

A Long Walk to Water



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LINDA SUE PARK

Linda Sue Park grew up in Chicago. She studied English at Stanford University where she also competed on the highly successful gymnastics team. Park later obtained a master's degree in literature from Trinity College. Her books often explore Korean history and Park's own Korean heritage, though *A Long Walk to Water* certainly does not. Her first novel, a children's book called *Seesaw Girl*, was published in 1999 and won several awards. She has published several books for children and young adults in the past fifteen years, the most critically successful of which was *A Single Shard* (2002), a short novel set in Korea that won the Newbery Medal, usually considered the most prestigious American award for children's literature. Currently, she lives with her family in Rochester, New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The backdrop for the first half of the book (the half told through Salva's eyes) is the Second Sudanese Civil War, which lasted from 1983 to 2005. During this period, the predominately Muslim central government of Sudan tried to impose *sharia* law on non-Muslim Sudanese citizens in the south. During the late 1980s, military officers staged a coup against the Sudanese government, declaring a new, non-Muslim government. In 1989, military officers staged a second coup and banned all other political parties. Throughout this period, there was widespread fighting in Sudan between South Sudanese troops vying for independence and North Sudanese troops fighting to keep the country intact. South Sudan became an independent country in 2011. While Linda Sue Park doesn't offer many details about the historical background to Salva's story, the information is essential to understanding the conflict that sets the story's main events in motion.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Readers interested in other books about Sudan and Sudanese culture are encouraged to read the novels of Tayeb Saleh, especially his masterful [Season of Migration to the North](#) (1966). Dave Eggers' *What is the What* (2006) is a fictionalized autobiography (based on a true story) written from the perspective of one of the Lost Boys of Sudan. Richard Cockett's *Sudan: Darfur and the Failure of an African State* (2010) is often regarded as one of the best histories of modern Sudan, emphasizing the clash of political and cultural forces that have contributed to civil war in the country.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Long Walk to Water
- **When Written:** 2009-2010
- **Where Written:** Chicago, Illinois and Rochester, New York
- **When Published:** Fall 2010
- **Literary Period:** 21st century fictionalized biography
- **Genre:** Historical fiction (part of the book is based on the true story of Salva Dun, but Park emphasizes that the book has been fictionalized in parts)
- **Setting:** Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, United States
- **Climax:** The death of Uncle Jewiir
- **Antagonist:** Poverty, warfare
- **Point of View:** Third person limited; the book cuts back and forth between the perspectives of the two main characters, Salva and Nya

EXTRA CREDIT

A successful nonprofit. Salva's organization, Water for South Sudan, is a real nonprofit organization; to date, it has built over three hundred wells throughout the Sudanese region.



PLOT SUMMARY

The book alternates between two storylines: one beginning in 1985 and revolving around Salva Dut, an eleven-year-old boy living in the South Sudanese village of Loun-Ariik; the other beginning in 2008 and revolving around a young South Sudanese girl named Nya.

On day in 1985, Salva is sitting in school when he hears the sound of gunfire. There's a violent civil war going on in his country, and Salva's teacher yells for everyone to run away from their village as fast as possible. In the chaos, Salva is separated from his parents and siblings. He spends a few nights staying with an elderly woman in her barn, but the woman eventually tells Salva that he'll need to keep moving, since there's no more food or water. Salva joins up with a large group of people from his village, and the group begins to wander across Sudan in the hopes of finding a safe refugee camp.

After weeks of wandering across Sudan, Salva befriends another boy in the group, whose name is Marial. A few weeks later, Salva is overjoyed to be reunited with his Uncle Jewiir, who used to be a soldier. Jewiir, recognizing that Salva's parents are nowhere to be found (and thinking they are likely dead), promises to take care of Salva. He becomes the *de facto* leader of the group, due to his gun and his military training.

One night, Salva wakes up to find that Marial has disappeared. Jewiir guesses that Marial has probably been eaten by a lion.

The group of refugees finally reaches the Nile River. By building boats out of reeds, everyone is able to cross to the middle of the river, where there is an island of fishermen. On the island, Salva enjoys more food than he's had in months. The group then proceeds onward to the other side of the river, in Ethiopia.

The next stage of Salva's journey is the hardest of all. The group must cross the Akobo desert—a journey that will take them three days. Midway through the long march, the group encounters a group of men who are near death from dehydration. To Salva's amazement, some of the adults in the group give their water to the men, thereby saving their lives.

When the group is almost out of the Akobo desert, it crosses paths with a group of soldiers. The soldiers steal the groups' food, supplies, and clothes, and murder Uncle Jewiir in front of Salva. Salva is devastated by his uncle's death, but he promises himself that he'll keep on moving—just as Jewiir would have wanted him to do.

Salva and the remaining members of the group march into Ethiopia, where they come to a refugee camp. Salva stays in the camp for six years, at which point the Ethiopian government collapses, and the new government forces refugees out of the country. Salva has no choice but to migrate into neighboring Kenya—a dangerous journey which takes a year and a half, during which time Salva emerges as the leader of his group of more than one thousand young boys. Salva leads the group safely to Kenya, where he stays in two different refugee camps until he's in his mid-twenties. Salva is often lonely, but he befriends a foreign aid worker named Michael, who teaches him how to speak and write English.

One day, it is announced that a few thousand Sudanese refugees will be adopted by American families. To Salva's surprise, he is placed on the list of boys that will be adopted, and is flown to Rochester, New York, where he lives with an American couple named Chris and Louise.

In 2003, Salva is about to start college. He receives a surprising email from a cousin, whom he's never met before. The email explains that Salva's father, Mawien Dut, is still alive, and is staying in a U.N. hospital in Sudan. Overjoyed, Salva arranges to travel back to Sudan. There, he has a tearful reunion with his father, and learns that his mother and sisters are alive, although two of his brothers died in the civil war. Salva is unable to return to his village, since the risk of being forced to fight in the war is too high. However, he vows to return to Sudan one day.

After returning to America, Salva is determined to use his advantages to help the suffering people of Sudan. With the help of Chris and Louise's friend Scott, Salva founds a nonprofit organization with the mission of building wells in impoverished Sudanese villages.

In the book's second storyline, which takes place between

2008 and 2009, Nya spends her days fetching water for her family, which means repeatedly walking to and from the large pond located miles away from her family's village. Walking so much is physically exhausting for Nya, but her family depends on her, as many families in the village depend on their daughters, to bring them water while they complete other vital tasks. Furthermore, the water from the pond is not clean, which is a constant source of illness for the people who must drink it.

One day, mysterious men arrive in Nya's village and begin speaking with the village chief. The villagers begin clearing the land in the center of the village for construction—although Nya doesn't understand exactly what the men are building. As the months go by, Nya learns that they're building a well that will provide clean water to the area.

By the end of 2009, the well is completed. Nya is delighted to learn that she will no longer have to march miles every day just to get clean water—since, from now on, there will be clean water available to her in the center of the village. Nya learns that there will also be a schoolhouse built, where she will be able to learn how to read and write, an option that was previously unavailable to most South Sudanese girls, who were expected to spend their time fetching water.

As the book comes to an end, Nya introduces herself to the man responsible for designing the well in her village, and thanks him. He smiles and introduces himself as Salva.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Salva Dut — Salva Dut is based on a real person, and one of the two main characters in *A Long Walk to Water*. Both in the book and in real life, Salva grows up in a small, south Sudanese village. At the age of eleven, he's forced to flee his village to avoid the ongoing civil war in his country. Salva spends much of the next decade of his life wandering across the country with other refugees, trying to find a safe place to live. Throughout the novel, Salva is a model of bravery and steadfastness. He is often terrified by what he experiences in Sudan—at one point even witnessing the murder of his own uncle—but he manages to summon the courage to carry on and the strength to survive. As he grows up, Salva begins to feel a desire to help others, not just himself. While in Sudan, he leads more than one thousand Lost Boys to a refugee camp. He stays in multiple refugee camps in different countries before being adopted by an American couple in Rochester, New York. As a young man, Salva reunites with his father, Marien Dut Ariik, and feels inspired to found a nonprofit organization to help struggling villages in his country. The organization, called Water for South Sudan, has brought clean drinking water to over three hundred Sudanese villages since 2003. *A Long Walk to Water* is the story of how Salva survives civil war in his country and grows into a young

man and a leader with a strong desire to help those in need.

