

# **What Is the What Study Guide**

## **What Is the What by Dave Eggers**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">What Is the What Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters I-III.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters IV-VI.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapters VII-IX.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters X-XII.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapters XIII-XV.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapters XVI-XVIII.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapters XIX-XXI.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters XXII-XXIV.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapters XXV-XXVI.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>



# Plot Summary

What is written as an autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, but authored by the American writer, Dave Eggers. Mixing fictional and non-fictional elements, Eggers tells the story of Valentino's long and arduous journey from his hometown in Southern Sudan to his present home in Atlanta, Georgia in the USA. Valentino suffers hunger and disease as, with thousands of others, he walks through his war-torn country to refugee camps in both Ethiopia and Kenya.

The book opens with Valentino answering his a knock on his apartment door to an African-American woman. She says she wants to use the phone, but moments later, a man appears and forces himself through the door and ties Valentino up while the woman robs the apartment. From this compromised position Valentino tells the reader the first part of his story.

Valentino was born in Southern Sudan in a village called Marial Bai. He speaks of his upbringing with fondness, surrounded by a good family and friends. Compared to many people in the area, he had a privileged background. His father owns a series of shops and is likely to hand them over to Valentino when he retires. However, the Sudanese government renders such plans impossible. In an attempt to oppress the uprising of the rebel army SPLA and bring the whole country under Islamic law, they order the destruction of Southern Sudan villages. The destruction of Valentino's village is brutal, but he manages to escape into the forest and join hundreds of other boys on a walk to Ethiopia.

Back in America, the robbers knock Valentino unconscious. When he wakes up, he is bound and gagged in his own apartment with a young boy named Michael left to guard him. Valentino unsuccessfully tries to reason with the boy, but eventually he falls back into his story, comparing his early life in Sudan to Michael's current life in America.

Valentino begins his walk to Ethiopia. The walk is treacherous in the extreme—wild animals, soldiers and disease threatening his life. As they walk through villages, other children join their group, but just as many die, including Valentino's walking partner, Deng. Valentino reunites with his boyhood friend, William K. They keep each other alive, both experiencing signs of madness and disease, until William K dies just before they reach Ethiopia.

Back in America, Valentino's house mate, Achor Achor, returns from his girlfriend's house. The robbers have now gone, and Achor Achor unties his friend and calls the police. When a policewoman finally arrives, she shows no sign that either she cares about the robbery or that she will take the investigation any further. Disillusioned, Valentino and Achor Achor visit the local hospital. They expect a doctor to see Valentino quickly, but after many hours they are still waiting. During the wait, Valentino continues his story.



They cross the border into Ethiopia and set up a refugee camp in Pinyudo near the Gilo River. More children join their ranks, and the elders organize them into groups. Valentino is head of his group, which he names the 11 because it consists of 11 boys. Slowly the elders build schools and begin to educate the children. Their idea is to develop a new generation of educated Southern Sudanese, who can continue to the fight. The rebel army oversees camp development and honors the refugees with visits and speeches from rebel leaders, most notably the SPLA founder, John Garang. It is not long, though, before the SPLA begin recruiting boys into the army. Valentino is just reaching the age of recruitment when the Ethiopian army drives the refugees away from the area.

The soldiers force the refugees into another treacherous journey into Kenya. In Kenya, they build another refugee camp in Kakuma. Unfortunately, foreign aid is less forthcoming, and they have to survive on one meal a day. Nevertheless, life becomes relatively comfortable. Valentino lives with a family, goes to school, plays basketball and meets his future girlfriend, Tabitha. Valentino is very popular and camp leaders give him a job as youth leader and the opportunity to visit Nairobi. However, when it comes to getting out of Africa and to the promised land of America, the authorities overlook him.

Back in America Valentino decides to give up waiting for a doctor and goes to work. His work mate questions why he looks so beat up, and Valentino's silence prompts him to ask why the Sudanese get into so many fights. In his now downbeat mood, Valentino thinks about his girlfriend Tabitha. They started their romance in Kakuma, but it ended prematurely when Tabitha moved to Seattle and found a new Sudanese boyfriend. When Valentino moved to Atlanta, they got in contact again, and soon afterwards Tabitha broke up with her boyfriend. Her ex-boyfriend became jealous and murdered her.

The authorities finally choose Valentino to immigrate to America. He has his doubts because he wants to see his family again and gets contact with his father. His father tells he must go to America and come back a successful and educated man. In 2001, in the wake of the terrorist attack in New York, Valentino flies to Atlanta.



# Chapters I-III

## Chapters I-III Summary and Analysis

Valentino opens his door to an African-American woman. She claims her car has broken down and needs to use his phone. Valentino lets her in, but just as he is looking for his cell phone, an African-American man walks into the house. An angry Valentino asks what is happening, and the man tells him they are robbing him. Valentino's mind drifts and he starts to think about his life in Sudan. This acts as an introduction, Valentino briefly covering the major events of the book such as the Lost Boys walk to Ethiopia, and his friend's death in Kenya. Back in his apartment, the man thinks Valentino is getting too cocky and hits him with the butt of his gun. When Valentino tries to get to his feet, the man kicks him in the head. While he is unconscious, Valentino thinks about his current life in America. He lives with his friend, Achor Achor, and works at a gym. He says representatives promised them a comfortable, peaceful life in America, but they have found it difficult to survive. Valentino partly blames this on the Sudanese's own high expectations. When Valentino wakes up, the two robbers are still there. They cannot leave the house because a policeman is talking to someone outside. In this opening chapter, Egger's compares Valentino's plight with that of the African-Americans. By showing African-American robbers attacking another African, he is saying even in a wealthy society, there are still major problems, and Valentino even links these problems to a type of war. Eggers is suggesting the Sudanese can quite easily be as neglected here as they can in their own country, and this can also lead to violence.

The two robbers, Tonya and Powder, wait for the policeman to leave, and Valentino reflects on his life in America. He says before he came to America the Sudanese elders warned them of the of he violence he would face and to keep away from African-Americans, particularly the women. He says that before he came to the States, everything he knew about African-Americans, he learned from films, showing them as gun-toting drug dealers. Finally, Tonya and Powder leave. Valentino gets up to see exactly what they have stolen, but minutes later they walk back through the door. Valentino tells them it is about time they left for good, and the man knocks him unconscious.

When Valentino wakes up, he is lying on the sofa, tied and gagged. The robbers have gone, but a boy he does not know is watching his television. His presence turns Valentino's mind to when he was a young boy in Sudan and had to walk from his village to Ethiopia. He walked with his friend, Deng, until Deng ate raw elephant meat and died.



