to have met people outside of Sierra Leone. Because if I was to get killed upon my return, I knew that a memory of my existence was alive somewhere in the world.”

Back in his home country, Ishmael returns to school in Freetown, and his future looks bright. But on May 25, 1997, the city is awakened by gunshots. Johnny Paul Koroma, leader of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), announces that he is the new president, and chaos is unleashed in the city. During this time, Ishmael’s beloved uncle suddenly dies of illness.

Ishmael realizes he cannot stay in Freetown, or he will be in danger of being swept back into the army, as some of his friends have already been. Ishmael calls Laura, the storyteller, and asks if he can stay with her if he can make it to New York. She says yes, and he makes his preparation to escape from Sierra Leone. Ishmael leaves Freetown in October 1997, telling only his friend Mohamed from the rehabilitation center, that he is going. To get to the United States, he must make it across the border to Guinea. The bus ride is long and dangerous, but Ishmael arrives in Conakry, the capital of Guinea,

after many close calls with corrupt soldiers who wish to rob him of his money and prevent him from leaving the country.

Across the border, he breathes a sigh of relief. He is a long way from home, from his childhood, from the horrors that have consumed him for the past four years. He is alone in a foreign city, looking to make his way to an even more foreign city in an unknown land. But all that is okay. What is important is this: he will never be a soldier again.