

# **A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier Study Guide**

**A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier by  
Ishmael Beah**

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# Plot Summary

A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier by Ishmael Beah tells the story of a young boy whose life was invaded by the rebel army. He became a boy soldier who eventually became repatriated, becoming a spokesperson for children in Sierra Leone.

Young Ishmael wasn't worried about war, even though he had seen refugees traipse through his village for several years. Instead, he was focused on dancing to Hip-hop with his group of friends and his brother, Junior in Mattru Jong, 16 miles from his home village.

While he was there, his home village was attacked, and his family disappeared. He and his friends were on their own, scrounging for food and scrambling for safety. They turned on each other as they fought for food.

The boys realized how precarious their situation was when they were caught by rebels and separated into two groups. Ishmael had a gun to his head before he was saved by a sound in the woods. He ran off with his friends, trying to survive. They discovered that no-one wanted to help them since trust was a rare commodity in war-time and someone had started a rumor about a group of boys who caused harm.

Ishmael and his friends were captured and interrogated, but they were let loose after Ishmael's music cassette was found, showing that he wasn't a threat. He was just a normal boy.

They discovered that some relatives were in a village 30 miles away so they set off to find the relatives after the village in which they were staying was burned to the ground. The boys traveled on and ended up on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean. It was beautiful, and they enjoyed their time on the beach until they came across a village. Instead of finding help, they were captured, interrogated, and their shoes were taken away before they were forced to leave.

It was so hot the skin burned off their feet. A man in a fisher's hut helped them until the villagers discovered their whereabouts. Once again, the cassette came to the rescue, showing that they were a group of innocent boys.

Ishmael and the boys continued traveling. They learned that Ishmael's family was in a village that was a two-days walk away. Right outside the village a man Ishmael recognized asked the boys to help him bring bananas to the village. While they were doing this, the village was attacked, and everyone was killed so Ishmael never got to see his family again.

Several days later, he and his friends were held at gunpoint. They joined a village comprised of over 30 orphaned boys. In this village, they learned how to fight the rebels and stay alive. They were taught to shoot and to hide. The boys were given drugs that gave them energy and helped them desensitize and become vicious.



When Ishmael was 16, he was told to get into a vehicle that took him into the city. He was thrown together with other child soldiers for rehabilitation. He had to learn how to live without drugs and embrace his childhood again while battling his nightmares. He overcame the hardship and became a spokesperson for the children in Sierra Leone for the rehabilitation center and at the United Nations.



# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary and Analysis

A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier by Ishmael Beah tells the story of a young boy whose life was invaded by the rebel army. He became a boy soldier who eventually became repatriated, becoming a spokesperson for children in Sierra Leone.

Chapters 1 - 4

In 1998, the author lived in New York City. He wrote that his friends suspected that he hadn't told them the whole story of his life regarding his time in Sierra Leone.

Chapter 1

The war sounded like it was happening in a faraway place. This changed when refugees began passing through the author's town. The people of his town were warned that the war would eventually reach their own town. Ishmael remembered how the children coming through were startled by sounds, and everyone seemed sad, malnourished, and exhausted. In 1993, Ishmael was 12 years old. He, his older brother, and a friend went to Mattru Jong to participate in a talent show. They had formed a rap and dance group when he was eight - years - old. Ishmael loved to dance, and he really enjoyed learning the lyrics to the songs because he thought they were poetic. Listening to the rap music also improved his English vocabulary.

The kids planned to come back to their village the next day so they didn't bother saying goodbye to anybody. The young boys didn't want to spend any money so they decided to walk the 16 miles to Mattru Jong. They stopped to swim along the way when they became hot. In the afternoon, they stopped at Ishmael's grandmother's village. After they rested the boys went on for the last six miles of their journey. That night, they stayed with their friends in Mattru Jong. The next day, their friends came home from school early. They were told that rebels had attacked Ishmael's hometown. School was canceled. The children heard gunfire, and everyone began to run away.