# Chapters IV-VI

## Chapters IV-VI Summary and Analysis

Valentino reflects on his life in his hometown of Marial Bai in Southern Sudan. His father has five wives and Valentino's mother is his first wife. Valentino describes his mother as 6 ft tall, but as thin as any woman and as strong as any man. His two best friends are Moses and William K. Valentino describes Moses as strong and William K as a great storyteller but prone to lying. Valentino tells a story of the time the three boys first saw a bicycle. They were so impressed, they offered to guard it through the night. Valentino continues to describe his relationship with an older girl named Amath. As a young boy, Valentino was completely enamored with her. One day, she asks him to fetch her some water. Valentino sprints off as fast as he can and goes to his father's shop to get a container and then to the river to get the water. On the way back, he falls over. Valentino finishes the chapter wondering what his friends and family are now doing. This part shows Valentino as an unreliable

narrator, though he does say in the book that he is recalling from his past and may not always be accurate. He describes a life that, although was far behind the Western world, he remembers it with nothing but fondness. Even when he hears soldiers have destroyed his village, he still wants to go back and recreate the happiest moments of his life. This shows people are generally happy with what they know. He may have more access to clothes and good food in America, but it is still an environment and culture he does not understand.

As Valentino continues to think about Sudan, he realizes the tape across his mouth is coming loose. He immediately begins to think he can save himself and even fantasizes about saving the boy, comparing the boy's plight to his own problems in Sudan. Eventually, Valentino frees the tape and speaks to the young boy. This is the last thing the boy expects, and he looks towards Valentino as if he is an alien. Valentino speaks again and the boy rushes to the kitchen where he tries to make a phone call. He does not get an answer, and Valentino hears him looking around for something. The boy returns with a telephone directory and drops it on Valentino's head. This symbolizes that Valentino is on the lowest rung of the ladder, even lower than a little boy with criminals for parents. Basically, Eggers is trying to show it is not easy for the Sudanese to come here; they start off with nothing, and consequently they are often seen as nothing. Eggers highlights this point later, when Valentino talks about the Sudanese men in America who have fallen into problems.

The phone rings and the young boy answers it as Michael. His name reminds Valentino of another Michael, who for him symbolizes the start of the civil war. One day William calls Valentino away from his hut and takes him to a crowd of people. In the center of the crowd is a man called Michael. He has no hands because the Arabs chopped them off under Sharia law. Valentino explains that the Arabs introduced Sharia to Sudan under the September Laws, ripping up the previous Addis Ababa agreement. The next



day, Valentino goes to his father's store, where he is talking to the Arab Sadiq. Valentino likes Sadiq because he always gives him presents. On this occasion, he gives Valentino a star made from glass and lets him sit upon his horse. Later Valentino joins his father and his friends for dinner. On Sadiq's request, his father tells the story of creation. He says God asked the Sudanese people if they wanted to keep the cattle or exchange them for What. Sadiq ask What is the What? Valentino's father tells the men that God was testing the Sudanese, a test they came through because they chose the less greedy option of the cattle. Valentino says war is only a few weeks away. Many villages in Southern will be badly hit, but Marial Bai will be one of the worse because it houses so many of the rebels. Currently the rebels are killing Arabs and burning down their businesses. Some rebel soldiers come to Valentino's father's shop and take some sugar without paying. When Valentino's father questions their action, they tie him up and threaten to kill him. Valentino says when the Arabs attack the village, the rebel soldiers have already left.



# Chapters VII-IX

## Chapters VII-IX Summary and Analysis

Valentino is helping his mother when he hears the sound of airplanes. His mother grabs him and pulls him indoors as the men in the planes shoot their guns. After an hour of shooting, the planes kill 30 men. The next day, government soldiers arrive in the village and burn it down. Valentino states that it was in retribution for the acts of the SPLA soldiers, but they had long since left the village.

Valentino's father decides they must leave Marial Bai for the nearby city of Aweil. Here, he says they can live peacefully, and he can set up another shop. He takes three of his wives, but leaves Valentino's mother. In Aweil, government soldiers interrogate all the Dinka, including Valentino's father. They tell Valentino's father he has been helping the rebel soldiers by giving them food. They take him away, but the next morning he is back. A few days later, the soldiers kill his friend Bol Dut, and they decide to go back to Marial Bai. When they get to the village, the soldiers have burned almost all the houses. William K tells Valentino the Arab soldiers killed his brother Joseph. The book does not just focus on the brutalities of war but also looks at the culture of the Southern Sudanese and, in particular, the Dinka tribe. Here his father makes all the decisions for the family, saying who he wants to stay at the village and who he wants to come with him to the city. This becomes more important later on as Eggers increasingly compares Valentino's culture with American culture. In fact, Valentino claims that the Sudanese men become confused and angry in America because they think women have too much freedom, something they do not understand.

A week later, Valentino is outside again with his mother when they hear the rumblings of horses. Valentino's mother grabs him, and they run to hide in the long grass. Two hundred Arab soldiers begin shooting randomly at the villagers. Valentino's mother decides they need to find another hiding place, but as they run off, a soldier stops them. He is getting off his horse when he slips, accidentally setting off his gun and shooting his horse in the leg. In the proceeding mayhem, Valentino and his mother make their escape to a compound full of grain. Valentino's mother hears the screams of a friend, and she decides she must investigate and leaves her son, promising she will come back in a few minutes. However, she does not come back, and Valentino decides to hide in the local church, the safest place he can think of. From the church, he can see everything. He spies his friend Moses standing over his mother's dead body screaming for her to stand up. When night comes, Valentino runs off into the forest. Two Arab soldiers hear him and Valentino hides. They try to entice him out, but Valentino stays as still as possible for a number of hours until they finally leave. In the morning, he comes upon a group of Dinkas. They tell Valentino his father is dead, and he should come with them to the Sudanese capital Khartoum. They set off, but it is not long before Arab soldiers attack them. Again, Valentino manages to escape.





# Chapters X-XII

## Chapters X-XII Summary and Analysis

Michael goes into Valentino's bedroom. Valentino tries to talk to him, worried he is looking at the photographs of his girlfriend Tabitha. The thought of Tabitha sends Valentino into a story about how they met. In Kakuma they attended the same Home Economics class run by Miss Spatula. Tabitha was unusual among the Sudanese in that her mother refused to allow her to marry early and instead encouraged her to learn. Such an upbringing gave her the opportunity to move to the USA, and she settled with her brothers in Seattle. Valentino states that many of the Sudanese in America want a Sudanese wife but find they have to travel back to Sudan to get one. For this reason Tabitha was coveted by all the Sudanese men. When Valentino moved to America, he got back in contact with her and counts himself lucky she chose him. Valentino calls Michael's name, but he closes the bedroom door. Alone, Valentino continues his story. After escaping the Arab soldiers for the second time, Valentino stays the night in a tree. In the morning, he sees a group of Dinka and climbs down to talk to them. Leading them is the elder Dut Majouk. Dut tells Valentino that they are making their way to Bilpam, and Valentino decides he has no choice but to join them. They walk off to the next village. During the walk, he makes the acquaintance of Deng. Deng tells him the Arab soldiers attacked his village as well, but he ran off to his school and hid in a locker. While in the locker, he wet his pants, the smell keeping away the soldiers who thought an animal had died in there. The boys get to the village, and an elder provides them with food. Later on, Dut tries to explain the political situation to a confused Valentino.