Nya — Nya is the other main character in *A Long Walk to Water*, also based on a real person. A young girl, Nya spends much of her waking life walking to and from a large pond, miles away from her family's village. She collects water from the pond into a gourd, balances the gourd on her head, and walks home, where she immediately deposits the water, turns back, and does it all over again. Linda Sue Park doesn't spend much time describing Nya's personality—readers know that she's a devoted sister and a loving daughter, but don't know much else about her. In many ways, Nya's role in the book is to serve as a witness to the enormous changes affecting her village in the early 2000s: thanks to Salva Dut's activism, wells are being built, bringing safe drinking water to thousands and saving Nya countless hours of work, which frees her to begin attending school.

Uncle Jewiir — Uncle Jewiir, the uncle of Salva Dut, is a former South Sudanese soldier. During the middle portion of the book, Jewiir acts as a guardian and protector to Salva, while they and thousands of others migrate across Sudan in search of a safe refugee camp. Because of his military training, his gun, and his helpful nature, Jewiir becomes the *de facto* leader of the refugees. However, he's later murdered by soldiers from the North. Jewiir's death is a traumatic event for Salva, who is forced to fend for himself and beg for food without Jewiir to protect him. However, Jewiir's example of strong and calm leadership continues to inspire Salva. There are many times in the book when Salva, on the verge of giving up, remembers Jewiir's encouragement to move "one step at a time." In this sense, Jewiir is an important influence in Salva's life—and in some ways, a father-figure to Salva.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Akeer — Nya's five-year-old sister, who suffers from gastrointestinal pain as a result of drinking dirty water.

Buksa — A young member of the Jur-chol tribe, who walks alongside Salva Dut after they're both forced out of their villages.

Marial — A young boy, Marial is Salva Dut's only friend early on in the refugee crisis, who mysteriously disappears, possibly because he's eaten by a lion.

Dep — The older brother of Nya.

Michael — An Irish aid worker who teaches Salva Dut how to read and write English, and how to play volleyball.

Chris — An American man who, along with his wife Louise, adopts Salva Dut, and later helps Salva found a nonprofit.

Louise — An American woman who, along with her husband Chris, adopts Salva Dut, and later helps Salva found a nonprofit.

Mawien Dut Ariik — The father of Salva Dut, who doesn't appear in the book until the final pages.

Scott — A friend of Chris and Louise, who helps Salva Dut set up a nonprofit designed to help Sudanese villages.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SURVIVAL

Linda Sue Park's *A Long Walk to Water* is a story about the lengths to which people will go in order to survive. The book is divided into two storylines, which remain separate until the final chapter (in fact, the final sentence). In the first storyline, set in Southern Sudan in 1985, an eleven-year-old boy named Salva Dut is forced to flee his village due to the outbreak of civil war. In the second storyline, set in 2008, a young Sudanese girl named Nya works hard to gather **water** for her family, often spending entire days walking to and from the nearest pond to collect the dirty water. The storylines offer two variations on the theme of survival: in each, extraordinarily difficult circumstances force children to fight for the most basic necessities of nourishment and safety.

Many of the most moving scenes in *A Long Walk to Water* revolve around the harsh truth that the concern for one's own survival trumps almost everything else. In a recurring motif of Salva's storyline, adults and other families refuse to give Salva food or protection, even though Salva is an innocent kid who has lost his parents and is in need of help. The adults reason that Salva is so small that he'll slow down the entire group—a serious problem, considering that the group is trying to flee enemy soldiers as quickly as possible. At the most basic level, other people refuse to help Salva because they value their own survival more highly than that of others. Similarly, in Nya's storyline, Nya is forced to spend her days fetching water from the pond—a physically demanding task that consumes almost all of her time and strength. No child should have to work as hard as Nya works. However, the difficult conditions of south Sudan (in particular, the almost total lack of drinkable water) force Nya and the rest of her family to sacrifice their comfort, since the alternative is to die of dehydration. Even though Nya is only a small child, she seems to understand the gravity of her family's situation; as a result, she works hard to gather water. Here, and throughout *A Long Water to Water*, the necessity of surviving forces the characters to sacrifice their compassion, their happiness, and more.

But even as survival is of enormous importance to the Sudanese characters in the book, Park demonstrates that, at times, some things *do* trump survival. In various instances,

characters risk their own survival in order to help others—usually because these other people are a part of their family, or share some kind of strong cultural bond. For instance, when a group of refugees eventually decides to take Salva with them, even though doing so will slow down the group, they offer a simple reason for their decision: Salva is Dinka, a member of the tribe to which they also belong. Along similar lines, Salva’s most important protector during the long march out of Sudan is his uncle, Jewiir. Jewiir repeatedly sacrifices his own safety, food, and energy to make sure that Salva stays safe. He makes impractical decisions in Salva’s interest—and does so without any hesitation—because Salva is a part of his family. Everyone wants to survive, *A Long Walk to Water* suggests, and yet, sometimes, people are willing to risk their own survival to help others out of a sense of compassion or kinship.

Although *A Long Walk to Water* is a book for young adults, it poses some difficult questions about the nature of survival. At one point, Salva witnesses the adults he’s travelling with sacrifice a portion of their water supply—an action which seriously endangers their own lives—in order to save the lives of men who are dying of dehydration. Salva wonders if he would do what they had done, and risk his own survival to help other people. Interestingly, Salva never answers his own question, suggesting that many of the moral problems that he encounters in Sudan are too difficult for any easy answer. Nevertheless, *A Long Walk to Water* suggests that people who have been prosperous and fortunate *do* have an obligation to help less fortunate people survive. For instance, after being adopted by an American couple and growing up in New York, Salva founds a nonprofit organization with the mission of providing clean water for impoverished Sudanese villages. In this case, Salva isn’t sacrificing his survival in any way—rather, he’s making relatively small sacrifices in his own life (and encouraging donors to do the same) in order to make a big difference in the lives of countless Sudanese people. Ultimately, *A Long Walk to Water* has an altruistic message, championing the everyday efforts of those who do what they can to improve their corner of the world. Park isn’t asking readers to risk their lives for the sake of others’ survival, but she is asking that they use their resources to work together to improve the lives of people who struggle to survive.



HOPE AND RESILIENCE

In addition to focusing on the physical realities of people struggling to survive—such as the need for water and shelter—*A Long Walk to Water* focuses on

the psychological and emotional aspects of the struggle for survival. It’s not enough to have food and **water**, Park suggests. Rather, to survive in dangerous times, people need to *want* to survive, which requires finding a source of strength, determination, and hope.

