

## FATHER OF THE LOST BOYS

YUOT A. ALAAK

ISBN (PB): 9781925815641

YEAR LEVEL: Y11–12

### ABOUT THE BOOK

During the Second Sudanese Civil War, thousands of South Sudanese boys were displaced from their villages or orphaned in attacks from northern government troops. Many became refugees in Ethiopia.

There, in 1989, teacher and community leader Mecak Ajang Alaak assumed care of the Lost Boys in a bid to protect them from becoming child soldiers during Africa's longest running civil war. So began a four-year journey from Ethiopia to Sudan and on to the safety of a Kenyan refugee camp. Together they endured starvation, animal attacks and the horrors of landmines and aerial bombardment.

This eyewitness account is by Mecak Ajang Alaak's son, Yuot, himself a Lost Boy. It is the extraordinary true story of a man who never ceased to believe that the pen is mightier than the gun.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yuot A. Alaak is an emerging Western Australian writer. His short story 'The lost girl of Pajomba' was anthologised by Margaret River Press in *Ways of Being Here*, and in 2017 he was a panellist at the Perth Writers Festival. His memoir, *Father of the Lost Boys*, was shortlisted for the 2018 City of Fremantle Hungerford Award and published in 2020 by Fremantle Press.

Yuot is a former child refugee from South Sudan and was part of the globally known 'Lost Boys of Sudan'. He currently lives in Perth with his family where he works as a mining professional, having attained degrees in the geosciences and engineering.

### THEMES

- South Sudan cultures and histories
- Second Sudanese Civil War
- Lost Boys of Sudan
- East African histories
- Refugee experiences
- Migration
- Australian multiculturalism
- The power of education

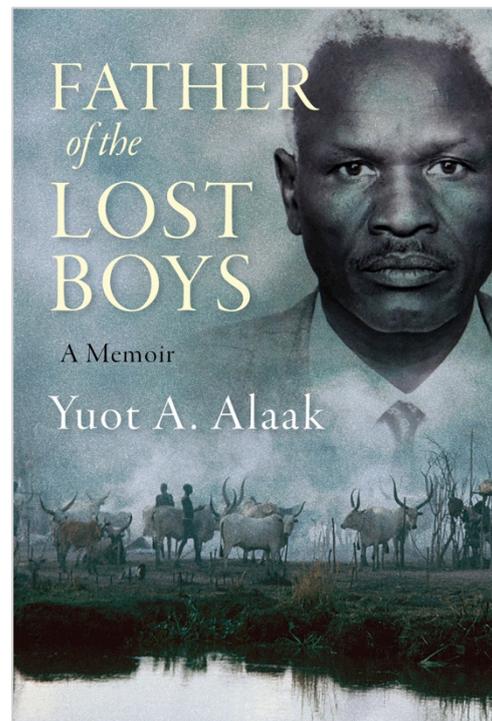
### AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Y11–12 English

Y11–12 Humanities and Social Sciences (Geography; Modern History)

### USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's Twitter: <https://twitter.com/YuotAlaak>
- BBC – South Sudan country profile: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14069082>



## CLASSROOM IDEAS

### Discussion questions

1. *In a place that has endured so much conflict for so long, there are as many points of view as there are stories to be told.* (p. 11) What do you think the author means? What other points of view might exist for this story? (Consider, for example, how the story might have been told from the point of view of the author's sister, or his grandmother, or a Lost Boy recruited to fight with the Rebels, or a northern Sudanese resident of Khartoum, or an Ethiopian living near the border, etc.)
2. What aspects of Dinka (Jieng) life and customs are described in the book's early chapters (pp. 13–29)? List as many as possible, including rites of passage (traditions relating to birth, marriage, death), family life, gender roles, daily duties / work, housing, dress, food, sports, and other aspects of Dinka (Jieng) culture described by the author.
3. What threats do the Lost Boys face throughout their exodus from Pinyudu to Kakuma? What measures do Mecak Ajang Alaak and others take to protect these unaccompanied minors?
4. *As some of the boys reach their early to mid teens, they are looked upon as potential soldiers by commanders under pressure on the frontlines in South Sudan. But my father is adamant. He doesn't want any of his boys going to war. To him, the pen is a more powerful weapon than the gun.* (p. 79) In what ways is the pen mightier than the gun? Why does Mecak Ajang Alaak insist on giving the boys the chance of an education?
5. What is a TKK in Kenya (pp. 158–161)? Why are refugees particularly vulnerable to it?
6. What is the difference between the terms 'migrants' and 'refugees'?
7. What challenges do Yuot and his family face as newly arrived refugees in Australia?
8. What does the term 'multiculturalism' mean in an Australian context?
9. Reread the book's ending on p. 208. What impact does the author's telling of his grandmother's story have on the reader? What aspects of identity are examined here?
10. What does the term 'intercultural understanding' mean? How can we improve our intercultural understanding to reap the benefits of cultural diversity?