Eggers writes the book through the eyes of Valentino. This works well, but sometimes the reader must wonder if Valentino is painting himself in too modest a light. In this chapter he says he was attracted to Tabitha because she was a free spirit. Yet as mentioned in the third summary he says other Sudanese men in America find it difficult to accept that they have less control over their wives and girlfriends in America. Valentino has lived a similar life so what makes him so different? This can be explained by the fact that Valentino is looking to create an accessible persona to get his book published and therefore raise more money for his charity.

Tonja arrives back at the apartment, takes the rest of Valentino's things and leaves with Michael. At this point, Valentino realizes he needs to raise the alarm. For a few moments, his anger overtakes him, and he begins to think the atrocities that his people have suffered over the years. Valentino claims that slavery is a problem started a hundred years ago by the Arabs. He says they impregnated the Sudanese girls and raped the boys. At the end of the chapter, Valentino manages to move himself to his door and begins to kick at it.

Valentino continues to talk about his walk to Ethiopia. They come to a village, but the villages do not take to them kindly, thinking the boys bring nothing but trouble. Dut leaves the boys and goes to talk to the village chief. Some of the older boys invade a



tent and steal some food. The crime incenses the villagers, and they attack the boys with spears, sending them running off in all directions. Now without Dut, the eldest boy Kur, decides to wait for him. Unfortunately, a lion attacks them, devouring two of the boys. They come to another village and to their surprise see the blue dog they saw at the previous village. Before long they realize they have walked in a circle and are back at the same village. However, since they were last there, soldiers have destroyed all the houses and killed most of the inhabitants. The group leave with an extra 18 boys in tow. At this point, people are becoming very ill. Some boys are losing their minds, and others like Deng complain of a painful stomach. They cannot stop, however, and increasingly Dut has to leave boys to die by the side of the road. They meet some soldiers who have killed an elephant and invite Dut and the boys to feast on the animal. The boys have not tasted meat for months and rip the elephant apart, eating the meat raw. Valentino is one of the few boys who wait for a fire to cook the elephant meat. They stay the night with the soldiers and in the morning, Deng is dead. Valentino is distraught and for the rest of the journey, he decides not to say another word. Further on in their journey, planes attack them and more boys die.



# Chapters XIII-XV

## Chapters XIII-XV Summary and Analysis

Valentino talks about Mary Williams, the founder of the Lost Boys foundation. She is the adopted African-American daughter of actress Jane Fonda and one of the first contacts Valentino makes. Some of the Sudanese blame Mary for not getting them access to the college educations they expected, saying she is stealing from their funds. Valentino, however, likes Mary, and they develop a good relationship. The relationship works well for Valentino, and Mary finds him an excellent sponsor in the lawyer Phil Mays. One day Valentino and some other boys go to the Mays' house for dinner. Here Valentino shows the cultural differences between the Sudanese and the Americans. First, Achok Achok tells a story about when his friends bought a box of tampons and took them back as decoration for their house because they thought they were beautiful. Second, Phil and his wife Stacey ask the boys if they know of any Dinka phrases. Their question worries the boys, and they excuse themselves and walk into another room to discuss exactly what the two Americans want from them. Valentino's next friendship in America is with Bobby Newmyer, a film director who wants to make a movie out of the Lost Boys experience. Valentino visits his house in LA and becomes a popular member of his family.

Back in Sudan, the boys have to cross the River Nile to get any further. Unfortunately, there are only two boats and they have to wait. More groups of travelers join them, and before long, thousands of people wait at the riverside. As they all wait, they are bitten by mosquitoes and some boys contract malaria. Finally, they get to cross. On the other side, Valentino meets his old friend William K. William tells Valentino when he fled Mariel Bai, he was lucky enough to find a bus that took him to the city where his relatives lived. He got a job as a bricklayer, but before long, the Muslims began to attack the Dinkas in retaliation for rebel attacks on their own people. William K and his family sought refuge with millions of others at the police station, and the police loaded them onto trains to move them to a safer place. Halfway way there, the second train carrying the men is set alight. William is on the other train with the women and children. When they see the men's train on fire, they force open their carriage doors and make their escape. A while later, William met Dut and joined the walking group.

The boys walk on. Their situation becomes increasingly desperate as they find less and less food. William K starts to act strangely, throwing sand at everyone because he thinks they are his archenemy from Mariel Bai. One night they are sleeping when they see lights. Kur screams for them to run and they scatter and hide themselves. Valentino is running when he feels something grab his leg. It is barbwire and it cuts him badly. As he frees himself, he hears the sound of a man's voice in the darkness. He has no chance to escape so he answers. Luckily, the man is a Dinka, and he takes him back to his hut, where he feeds Valentino nuts and fresh water. In the morning, Valentino promises the man not to say anything about him and walks back to the other boys. Here he finds they ran away from nothing. The lights were probably an aid truck and the



rumbling sounds were merely the boys running. They walk on and find some birds' nests. Valentino and the others eat the bird's eggs and some even eat the baby birds raw. William K, though, is not feeling well and the next day he dies. The group is now very close to their destination. They come to the River Gilo, which separates Sudan with Ethiopia. There are crocodiles in the river, but Dut manages to persuade the boys to cross. All of them make it.

Achor Achor finally arrives at the apartment and unties Valentino. He suggests they phone the police, though the idea does not enthrall Valentino. He has had trouble with the police in the past. One time a police officer stopped him because his plates had expired. The policeman threatened Valentino with jail and by letting him go, made out like he was saving his life. Nevertheless, Achor Achor calls the police. An hour later, a female police officer knocks at the door. She takes a few notes, but seems disinterested, and Valentino knows she will not take the investigation any further. When she leaves, Achor Achor drives Valentino to the local hospital.



# Chapters XVI-XVIII

## Chapters XVI-XVIII Summary and Analysis

At the hospital, they fill out a form and wait for a doctor. After an hour, they wonder what is taking so long and Achor Achor suggests it is because Valentino does not have medical insurance and perhaps they think he cannot pay for his treatment. Valentino agrees and shows the receptionist his credit card. The receptionist says it has nothing to do with money and a doctor will see him shortly. Three hours later, they are still waiting. Achor Achor suggests Valentino phone Deb Newmyer for advice. Again, Valentino agrees and rings her on his cell phone. Deb requests to speak to the receptionist, but when the receptionist hands the phone back, Deb tells Valentino they are short of staff, but if doctor does not see him in an half an hour, he should call her again.