In tough times, the book shows, hope can be as important as

food and water, if not more so. First and foremost, Park dramatizes the importance of hope through the relationship between Salva Dut and his uncle Jewiir. Uncle Jewiir teaches Salva how to remain optimistic, even when it seems circumstances could not be any worse. In one of the most poignant scenes in the book, Salva collapses in the middle of the desert, overcome not only by hunger and thirst, but by despair. Jewiir compels Salva to keep moving, urging him to make progress by focusing on taking one **step** at a time. As Jewiir sees it, the key to holding onto hope is concentrating on concrete tasks instead of becoming overwhelmed by the enormity of the greater goal. If Salva were to stop and think about the magnitude of what he has to do—i.e., walk all the way into Ethiopia—he might give up. Instead, with Jewiir’s help, Salva concentrates on doing as much as he can, each moment. At the same time, Salva finds motivation in his desire to reunite with the rest of his family. Even after years of not seeing them, he continues to hope that they’re still alive. As *A Long Walk to Water* portrays it, hope is both idealistic and practical, universal and particular. Salva’s hopefulness keeps him focused on the long-term goals of surviving the civil war and reuniting with his family, but it also helps him concentrate on short-term necessities, like continuing to place one foot ahead of the other.

As the story goes on, Park shows that hope, in addition to being a powerful force for survival, can be passed on to other people. Just as Uncle Jewiir’s calm, cautiously optimistic leadership inspires Salva to stay strong, Salva’s hopefulness inspires other people. As a young man, Salva successfully leads over a thousand younger children to safety in Kenya. He takes inspiration from Uncle Jewiir by encouraging the children to concentrate on moving “one step at a time.” Later, when he moves to the United States, Salva’s hope leads to even more remarkable progress. Speaking in schools, universities, and churches, Salva inspires Americans to donate their time and money to improving the situation in Sudan. His actions—grounded in his confidence that Sudan can be made safer and better—result in hundreds of wells being built throughout the country, helping many thousands of Sudanese people. In this way, the book shows that hope isn’t just an emotion—but, on the contrary, it can make possible the enactment of real, tangible changes for the better.



SOCIAL STRIFE

Although it is primarily set during Sudan’s Second Civil War, *A Long Walk to Water* offers surprisingly little background information about the conflict.

Aside from a short author’s note, the book is free from any mention of the political forces that led to the long, bloody war. Instead of going into detail about the causes of the violence in Sudan, Park portrays the *effects* of this violence: displaced villagers, orphaned children, and an overall sense of despair. In this way, her book offers a moving portrait of the social strife in

Sudan in the past thirty years.

Even though *A Long Walk to Water* isn't a thorough history of Sudan, Park divides the social strife in Sudan into two clear groups. First, she describes the civil war that took place in Sudan beginning in the 1980s. During this period, North Sudanese soldiers acting on behalf of the government tried to tighten controls over the population in semi-autonomous South Sudan. South Sudanese forces refused to be incorporated into the rest of Sudan, partly because they objected to the Islamic laws of the North Sudanese government, and partly because of the lucrative oil reserves on their land. (For more information on the Second Sudanese Civil War, see Background Info.) Park also emphasizes the social strife between different ethnic groups in South Sudan, such as the Nuer and Dinka tribes. On several occasions, Park notes that these two tribes have been warring for centuries, largely over land and **water**. These two main forms of social strife have one thing in common: both are premised on cultural difference (even if Park doesn't go into a lot of detail on what, exactly, those differences are) and scarcity of resources (such as oil and water).

Park is unambiguous in her depiction of the effects of social strife in Sudan: it tears apart families, terrorizes children, and kills innocent people. The civil war forces Salva to flee his village without his parents and siblings. He and countless other refugees must walk across the country in search of safer conditions in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the ongoing rivalries between different South Sudanese tribes make survival during wartime even more difficult. While the North Sudanese troops think of the southerners as a single entity, the different tribes of South Sudan refuse to work together, instead breaking off into competing factions, which makes them more vulnerable.

A Long Walk to Water offers an optimistic, though arguably simplistic, view of how to remedy social strife: development. (See "Development" theme.) The book ends with Salva, now an adult, returning to South Sudan to build wells for many different tribes. In doing so, Park implies, Salva is ending an age-old rivalry between tribes and breaking down barriers. Even more broadly, Salva's well-building initiative arguably improves some of the social strife between North and South Sudan, since it provides impoverished people with the resources they need—some of the same resources whose absence sparked civil war in the first place. However, in recent years, the social strife in Sudan has proven to be far harder to repair than Park suggests at the end of her book. Centuries-old rivalries, based not only on the availability of resources but on basic cultural differences, have continued to contribute to instability in the region. While Park can hardly be blamed for ending a young adult novel on an optimistic note, her novel arguably turns a blind eye to some of the more nuanced social issues that leave Sudan vulnerable to ongoing social strife in the future.



DEVELOPMENT

Especially in the second half of *A Long Walk to Water*, Park explores the theme of development—in other words, the methods that engineers, politicians, and aid workers use to improve the living conditions of people in Sudan. For the most part, the book takes an optimistic view of development, arguing that factors such as foreign aid and an influx of infrastructural development such as wells will be able to dramatically improve the situation in Sudan.

In both halves of the book, but particularly the half featuring Nya, Park explores the positive effects of technological development on Sudanese society. Development empowers entire Sudanese villages by giving the villagers more time for other pursuits, such as education. By installing a simple well in the middle of the village, for example, engineers save the villagers countless hours of walking—adding up to weeks or months, probably—every year. Following the same logic, this type of development empowers women: Nya, for instance, will be able to attend school alongside her male peers and learn how to read and write due to the time the new well saves her. It is often argued that educating and empowering women is the single best "cure for poverty," and *A Long Walk to Water* shows how a little development goes a long way toward providing this "cure."

Finally, the book shows how development might ease cultural tensions in Sudan as a whole. Salva Dut, who initiates an influential project to build wells in Sudan, makes a point of designing wells for many different tribes, not just his own Dinka tribe. In this way, Salva makes sure that the different cultural and ethnic groups in South Sudan reap the rewards of development equally. Furthermore, Park suggests that many of the rivalries between tribes stem from disputes over access to **water**, meaning that providing clean water for the different tribes will make South Sudan more a more peaceful place for its inhabitants.

In sum, Park offers an optimistic account of how development might bring the people of Sudan together and promote peace and equality in a part of the world that has, for decades, been the site of horrific violence. While it is true that violence will continue to afflict the people of Sudan for a long time, Park hopes that development—organized by well-trained and compassionate people—will be able to reduce some of the social strife and the violence it produces.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



WATER

The central symbol of *A Long Walk to Water* is, unsurprisingly, water. The main characters in the book are desperate for water, and will go to great lengths to find it. Nya spends hours every day walking to and from a faraway pond, just so that her family can have enough water to survive. Similarly, Salva Dut is often in need of water during his long walk across Sudan. During his walk through the desert, he sees first-hand the consequences of not having enough water when he witnesses several men dying of thirst. In all, water symbolizes survival, and the difficulty of obtaining water shows the difficulty of survival in Sudan during the two periods depicted by the novel.



STEPS

During his long walk across Sudan, Salva Dut experiences many setbacks. Sometimes, he's just too exhausted and distraught to keep moving. However, Salva's uncle Jewiir encourages him to keep moving by telling him to move forward "one step at a time." Salva remembers this advice long after Jewiir's death—as, years later, it motivates him to found a nonprofit designed to help Sudanese villagers. Throughout the book, steps symbolize the slow, deliberate, cautiously optimistic way that Salva chooses to live his life—refusing to give in to despair.

Sue Park discusses the history of the Second Sudanese Civil War. Because Park depicts the war through the eyes of Salva Dut, a young child (and, furthermore, because she's writing a book for young adults), Park writes relatively little about the war's causes. Here, she suggests that the war was partly religiously-motivated, sparked by the efforts of the predominantly Muslim North Sudanese government to seize control of South Sudan. But the civil war was partly motivated by a struggle for resources, and especially petroleum, which gave the North Sudanese government a big financial incentive to occupy the oil-rich South Sudanese region. So although the origins of the civil war *were* partly religious, conflict also stemmed from a lack of available resources, reinforcing some of the points Park makes about the importance of development elsewhere in her book.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ Nya filled the container all the way to the top. Then she tied the gourd back in place and took the padded cloth doughnut from her pocket. The doughnut went on her head first, followed by the heavy container of water, which she would hold in place with one hand.