The boys went to the wharf trying to find any members of their families who might have escaped. They decided to go back to their home. Along the way, they heard horrible things that had been going on in their homes. Ishmael's grandmother's village was deserted. Many people Ishmael saw were dead or dying. The boys realized that they couldn't go home, and they had to go back to Mattru Jong for safety. They stayed there for a week, and didn't hear anything about their relatives. The local soldiers were waiting for the rebels.

Chapter 2 - Back in New York City, Ishmael woke up from a nightmare from his past. He remembered attacking others and killing them. He didn't want to go back to sleep because he was afraid the memories and nightmares would return.



Chapter 3 - Young Ishmael stayed in Matru Jong longer than he had anticipated. Many people left the town, but the boys continued to stay. Ten days later, they decided that the rebels were coming. Ishmael was cooking rice when they did show up. The children heard gunshots, and people started running. They ran out of town across the stone, dodging bullets. The children stayed together as they ran.

Chapter 4 - The 6 young boys walked along a tiny path for several days. They slept in abandoned villages and scrounged for food. They were beginning to starve so they went back to Matru Jong to try to buy food. Hiding from the rebels, they found some food and some money. The rebels saw them and began shooting. The boys went back to the swamp without the food. They were so hungry over the next few days, they would steal food from people as the other people slept.



# Chapters 5-8

## Chapters 5-8 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5 - Ishmael and the other boys were so hungry they felt ill, and they became irritable. They chased a little boy down for some of his food and grabbed it from him. The parents of the young boy took pity on them and gave them some food. The boys continued walking. At one point some rebels grabbed them. The rebels took them to a village where they witnessed soldiers interrogating a man then killing him. The rebels separated the boys so that Ishmael was in a different group from his brother, Junior. One group was going to die, and the other group had a chance to live. Ishmael was just about to be killed when the rebels heard a noise. While they were distracted, the boys ran. The friends all made it into the woods safely. They walked on, looking for a place to rest.

Chapter 6 - The six boys traveling together received a bad reputation. Someone had started a rumor that they killed families and burned villages. Because of this, people ran away when they came close, and they didn't want to help the boys. In one village, the boys were tied up and questioned. The village people found Ishmael's cassette tapes of rap music and asked what they were. Ishmael answered them and explained what the music was, and the villagers began to understand that the boys were harmless. They gave Ishmael and his friends some good food. A group of travelers came through the town, and one woman told Gibrilla that he had an aunt in a village 30 miles away.

The boys showed their gratitude for the food and rest they enjoyed in the village by watching out for rebels. They also helped with the planting. Eventually the rebels came and destroyed everything that they had worked on anyway. During this attack, Ishmael was separated from his brother, Junior. He never saw his brother again.

Chapter 7 - The attack happened during the night without warning. Ishmael went off into the bush by himself. He and a friend went back to the village the next day, and all the houses were burned. They looked for their friends, but couldn't find anyone. They stayed with a family from the village for two weeks, wondering if they were going to be attacked again. Ishmael refused to live in fear. He wanted to go somewhere peaceful. He went away on his own, walking all day. He walked for five days without seeing any other humans. The boys slept in abandoned villages. On the sixth day, he found a family, but they were scared of him so he parted from them. Before he left, they showed him the way to the sea.

Chapter 8 - Ishmael walked for 2 days without sleeping. On the third day, he found a safe place to rest. Scrounging around, he discovered a fruit he could use for food. It was an extremely lonely existence. In the woods he had to be careful to avoid different types of dangers. Instead of rebels, he had to contend with beasts such as wild pigs. He remembered a story his grandmother had told him about the wild pig.



Ishmael continued walking, and at one point he met with children his own age. He recognized some of them from his previous school. Now there were seven young boys traveling together. Once again rumors surfaced around them, and people were told to watch out for "the seven boys." They were outcasts.





# Chapters 9-12

## Chapters 9-12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9 - When they were walking, the boys heard a loud thundering sound. When they went to check out what it was, they discovered it was the ocean. They boys played on the sand and in the water. They moved on and came across a village. The village seemed deserted so the boys thought rebels had been there, but even as they were thinking that, villagers surrounded them and attacked them.