Throughout the book, Eggers mixes non-fiction with fiction. So far in America in only a few hours Valentino has been robbed, ignored by the police and here at the hospital, he is left waiting 14 hours, probably because he does not have insurance. This obvious exaggeration often feels like Eggers is trying to use Valentino's plight to criticize American society. It is no surprise then that Valentino's arrival in America coincides with the September 11 attacks

Ethiopia is not the haven Valentino and the other boys expected. Nevertheless, life becomes far more secure. The only problem they have is lack of food, made worse by the increasing number of people coming into the camp. Initially, they fish in the nearby Gilo River, a task Valentino finds difficult until he meets Achor Achor, who shows him to make a proper fishing rod. The elders begin to organize the boys and families into groups. They put Valentino in charge of 11 boys with Achor Achor as his deputy. Each boy has his own specific job. Valentino gives one boy the task of developing relationships with important people because he is good at making friendships. Valentino's job is to go down to the river everyday for water. One day at the river, he finds a human head. It is the head of an SPLA soldier, who stole from the local Ethiopian village. The villagers inflict deaths on thieving Sudanese men, and the SPLA retaliate by killing Ethiopians. Meanwhile Valentino is getting healthier. This comes with its own problems as he knows he is now expected to work more. His main job is to help bury the dead.

Valentino reunites with his old friend Moses. He was sure the soldiers had killed him, and initially, he thinks Moses is nothing more than a mirage. Once he realizes he is real, he listens to Moses' story. Arab soldier took him back to the city and sold him as a slave. He became the servant of a prominent Arab family. However, life was no easier, and they regularly beat and tortured him. One day they told him he was a donkey and fed him garbage until he was sick. They put Moses into the hospital, and here he realized being sick is the only chance he had of escape. On his return to his master, he feigns



sickness until he leaves his master no choice, but to sell him on. His new masters then sell him to some white people, who let him free.

Valentino is still in the hospital. He thinks about his girlfriend Tabitha and how spending time with her in a hospital waiting room would be a pleasure rather than a chore. He says things between them have become complicated because she has been sending him mixed signals. One day he will receive an email saying she loves him and the next an email suggesting she is unsure of their relationship.

Back in Ethiopia, Valentino explains life is getting better. The refugee builds Schools and the UN sends clothes. Valentino's teacher is Mr. Kondit. Everything is going well until Mr. Kondit introduces his four young nieces to the class. Their presence distracts the boys from their learning, and they find themselves positioning their chairs to get a better look at the girls in class, and then after class doing nothing but talk and think about them. However, Valentino decides the best way to get their attention is to work hard. For the remainder of the semester he studies after school, helps Mr. Kondit in class and puts his hand up to every question. His ploy works and the girls invite him for lunch at their house. Valentino's father had taught him never to accept an invitation and initially he says no, but soon realizes his mistake. The next day, he accepts their offer. At their house, the girls tell him they want to study with him and lead Valentino into their bedroom. Here they play a game where they have to take turns to search for each other's sexual organs. Similar games continue for the rest of his time in Pinyudo.



# Chapters XIX-XXI

## Chapters XIX-XXI Summary and Analysis

Finally, the receptionist calls Valentino in to the Doctor. The receptionist is an African-American called Julian. He tells Valentino he fought in the Vietnam war, continuing to claim two boys mugged him by gunpoint. He tells Valentino he beat them up. Valentino asks if he shot them and Julian says no, but he beat them up pretty bad. Julian takes Valentino for a MRI scan. Valentino is happy because he has wanted a MRI scan for months. He thinks a scan will help him find out why he gets such mediocre grades at college. After the scan, Julian takes him back to receptionist to wait for the results.

John Garang the leader of the SPLA comes to visit the camp. The refugees greet him enthusiastically and the children sing patriotic songs. He tells the children of all the injustices put upon the Dinka tribe and says that the boys here today will fight for the freedom of Sudan. After his speech, young boys volunteer for the army, including Valentino's friend Moses. More commanders come to the camp and deliver speeches. One commander farms the land, and the children all plant tomato seeds. Another commander comes to ban the children from speaking English. He says if any of the aid workers ask them any questions, they should feign shyness and say nothing. From here on in, the teachers start to instill far more discipline. They cane the boys for misbehaving, but some of the boys are so weak they die from the punishment. Then the teachers force the boys to cane each other. Some children try to run away, but the soldiers kill them.

One day a commander called Giar Chuany visits the camp with some prisoners. He says the prisoners are traitors who have raped and killed their own people. One of the prisoners steps forward and says it is all lie; they have done nothing and the SPLA eat their own. Other prisoners scream out the same thing and the soldiers shoot them all in the head. Scared, the children all run away. Valentino runs to Mr. Kondit's house and finds him lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He tells Valentino he does not know what is happening anymore. Meanwhile the Ethiopian people overthrow their president, which means the Dinka are no longer safe at the camp. To leave, they have to cross the Gilo river, but just as they are about to set off, Ethiopian soldiers attack them. Amid a shower of bullets, Valentino swims safely across. On the other side, he finds Achok Achok. They make their way to Pochalla. At one point, a woman appears from the long grass and calls some boys over, claiming she is a mother and wants to help them. When they are close enough, she pulls out a gun and shoots them. Both Valentino and Achok Achok escape unharmed.

Back in Sudan, Valentino and the others have to walk to Kakuma in Kenya. Here they are told aid workers are building them a haven. Unfortunately, at this point, Valentino's eyes have swelled up and he can hardly see. The same problem occurs to other boys, but while their swelling goes down after a few days, Valentino's problem persists. Valentino talks about Tabitha. She had told him her ex-boyfriend Duluma did not take



kindly to their break up and is still bothering her. Valentino phones Duluma, and they have such a good chat Valentino presumes it puts an end to the problem. A few days later Valentino is attending a meeting when Tabitha rings his phone. He is too busy to answer and turns the phone off. Tabitha rings again, but again Valentino has to leave it. After the meeting Achor Achor phones him to ask if he has heard what has happened to Tabitha. He says she was staying with a friend to get away from Duluma when he knocked on the apartment door. Unafraid Tabitha confronted him, and Duluma pulled out a knife, stabbing her in the chest 22 times. Duluma later jumped off a bridge and is currently in hospital with a broken back. Back in Sudan, the group approach Kakuma. However, Valentino is too tired to walk any further and collapses on the path. He has no energy to get up, but a girl called Maria forces him to stand and walk that little bit further to their new home.





# Chapters XXII-XXIV

## Chapters XXII-XXIV Summary and Analysis

In the wake of Tabitha's death, Valentino's American friends worry for his state of mind. They all apologize for their country, but Valentino guesses they worry more about of what he is now capable. He says the media are full of stories about Sudanese people committing criminal acts. He tells the story of a Sudanese man who refused to let his Sudanese wife travel to Atlanta to see her family. His wife went anyway and on her return, the man killed her. Valentino says the problem is culture. For example, women in Sudan are expected to do what men say without question, but in America they are given more freedom, which is confusing to some Sudanese men. He goes onto say that he thinks Dumalu killed Tabitha because she aborted his baby. Such a thing would never be allowed in Sudan, where sex before marriage is prohibited.

