



Women Caught in the Crossfire: One Woman's Quest for Peace in South Sudan

Abuk Jervas Makuac and Susan Lynn Clark

“Tragic, and at the same time inspirational, Abuk’s account of life behind the battlefield powerfully reveals the struggles that seldom make the news. As the fighting rages, women unite to keep each other, their families, and strangers alive. This harrowing account is told with courageous honesty that is vital to the understanding of the impact of war on innocents.”

— JUDY A. BERNSTEIN, Author of *Disturbed in their Nests, A Journey from Sudan's Dinkaland to San Diego's City Heights*

Introduction:

WOMEN CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE documents the experiences of one woman among many that were thrust into the hardships of civil war in South Sudan during the violent struggle for independence from 1983 to 2011. It explores the question, *What becomes of a peaceful person when forced into the circumstance of war?* This book invites us to witness the power of female resilience not only in one life but also in the life of a nation.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the position of women in South Sudanese culture?
2. How does Abuk's position change over the course of the book, through her time in Wau, where she lived with her family, through her time in the camp in Itang, to her time in the refugee community in Dallas?
3. What do you see as the factors of this change both in Abuk and in the other women?
4. In the camp in Itang, what gives Abuk the strength to go on despite the horrendous conditions?
5. Is Abuk's husband Maker a man of peace as he claims? In the camp, Maker says to an old man, "We will not make the same mistakes your generation did." Do you think that is true?

6. Abuk says her memory in the camp was fragmented. Everyone, she says, had problems with memory. Why do you think that was?
7. Do you understand what the war was about, i.e., what the different forces were fighting over? Why or why not?
8. How is the reality of the war different from the way it is portrayed on the radio?
9. In Itang, the boy Koich says there were two kinds of people on the road fleeing the rebels, which made the difference between those who survived and those who did not. What do you think made the difference between them?
10. What is the role of tribal affiliation in the conflict? (South Sudan tribes are broadly Dinka or Nuer, but, as we learn towards the end of the book, there are actually 64 diverse tribes.)
11. Two other conflicts come up in the book, the conflict in Northern Ireland mentioned when IRA bombings occur during Abuk's stay in London, and the war in Ethiopia, in the person of Haile Selassie's granddaughter who shares a hospital room with Abuk. What do these references add to the narrative?
12. What do you think of the morality of Abuk's decision to manufacture alcohol and her behavior around its sale during her second stay in Itang?
13. After Abuk has emigrated to the U.S. and returns to South Sudan, why do you think her primary efforts go to support women-owned businesses?
14. What is the significance of the white handkerchiefs the women give to male leaders in the November 2017 meeting in Juba?
15. Peace is spoken of throughout the book, on different levels and with differing factors. Identify at least 5 different dimensions/levels of peace described as her story unfolds – from the most basic to the most lasting.
16. What can you identify as the underlying factors of both Abuk's resilience and women's resilience in general as portrayed in the book?

Recommended Reading:

Bernstein, Judy A. *Disturbed in their Nests, A Journey from Sudan's Dinkaland to San Diego's City Heights*. Blackstone Publishing; Unabridged edition. 2018

Bixler, Mark. *The Lost Boys of Sudan*. University of Georgia Press. 2005

Bok, Francis with Edward Tivnan. *Escape from Slavery*. St. Martin's Press. 2003

Bubbenzer, Friederike and Orly Stern (Editors). *Hope, Pain and Patience: The Lives of Women in South Sudan*. Jacana Media. 2012

Deng, Benson, Deng, Alephonsion, Ajak, Benjamin with Judy A. Bernstein *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky: The true story of three Lost Boys from Sudan*. PublicAffairs; 10th Anniversary ed. Edition. 2015

Deng, Francis Mading. *The Dinka of Sudan*. Waveland Press, Inc. 1972

Eggers, David. *What Is the What?* Vintage Press. 2007

Scroggins, Deborah. *Emma's War: An aid worker, a warlord, radical Islam and the politics of oil – A true story of love and death in Sudan*. Pantheon Books. 2002

Movies:

The Good Lie: A group of Sudanese refugees are taken in by a brash American woman (Oscar® winner Reese Witherspoon) assigned to help them as they adjust to modern life in the United States. (IMDB 7.4)

God Grew Tired of Us. An award-winning, critically acclaimed documentary, narrated by Nicole Kidman, which chronicles the Sudanese Lost Boys' triumph over insurmountable odds at home and in the US.

Related Websites:

<https://www.rescue.org> The International Rescue Committee

www.CrisisGroup.org International Crisis Group

www.hrw.org Human Rights Watch

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/south-sudan/> Amnesty International – South Sudan

<https://www.womenforwomen.org> Women for Women International