The boys tried to tell the villagers that they were harmless, but the villagers had heard that some young people were heading their way, and these young people were rebels. The men in the village took off the boys shoes and chased them out of the village. It was over 120° that day, and their skin was burned off their feet. They came to a fishing hut, and the man who lived in the hut saw what had happened to the boys and helped them. He gave them food and salve for their feet.

They stayed there in the hut for two weeks until one morning an older woman came to them and told them that their existence in the hut had been discovered. People were on their way to capture them. The boys were caught and brought back to the village. They stripped the boys, and they took off Ishmael's clothes. The music cassette fell out of his pocket. The chief asked what it was, and when Ishmael talked about the music, the chief realized the boys were not a problem. The chief asked Ishmael to dance, and he did. The boys were let go.

Chapter 10 - Ishmael found it unsettling that he never knew when his journey was going to end. His main goal was survival. He remembered his family and good memories from his home. One evening as they were traveling, Musa told the boys a story. He was a good storyteller. It reminded Ishmael of his grandmother, and how she told the story about when he received his name.

The boys had been traveling for a while, and they were very hungry again. They had some food, but a dog took it from them. The boys talked about eating the dog, regretting that they had let it go. Ishmael learned about how each of the children with whom he was traveling came to be on their own. All their villages were destroyed and their families were gone.

One of the boys became very ill as they were traveling. They went to the next village for help. In this village, Ishmael discovered that his family was a two-day's walk away. The friend died. They buried him then moved on.

Chapter 11 - The boys walked all night, grieving for their friend who had died. They looked forward to reuniting with their families with joy. The weather was strange as they continued walking. Eventually, they approached the village where they would find their families. Ishmael saw a man he recognized, and the man asked for some help carrying



bananas to the village. They stopped to help him, and while they were doing so, the village was attacked. By the time they got there, the village had been burned, and everyone in the village was dead. Ishmael never had a chance to see his family. From their hiding spot outside the village, they heard the rebels laughing and bragging about all the people they killed. It made Ishmael and his friends very angry. The rebels heard the boys and shot at them. The man they were with was shot, and he died after much suffering.

Chapter 12 - After Ishmael had been walking for several days, two men held him and his friends at gun point. They were told to get in the back of a line, and at the back they saw a dead man. They were told that they had to get used to this. The boys were led to a village that was occupied by the military. At first, it seemed ideal. The village was filled with happy people and food. The only sad aspect of the village was all the orphaned children. Ishmael was one of them. He helped with chores and played with the children. He remembered happier times with his family, but at the same time he also fought migraines. At night, Ishmael had a hard time sleeping. He would sometimes join the other boys and listen as Musa told stories.

One morning the atmosphere in the village changed, and everyone seemed tense. They began to hear more gunshots, and the men in the village cleaned and checked their weapons. Soldiers went out and came back on a regular basis. The boys were given a choice to stand up and fight or leave. Ishmael realized that if they chose to leave the village, they would most likely end up dead. There were over 30 boys ranging from seven years-old to 17 years-old. They were given guns and shown how to use them. They were also given new clothing, and their old clothing was taken away and burned. Ishmael's cassette was still in his pocket, and tears came to his eyes as he saw them burn.

The boys were taught how to hide and crawl. They continued their training exercises and drills, learning to work together. Their incentive to fight was to obtain revenge on those who killed their parents.



# Chapters 13-16

## Chapters 13-16 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13 - One day the corporal told the boys to take the day off. He told them that if they were Christians, they might want to worship the Lord because it might be their last chance. The kids began playing soccer, and they also went swimming. After that they were told that the holiday was over, and they were instructed to get their weapons and other gear.

The corporal handed out ammunition, and green head ties. He instructed the boys to shoot and kill anyone who was not wearing a head tie. A soldier passed out white tablets and told the boys that the tablets would boost their energy.

Ishmael and his friends decided to stay together as much as possible. He was terrified. As they went into battle he had no desire to shoot anyone. Then, he heard the tortured cry of one of his young friends and something snapped in his mind. He began killing anyone without a head tie that he could.

