

# What is the what

Literature



## " What Is the What"

The novel *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Ashak Deng* by Dave Eggers is a touching story of a displaced person in a country that bleeds with the civil war. This heartbreaking book is inspired by actual events and tells us about the hardships of one of the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan, which is the name given to thousands of boys who were displaced to refugee camps, orphaned or lost their parents during the Second Sudanese Civil War. The protagonist of the novel, Valentino Ashak Deng, narrates a compelling story of his life marked with the tragedy of war that has overwhelmed his motherland and made him struggle for survival. Despite all his troubles, the boy, who was only 7 years old when the war broke out, did not lose optimism and exemplified a unique, yet empowering trust in himself.

The author of the book, Dave Eggers, called it autobiographical as he had collaborated with actual protagonist of the story for many years long after the actual events narrated by Valentino had happened. Eggers strived to save this never-give-up story from oblivion in order to inspire people who lost faith in themselves. Valentino was only a little boy when war came in his town. He lost his father, mother and friends but he would never lose courage and confidence in his own abilities, no matter what troubles and dangers followed him on his way to survival. Left all alone, Valentino had to flee barefooted through the desert and literally ran for his life to get to the refugee camp in Ethiopia confronting pitfalls all the way down. Way-worn, scared and exhausted, this little kid with unbroken spirit displayed undying faith in people that surrounded him throughout his way. Unlike many people he met on his way, he did not let paranoia and hatred take over his mind.

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When Gop, one of Valentino's pals in a refugee camp, disclosed that he believed all of the refugee in that camp would soon be murdered just like Jews had been murdered during the Holocaust, Valentino calmed him down. Instead of getting obsessed with paranoid fear, just like Gop did, Valentino looked at it with admirable sense of humor and irony. His thoughts proved that there was hardly anything that could break his spirit and change his optimistic approach to life:

People spoke a lot about the Jews in those days, which was odd, considering that a short time before, most of the boys I knew thought the Jews were an extinct race. (Eggers 322)

Years later, once his wandering from one refugee camp to another was finally over, Valentino moved from Africa to the United States of America, where he had to overcome troubles and face existential problems.

Throughout the story Valentino is shown as a grown man living in America and experiencing continuous flashbacks to his troubled past. Pressed with a burden of his past as a war child, Valentino realized that the war, which had failed to break his spirit long time ago, got back to his life once again as a persisting memory with yet another attempt to damage his soul. He accepted this challenge and instead of losing heart he found an interesting way to deal with his painful past by starting imaginary conversations with his neighbors. Most of them were completely indifferent and even hostile at times but he felt the need to tell his story and once again tried to find something good in people that surrounded him. Looking at his neighbors Valentino was thinking to himself:

If someone cut in front of me in line, ignored me, bumped me or pushed me, I would glare at them, staring, silently hissing a story to them. (Eggers 29)

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Valentino does his best to keep his mind open to the world that inflicts so much pain upon him. Whatever happens to him he never gives up. His personality doesn't get hardened over the years because he always seeks for a way to deal with his troubles. Maybe, it is his ability to find a relief in his imaginary world at times that gives Valentino strength to stay optimistic and get out of the scrape each time without eventually turning into a cynical man.

#### Work Cited

Eggers, Dave. *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Ashak Deng*. New York: Random House, 2006. Print.