Related Characters: Nya

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief passage, readers begin to get a sense for what Nya's daily life is like. Nya, a young girl who lives in a South Sudanese village, must walk many miles every day just to fetch water for her family. The nearest pond is so far away that Nya needs a good method for transporting the water back to her home, lest she spill some of it. She keeps the water in a gourd and then balances the gourd on her head. Throughout the book, Park conveys the immense difficulty of Nya's life: she's very young, but she must spend her days fetching water, or else her whole family would go thirsty.

☞ The tears were hot in Salva's eyes. Where had everyone gone? Why had they left without waking him? He knew the answer: because he was a child . . . who might tire easily and slow them down, and complain about being hungry, and cause trouble somehow.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt edition of *A Long Walk to Water* published in 2011.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ The war had started two years earlier. Salva did not understand much about it, but he knew that rebels from the southern part of Sudan, where he and his family lived, were fighting against the government, which was based in the north. Most of the people who lived in the north were Muslim, and the government wanted all of Sudan to become a Muslim country—a place where the beliefs of Islam were followed.

Related Characters: Salva Dut

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the few passages in the book in which Linda

Related Characters: Salva Dut

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

In this moving passage, Salva wakes up to find that the other refugees, with whom he's been wandering away from his village, have abandoned him. Salva quickly realizes what has happened: the refugees have abandoned him because he's too young, and is therefore seen as a liability to the group. Salva is so young that he won't be able to walk fast, work hard, or do anything that could help the other refugees. To say the least, this is a callous way to think about taking care of a child. But under the dangerous circumstances of the Second Sudanese Civil War, ordinary people were forced to make incredibly difficult decisions in order to ensure their own survival. Adults sometimes, as in this passage, abandoned children because they feared for their own lives.

Chapter 4 Quotes

●● Nya nodded. She picked up the plastic container and took Akeer by the hand. Home for just long enough to eat, Nya would now make her second trip to the pond. To the pond and back—to the pond and back—nearly a full day of walking altogether. This was Nya's daily routine seven months of the year.

Related Characters: Akeer, Nya

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Park captures the monotony of Nya's life. Because Nya's family lives far away from the nearest pond, Nya spends much of her waking life walking to or from the pond. She has no time to go to school or play with other children. Her family, and her community, is so impoverished that everyone, no matter how young or old, must contribute something to the greater good. Thus, Nya must do her part for the family, fetching water all day long. This may not be a happy way to live one's life—but without real change in the region in the form of infrastructural development, the alternative is dying of dehydration.

●● The man nodded and turned to the group. "We will take him with us," he said.

Salva looked up quickly. A few in the group were shaking their heads and grumbling.

The man shrugged. "He is Dinka" he said, and began walking again.

Related Characters: Salva Dut

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Salva Dut benefits from some good luck. He's about to be abandoned by the elderly woman who's been taking care of him—like the earlier group of refugees, she believes that Salva will only be a burden. However, just as the elderly woman is about to leave, she encounters a large group of refugees who hail from the same tribe as Salva. After hesitating for a moment, the refugees agree to take care of Salva, even though he's young, moves slowly, and is seen as just another mouth to feed. Their reason for letting him join their group is simple: he's already "one of them," another member of their tribe.

The passage is a striking example of how human beings sometimes sacrifice their own self-interest for the good of the group. Even though the refugees as a whole will be set back by Salva's presence, they feel loyalty to their fellow Dinka tribesmen. People are self-interested, Park seems to suggest, but not entirely self-interested. At times, they'll sacrifice their own self-interest, especially if they feel they have something important in common with the person on the receiving end of their generosity (whether that's a shared culture, ethnicity, or experience).

Chapter 5 Quotes

●● The boy was still looking at him. "Your family?" he asked. Salva shook his head.

"Me, too," the boy said. He sighed, and Salva heard that sigh all the way to his heart.

Their eyes met. "I'm Salva."

"I'm Marial."

It was good to make a friend.

Related Characters: Salva Dut, Marial (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

While walking through Sudan with the other refugees, Salva Dut makes a friend. The friend is another young boy who, like Salva, has lost his family in the confusion surrounding the Second Sudanese Civil War. Salva and Marial seem equally frightened and confused about what's been going on in their country. So perhaps it's inevitable that they would become friends: their experiences are so similar that they get along very well.

Salva and Marial's friendship helps both of them keep fighting for survival despite the difficulty of their circumstances. They're lonely and scared, and both in need of emotional support, which a friend can help provide. In the absence of their families, Salva and Marial turn to each other for emotional support.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☛☛ As Salva spoke, Uncle nodded or shook his head. His face became very solemn when Salva told him that he had not seen nor heard a single word of his family in all that time. Salva's voice trailed off, and he lowered his head. He was glad to see Uncle again, but it looked as if he might not be much help either. Uncle was quiet for a moment. Then he patted Salva's shoulder. "Eh, Nephew!" he said in a cheerful voice. "We are together now, so I will look after you!"

Related Characters: Uncle Jewiir (speaker), Salva Dut

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Salva runs into more good luck. Entirely by chance, he reunites with his Uncle Jewiir, who has previously fought as a soldier for the South Sudanese. Jewiir senses that Salva's family is probably dead, though he doesn't say so explicitly. Instead, he promises to take care of Salva. For the next few chapters, Jewiir will play the part of a father-figure for Salva, giving him the advice, nourishment, and emotional support that Salva needs to survive this tumultuous time in Sudanese history. Jewiir's behavior is another important example of how people put aside self-interest for the sake of their friends, family, and fellow tribesmen: Jewiir doesn't even hesitate to help his nephew, because he knows how important it is to take care of those who can't defend themselves, especially when they're family members.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ A trip like that would be very difficult for Akeer. Should they stay at the camp and let her rest so she might heal on her own? Or should they begin the long hard walk—and hope they reached help in time?

Related Characters: Akeer

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Nya's family faces a difficult decision—one which no family should ever have to make. Akeer, Nya's little sister, is suffering from stomach pain, probably from drinking bad water. The family knows that the nearest medical clinic is very far away. Therefore, they have to decide whether it makes sense to bring Akeer to the clinic, or whether they should wait for Akeer to recover on her own.

The passage illustrates the kinds of dilemmas that impoverished people in developing nations frequently face. Without easily available institutions, such as hospitals, or clean drinking water, Nya's family (and millions of other families) has to experience the physical pain of drinking dirty water and, even worse, the difficulty of having to make a decision that could determine whether a child lives or dies.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛☛ The water from the holes in the lakebed could be collected only in tiny amounts. If her mother tried to boil such a small amount, the pot would be dry long before they could count to two hundred.

Related Characters: Nya

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nya's family learns why Akeer got sick: she drank water that had become infected with bacteria. Bacterial infections stemming from unclean water are a major problem in Sudan. It is a particularly poignant

problem because the solution is seemingly so simple: boiling the water is an effective way of killing the bacteria. Unfortunately for Nya's family, however, there's so little available water that it can't be boiled, since doing so causes too much water to evaporate. Therefore, Nya's family has no choice but to continue drinking the dirty water, knowing full-well that they're rolling the dice every time they do so.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ Soon he was crying so hard that he could hardly get his breath. He could not think; he could barely see. He had to slow down, and for the first time on the long journey, he began to lag behind the group. Stumbling about blindly, he did not notice the group drawing farther and farther ahead of him. As if by magic, Uncle was suddenly at his side. [...]
Salva lifted his head, the sobs interrupted by surprise. "Do you see that group of bushes?" Uncle said, pointing. "You need only to walk as far as those bushes."