Later, in the village, Ishmael didn't feel anything. He couldn't sleep. The corporal and the lieutenant gave him more white capsules. Ishmael stayed awake for almost a week. They went out two more times during that week, and he never had a problem shooting his gun.

Chapter 14 - Ishmael didn't play anymore. Instead, he focused his energy on soldierly things. He guarded posts, smoked marijuana, and sniffed cocaine mixed with gunpowder. It gave him a lot of energy. He also watched war movies. He and the other boy soldiers raided rebel camps for supplies. Ishmael had no problem killing anyone, and he celebrated with the others when rebels were tortured and killed. They learned different ways to kill their prisoners, and Ishmael became a junior lieutenant.

Chapter 15 - The group of soldiers became Ishmael's family, and they stayed and slept in villages that they captured. He fought for two years, losing his childhood. One morning when he was 16, Ishmael was chosen to go away with some men from UNICEF. He was very angry about this decision. He was taken to Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. He and the other boys who were taken were given food and cots. They were told that they would get shoes the next day. The boys were hostile and ready to fight. They went after each other with machetes and grenades that they had hidden in their clothing. Military police pulled them apart.

Ishmael and the others were taken to Benin Home. It was a rehabilitation center on the outskirts of the city. They asked each other for drugs, but no one had any. Ishmael began fighting migraines again. His headaches were very bad.

Chapter 16 - Ishmael's life changed radically. He had to obey civilians and learn how to live without drugs or guns. He and the other young men were very violent, and they

would throw everything from bowls to benches at the counselors and doctors who tried to help them. They beat up locals in the neighborhood and destroyed their property. One day they beat up one of the workers, but when he came back to work the next day he wasn't upset at them. He told them that it wasn't their fault that they did such a thing to him.

Ishmael had a really hard time getting used to life without drugs, and his migraines were very difficult to deal with. One day he punched in a glass window. He went to a nurse who took care of him. As a junior lieutenant Ishmael was used to having some power. He was a good soldier. He didn't appreciate the turn his life had taken now, where others were taking care of him. Some of his comrades discovered that they could sell school supplies on the black market to earn money. He enjoyed going with them into the city.

For some reason, the buyers stopped coming. The only way to get into the city was to go on weekend trips after attending class all week. The students re-learned the basics of their education in school, and they didn't pay attention. Instead, they would fight with each other. The teacher would tell them that it wasn't their fault that they couldn't sit still in class - someday they would be able to again. The young boys all had different ways of dealing with this situation, and most fought nightmares. Ishmael would frequently wake up outside where a staff member would find him, wrap him up in a blanket and take him inside while reminding him that his situation in life wasn't his fault.



# Chapters 17-21

## Chapters 17-21 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 17 - The nurse who cleaned out Ishmael's cuts when he broke the glass came up to him one afternoon while he was playing table tennis. She invited him to come visit her. The two developed a friendship. At first, he didn't trust her, but she was always kind to him. One time she got him a Walkman and a cassette tape. She had seen in his records that he liked music. She asked him about his scars, and he remembered a battle he had been in. He didn't even feel the bullets as they hit him. He was doing very poorly, but the other soldiers who fought with him took good care of him. The situation reminded him at the time to stay loyal to them. As the nurse, Esther, heard the story, she teared up, and she reminded him that it wasn't his fault. Ishmael tried to remember his childhood, but he kept getting horrible flashbacks to the first time he slit a man's throat. He didn't want to sleep because he knew nightmares would come.

The nurse, Esther, took Ishmael and his friend into the city so Ishmael could go see a doctor. She introduced him to a man named Leslie who had been assigned to Ishmael to find a place for him to live after he completed his rehabilitation. After a while, Ishmael began sharing his dreams with Esther. She reminded him that none of the things he had been through were his fault. He loved the fact that she didn't judge him.