Valentino talks about life in Kakuma. They do not have access to the amount of food they had in Pinyudo, but life is more secure, particularly without the military. The children now enjoy themselves with sports such as basketball and soccer. Valentino is good at basketball and is part of a Sudanese team that is almost unbeatable. However, rumors spread that UN are going to kill the Dinka in the camp. People say the Sudanese government have told the UN the Dinka carry a plague and have paid the UN to get rid of them. The rumors become more intense when the UN builds a fence around the camp. However, the fence is to help the aid workers gather people and count them. They have had problems with numbers because people leave the camp, go back to Sudan and then come back with a new name and an extra ration card. The refugees call this a recycling trip, and Valentino needs to make the trip himself because the man he is living with is expecting his wife and daughters to arrive, and soon they will have more mouths to feed. Valentino leaves at night. After a sleep, he meets Thomas, who tells him the papers he needs will cost money. Valentino had no idea about this and brought only enough money to bribe the Kenyan soldiers. Thomas gives him some more money and talks one of his friends into driving Valentino to Sudan. However, when Valentino climbs aboard the back of the vehicle, he finds himself surrounded by dead bodies. The truck stops at a hospital and Valentino runs off into the building. A Kenyan doctor stops him to ask what the matter is and Valentino tells him about his journey to Sudan. The Kenyan tells him not to go, as the men who are giving him a lift are liable to sell him to the SPLA. At this point, the truck drivers start calling for Valentino to return to the truck, but he decides to stay with the doctor. The doctor gives Valentino some chicken and soda before Valentino starts his journey back to Kakuma. On the way back, he meets a man who offers to buy some of his clothes. Valentino thinks if he sells his clothes, his trip will not be such a failure and barter a good price. The man says Valentino is a good businessman, but he will have pay for the clothes tomorrow. He says he will meet Valentino in Kakuma. As the man walks away with the clothes, Valentino realizes he has been duped.



The Japanese become interested in Kakuma and help the refugees build a library and hospital. In this new environment, Valentino becomes one of the few people to get a job, working on the Youth and Culture program. He becomes particularly interested in drama and tries to persuade his friend Marie to come along. She says she wants to but has problems with her carer (father), who is very old fashioned and thinks Dinka women should stay at home and look after their man. Valentino persuades her to come along, but their plays receive mixed comments and particularly from the adults, who do not appreciate their risqué content. Subsequently Marie's carer stops her from going. Valentino is now a respected member of the camp and offers to speak to her father. He tells her of another time when he persuaded Adyeoi's parents to allow her to come to drama group. He knew they wanted her to find a suitable husband, so he told them she was more likely to find a good suitor if she had a talent like acting. However, Marie says that will not work on her carer. She tells Valentino she is worried because she has started menstruating, which according to Sudanese traditions mean she is ripe for marriage. At this time at the camp, the SPLA are looking around for brides, so she tells Valentino to keep the information to himself. In fact, the SPLA have been making themselves known again to the boys as they search again for recruits. One day, they visit and the commander tells them they no longer punish people that run away from the army and, in general, they have changed their outlook to become stronger in their fight for independence. The commander continues to talk about the Arab atrocities and how they are trying to take over the whole of Sudan and destroy Dinka culture. The speech has a great effect, and many boys decide to join the SPLA that day. Achor Achor wants to go as well, but decides he should think about it first. He talks to Valentino, who tells Achor Achor how can he possibly think about going when he has to wear glasses to attend school. To Valentino's surprise, Achor Achor takes this as a valid argument and stays at the camp.

In class, the boys all become enamored with their history teacher, Miss Gladys. She raises the boy's temperatures by relating everything to sex. For example, when she talks about Genghis Khan, she says though he was an evil dictator, he was surprisingly gentle with women. Her comments interest all of the girls but one. Her name is Tabitha.

Valentino is doing so well in his job, the camp leaders promote him to Noriyaki's right hand man. Noriyaki is a popular Japanese aid worker and he and Valentino develop a close relationship. He even gets Valentino a laptop. Valentino has no idea how to use it but takes pride at his place at the dinner table. The camp hears of the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and everyone claims it was the work of Osama Bin Ladan. When they hear that Clinton bombs Khartoum, they all rejoice, thinking someone is finally doing something.

Valentino asks Tabitha on a date. She says yes and soon they become an item, but under the all-seeing eyes of the elders, they have few chances to get really close until Valentino plays in a volley ball game. Every time his team wins a point, he celebrates by embracing her. A Kenyan theatre group invites Valentino's drama class to Nairobi, and Valentino know finally he has a chance to get close to his girlfriend.



Before he goes, Deborah Agok pays him a visit. She says she has just come from Marial Bai, where she met Valentino's mother. Valentino cannot believe she is still alive and the news gets even better. She also met his father, but she needs to ask Valentino a few questions and verify he really is their son. Upon hearing the news, Valentino immediately wants to go home. Gop says it is not a good idea because there is a famine all across Sudan. He tells Valentino to go to Nairobi and think it over.

In Nairobi, Valentino stays with his sponsor Mike. He lives in luxury for a week eating good meals, going to the cinema and watching Sky television. However, his best moment comes when Mike treats Valentino and Tabitha to dinner. After the meal, he takes them to a shopping mall and says he will leave them alone, picking them up in an hour. When he is gone, Tabitha suggests they run away. Valentino says that is a horrible and selfish idea, putting at jeopardy all they have worked towards at the camp, and anyway he has just discovered his parents are still alive and he wants to see him. Tabitha asks Valentino to kiss her.



# Chapters XXV-XXVI

## Chapters XXV-XXVI Summary and Analysis

Valentino goes to work at the century club, where he meets his fellow work mate, Ben. Ben asks what happened to his face. Valentino says nothing and Ben presumes he got into a fight, which he says is the case with too many of the Sudanese in America.

Back in Sudan, news gets to the camp that the Lost Boys have a chance of going to America. Their first step is to write autobiographies of what happened to them on their journey to Kakuma. Valentino struggles to write his and goes to see Achor Achor. Achor Achor has written five pages, yet has only just started. In the end, Valentino decides to describe every little detail of his journey, right down to the color of the trees, putting together a 10-page autobiography. However, as all his friends, including Tabitha and Achor Achor, leave for America, Valentino is left to wonder why he is still in Kakuma. People tell him it is probably because he is too important to the camp, but Valentino thinks it must have something to do with his parents being alive. Eventually, though, he has an interview. He surprises the interviewer with his honesty, and the interviewer tells him he has done well. Yet still nothing happens. Nevertheless, Valentino gets on with his usual activities at the camp. One day, Valentino and Noriyaki drive the basketball team to a tournament in Tarament in Kenya. Nariyaki has never driven a car with a gear stick and is struggling to control it. When they meet an obstruction in the road Nariyaki swerves left, losing control of the car. He swerves right and the car rolls over onto its roof.

