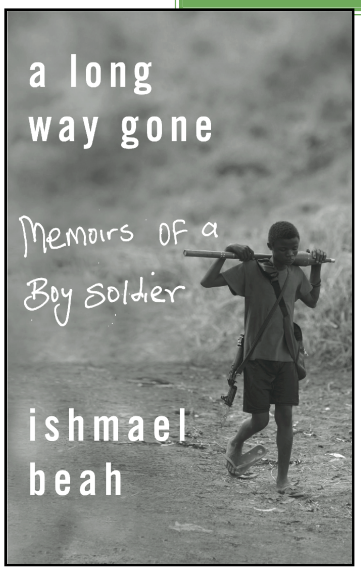
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
TEACHER'S GUIDE

Accelerated Reader

A Long Way Gone

Memoirs of a Boy Soldier

by Ishmael Beah



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"Everyone in the world should read this book . . . We should read it to learn about the world and about what it means to be human."
—Carolyn See, *The Washington Post Book World*


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TO THE TEACHER

In the fifty-plus conflicts now going on around the globe, it is estimated that there are some 300,000 child soldiers. Ishmael Beah, the author of this horrifying yet vitally important memoir, used to be one of them.

What is war like for a twelve- or thirteen-year-old soldier? How does a child become a killer? How does one stop? Child soldiers have been profiled by journalists, and novelists have tried to imagine their lives. But until now, there has been no firsthand account by someone who came through such hell and survived.

Riveting yet readable, unimaginable yet unforgettable, *A Long Way Gone* is sure to become a classic: a unique autobiography about the civil war in Sierra Leone, as recorded by one who took up an AK-47 at the age of twelve. Now in his mid-twenties, Beah is both eloquent and perceptive in his account of fleeing attacking rebels, searching for his lost relatives, seeking out food and shelter in the bush, and wandering a land rendered unrecognizable by brutality and violence. Yet once he's been picked up and recruited by the government army, Beah, a gentle boy at heart, finds that he, too, is capable of truly terrible actions. Told with real literary force, ample insight, and heartbreaking candor, *A Long Way Gone* is a rare, mesmerizing work that addresses a twenty-first-century, and international, nightmare: the collision of war and childhood.

"[Beah's] honesty is exacting, and a testament to the ability of children 'to outlive their sufferings, if given a chance.'" —*The New Yorker*

"This remarkable firsthand account shows how civil strife destroys lives . . . The horrors [Beah] saw or perpetrated still haunt him and will be difficult for the reader to forget . . . Beah writes his story with painful honesty, horrifying detail, and touches of remarkable lyricism. This young writers has a bright future . . . As children fight on in dreadful wars around the globe, Beah's story is a must for every school." —Rayna Patton, *VOYA*

"Beah's autobiography is almost unique, as far as I can determine—perhaps the first time that a child soldier has been able to give literary voice to one of the most distressing phenomena of the late 20th century: the rise of the pubescent (or even prepubescent) warrior-killer . . . Beah's memoir joins an elite class of writing: Africans witnessing African wars . . . *A Long Way Gone* makes you wonder how anyone comes through such unrelenting ghastliness and horror with his humanity and sanity intact." —William Boyd, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Beah's is a story of loss and redemption—from orphan to fighter to international participant in human-rights conferences on child soldiers. While his account of loss is painful to read . . . it is his account of rehabilitation that most occupies the reader's mind—how these children who become addicted to drugs and violence are able to re-enter the world of civil society." —Jeff Rice, *Chicago Tribune*

"Terrifying, often graphic in portraying the violence he both witnessed and carried out as a barely adolescent soldier in Sierra Leone, 26-year-old Beah's story is also deeply moving, even uplifting . . . Reports about child soldiers and the crises in Africa proliferate, but Beah's story, with its clear-eyed reporting and literate particularity—whether he's dancing to rap, eating a coconut or running toward the burning village where his family is trapped—demands to be read." —*People*

"It would have been enough if Ishmael Beah had merely survived the horrors described in *A Long Way Gone*. That he has written this unforgettable firsthand account of his odyssey is harder still to grasp. Those seeking to understand the human consequences of war, its brutal and brutalizing costs, would be wise to reflect on Ishmael Beah's story." —Chuck Leddy, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Beah's story is a wrenching survivor's tale, but there's no self-pity or political digression to be found. Raw and honest, *A Long Way Gone* is an important account of the ravages of war, and it's most disturbing as a reminder of how easy it would be for any of us to break, to become unrecognizable in such extreme circumstances . . . Beah's uncompromising voice is a potent elegy for their suffering, a powerful reminder of the innocent casualties of war." —*The Miami Herald*

PREPARING TO READ

This teacher's guide consists of three sections: Reading and Understanding the Book, Questions and Exercises for the Class, and Terms to Define and Discuss. The first section will help students follow along with ; the second will aid in their exploration of, and reflection on, this memoir (as individuals and as a group); and the third will sharpen their comprehension of Beah's work via definition, term identification, and review. Teachers looking for additional historical or political context will note that the book itself includes an introductory map and a detailed chronology of Sierra Leone-related events.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK

1. How did Ishmael Beah's grandmother explain the local adage that "we must strive to be like the moon" (p. 16)? And why has Ishmael remembered this saying ever since childhood? What does it mean to him?