Chapter 18 - Ishmael lived at the rehabilitation home for five months before he had a serious talk with Esther. During the talk he told her that he felt as if there was nothing left for him to live for. She told him to think of her as his sister. She would be his family. The next day, visitors came to tour through the rehabilitation center. Ishmael and the other boys demonstrated to them that it was possible to be rehabilitated. Ishmael was asked to become a spokesperson for the center. With this new role, he wore nice clothes and talked to others about leaving his past as a soldier behind.

During his seventh month at the rehabilitation center, Leslie talked with Ishmael and told him that he couldn't locate any members of his family so he would have to find him a foster family. Ishmael told him about an uncle whom he had never met. He knew he lived in the city and that the man was a carpenter who was named Tommy. Leslie showed up later on with a man. It was Ishmael's uncle. At first Ishmael didn't trust him, but then he realized it really was his uncle. Tommy continued visiting Ishmael regularly, sharing stories of his youth with Ishmael's father. One weekend he took Ishmael to meet the rest of the family, and they got along well. Ishmael was very happy to be part of a family again.

Chapter 19 - Ishmael was about to be repatriated. He began taking his place in normal society by going home to live with his uncle. He had some concerns as to how he would act when he got his nightmares and his migraines. Ishmael didn't know how he was going to explain his sadness to the other children in the household who were not aware of his past. Esther reassured him that everything would be fine.



He said goodbye to his friends and went off to this new home. His uncle and aunt and cousins all welcomed him. One cousin took him out to a bar where girls showed an interest in him. They left him after he refused to share his past. Leslie checked on him and told him about an interview opportunity. Two children were going to be sent to the United Nations in New York to talk about the lives of children in Sierra Leone. Leslie felt that Ishmael would be a good candidate for this position.

Ishmael went to the interview and explained why he thought he should be chosen. That night, the family sat around listening to stories on a recording after they ate their dinner. It was a funny story, and Ishmael laughed. It felt very good to laugh with others. A few days later, a man came to the home to tell the family that Ishmael had been chosen to go to the United Nations. Ishmael's uncle couldn't believe it. Ishmael went through all the steps to prepare for the trip and he met the other boy who was traveling with him. His uncle still didn't believe that he was going, even as he went out of the house.

Chapter 20 - New York was shocking to Ishmael. He wasn't prepared for the extreme cold, and he didn't understand why it was so dark in the evening. The buildings were much taller than anything he had ever seen before, and he couldn't get used to the food. There were 57 children from 23 countries at the United Nations. Everyone had a chance to talk about their own country. While he was there, he met a storyteller. She noticed that he and his friend were cold, and she got them coats.

Ishmael called his uncle from New York. He had opportunities to see the city, and he really enjoyed going to Times Square. When it was his turn to talk at the United Nations, Ishmael talked about the fate of the child soldiers. He talked about how he was rehabilitated and how he now realized that he was not a soldier anymore. He was a child. It was difficult saying goodbye to the storyteller before he got back on the plane. The trip occurred shortly before his 16th birthday.

Chapter 21 - In the evenings that followed his New York City experience, Ishmael sometimes told his family about his trip. He started school again, but he discovered that the other students didn't want to have anything to do with him. Somehow they had learned about his past and they were scared of him. On May 25, 1997, he woke up to the sounds of gunshots. War was once again on his doorstep. The rebel army collaborated to oust the civilian government. Ishmael realized that he couldn't deal with this. He didn't want to return to his previous life.

His family needed food so he risked his life to get some, scaring his uncle who told him not to do that anymore. The fighting continued for the next five months. Ishmael's uncle became very ill and died. During this time, Ishmael lost contact with Laura, the storyteller from New York. She had been writing him and sending him some funds. After his uncle died, Ishmael was able to make a collect call to Laura. He asked if he could stay with her if he could get to New York City. She said yes. He ran off, and after facing many difficulties, he made his way out of the city.