Valentino wakes up in hospital to hear everyone thinking he is dead. He asks a nurse if the accident actually killed anybody and she says only the Japanese driver. When Valentino gets back to the camp, he finds his name is up on the board to go to the USA. At this point, the thought that he is leaving his family and country sink in, and he needs to get in contact with his father. He visits Mr. CB, who has a radio company and for 250 shillings will attempt to get in contact with a person's loved ones. Mr. CB gets ahold of Valentino's father, who is still living in Marial Bai. Valentino asks his father if he should go to America or come home to the village. His father tells him not to dare think about coming to the village as it's all a pile of ash. He tells his son to go to America and make a success of himself.

Valentino gets ready to go to America. He attends orientation classes and starts the camp custom of giving away all his possessions. Before he leaves, he meets Marie for the final time. She tells him to stay in Kakuma because she has a premonition something bad will happen to him. Valentino says she is being silly and heads off with the others to the airport. They are just about to leave for New York when they hear an announcement that there are problems in New York, and the plane cannot currently leave Kenya. When they get back to the lobby, the TV news is showing the September 11 attacks. Valentino goes to the airline as representative of his people. He tells them they have waited for years for this opportunity, and they must take them all to America.

An official tells him they have only delayed the flight, and they will hopefully get to leave in a few days. Back among his friends, Valentino is hailed as a hero and the reason they finally get to leave for the States.



# Characters

## Valentina Achak Deng

Valentino is the main character and the narrator of the book. He was born in Southern Sudan in a village called Marial Bai. He describes his village and Sudan as a few hundreds years behind the western world. Despite this, Valentino's early life is relatively comfortable. He goes to school to learn English and every Sunday, he worships at a Christian church. His family is big because his father, like most southern men in Sudan, has many wives. Many children in Southern Sudan do not know who their mother is and regard all their father's wives as their mother. However, Valentino does know. She is his father's first wife and one of the village's midwives. His relatively comfortable upbringing has a lot to do with his father's solid status within the village. He owns many shops and does his best to get on with the Muslim traders.

The Islamic north of Sudan attacks the southern regions including Marial Bai. They destroy Valentino's village, but he manages to escape during the night. He meets the schoolteacher Dut, and they walk to what they think is the haven of Ethiopia, picking up other boys on the way. The journey is treacherous with many boys either dying from disease or killed by soldiers or wild animals. On the walk, Valentino experiences the death of a close friend for the first time, his walking partner, Deng, dying from hunger and disease. Interestingly, Valentino rarely represents such awful experiences as developing his strength as a person. Rather he never lets the reader forget he was experiencing such tragedies through the eyes and sensitive disposition of a child.

Valentino expects Ethiopia to be a haven, but unfortunately the locals do not receive the Sudanese boys with welcome arms. Despite the animosity, they build a solid camp life and develop a more routine lifestyle. Here many events shape Valentino's life. He goes to school and learns life skills such as cooking. He works so hard that the elders choose him to become the leader of 11 boys, including his friend Achor Achor. Part of the reason Valentino works so hard is to win the love of the Royal girls. His ploy works and he has his first experience with girls at the camp. Unfortunately, a change in Ethiopian government jeopardizes their stay and they have to move on. This has its positives for Valentino as he manages to avoid being drafted into the SPLA.

Valentino and the others walk to a refugee camp in Kakuma in Kenya. Here life becomes better. Valentino continues his friendship with Achor Achor, meets his future girlfriend, Tabitha, and the elders give him a paid position as youth leader. At the camp, Eggers presents Valentino as a very likable man, popular with everybody. However, when he applies to go to the USA it seems that for a long time he has failed his application. Against him is the fact his parents are still alive and that he is too honest in his interview. Where many of the other boys make their lives worse than they are or have been, Valentino paints a relatively comfortable existence. Nevertheless, in 2001, and after 11 years of living in refugee camps, Valentino finally sets off Atlanta to live with his friend Achor Achor.



## Achor Achor

Achor Achor is Valentino's best friend. They meet at the Pinyodo refugee camp in Ethiopia where Achor Achor is part of Valentino's Eleven Group. They split up when Ethiopian soldiers force the Sudanese out of the camp but reunite on the other side of the Gilo River. From here, they make their way to Kakuma. At Kakuma, they attend classes together, but initially live apart. When Gop's wife and children arrive at the camp, he has to build a new section for Valentino. It is highly irregular that a boy has his own room, and Gop invites five other boys to stay, including Achor Achor.

Valentino has great respect for Achor Achor and presents him as a strong individual, who never gives up on life. In fact, it is significant that unlike the others, Achor Achor never seems to get ill. This partly has to do with his survival instinct. Achor Achor has a knack of being able to make the best of situations and seeing things to which others are blind. In Pinyodo, he shows Valentino how to fish and then on their walk to Kakuma, he finds a tin can, which he makes into a cup. At one stage, Valentino says he would have found it difficult to survive without Achor Achor.

The two friends reunite in Atlanta in America, where they share an apartment in a poor neighborhood. Again, Achor Achor shows his ability to survive by finding an American girlfriend, a rarity for the Sudanese immigrants. When robbers attack Valentino, Achor Achor is at his girlfriend's house. However, he comes back the next day, unties his friend, calls the police and takes Valentino to the local hospital.

## Tabitha

Tabitha is Valentino's girlfriend. They meet at the camp in Kakuma, where they instantly fall in love. Valentino describes her as a beautiful Sudanese girl, who attracts the attention of all the men at the camp. However, Tabitha is fortunate that she has a strong and educated mother, who refuses to give her hand away in marriage. Her sense of difference attracts Valentino, and he eventually asks her out on a date. Because of strict codes of conduct in the camp, their relationship develops slowly, limited to secret meetings and hugs at basketball games. There is a surprising development when they visit Nairobi. Valentino's Kenyan guardian allow him and Tabitha some private time, which they use to share their first kiss.

Valentino is deeply in love with Tabitha, yet has some reservations about her character. First, he thinks she has other relationships while she is living in Seattle, and second, he knows she attracts the wrong type of man. This confuses Valentino as he is a relatively passive person, and throughout the book, he wonders why such a woman would want to be with him. In fact, Valentino is far more comfortable when she wears glasses because then he feels like she is truly his. While in Seattle Tabitha's ex-boyfriend murders her.



## Dut Majok

Dut is the leader of Valentino's Lost Boys group. He successfully leads them to the Pinyudo refugee camp, where he helps set up schools and house. They are all forced to leave Pinyudo and Valentino never sees Dut again.

## Kur Grang Kur

Kur is Dut's second in command.

## William K

William grew up with Valentino in Marial Bai. William often tells improbable tales, even about deaths in his own family, but nevertheless he is one of Valentino's best friends. After the death of Valentino's walking partner Deng, William provides great comfort; his exaggerations keeping Valentino motivated. Unfortunately, William dies from sickness just before they reach Pinyudo.