Related Characters: Uncle Jewiir (speaker), Salva Dut

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this important passage, the refugees—including Salva Dut and Uncle Jewiir—are crossing a vast, dry desert. Salva Dut becomes so physically exhausted, and so distraught, that he collapses and refuses to keep moving. Uncle Jewiir manages to convince him to carry on by encouraging him to focus on small, manageable goals. He urges Salva to move to the nearby bushes—an easy, manageable achievement. In this way, Jewiir is able to break down the formidable task ahead of Salva (walking all the way across the desert) into a series of more modest tasks.

The passage resonates throughout the second half of the book, even after Uncle Jewiir's tragic death. There are many times when Salva feels like giving up—however, by employing Jewiir's strategy and focusing on short-term goals, Salva is able to summon the strength and the hope needed to survive over the long, dangerous civil war years.

☞ Salva looked at the hollow eyes and the cracked lips of the men lying on the hot sand, and his own mouth felt so dry that he nearly choked when he tried to swallow. "If you give them your water, you will not have enough for yourself!" the same voice shouted. "It is useless—they will die, and you will die with them!"

Related Characters: Salva Dut

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter Nine, Salva and the other refugees come across a group of dying men in the middle of the desert. The men are too weak and dehydrated to move on, and if they stay where they are, they'll surely die. Some of the people in Salva's group offer their water to the dying men, even as others shout that doing so is foolish, since water is scarce and the men are going to die anyway.

The passage points to a moral conundrum that has no easy answer. In its simplest form, this moral conundrum comes down to a clash between altruism, on the one hand, and the self-interest one needs to survive in wartime, on the other. The refugees know that they need every drop of water to survive their trek through the desert. But they also feel a natural sense of compassion for the dying men. Confronted with this dilemma, some of the refugees choose to risk their own lives by giving up some of their water. But others refuse to do so. Importantly, Park doesn't interject her own views about what the "right" or "wrong" thing to do is, instead leaving readers to grapple with the question for themselves.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Related Characters: Salva Dut

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter Ten, Salva watches as some of

the refugees nurse the dying men back to health. While some of the men are beyond the point of being saved even by medical attention, some of them begin to regain their strength thanks to the refugees' water and generosity.

Salva recognizes that the refugees who *do* give up their water have been incredibly generous and compassionate. The refugees know that water is scarce, and that they're endangering their own survival by helping other people. Salva seems to admire their altruistic behavior, even if he's not sure he could ever live up to it himself. Were he an adult, he thinks, he's not sure if he'd give up his water or not.

The passage is an important milestone in the book, because it shows Salva thinking about compassion, morality, and the importance of helping other people. For the time being, Salva is a young child, but as time goes on, he becomes more conscious of his moral obligations to other people, and makes great personal sacrifices to help those in need.

☝☝ *He knows it will be hard for me, Salva realized. He does not want to leave me there, but he has to go back and fight for our people. I mustn't act like a bay—I must try to be strong ...*

Related Characters: Salva Dut (speaker), Uncle Jewiir

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Uncle Jewiir has just informed Salva that he won't be staying in the Ethiopian refugee camp where Salva is going to be staying. Instead, Jewiir will go back to South Sudan and fighting alongside other "rebel" soldiers. Salva is understandably devastated by this news. He loves and trusts Uncle Jewiir, and looks to him for both material and emotional support.

At the same time, Salva refuses to allow himself to become consumed with sadness. Showing remarkable maturity for a child of eleven, Salva tries to see things from Jewiir's point of view, and realizes that while Jewiir *wants* to stay behind with Salva, he feels he has a duty to go back and fight. This is one of the earliest examples of Salva's ability to overcome his own despair and find the strength to "keep fighting." Even when things look bleak, he refuses to give up.

Chapter 11 Quotes

Related Characters: Salva Dut

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately following the murder of Uncle Jewiir by enemy soldiers, the refugees are thrown into chaos. They've just lost their leader, the man who protected them and hunted on their behalf. But instead of giving up, the refugees continue their long walk to safety. Here, Park notes that Salva is able to concentrate on walking out of the desert and into Ethiopia. Even though he loved his uncle, and is understandably shaken by the sight of his execution, Salva surprises himself and continues walking, "faster and more boldly than he had before." Psychologists have noted that people who live through a traumatic incident sometimes respond to the trauma, if only in the short term, by becoming more focused and energetic. Salva's behavior would seem to reinforce psychologists' findings: instead of giving up after his uncle's death, he experiences a sudden "surge" that enables him to make it all the way to Ethiopia.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ How can I go on without them?

But how can I not go on? They would want me to survive... to grow up and make something of my life,... to honor their memories.

What was it Uncle had said during that first terrible day in the desert? "Do you see that group of bushes? You need only to walk as far as those bushes..."

Uncle had helped him get through the desert that way, bit by bit, one step at a time. Perhaps... perhaps Salva could get through life at the camp in the same way.

Related Characters: Salva Dut, Uncle Jewiir (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Now stationed in an Ethiopian refugee camp, Salva finally begins to come to terms with the realities of his situation. He begins to accept the apparent truth that his family (his

parents and siblings) have been murdered in the civil war. Furthermore, he accepts the death of his uncle Jewiir—a gruesome event that occurred before his very eyes. Instead of despairing, as many people would do in a similar situation, Salva treats the deaths of his beloved family members as a mandate that he survive and live a long, happy life. In other words, Salva believes that he owes it to Jewiir and his parents to make it through the civil war. Salva remembers his uncle's advice that he get through the desert "a step at a time." Now, he interprets this advice as a strategy for making it through life in the refugee camp.

Chapter 13 Quotes

●● Salva made up his mind. He would walk south, to Kenya. He did not know what he would find once he got there, but it seemed to be his best choice.

Crowds of other boys followed him. Nobody talked about it, but by the end of the first day Salva had become the leader of a group of about fifteen hundred boys. Some were as young as five years old.

Related Characters: Salva Dut

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Salva begins to take on leadership positions for the first time in the story. After being kicked out of the Ethiopian refugee camp, he must wander until he finds a safe place to stay. Salva decides that his best option is to migrate into neighboring Kenya, in the hopes that he'll find a refugee camp there. But Salva doesn't only take care of himself. Now that he's a teenager, he decides to help take care of some of the younger, less confident boys he's met in the Ethiopian refugee camp, and quickly becomes the leader of the pack.

The passage suggests that Salva has been inspired by his uncle's example. Just as Uncle Jewiir was the natural leader of the refugees during their walk into Ethiopia, Salva becomes the natural leader of this group of "Lost Boys" as they try to find a new home. Even though he's been through a lot, Salva refuses to give up. Quite the contrary, he rises to the occasion and leads over a thousand people to safety.

●● Whatever food or water they found was shared equally among all of them. When the smaller boys grew too tired to walk, the older boys took turns carrying them on their backs. There were times when some of the boys did not want to do their share of the work. Salva would talk to them, encourage them, coax and persuade them. Once in a while he had to speak sternly, or even shout. But he tried not to do this too often. It was as if Salva's family were helping him, even though they were not there.

Related Characters: Salva Dut

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Salva Dut leads his group of "Lost Boys" to safety and makes sure to take care of everyone equally. In striking contrast to the way the previous refugee group behaved, Salva's boys work together and share food equally, instead of excluding the youngest, weakest children. As the passage points out, Salva's own family inspires him to lead the other boys in this way. Salva can still remember the way his siblings and parents treated him—not to mention his uncle. He mirrors their behavior, providing calm, confident leadership for hundreds of frightened, lonely children.

