

JSC Common Reading Initiative

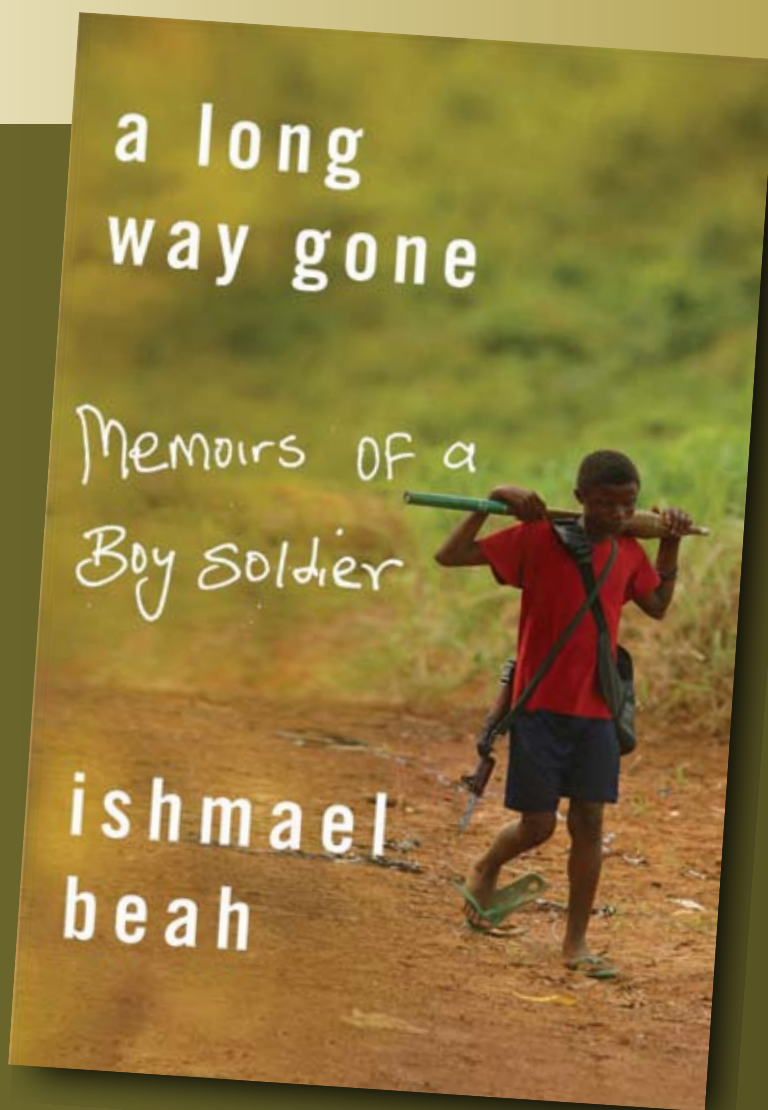


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
About the Author	2
Sierra Leone: Background Information	3
Map of Sierra Leone	4
Questions to Guide and Enhance Your Reading	5
Notes	6

Dear Johnson State College Students:

Welcome to the JSC community! Your decision to attend the Johnson State College is the first step in exploring a world of new ideas and experiences. That exploration begins today when you open *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah.

As a first-year student, you will be participating in the College's first Common Reading Initiative, a program of lectures, discussions, exhibits, films, and concerts that complement the book. The highlight of the semester will be an on-campus visit by the book's author, Ishmael Beah.

We've designed the program to introduce you to the academic and intellectual culture of the College through a common reading experience. A committee of faculty and staff met this spring to choose a book for the entire incoming class to read during the summer. This fall, you will have many opportunities to share and compare ideas about the common book. Your Peer Orientation Leaders, as well as many faculty and staff will also have read *A Long Way Gone*, providing a broad base for discussion and integration into the JSC community.

A Long Way Gone is Beah's first-hand account of being pressed into service as a child soldier in the war-torn country of Sierra Leone. His story of a childhood lost and an adulthood found is an inspiring journey from heartbreaking tragedy to hope and redemption.

We expect all students to have read the book by August 25th in preparation for the first discussion during the New Student Orientation. In addition to this inaugural discussion, we've scheduled:

- Small group discussions with faculty and peers-August 25th
- Music by the Sierra Leone Refugee All-Stars – August 27th
- Film series- on selected Mondays and Wednesdays throughout the semester
- A visit and talk with author Ishmael Beah on October 22

Please take a look at the background material presented in this brochure, and keep in mind the discussion questions listed as you read *A Long Way Gone*. We hope that you will read and reflect on the issues presented in the book and look forward to seeing you at all the related events.