2. As Chapter 2 begins, we flash forward to Ishmael's new life in New York City. He relates a dream of pushing a wheelbarrow. What is in the wheelbarrow, and where is he pushing it? What does Ishmael mean when he says, "I am looking at my own" (p. 19)?

3. "That night for the first time in my life," writes Ishmael in Chapter 3, "I realized that it is the physical presence of people and their spirits that gives a town life" (p. 22). What prompts him to observe this? How old is he at the time? Also, who are the five boys with whom Ishmael flees at the end of this chapter?

4. Why, after their escape, do Ishmael and the other boys sneak back into the village of Mattru Jong?

5. Commenting on how a rebel soldier had interrogated an old man, Ishmael writes: "Before the war a young man wouldn't have dared to talk to anyone older in such a rude manner. We grew up in a culture that demanded good behavior from everyone, and especially from the young" (p. 33). Where else in *A Long Way Gone* did you encounter the brutal, thuggish, or even sadistic behavior of young rebels—or of other young people?

6. In Chapter 6, how and why do Ishmael and his companions start farming in the village of Kamator? Why is farming so difficult for Ishmael?

7. After Kamator has been attacked, and the two boys have been cut off from the others in fleeing, Ishmael and Kaloko sneak out of the bush and back into Kamator, bringing along brooms every time. Why do they bring brooms? And why, later, does Ishmael set out on his own?

8. What does Ishmael tells us was the "most difficult part of being in the forest" (p. 52)? And who are the six boys Ishmael encounters after wandering and surviving in the forest on his own for more than a month? Where does he know some of these boys from?

9. Who is the anonymous man with the fishing hut near the ocean, and how does he help to soothe and heal the severely scalded feet of Ishmael and the others? And later, how are the lives of all seven boys saved by rap music—specifically the music of LL Cool J?

10. Describe the "name-giving ceremony" (p. 75) that Ishmael recollects his grandmother telling him about. Who attended this ceremony, and what did it entail in the way of preparation, purpose, ritual, and food? Also, what do we learn in Chapter 10 of the various backgrounds of Ishmael's companions? And how does Saidu die?

11. Who is Gasemu? Why does Ishmael befriend him and then later try to strangle him?

12. At the village of Yele, a pivotal shift in this memoir begins when Ishmael goes from being an observer and victim of savage, war-triggered violence to being both of these things as well as a perpetrator of such violence. How does this shift happen? Do Ishmael and his companions have any choice in making it?

13. In Chapter 13, the boy soldiers are given white tablets by their army superiors. What are these? Why they being handed out?

14. What do Ishmael and the other boy soldiers do when they're not out on a mission? What movies do they like to watch, and why? What else to they do with their spare time? At one point, the lieutenant tells them, "We are not like the rebels, those riffraffs who kill people for no reason" (p. 123). Is this true? Also, why is Ishmael promoted to junior lieutenant? How did he achieve this new rank?

15. As Chapter 15 begins, a dreadful, nightmarish routine is, by now, firmly in place—"In my head my life was normal," Ishmael writes (p. 126). How long has he been a soldier? And what happens to Ishmael and Alhaji, and a few other select boys, in the town of Bauya? Where are they taken, and by whom?

16. Who is Mambu? Why does Ishmael take a liking to him? And who is Esther, and why does Ishmael—later on—take a liking to her?

17. Benin Home, where Ishmael undergoes psychological, emotional, and social counseling, as well as physical and medical attention, is where he keeps hearing the "this isn't your fault" remark from various staffers and professionals. Does he ever really accept this mantra? Explain.

18. In Chapter 17, Ishmael describes "the first time [he'd] dreamt of [his] family since [he] started running away from the war" (p. 165). Paraphrase this nightmare, explaining how it differs from the many other dreams we've heard about from Ishmael. Also, explain how the dream illustrates his inner conflicts.

19. As he is leaving Benin Home, Ishmael says farewell to his friend Alhaji, who salutes him while whispering, "Goodbye, squad leader." "I couldn't salute him in return," Ishmael writes (p. 180). Why?

20. Describe the family Ishmael goes to live with after his eight-month rehabilitation. Who are they? How is he related to them? What does he think of them? Is he entirely honest with them? Which members of his new family is Ishmael closest to?

21. What is the "open metal box" (p. 186) that Ishmael is so confused by? Why and where has he encountered this box?

22. How does Ishmael's experience of New York City differ from what he had pictured beforehand? What does he like most about New York? What doesn't he like? And why is he visiting New York in the first place? Identify some of the meaningful personal and professional contacts that our narrator makes there.