## Moses

Moses is William K's brother. William K tells Valentino that Moses is dead, but Moses reappears at Pinyudo. He tells Valentino he was enslaved by Arabs and was branded with the number 8 behind his ear. At Pinyudo, Moses joins the SPLA.

## Deng Arou

Deng Arou is Valentino's father. He was a member of the rebel army during the first Sudanese war but has since become apolitical. At the beginning of the book, he owns a number of shops and for the sake of his business, does his best to get on with everybody. Deng Arou has many wives; his first wife is Valentino's mother. Perhaps because of this, Valentino presents himself as his father's favorite child.

## Mr. Kondit

Mr. Kondit is Valentino's teacher in Pinyudo. He is also uncle to the Royal girls.

## Maria

Maria helps Valentino when he collapses on the way to Kakuma. They develop a strong relationship, and when Valentino leaves for America she attempts suicide. Maria recovers to find a better life, away from her abusive guardian. She eventually enrolls at a University in London.





## **Gop Chol Kolong**

Gop shares a house with Valentino in Kakuma. When Gop's wife and children arrive, he builds a new section for Valentino and 10 other boys.

## **Miss Gladys**

Miss Gladys is Valentino's beautiful teacher in Kakuma. She maintains the interest of her students by relating everything to sex.

## **John Garang**

John Garang went to University in America and came back to Sudan as founder of the SPLA.

## **Commander Beltbuckle**

One of the SPLA commander's at Pinyudo

## **Commander Secret**

One of the SPLA commander's at Pinyudo

## **Tonya**

Tonya is the African-American woman who robs Valentino's house.

## **Powder**

Powder is Tonya's accomplice. He ties Valentino up and beats him when he talks back.

## **Michael**

Michael is Tonya and Powder's young son. They give him the responsibility of keeping an eye on Valentino.

## **Mary Williams**

Mary Williams is founder of the Lost Boys Foundation and the adopted daughter of Jane Fonda.



## **Phil Mays**

Phil Mays sponsors Valentino while he is in America.

## **Anne Newton**

Valentino is good friends with the Newton family. He phone Anne while he is waiting to be seen at the hospital.

## **Duluma**

Duluma is Tabitha's ex-boyfriend in Seattle. He ends up murdering her out of jealousy.

## **Noriyaki Takamura**

Noriyaki is a Japanese aid worker in Kakuma. He develops a strong relationship with Valentino, but eventually dies in a car crash.



## Objects/Places

### Atlanta

Valentino lives in Atlanta

### Valentino's Apartment

Valentino lives in a small apartment in Atlanta with his friend Achor Achor. The book begins with a robbery taking place in the apartment.

### Sudan

Valentino is Sudanese and with the other Lost Boys he walks through Sudan to Ethiopia.

### Mariel Bai

Mariel Bai is Valentino's home town in Sudan. It is completely destroyed.

### Ethiopia

The Lost Boys walk to Ethiopia, which they are told offers them a much better life.

### Pinyudo

The refugee camp in Ethiopia.

### Kenya

Valentino walks from Ethiopia to Kenya.

### Kakuma

The refugee camp in Kenya

## **Nairobi**

Valentino visits some volunteers in Nairobi and experiences modern comfort for the first time.

## **America**

Valentina and other Lost Boys travel to different parts of America to find work and hopefully complete a college education.

## **Century Club**

The gym in Atlanta where Valentino work.

## **The Hospital**

Valentino goes to a hospital in Atlanta for an MRI scan.



# Themes

## War and Poverty

Worried the government will implement Sharia law throughout the country, the rebel army SPLA attack Islamic areas. The Sudanese government retaliate and the civil war begins. The government destroys villages in Southern Sudan, putting millions out of their homes. The Southern Sudanese walk to Ethiopia and away from the trouble. During their walk, they have to avoid capture, hunger and disease. Even though many are just small children, people do not want to help, fearing retaliation, particularly as Valentino's Dinka tribe is affiliated with the SPLA. One of the only ways the Dinka can get help is through bartering. By the end of their journey, many boys have sold their clothes for food. Unfortunately, this leaves them without protection from the mosquitoes and the rain. When they get to Ethiopia, life is more secure, but the SPLA control their camp. Many boys join the SPLA as way out, but find the SPLA's promises are lies.

In Ethiopia, management decides to build a fence around the camp. This brings comparisons with concentration camps in World War II, and the Holocaust. Many of the Dinka at the camp think the Sudanese government has told the UN that they carry plague, and the UN will have no choice but to kill them. In reality, they have just put up the fence to help with the counting of the refugees. However, the fact they can make such comparisons shows how desperate their situation is and how little control they have over their own lives.

## Cultural Differences

The book is full of cultural differences, and they are a big reason why the civil war in Sudan starts in the first place. The Islamic region of Northern Sudan tries to implement Sharia law for the country. However the south refuse to give up their own cultural beliefs and attacks nearby Arab businesses. The government retaliates and before long, war sweeps through the whole country.

The Sudanese government destroys the southern Sudanese villages and the homeless tribes walk to Ethiopia, building a camp next to the Gilo River. Initially the Sudanese get on well with the nearby Ethiopian tribes, but due to lack of food, the Sudanese begin to steal things from the villages. One day, the Ethiopians behead a Sudanese man, beginning a series of attacks between the two groups. Later on Ethiopia has a change in government, and the Sudanese are no longer welcome. Ethiopian soldiers ambush their camp and with the help of the villagers, kill hundreds of people.

The South Sudanese then move to Kakuma in Kenya, where they find a more stable environment. Here Valentino notes a number of cultural differences. First, it is easy to bribe the Kenyan guards, as they do not have the nationalist fervor of the other African nations. However, it is not until Valentino visits Nairobi for the first time that he realizes



how different Kenya is to his own country. For the first time, he sees tall buildings, watches satellite television and goes to a cinema. Most striking, though, is the Kenyans' more liberal attitude. Valentino's guardian allows him time on his own with his girlfriend Tabitha, which Valentino uses to kiss her for the first time.

When Valentino moves to America along with his fellow Sudanese, he struggles to adapt to the faster pace. The biggest problem he faces is moral differences. In Sudan, men are used to women never questioning the men's position as boss. However, in America, the Sudanese women take advantage of a freer society, angering and confusing their Sudanese husbands. Valentino suggest this results in many problems. For example, he says Tabitha's ex-boyfriend Daluma murders her because she had an abortion, something he says would never happen in Sudan. He also claims homosexuality is non-existent among his Dinka tribe, and there is rarely any sex before marriage.