Sincerely,



President

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ishmael Beah was born in Sierra Leone in 1980 and moved to the U.S. in 1998. In 2004 he graduated from Oberlin College with a B.A. in political science. He is a member of Human Rights Watch Children's Division Advisory Committee, and has spoken before the United Nations, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO) at the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory. Beah's writings have appeared in *Vespertine Press* and *LIT* magazine. He lives in New York City.

A Long Way Gone is a unique autobiography about the civil war in Sierra Leone, as recorded by one who took up an AK-47 at the age of twelve. Now in his mid-twenties, Beah is both perceptive and eloquent in his account of fleeing attacking rebels, searching for his lost relatives, seeking out food and shelter in the bush, and wandering a land rendered unrecognizable by brutality and violence. Yet once he's been picked up and recruited by the government army, Beah, a gentle boy at heart, finds that he, too, is capable of truly terrible actions. *A Long Way Gone* is a mesmerizing work that addresses a twenty-first-century, and international, nightmare: the collision of war and childhood.

SIERRA LEONE*

Background

The government is slowly reestablishing its authority after the 1991 to 2002 civil war that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and the displacement of more than 2 million people (about one-third of the population). The last UN peacekeepers withdrew in December 2005, leaving full responsibility for security with domestic forces, but a new civilian UN office remains to support the government. Mounting tensions related to planned 2007 elections, deteriorating political and economic conditions in Guinea, and the tenuous security situation in neighboring Liberia may present challenges to continuing progress in Sierra Leone's stability.

Geography

Location: Western Africa, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Guinea and Liberia

Area:

total: 71,740 sq km

land: 71,620 sq km

water: 120 sq km

Comparative Area: slightly smaller than South Carolina

Climate: tropical; hot, humid; summer rainy season (May to December); winter dry season (December to April)

Terrain: coastal belt of mangrove swamps, wooded hill country, upland plateau, mountains in east

Natural Resources: diamonds, titanium ore, bauxite, iron ore, gold, chromite

Environment/Current issues: rapid population growth pressuring the environment; overharvesting of timber, expansion of cattle grazing and slash-and-burn agriculture have resulted in deforestation and soil exhaustion; over fishing

Note: rainfall along the coast can reach 495 cm (195 inches) a year, making it one of the wettest places along coastal, western Africa



TABLE OF COMPARATIVE STATISTICS*

	United States	Sierra Leone	South Africa	India
Population	301,139,947	6,144,562	43,997,828	1,129,866,154
Median Age:	36.6 years	17.5 years	24.3 years	24.8 years
Number of children per women in lifetime	2.08	6.01	2.16	2.81
Infant mortality rate	6.37 deaths 1,000 live births	158.27 deaths 1,000 live births	59.44 deaths 1,000 live births	34.61 deaths 1,000 live births
Life expectancy at birth	78 years	42.87 years	42.45 years	68.59 years
Literacy (age 15 and older can read and write)	99%	35.1%	86.4%	61%

*Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook 2007*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac, 2007.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. What did Ishmael's parents teach him about being a man? How did he define manhood once he began his long walk west? What general life lessons were his parents able to teach him that sustained him during his brutal passage from boyhood, and that he carries with him to this day?
2. Discuss the role of American hip-hop culture in creating a “soundtrack” for Ishmael's life. Why are rappers so appealing to him?
3. Ishmael tells us that some of the boys who had been rehabilitated with him later became soldiers again. What factors ensured that he could remain a civilian?
4. It takes many weeks before Ishmael feels comfortable with the relief workers' refrain that these events are not his fault. What destructive beliefs had he become addicted to? What states of deprivation and euphoria had his body become addicted to?
5. Storytelling is a powerful force in Ishmael's life, even providing a connection to his future mother, Laura Simms. What traits make Ishmael a memorable and unique storyteller? How does his perspective compare to the perspectives of filmmakers, reporters, or other authors who have recently tried to portray Africa's civil wars?
6. How does Ishmael's concept of family change throughout the memoir, from his early life in Matru Jong, to the uncle with whom he is reunited, to his American family with Laura?
7. Ishmael gives credit to relief workers such as Esther, in conjunction with organizations such as UNICEF, for rescuing him. He has dedicated his life to their cause, studying political science and speaking before a broad variety of groups, ranging from the Council on Foreign Relations to the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities at the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory. What steps has he inspired you to take to help end the use of child soldiers? How can each of us join Ishmael's cause?
8. Do you think *A Long Way Gone* is a good choice for a book to read as a community? What might we learn as common lessons?