At a time of crisis, during which many refugees in South Sudan choose to take care of themselves and not their neighbors, Salva proves that it's possible to take care of oneself *and* other people. Evidently, Salva is motivated by a strong instinct to help the unfortunate—an instinct that not everyone feels, or listens to, when the going gets tough.

Chapter 14 Quotes

●● The rumor was that about three thousand boys and young men from the refugee camps would be chosen to go live in America!

Related Characters: Salva Dut

Related Themes:  

Page Number: Book 87-88

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Park explains that American families are volunteering to adopt some of the orphaned children of Sudan. By the mid-2000s, there were tens of thousands of orphaned children in the country as a result of two decades

of brutal civil war. Some of these children were adopted by Sudanese families in safer and more prosperous parts of the country. Other children were adopted by families in Europe, Canada, or America. For the purposes of this book, Park focuses on the American families who generously volunteered to help orphaned Sudanese children. However, there were many other countries whose citizens did the same. (It's also worth noting that the vast majority of the orphaned Sudanese children who were adopted were boys. In the 2000s, many of the "Lost Girls" of Sudan were already in foster homes, and therefore technically didn't qualify as orphans. Indeed, less than one hundred Sudanese girls were adopted by American families.)

Chapter 15 Quotes

●● Salva stood still inside the terminal doors for a few moments. Leaving the airport felt like leaving his old life forever—Sudan, his village, his family. . . . Tears came to his eyes, perhaps from the cold air blowing in through the open doors. His new family was already outside; they turned and looked back at him. Salva blinked away the tears and took his first step into a new life in America.

Related Characters: Louise, Chris, Salva Dut

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In this poignant scene, Salva Dut arrives at the airport in Rochester, New York. He's understandably shaken by the experience of leaving Sudan: he's never seen a plane, let alone been on one, and almost every aspect of life in New York is different from what he's used to in South Sudan. Moreover, Salva Dut feels strange about leaving Sudan because he's still unsure of what happened to his family members. By moving to New York, Salva senses, he isn't just living in a different part of the world—he's leaving his old life behind.

Park suggests that the tears in Salva's eyes are the result of the cold air blowing inside, but it's clear that Salva is feeling genuinely sad—or perhaps just overwhelmed. He's experienced so many sudden changes in so little time that his tears are easy to understand.

Chapter 17 Quotes

●● Nya went back and picked up the plastic can. She felt as if she were flying. School! She would learn to read and write!

Related Characters: Nya

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Nya discovers that the mysterious men who've been building a well in her village will also design other facilities, such as a school. With all the extra time the villagers will have (as a result of not having to walk miles every day to fetch water), the village children, both male and female, will now be able to attend school. Nya is overjoyed to be able to learn how to read and write along with her brothers.

The passage implies a couple things about development in developing nations. First, it suggests that impoverished villages tend to stay impoverished because there simply isn't enough time for other pursuits. Since the villagers must spend so many hours on seemingly simple tasks (like getting water), they don't have enough time for others (like building a hospital or a school). Second, the passage suggests that girls in many parts of the developing world aren't given an education because of this lack of available time. While this may be true in part, it's only part of the story. In many parts of the world, girls aren't permitted to learn in schools, not because there isn't enough time but because of strong cultural expectations about what women should and shouldn't do. Sudan is hardly an exception to this rule: tradition dictates that women should remain in the domestic sphere rather than educating themselves. So perhaps it's overly simplistic to suggest that installing a water pump into a Sudanese community can help to improve gender equality.

●● "I will come to the village," Salva promised, "as soon as it is safe!"

"We will be there waiting for you," his father promised in turn. Salva pressed his face tightly to his father's as they hugged goodbye, their tears flowing and blending together.

Related Characters: Mawien Dut Ariik, Salva Dut (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

In this emotional scene, Salva reunites with his father, Mawien Dut—a man whom Salva has long assumed to be dead. Mawien Dut is alive, but ill; after drinking contaminated water for so many years, he needs gastrointestinal surgery. Salva is overjoyed to reunite with his father. However, he is dismayed to learn that he won't be able to return to his village. In the village, rebels try to recruit civilians to fight in the war. In order to avoid this, Salva makes the difficult choice to stay away from his village and, by the same token, his mother and siblings. The scene also emphasizes that Salva has grown apart from the rest of his family as a result of his adoption in America. In the final chapter of the book, Park will show how Salva uses the advantages he's been given in life to give back to the impoverished people of South Sudan.

☝ Whenever he found himself losing hope, Salva would take a deep breath and think of his uncle's words.

A step at a time.

One problem at a time—just figure out this one problem.

Day by day, solving one problem at a time, Salva moved toward his goal.

Related Characters: Uncle Jewiir, Salva Dut

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Park shows how Uncle Jewiir's gentle and compassionate encouragement has proved to be a lasting influence in Salva's life. Salva is now a young man, and he's eager to use his advantages to help the impoverished people of South Sudan. He begins speaking at churches and schools in order to build awareness surrounding the humanitarian crisis in Sudan and, furthermore, to raise funds to help the Sudanese people.

Salva faces a difficult project. He wants to improve the situation in Sudan, but the situation in Sudan keeps deteriorating. It would be all-too easy for Salva to give up and conclude that nothing can be done to help his country. But when he feels like giving up all hope, Salva remembers the words his uncle spoke to him in the desert—"a step at a

time." Instead of becoming overwhelmed by the task ahead of him, Salva forces himself to concentrate on smaller, more manageable tasks. In this way, he makes slow but deliberate progress toward helping the people of Sudan.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝ In a few more days, the school would be finished. Nya and Dep and Akeer would all go to school, along with the other children. Next year there would be a marketplace where the villagers could sell and buy vegetables and chickens and other goods. There was even talk of a clinic someday—a medical clinic, so they wouldn't have to walk so far to get help, as they had to when Akeer was ill.

Related Characters: Akeer, Nya

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

The chapter begins with the completion of a well in Nya's village. The well, Park makes very clear, is going to change life for the villagers in almost every way. No longer will the female villagers have to spend their days walking dozens of miles in the hot sun to fetch water. Instead, they'll only have to walk a few paces, to the center of the village. Park also suggests that the well is going to cause a "domino effect" of innovation in the community. For example, the availability of water will enable the villagers to build a school, as well as a market and a medical clinic. These projects won't be easy, but with the enormous amount of extra *time* that the well provides, the villagers will be able to complete projects like these that they likely wouldn't be able to complete otherwise. Many people have supported Park's ideas about development: one innovation tends to lead to another, and another.

☝ The Dinka and the Nuer were enemies—had been for hundreds of years.

"Why would a Dinka bring water to us?" she wondered aloud.

"I heard Uncle and Father talking about him," Dep said. "He has drilled many wells for his own people. This year he decided to drill for the Nuer as well."

Related Characters: Nya, Dep (speaker), Salva Dut

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

One of the most important aspects of the initiative to build wells in South Sudan is its lack of partisanship or tribalism. Instead of favoring one tribe over another, the well-builders are trying to bring clean water to all South Sudanese people, regardless of tribal affiliation. By refusing to favor one tribe over another, the well-builders may permanently change the *status quo* in Southern Sudan. At the beginning of the book, Park emphasized the tribal rivalries that have left the region unstable and violent. Many of these rivalries, Park suggests, are based on disputes over areas of land with plentiful water. Therefore, by building wells for many different tribes, the well-builders seem to be addressing one of the root causes of social strife in South Sudan.