## **The Struggle to Survive**

Valentino spends a lot of the novel struggling to survive. When soldiers burn down his village, he finds himself on his own, surrounded by men looking for boys to enslave. He manages to escape into a forest and then into open country, where he meets with the other Lost Boys. Valentino is not the most innovative of people but has a penchant for befriending some of the stronger characters. For example, when he arrives in Ethiopia, he meets Achor Achor, who he says helps him catch fish and find valuable items he can use to make his life better. This ability to befriend people and particularly the right people helps him get a job in Kenya, where he meets the Japanese man Nariyaki. Nariyaki gets Valentino a laptop and trains him to use it. By the time Valentino reaches America, his exposure to modern living means he is more prepared for the cultural shock than many of the others. In America, he befriends all the right people and unlike the other boys, gets a sponsor all to himself. His sponsor helps him get into college and even sends money to help Valentino's father set up a new shop.



# Style

## Perspective

What is the What claims it is Valentino's autobiography, but it does not hide the fact it is written by the professional writer Dave Eggers. For some critics, this is a contentious point, particularly since the book blends both fiction and non-fiction. The question asked is how can someone other than the subject write a truly accurate autobiography. Dave Eggers counters this criticism by saying he wrote the book from extensive interviews, enabling him to accurately recreate Valentino's voice. He uses both fiction and non-fiction in the book to make the story more entertaining, which, of course, will sell more copies and in this case earn more money for Valentino's charity. Consequently the book comes from a human viewpoint rather than a political.

The naming of Dave Eggers as an author is merely a marketing tool. Eggers is one of the world's most prominent writers and no doubt his name guarantees the books place on the best sellers list. At some points, Eggers takes advantage of the situation. In particular, the reader may view some of the negative comments about modern American society as the author's opinion, rather than Valentino's. On top of this, by claiming it is an autobiography of Valentino and then writing under his own name, Dave Eggers is parodying the genre. In fact, Valentino calls the book a work of art, suggesting they intended the book to be an artistic statement as well as a depiction of events in Sudan.

## Tone

The tone of the book is both subjective and objective. Valentino's depiction of his life in Sudan has an objective tone. Although the reader sees everything through his eyes, Valentino never takes a political stance. Instead, he looks at it in terms of human tragedy, where war itself, rather than any particular group, is at fault. Eggers adopts this tone to reinforce the fact that Valentino saw the violence as young boy and therefore did not have the ability to form a balanced opinion. Valentino seems to develop most of his opinions as an adult in America, away from the reality of the situation. Valentino's objective tone also works to present the conflict as a highly-complex civil war that most readers could only possibly understand on its surface. Instead he wants the reader to have a deeper understanding of human suffering. By doing this, he can develop more interest in his charity.

In contrast, Dave Eggers' depiction of America has a subjective tone, painting American culture in a negative light. In America, the police do not care that robbers beat and tie up Valentino, and the hospital staff leave Valentino waiting for 14 hours before they see him. In particular, Eggers portrays the American dream as a fabrication. The Sudanese go to America with expectations of getting a good job and a college education, only to find life is not much easier than it is back home. Eggers suggests this environment is

the cause for the Sudanese turning to crime. When Duluma kills Tabitha, Valentino's American friend apologizes and says this is what his country does to people.

## Structure

Eggers divides *What is the What* into three parts. The first part opens with two African Americans robbing Valentino's apartment. Through a series of flashbacks, Valentino talks about his early life in Marial Bai with his father and mother and his treacherous walk to Ethiopia. In between, he comments on his life in America. At the end of the first part, his best friend William K dies. A similar pattern continues in the remaining two parts. The second part starts with his friend Achor Achor finding him tied up in his American apartment and takes him to the local hospital, where Valentino continues to tell the reader about his life at the refugee camp in Pinyudo. He paints a relatively-secure life until Ethiopian soldiers force them out. At the end of the second part, he talks about the murder of his girlfriend Tabitha. In the final part, Valentino talks about the support of his American sponsors and then moves on to his time in the refugee camp in Kakuma. Near the end of the book, he describes watching the 9/11 attacks on television in Kenya, just before he flies to America.

Each part begins with a problem Valentino eventually overcomes only for another tragedy to occur again at the end. This works to show that problems do not limit themselves to one place, and the extent of the problem is relative to a person's present situation. Valentino's problems are a lot worse in Africa, but at the same time Eggers points out that a person can only lose what they have. In this regard, the robbery and the loss of Tabitha is potentially more damaging to Valentino because they are highly unexpected and occur within an alien environment. However, within this structure, Valentino grows stronger with each tragedy. In the final section, he cuts a determined and human figure, not only surviving in another country, but also releasing a book of his journey.





## Quotes

"I will fill today, tomorrow, every day until I am taken back to God. I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run. All the while I will know that you...."  
P519

"'You're from Africa, right?' I nod. 'All right then. That means we're brothers.' I am unwilling to agree."  
P9

"I suppose there is little in the way of violence that I have not seen in Sudan, in Kenya. I spent years in a refugee camp in Ethiopia, and there I watched two young boys, perhaps twelve years old, fighting so viciously over rations that one kicked the other to death."  
p13

"—You didn't tell us the answer: What is the What? My father shrugged.  
—We don't know. No one knows."  
p64

"They started a great fire in the middle of the market, and from this fire they took burning logs and torches, and these they threw onto the roofs of most of the homes within a one-mile radius. The few men who resisted were shot. This was effectively the end of life in Marial Bai. "  
p76

"Any resistance would bring reprisals. Men would be killed on sight. Women would be raped, the homes burned, the wells poisoned, and children would be abducted. You have seen all this I trust."  
p132

"Each set of guards were bought with fifty shillings and were exceedingly polite and businesslike about the transaction. I might as well have been buying fruit from a sidewalk grocer."  
p382

"—I have no right to make life harder for anyone else,' I said."  
p449

"'Why are you Sudanese always fighting?'"  
p462

"—You have to go, boy. Are you crazy? This town is still ashen from the last attack. Don't come here. I forbid it. Go to the United States. Go there tomorrow."  
p496



"A boy named Charles threw himself onto the bed and pretended to swim. Then others joined in, and I did it myself. We all swam on the white sheets and laughed until we were sore."

p506

"—'You thought it would be better there?' he yelled, as the television presented a new angle of the planes breaking through the black glass of the buildings. No one answered him. —'It'll be no better!' he continued. —'You thought you'd have no problems? Just different problems, stupid boys!'"

p511



## Topics for Discussion

Does the books use of fiction add or take away from the books importance as a work of non-fiction?

The book is an auto-biography of Valentino Achak Deng, but is he a reliable narrator?

How do the American and African settings compare? Is Valentino's life a lot easier in the USA?

How much of the book do you think is Dave Eggers's own opinion? Does he use views that are perhaps not the viewpoint of his subject?

Towards the end of the book, an old man says they will not escape their problems by moving to the USA, but they will only find new ones. How true do you think this is? Are all problems relative?

Why does Eggers include the account of the robbery? Why is the fact the robbers are African-American important?

What is the What often reads like an adventure story. What is the effect of this, and why has Eggers chosen to write the book in this style?