### History and geography

1. Study a map of Africa. Which countries does South Sudan share a border with? Make a list.
2. On a photocopy of the maps on pp. 8–9, chart the journey made by author Yuot A. Alaak throughout the book, starting in Bor Town and ending in Nairobi (from which he flew to Adelaide).
3. Create a country profile for each of these four countries: South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya. Include the following information: official name, capital city, population, area, flag, currency, life expectancy, major languages, major religions, customs and traditions, national holidays, food, geography, climate, flora and fauna, resources, current leaders, interesting facts.  
(Useful link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16833769>)
4. Research the history of southern Sudan (South Sudan since 2011) from 1800 to the present day.
  - a. Present your findings in a report.
  - b. List all sources consulted in your research.
  - c. Assess the extent to which each source gives an accurate insight into this history, and each source's strengths and weaknesses.
  - d. Identify any gaps in the information you were able to obtain.
5. Research Australia's immigration policies from 1945 to today. How has migration contributed to Australia's changing identity as a nation?
  - a. Present your findings in a report.
  - b. List all sources consulted in your research.
  - c. Assess the extent to which each source gives an accurate insight about this subject, and each source's strengths and weaknesses.
  - d. Identify any gaps in the information you were able to obtain.
6. The author describes his experience of living in refugee camps for most of his childhood, including Pinyudu in Ethiopia (p. 55) and Kakuma in Kenya (p. 147). View images of these camps online.  
(Useful link: <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/kakuma-refugee-camp>) Research information about refugee camps in the world today. What is a refugee camp? Who administers it? What are living conditions like? How many people today live in refugee camps? Why did they arrive there? By what means did they arrive, and where from? How long did it take them to reach the camps, and what threats did they face on the way? How long are they likely to stay in the camps and where will they go subsequently?  
(Useful link: <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps>)

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

***Describe your manuscript in your own words.***

*Father of the Lost Boys* tells the story of my family and especially my dad, Mecak Ajang Alaak, who led almost 20,000 unaccompanied minors out of danger during Africa's longest running civil war. It is an eyewitness account by me, who trained as a child soldier and walked by my father's side, clutching an AK-47 as I slept next to him.

Before taking on his central role with the now-famous Lost Boys of Sudan, Dad was a prominent educator imprisoned by a government that served its own propaganda interests by announcing his death over the radio. We conducted his funeral, only to discover he was still alive. Dad returned to a hero's welcome and to one of the most challenging tasks imaginable.

The story follows the Lost Boys as they journey through rainforests, savannah and desert to escape a genocidal war and devastation. I saw my father at times of immense stress, but also witnessed his determination to guide the Lost Boys towards a brighter future. Although many succumbed to starvation and thirst, drowned in treacherous rivers, or died as the result of aerial bombardments, landmine explosions, gunshot wounds and wild animal attacks, the majority of the Lost Boys survived. Their story is of global significance and has featured on the BBC, CNN and the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. But Dad's remarkable story as leader, teacher and father of the Lost Boys has never previously been told, until now.

***What inspired you to write it?***

Maya Angelou! Her words, 'There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you' rang true to me. I wrote this story to free myself of that agony. I've refused to let my past define my future but I think this is an important story and I believe it will resonate with many of my fellow Aussies – most of whom have their own migrant stories, dating as far back as 1788 or as early as yesterday.

***How long have you been working on it?***

I've been wanting to write this story for what seems like an eternity but I only started to get serious in the last twelve to eighteen months. My romantic fantasies about the writing process have since been thrown out the door. Writing is quite a slog but the joy of seeing a story come to life far outweighs any pain, which for me was quite emotionally draining at times.

***What does it mean to you to make the shortlist of the 2018 City of Fremantle Hungerford Award?***

It means a great deal and is beyond my wildest dreams! I sent in my manuscript knowing the chances of making the shortlist were pretty much non-existent, but I used the submission deadline as motivation to keep writing. I've grown up hearing, 'Maaate! You've got to be in it to win it', so I submitted and I am super stoked at making the shortlist.

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