●● The man smiled. "What is your name?" he asked.
"I am Nya."
"I am happy to meet you, Nya," he said. "My name is Salva. "

Related Characters: Nya, Salva Dut (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

In the final sentences of *A Long Walk to Water*, the two separate storylines (Nya's and Salva's) merge together. The mysterious man who's been planning to drill a well in Nya's Sudanese village turns out to be Salva Dut, who readers first encountered as a frightened eleven-year-old boy. Over the years, Salva has endured a lot of traumatic experiences. However, he's refused to give up on his dreams of helping the people of South Sudan. Years after the beginning of the Second Sudanese Civil War, Salva has returned to his country of birth to build wells for the small villages in the region. In doing so, Salva realizes his dream of being able to help others. Furthermore, he arguably combats one of the root causes of poverty and social strife in Sudan: lack of access to water. If everyone has access to clean drinking water, perhaps there will be less fighting between the tribes over scarce resources, and more resources to follow pursuits other than survival.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

In South Sudan in 2008, an eleven-year-old girl named Nya walks through a hot, dry environment. She knows that she needs to move quickly.

Nya is one of the book's two main characters. Like many of the other characters, she has to work exceptionally hard to survive, in spite of the fact that she's only a child.



In South Sudan in 1985, an eleven-year-old boy named Salva sits in class, while his teacher drones on about “the Arabic language.” Salva speaks the language of the Dinka tribe, but in school he learns Arabic, the official language of Sudan. Salva is lucky to be able to go to school. His father is successful, and works as a village judge. Salva’s three brothers go to school, but his two sisters don’t—instead, they stay home and learn “how to keep house.”

The story jumps 23 years backwards in time to introduce Salva, the book's other protagonist, and situate his life within Sudan's historical timeline. In the mid-'80s, civil war broke out in Sudan between the North Sudanese government (who mandated that Arabic be the official language of Sudan and Islam the official religion) and the South Sudanese rebels. The passage also emphasizes the strict gender roles in Sudanese society: women aren't educated, and are expected to stay within the domestic sphere.



Salva and his brothers spend much of their time herding cattle. The older they get, the more cattle they're responsible for. The brothers also like practicing archery by shooting at birds. They know how to build a fire and roast small animals.

Despite being very young, Salva has a lot of responsibilities. Largely because he lives in an impoverished country, Salva must do his part to help support his family.



Back in the classroom, Salva feels hungry. He imagines going home and drinking a bowl of fresh milk. Suddenly, a loud noise fills the classroom—the sound of gunfire. The teacher yells for the students to get down, but then orders them to run into the nearest bushes. The teacher insists that the students *not* try to run home—the people firing guns are probably headed for villages.

The passage depicts the civil war in Sudan through the eyes of a young child. Salva is understandably confused—and in his confusion, he naturally wants to be with his parents, even though his teacher urges him to run away from his village.



For two years, there's been a war in Sudan. There are rebels in the south, fighting against the government in the north. Salva doesn't know much about these rebels, but he knows they don't want to practice Islam. Terrified, Salva runs out of the classroom, toward the bushes and away from his home.

Park doesn't offer a great deal of historical context, but she characterizes the civil war between North and South Sudan as religious in nature. However, the scramble for resources, especially oil, is also an important factor in the conflict.



CHAPTER 2

In South Sudan in 2008, while going about her chores, Nya walks along a path and accidentally steps on a thorn, piercing her foot.

Nya endures a lot of physical pain for the sake of her chores (though it's still not clear what these chores entail).



In 1985, Salva rushes out of the classroom and sees a massive cloud of smoke. He runs as fast as he can—seemingly for hours. He runs past many other people, all of whom are fleeing their villages. Soon, it grows dark, and the crowd stops. The people try to organize themselves by villages. Salva finds some people from his village, Loun-Ariik, but he doesn't know any of them very well. He and his fellow villagers fall asleep.

In the confusion of the attack, Salva has been separated from his family members. However, he maintains a semblance of his old community by staying with other members of his village.



The next morning, everyone wakes up and continues walking away from the rebels. But in the early afternoon, Salva sees a group of rebel soldiers in the distance. The rebels aren't pointing their weapons at the fleeing villagers, but they don't seem friendly, either. They surround the villagers, and Salva feels afraid.

The rebel soldiers in the civil war hail from South Sudan, meaning that they don't exactly bear Salva and his peers any ill will. However, many men in South Sudanese villages have been forced, at gunpoint, to fight in the civil war.



The rebels march the villagers to a camp, where they divide the villagers into two groups: men in one group, women, children, and the elderly in the other. Because of his age, Salva is placed with the women and the elderly. He's one of the only children in the group.

The rebels appear to be dividing the villagers up so that they can recruit all able-bodied men for fighting, whether the men want to fight or not.



The next morning, the rebels move on, forcing the group of men from Salva's village to carry their supplies. When one man refuses to do so, a soldier beats him with the butt of his gun. The remaining women, children, and elderly people proceed in the direction opposite that of the rebels—since they know that, wherever the rebels go, there will be fighting. In the evening, the group of women, children, and elders from Loun-Ariik arrives at a small barn, where everyone sleeps.

The rebels, like the villagers, are from South Sudan, but they don't treat the villagers with any respect. Instead, they treat the men as servants, who must obey them or risk horrible punishment.



The next morning, Salva wakes up to find that the other people in his village have abandoned him—he's all alone in the barn.

Although it is not explained why the others abandon Salva, it likely has to do with the difficulties inherent in looking after a child. Salva's sudden abandonment by the villagers highlights the ways in which war can make it extremely difficult to choose to look after others. Salva will have to take care of himself from now on.



CHAPTER 3

In 2008, Nya approaches a pond in the middle of the desert. Many other people are gathered around the pond, scooping up the brown, muddy **water**. Nya drinks some water and feels cooler. She fills a gourd with more water, balances it on her head, and prepares herself for the journey back home.

Nya's chores involve fetching water, one gourd at a time, to bring home to her family. This is physically demanding work that consumes most of her waking life.



Back in 1985, Salva weeps: his village has abandoned him. He realizes that the other villagers have left him because he's a child, and will slow down the group. In the horizon, he sees smoke, a burning barn, and—to his relief—a woman. Approaching the woman, Salva sees that the woman is Dinka—that is, she's from the same tribe as Salva. Salva knows that the Dinka and the Nuer (another tribe) have a long-standing rivalry. The two tribes argue over land, and try to claim the areas that have the most **water**. They've been fighting for centuries.

Even though Salva has just experienced a crushing blow, he forces himself to continue moving, and before long he encounters another person. The passage also raises the issue of the rivalry between different South Sudanese tribes. These rivalries date back centuries and, according to Park, arise largely from the scarcity of water. If there were more water in South Sudan, Park suggests, tribal tensions would be eased.



Salva greets the Dinka woman, who's very old, and she nods to him. She offers him a little food—some peanuts—and asks him, "Where are your people?" Salva cries and explains that he had to run away from the fighting, and doesn't know where his family is.

The woman agrees to help Salva, at least at first. It's implied that she helps Salva in part because Salva is from her tribe—had Salva been Nuer, the woman might not have been so friendly.



Salva stays with the Dinka woman in her barn. He makes a point of doing chores for the woman, so that she won't kick him out—he fetches **water** and firewood. In the distance, he can hear the sound of gunfire.

Salva is a young child, but he's used to working hard. He also understands that "there's no such thing as a free lunch" (which is more than a lot of eleven-year-olds understand), and for this reason he works hard to repay the woman for her kindness.



After four days, the woman tells Salva that it's time for her to leave. The **water** is drying up, and winter is coming. Salva, she insists, can't come with her—if he comes with her, the soldiers will hurt her. On her own, however, she's just a harmless old woman.

Although the woman has helped Salva, she ultimately prioritizes her own survival. Therefore, she refuses to take Salva with her—since doing so would mean risking her own safety.



Frightened, Salva tries to decide what to do. Suddenly, he hears voices in the distance. As the people draw closer, Salva sees that they're Dinka—he wonders if his family members are among them.