23. How does Uncle Tommy die? And how, if at all, is his death facilitated or even triggered by the civil war fighting that has reached Freetown and its environs?

24. This memoir ends with a striking image, as Ishmael sees a mother telling her two children a story that he had also heard as a child. It's a memorable fable that touches on several of the key themes of this book, including violence, family, storytelling, childhood, and African village life. But it also carries a message of sacrifice. Explain how this last message also reverberates throughout *A Long Way Gone*.

25. Look back to the short "New York City, 1998" prologue that begins this memoir. What is it, exactly, that Ishmael's friends find so "cool" about his past? Do you think his friends, after reading this book, would still feel that way? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR THE CLASS

1. As a class or in smaller, more focused groups, begin your discussion of *A Long Way Gone* by talking about what you learned from the book on an historical level. What did Ishmael's personal history communicate to you about the recent history of his homeland?

2. This book describes two kinds of domestic living in detail, village life and city life. Which does Ishmael prefer, and why?

3. Violence is, of course, a major theme in these pages—physical, psychological, social, and otherwise. Indeed, some of the more violent passages in this book make for very difficult if not unsettling reading. In a brief essay, reflect on what Ishmael's many violent experiences taught you about the consequences or aftereffects, both intended and unintended, of violence.

4. What kinds of music does Ishmael like, and why? What is it about music that matters to Ishmael, or that moves him so? Why is it important to him, especially during his rehabilitation at Benin Home?

5. "I could no longer tell the difference between dream and reality" (p. 15), Ishmael writes early in his tale. Indeed, memories, dreams, and troubling or inescapable thoughts are perhaps even more important to this book than firsthand events and actions are. Talk about *A Long Way Gone* as a psychological memoir, comparing and contrasting it with other works you have experienced in this vein.

6. Review the tale of the "wild pigs" (p. 53) that Ishmael learned about from his grandmother, and the "Bra Spider" story (p. 75) that Musa tells Ishmael at the other boys. What other myths or legends did you come across in this book? After naming a few, explain the particular narrative and cultural purposes of each.

7. Nature is often personified in *A Long Way Gone.* Point out several instances of this—from throughout the memoir—and then write a short poem or story that employs anthropomorphism in a similar manner.

8. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is an important reference point in *A Long Way Gone*. Which individual, other than Ishmael, is familiar with it, and why do you think that person is always reading it? Read this play on your own, or at least study its key speeches and monologues (namely, those mentioned throughout this book), and then explain how the themes and events of Shakespeare's play might echo Ishmael's memoir.

9. Early in his account, Ishmael laments how "the war had destroyed the enjoyment of the very experience of meeting people" (p. 48). Where else does he express this fact, or else suffer from its consequences? As a class, discuss the book's ongoing struggle between trust and survival. Can these two phenomena coexist?

10. *A Long Way Gone* is a book with much to say on the subject of family: family life, family relationships, and family environment. Write a short paper that catalogs and characterizes the many different families that Ishmael has belonged to over the course of his young life.

11. How are "civilians" depicted in this book? How are they thought of? How are they treated? As a class, explore how our narrator's relationship with them changes over time.

12. Finally, discuss this harrowing account of civil war and childhood as a meditation on finding one's ultimate purpose. How does Ishmael, at a relatively early age, arrive at what seems to be his calling in life?

TERMS TO DEFINE AND DISCUSS

crapes (p. 7)
kamor (p. 8)
lorry (p. 10)
cassava (p. 17)
RUF (p. 21)
palampo (p. 23)
RPGs (p. 24)
sleepers (p. 27)
imam (p. 44)
sura (p. 44)
waleh (p. 51)
Nessie (p. 51)
Temne (p. 55)
Mende (p. 55)
soukous (p. 59)
jerry cans (p. 59)
Sherbro (p. 63)
carseloi (p. 71)
spirogyra (p. 73)
pestles (p. 76)
lappei (p. 76)
leweh (p. 76)
Ngor (p. 91)
gari (p. 91)
wahlee (p. 98)
brown brown (p. 121)
tafe (p. 137)
kalo kalo (p. 150)
repatriate (p. 171)
kule (p. 177)
sackie thomboi (p. 181)
ablution (p. 182)
raggamorphy (p. 183)
upline (p. 184)
poda podas (p. 185)
SLPP (p. 188)
groundnut (p. 188)
CAW (p. 188)
United Nations First International Children's Parliament (p. 195)
NGOs (p. 196)
UN ECOSOC (p. 199)
"Sobels" (p. 203)
G3 (p. 207)
Conakry (p. 209)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ishmael Beah was born in Sierra Leone in 1980 and moved to the U.S. in 1998. In 2004 he graduated from Oberlin College with a B.A. in political science. He is a member of Human Rights Watch Children's Division Advisory Committee, and has spoken before the United Nations, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO) at the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory. Beah's writing has appeared in VespertinePress and LIT magazine. He lives in New York City.

Scott Pitcock, who wrote this teacher's guide, is an editor and writer based in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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