# Characters

## Ishmael Beah

Ishmael Beah is the author of this book, although his author's name was Ishmael. Throughout the book he called himself Ishmael when mentioning his name. He wrote this book when he was older, living in New York City. Ishmael first learned about war when he was 10. He faced it personally when he was 12. A lover of hip-hop, Ishmael, his brother, and his friends formed a performing group and competed. He loved the music so much that he kept a cassette with him as he escaped from rebels and ran for his life. Ishmael was a troublesome child who radiated happiness when he was young. He didn't like being alone, and he also didn't like living in fear. Out of fear for his life, he became a boy soldier. Thanks to drugs he was given and a thirst for revenge, he became a remorseless killer until he was rehabilitated and repatriated by UNICEF. After this experience he became a spokesperson for children in Sierra Leone, traveling to speak at the United Nations about the children's plight.

## Tommy

Tommy was a carpenter in Freetown. He was also Ishmael's uncle. The two never met when Ishmael was younger, but Ishmael's father had told the boy stories about his uncle. When Ishmael was in rehabilitation, Tommy came to visit him then took him to meet the family. He never had his own children, but he took in children from his siblings when they couldn't care for their children. The man was filled with love and provided a house filled with laughter. After dinner, he and the family would gather to listen to recordings from storytellers. When Ishmael risked his life to get food for the family, Tommy was very upset and told him never to do that again. He became very ill and died when the family couldn't go out and get help for him due to the state of warfare in the city. He was mourned by many family and friends.

## Junior

Junior was a year older than Ishmael. He and Ishmael escaped together but eventually became separated from each other.

## Mohamed

Ishmael claimed Mohamed as his best friend. They escaped together, became soldiers together, and went through rehabilitation together.



## **Father**

Ishmael's father didn't live with him, but he still loved the boy. His new wife interfered with the relationship between this man and Ishmael.

## **Mother**

Ishmael's mother was filled with love for him. She reassured him of his father's love for him.

## **Mamie Kpana**

Mamie Kpana was Ishmael's grandmother. She told wonderful stories that Ishmael would remember when times were hard for him.

## **Grandfather**

Ishmael's grandfather was a teacher who taught Ishmael about plants. This helped Ishmael when he was out in the woods, trying to survive.

## **Musa**

Musa traveled with Ishmael. He was very good at telling stories, and he would entertain the others at night when they were soldiers.

## **Sheku**

Sheku was seven years-old. He was forced into soldier-hood, and slept in the same tent as Ishmael.

## **Josiah**

Josiah was 11 years old. He was forced into soldier-hood, and slept in the same tent as Ishmael. His gruesome death spurred Ishmael on to killing the rebel soldiers.

## **Aminata**

Aminata was Ishmael's cousin who also became a friend. He called her house from New York to tell his uncle that he had made it.





## **Aunt Sallay**

Aunt Sally was a loving woman who took Ishmael into her home. She made good food.

## **Bah**

Bah traveled with Ishmael as another child ambassador for the children of Sierra Leone. He and Ishmael were both very cold in New York City.

## **Laura Simms**

Laura Simms was a storyteller that Ishmael met in New York. She communicated with him, sent him funds, and eventually adopted him.

## **Therese Plair**

Therese Plair was the co-facilitator for the storyteller.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Mattru Jong**

Mattru Jong is where Ishmael was headed as the book began. He was going to participate in a competition where he would perform with his friends.

### **Mobimbi**

Mobimbi was where Ishmael would go to swim and watch television.

### **Casette**

Ishmael had a cassette in his pocket as he escaped from the rebels. It was taken away and burned when he became a boy soldier.

### **Hip-hop**

Ishmael enjoyed hip-hop music. It taught him English, and he loved the poetry and lyrics.

### **Kabati**

Kabati was where Ishmael's grandparents lived. He visited them on his way to the competition.

### **Sierra Leone**

Ishmael lived and fought in Sierra Leone.

### **New York City**

Ishmael traveled to New York City in order to speak at the United Nations.

### **Centennial Secondary School**

Centennial Secondary School was the school in Mattru Jong.

## **Yele**

Yele was a village that was occupied by the military.

## **Freetown**

Freetown was where Ishmael went on weekends after attending school in rehabilitation.

