

## What is the What by Dave Eggers



Review by: Lauren Evans

It is gut-wrenching to think that between May 16, 1983 and January 9, 2005, more than 2.5 million people died of war-related causes in Sudan, over four million people were internally displaced in southern Sudan and nearly two million southern Sudanese took refuge in foreign countries. I picked up this book because I have never been to Africa and am on a quest to learn a lot about it before my first trip this fall. I know what has happened in Sudan over the past few decades, but reading a vivid account of what occurred during that time made a profound impact on me by making me feel what it was like to be one of the Lost Boys of Sudan. *What is the What* is a gripping novel about a Sudanese refugee from the second Sudanese civil war that took place between 1983 and 2005. The subject of the story, Valentino Achak Deng, is one of the Lost Boys who, along with the 20,000 or so others that joined him in his escape, walked thousands of miles from their homes in Sudan to refuge in Ethiopia. The journey was a difficult one for these young boys, many of them under the age of 12, as they were plagued with sudden death, disease, hallucinations, dehydration, starvation and attacks by animals and the Sudanese air forces.

The book takes readers to a state between past and present, one part of the story describing the horrific events of Deng's childhood, the other talking about his present day life in Atlanta. At the beginning of the book, Deng recounts a time when he was robbed and beaten at his apartment in Atlanta. While he is tied up and being watched, much of his life story is told to us in a monologue to one of his captors. Deng's life started happily among the Dinka tribe in the village of Marial Bal. The tranquility though quickly turns to war, as Marial Bal becomes a battleground fought over by government and rebel armies. Deng escapes his war-ridden village on foot. After fleeing from Sudan, Valentino washed up on the banks of Ethiopia, but his journey to safety was far from over. He spent 13 years living in Ethiopian and Kenyan refugee camps where he was eventually chosen to receive sanctuary in the US in 2001. His early experiences in the US include being adopted by Christians, meeting and befriending a Hollywood producer and connecting with his long lost love from Sudan. Despite escaping Sudan, where millions were not so lucky, he finds in America is that his life is oftentimes more difficult than in the camps from where he escaped. Even though this book is historically accurate, it's good to know as a reader that some of the stories included have been fabricated. Deng states that "the world I have

known is not different from the one depicted within these pages. We live in a time where even the most horrific events in this book could occur, and in most cases, did occur.”

In recent years, the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement gave southern Sudan the opportunity to rebuild itself, but human rights violations similar to the ones described in *What is the What* still run rampant in the Darfur region. Eggers and Deng are doing what they can to help – proceeds from the sale of the book are helping to improve the lives of the Sudanese both in their home country and elsewhere, through the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation. It is my hope that more and more people are exposed to stories like Deng’s so that they can not only have empathy for how millions lived and still continue to live today, but also be inspired to take action and empower these people to change their own lives so that history does not repeat itself.