

The Sierra Leonean Writer, Ishmael Beah

LOST INNOCENCE

Helen Fallon

“The day seemed oddly normal. The sun peacefully sailed through the white clouds, birds sang from treetops, the trees danced to the quiet wind. I still couldn’t believe that the war had actually reached our home. It is impossible, I thought. When we left home the day before, there had been no indication the rebels were anywhere near.”

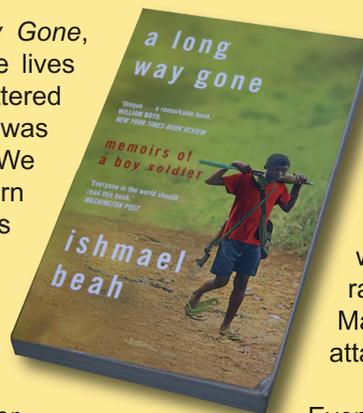
In his harrowing memoir, *A Long Way Gone*, Ishmael Beah tells how his life and the lives of his fellow Sierra Leoneans were shattered during the civil war that began in 1991. I was working in Sierra Leone at that time. We heard that there was fighting in the eastern part of the country and Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO), the organisation I worked with, recalled its workers from that area.

They came to Freetown expecting to return to their posts in a matter of weeks or possibly months. There was a six o’clock curfew in the city and a strong military presence. President Momoh sent troops to the east to put down the skirmish. But it all seemed very far away.

FAR AWAY, SUDDENLY NEAR

To the ten-year old Ishmael it seemed equally distant: “There were all kinds of stories about the war that made it sound as if it was happening in a faraway and different land. It wasn’t until refugees started passing through our town that we began to see it was actually taking place in our country. Families who had walked hundreds of miles told how relatives had been killed and their houses burned. The children of

these families wouldn’t look at us, and they jumped at the sound of chopping wood or as stones landed on the tin roofs, flung by children hunting birds with slingshots. The adults...would be lost in their thoughts during conversations with the elders of the town. Apart from their fatigue and malnourishment, it was evident they had seen something that plagued their minds, something that we would refuse to accept if they told us all of it.”



In January 1993, Ishmael, now twelve, his brother Junior and their friend Talloi, both a year older than Ishmael, leave their village to walk the sixteen miles to the town of Mattru Jong to participate in a talent show. The three, with another friend, Mohamed, had started a rap dance group four years previously. While in Mattru Jong they get word that the rebels have attacked their hometown.

Eventually the rebels reach the area where the friends are sheltered. “When the rebels finally came, I was cooking. The rice was done and the okra soup was almost ready when I heard a single gunshot that echoed through the town.”

Ishmael and five other boys manage to escape and begin wandering in search of a safer place. Constantly hungry and exhausted the boys pass through towns where “bodies, furniture, clothes, and all kinds of property were scattered all over.” In places where the rebels haven’t yet been, they are viewed with suspicion and quickly driven away. During one attack on a village, the boys are separated. “It was the last time I saw Junior, my elder brother.”

Ishmael Beah was born in Sierra Leone in 1980. He went to the United States in 1998 and finished his last two years of high school at the United Nations International School in New York. In 2004 he graduated from Oberlin College with a Bachelor of Arts in political science. He is a member of the Children's Rights Advisory Committee and has addressed the United Nations, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Centre for Emerging Threats and Opportunities and many NGO panels on the plight of children affected by war.

(Photo: High School for Global Citizenship)



INTO A NIGHTMARE WORLD

Now alone and fleeing, Ishmael remembers the words his father said to him in his childhood: "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." Ishmael notes that "these words became the vehicle that drove my spirit forward and made it stay alive."

Eventually Ishmael is captured by government troops and, aged thirteen, he is handed an AK-47, fed drugs and forced to fight for the army. Over the next three years, fired up with Rambo movies, marijuana, and "brown brown" (a toxic mix of cocaine and gunpowder), he actively participates in casual mass slaughter, as do other children, so young they can barely lift their rifles. "My squad was family, my gun was my provider and protector and my rule was to kill or be killed."

Beah recalls, "The extent of my thoughts didn't go much beyond that. We had been fighting for over two years and killing had become a daily activity. I felt no pity for anyone."

Two years after he joined the army, a UNICEF truck showed up at their barracks and whisked him and fourteen other child-soldiers to a rehabilitation centre and school in Freetown. Rehabilitation was not easy. Eventually, thanks in part to a nurse who responded to his interest in American rap music, Ishmael softened and reclaimed some of his innocence.

In 1996, he was chosen to speak in New York at a UN conference on child-soldiers. On returning to Sierra Leone, he was beginning to build a normal life in the home of an uncle when the continuing civil war reached

Freetown. Frightened that he would once again be dragged into the fight, Ishmael managed to flee to neighbouring Guinea. From there he travelled to the United States, where he now lives.

THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND CHILD-SOLDIERS

A Long Way Gone is a searing, deeply moving, graphic account of the violence Ishmael both witnessed and perpetrated. He writes with frankness and honesty about the atrocities. "Those parts of the book were especially difficult to write. I wasn't trying to sensationalize the violence – I was trying to explain how people were forced into it. How does a kid growing up in a very loving community...become forced into doing things that he never thought he'd be capable of doing? For me to show that, I needed to show what happened... and what that did to my humanity."

It is currently estimated that there are three hundred thousand child-soldiers involved in more than fifty conflicts in various parts of our world. ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. *A Long Way Gone*, also selected and reviewed by Fr Leo Sheridan in our September/October issue, is published by Fourth Estate Ltd (Harper Collins).