## **Benin Home**

Benin Home was where Ishmael was taken for his rehabilitation.

## **New England Ville**

New England Ville was where Ishmael lived with his uncle and the family. He left when the war came so close that he was afraid he would have to go back to his former life.

## **Conakry**

Conakry was the capital of Guinea. It was the peaceful neighboring country.



# Themes

## The Plight of the Boy Soldier

Although Ishmael tried to fit in as an average high school boy in New York City, his friends knew that he was holding something back. In fact, he had a very traumatic past. When he was 10 years old he started seeing the remnants of war as travelers came through his village. He noticed that the children jumped at sounds and everyone was terrified. When he was 12, he experienced war firsthand when his village was destroyed while he was away for a couple of days. He lost his family that day, and when the rebel soldiers came after him and his friends, he had to escape.

Ishmael witnessed numerous grotesque deaths and experienced isolation and starvation as he tried to get away from the rebel soldiers. At one point, he and his friends were brought to a camp where they were trained to become soldiers themselves. The camp was filled with orphaned boys, some as young as 7 years old. They were all trained to become killers.

The boys were given white tablets to get more energy, and Ishmael became addicted to drugs that desensitized him. He was taught to attack mercilessly, without remorse, in order to avenge his family. He knew that if he left his fighting community, he would die. He was not the only boy in this situation. When he was rescued by UNICEF and sent to a place for rehabilitation, Ishmael met numerous other boy soldiers who came from similar circumstances to his own.

## Rehabilitation of the Child Soldiers

Ishmael was very comfortable with his life as a boy soldier. However, one day he was taken away from that lifestyle and brought to the city by UNICEF so he could be rehabilitated. He and the other young soldiers who were brought there were not happy with the changes in their lives. They were used to having the power over deciding who was going to live and die, and now they had to listen to and obey civilians. They were also forced to go through drug withdrawal. The drugs were used to desensitize them while they were soldiers so once the drugs were out of their systems, the nightmares kicked in. The boys attacked each other, and they attacked those around them.

The workers in the rehabilitation center were very patient and constantly reminded them that it wasn't their fault that they were behaving that way and that their lives had turned out that way. The boys had to learn how to trust once more. They had doctors, nurses, psychologists and other specialists on hand to work with them, teaching them to the children once more.

The center also helped find homes for the boys when they were ready to become repatriated. For many, this meant finding relatives who were willing to take them in. For others without relatives, this meant finding foster care. Ishmael became a spokesperson



for rehabilitation, speaking about the soldier child's plight and showing how rehabilitation can be successful. He, himself, had learned that revenge was not the answer. In fact, it only bred more violence. Eventually he traveled to talk at the United Nations in New York City about the issues faced by children in war-torn Sierra Leone.

## Storytelling and Music

Ishmael's life was saved by music multiple times. When the book opened, Ishmael's friends were on the way to a competition where they were going to perform a dance routine to hip-hop music. While they were gone, his village was invaded by rebel soldiers. His family escaped only to be killed at a later date by rebels. If he had been with them, he would have most likely died as well. On two different occasions during his travels, he was interrogated by villagers who thought he was dangerous. Both times, someone discovered his cassette tape with music and asked what it was. When he explained about the music, he was released.

Music wasn't his only solace; Ishmael also appreciated storytelling. He remembered his grandmother's stories as he traveled, and he found solace in some of Musa's stories. When Ishmael was getting rehabilitated, his nurse used music to connect with him. She got him a Walkman and a reggae tape. It made him happy, and he enjoyed the poetry of the lyrics. When he moved in with his uncle, the family bonded over storytelling after dinner. He learned to laugh again.

When Ishmael went to New York City, he connected with a storyteller at the United Nations. They kept in touch after he went back to his country, and she sent him funds. When the war became intense in his area, he escaped and went to New York to live with the storyteller.

# Style

## Perspective

*A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah is the story of the author's own life. He comes from a culture where storytelling is held in high regard, and he was adopted by a storyteller in the United States. This shows through in the novel as he weaves words and events to tell a captivating, educational and important story. He is blunt about events he experienced, describing horrors in detail, yet doesn't glorify any violence.

In the first section of the book, before the index, there is a brief overview of the author's life, which offers insight to his perspective. He moved to the United States at the age of 18 and finished high school at the United Nations International School. This shows the connection of how a young boy from Africa survived his past and came to live in a new land where he could tell the tale of the children in his war-torn country. His passion extends beyond the book and into his own life where he heads the Ishmael Beah Foundation, which dedicates itself to reintegrating child soldiers into society.

## Tone

After an initial third-person introduction, this novel is written as a first person narrative. The material presented is harsh and real, describing brutal killings in detail. These details are presented as a matter-of-fact without extra drama.

Several times throughout the novel, the author points out that he appreciates poetry in the music he hears, and he also enjoys reading and performing Shakespearean writing. This shows through in his own writing. Many of his descriptions are poetic. Instead of saying he was scared, the author would write, "My veins tightened." Instead of saying he was sad, the author would write, "I felt a sting in my heart."

## Structure

*A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah begins with several pages of praise from reviewers from prestigious news outlets such as "The Wall Street Journal" and "Newsweek." These quotes are followed by a third-person overview of the author, detailing who he is and offering a brief biography. This is followed by the title page and a dedication page then a map depicting Ishmael's journey through Sierra Leone into Guinea.

After the map, the author wrote a brief section about why he wrote the book. This section is labeled under the heading of "New York City, 1998." After this page comes a table of contents, which shows that there are 21 chapters in the book. They do not have titles, merely numbers. The chapters range in length from two pages up to

approximately 20 pages. The end of the story is followed by a chronology that details the political history of Sierra Leone from the 1400s to 2006. The book ends with acknowledgements from the author to those who have helped him with the book, his education and his life.



## Quotes

"It wasn't until refugees started passing through our town that we began to see that it was actually taking place in our country."

Chapter 1, p. 5.

"We didn't know that we were leaving home, never to return."

Chapter 1, p. 7.

"I get a chance to observe the moon now, I still see those same images I saw when I was six, and it pleases me to know that that part of my childhood is still embedded in me."

Chapter 1, p. 17.

"These days I live in three worlds: my dreams, and the experiences of my new life, which trigger memories from the past."

Chapter 2, p. 20

"This was one of the consequences of the civil war. People stopped trusting each other, and every stranger became an enemy."

Chapter 4, p. 37

"If you are alive, there is hope for a better day and something good to happen. If there is nothing good left in the destiny of a person, he or she will die."

Chapter 8, p. 54

"Even in the middle of the madness there remained that true and natural beauty, and it took my mind away from my current situation as I marveled at this sight."

Chapter 9, p. 59

"How many more times do we have to come to terms with death before we find safety?' he asked."

Chapter 10, p. 70

"Every time people come at us with the intention of killing us, I close my eyes and wait for death. Even though I am still alive, I feel like each time I accept death, part of me dies. Very soon I will completely die and all that will be left is my empty body walking with you. It will be quieter than I am."

Chapter 10, p. 70





"My childhood had gone by without my knowing, and it seemed as if my heart had frozen."

Chapter 15, p. 126

"'In the sky there are always answers and explanations for everything: every pain, every suffering, joy, and confusion.' That night I wanted the sky to talk to me."

Chapter 17, p. 166

"'I've come to learn that if I am going to take revenge, in that process I will kill another person whose family will want revenge; then revenge and revenge and revenge will never come to an end...'"

Chapter 20, p. 199

"I concluded to myself that if I were the hunter, I would shoot the monkey so that it would no longer have the chance to put other hunters in the same predicament."

Chapter 21, p. 218

## Topics for Discussion

How did Ishmael become separated from the rest of his family when he was 12 years old?

What was it about music that appealed to Ishmael?

How did music save Ishmael?

Why did Ishmael become a boy soldier?

What was Ishmael's job as a spokesperson?

Why did Ishmael leave his home with his aunt and uncle?

How did Ishmael come to live in New York?