Even as Salva experiences setback after setback, he refuses to give up. Instead, he's full of hope that he'll reunite with his family.



CHAPTER 4

In 2008, Nya has returned to her mother, carrying **water** from the tiny pond. Her mother gives her food—"a bowl of boiled sorghum meal"—and then returns to nursing Nya's baby brother. Nya's mother tells Nya to take her little sister, Akeer, back to the pond to gather more water. Akeer is only five years old, but she needs to learn to gather water, Nya's mother insists. Every day, Nya exhausts herself walking to and from the pond.

In 1985, Salva scans the faces in the group of Dinka villagers approaching the barn. To his dismay, none of them belongs to his family. The elderly woman, who hasn't left the barn yet, greets the group and asks that they take care of Salva. Some people grumble that Salva is too young to do work, or that he'll slow down the group. However, one of the men agrees to take him, explaining, "He is Dinka." The elderly woman gives Salva **water** and peanuts and says goodbye.

In the coming days, Salva walks farther than he's ever walked in his life. He's tired and frightened. Soon enough, Salva has no more food to eat. He has no idea where the group is headed. But as the days go on, more people join the group, including members of a neighboring tribe called the Jur-chol. One member of this tribe is a young man named Buksa.

One day, the group is walking when suddenly, Buksa stops. In the distance, Salva can hear a loud, rumbling sound. Buksa begins to smile—he tells Salva to gather his Dinka peers quickly. Buksa can hear the sound of a beehive in the distance: tonight, the group will feast on honey.

CHAPTER 5

In 2008, Nya and her family are living a three days' walk from a big lake. Most of the year, Nya's family lives far from the lake, near a smaller pond. In this way, they avoid the fighting between their own tribe, the Nuer, and the rival Dinka tribe, most of which concerns the land by the lake. But for some of the year, Nya and her family move closer to the lake to access **water**. The water in the lake is muddy and unclean, but Nya's family has no choice but to drink it.

In 1985, Salva, Buksa, and the other wanderers have just been stung by bees. They tried to clear the bees away from the beehive by lighting a fire underneath it, but the fire angered the bees. Still, they manage to get the honey, and even though Salva has a nasty sting on his eye, he thinks the pain is worth it for a taste of honey.

At an age when many children don't even understand the concept of work, Nya and her sister are made to work hard gathering water. The work is exhausting, but Nya's parents are busy with their own daily tasks, which are no less essential to the family's survival.



Even though the refugees recognize that Salva will slow them down, they also recognize that he's "one of us"—another member of the Dinka tribe. This is an important reminder of how cultural and communal ties can convince people to sacrifice their own self-interest for the sake of the group, in this case the Dinka tribe.



As time goes on, the seriousness of the Dinka refugees' predicament leads them to join up with other tribes. Even if these tribes have many cultural differences, they're united in this crisis.



The refugees experience some good luck in the midst of crisis: after weeks of eating little or nothing, the prospect of fresh honeycomb must sound delicious.



The family's existence is structured around the availability of water. Often, the fighting between the different South Sudanese tribes arises from the scarcity of resources—in the absence of enough water for all, the tribes fight for as much as they can get.



Salva endures a lot of pain following the outbreak of civil war in his country. Perhaps surprisingly, though, he seems to maintain a stoic attitude, calmly weighing the pros against the cons in every decision and concluding that his behavior has been worth the negative repercussions.



Every day, Salva's group gets bigger. One evening, Salva accidentally steps on another boy's hand. The boy is Dinka, but hails from a different village than Salva's. The boy is angry, but quickly softens. He asks Salva, "Your family?" Salva shakes his head, and the boy says, "Me, too." The boy introduces himself as Marial, and they become friends.

Marial tells Salva that the group is headed into Ethiopia. Salva finds this unlikely, since Ethiopia is far away. Marial jokes, "If we keep walking east, we'll go all the way around the world and come right back!" The two friends laugh.

It's been more than a month since Salva fled his village. The group passes through the Atuot region of Sudan. The people in this tribe are said to be fierce and powerful, like lions.

One morning, Salva wakes up to hear his name being spoken. He turns, and his mouth "fell open in amazement."

Under different circumstances, Salva and Marial might have ended up fighting. But because they're both living in desperate times, and because they're both cut off from their families, they befriend one another.



Even in the depths of their despair, Marial and Salva find ways to be happy, laughing and joking with each other.



The refugees must pass through unfamiliar, potentially dangerous territory in order to avoid the civil war.



The chapter ends with a cliffhanger—Salva seems to have made contact with somebody who knows him.



CHAPTER 6

Nya's family has been coming to the lake for decades, so Nya has gone to the lake for as long as she's been alive. Nya has also grown familiar with the look of fear on her mother's face when Nya's father and brother, Dep, go hunting. Nya's mother is frightened that Dinka tribesmen will kill her husband and son—but so far, Nya's family has been lucky, and nobody has died.

Salva has just woken up to the sound of his own name. He turns and sees his Uncle Jewiir, the brother of his father. Jewiir has fought for the army, and Salva hasn't seen him in two years. Salva embraces his uncle, and quickly explains to him that he hasn't seen the rest of his family in a month. Jewiir is quiet and solemn, but then he smiles and tells Salva, "I will look after you." Jewiir shows Salva the rifle he used in the army—a rifle he intends to use to catch food. Later that day he shoots an antelope and cooks it for Salva and the other people in the group. The meal is delicious, but Salva has been so used to eating nothing that he spends the night vomiting.

The group proceeds through Atuot land. Salva and Marial walk together with Uncle Jewiir. One day, the group walks for ten hours straight in the hopes of finding a **water** hole. However, they don't find water.

Nya's family lives in a near-constant state of fear and uncertainty. Every day there are new dangers, once again stemming from the scarcity of resources. The constant fighting between different South Sudanese tribes makes the area dangerous.



Uncle Jewiir becomes something of a father-figure to Salva, since he recognizes that nobody else is going to take care of Salva. Jewiir treats Salva kindly and generously, giving him food and emotional support. Jewiir appears to share his catch with the other refugees, suggesting that Jewiir, by virtue of his gun and his generosity, is becoming the leader of the group.



The refugees are so desperate for water that they're willing to wander for an entire day in search of a drink.



That night, Jewiir wakes Salva up. He says, “I am sorry, Salva. Your friend ...”

The chapter ends on another cliffhanger, suggesting that something bad has happened to Marial.



CHAPTER 7

Nya notices that her little sister, Akeer, is quiet. Akeer has been complaining about her stomach pains, but now she’s eerily quiet. Nya knows many people who suffer from stomach pains. There’s a medical clinic located a few days’ walk away. Nya’s family has to decide: should they take Akeer to the clinic or hope that she heals on her own?

One of the most unfortunate consequences of the scarcity of water in developing countries is the ubiquity of bacterial diseases. Here, Akeer appears to be suffering from some kind of gastrointestinal infection as a result of drinking dirty water. Even worse, the clinic is so far away that Akeer’s family has to take a gamble on whether they should take her to seek medical attention or not.



Salva walks with the rest of the group, thinking about what Jewiir has told him. Martial is gone, and in this part of the country, his disappearance probably means he’s been killed by a lion. Jewiir assures Salva that he’ll protect Salva from lions using his rifle.

Salva doesn’t know what happened to Marial, and never will—but must move on. Jewiir has by now established himself as Salva’s protector and, in many ways, his de-facto parent.



One day, the group begins to smell vegetation, which means that they’re getting closer to the Nile River, the longest river in the world. This also means they’re almost in Ethiopia. Jewiir assures Salva that they’ll all be able to cross the **water**.

Jewiir’s confidence seems to motivate Salva to keep moving, even though Salva is skeptical that he’ll be able to cross the Nile safely.



When the group reaches the Nile, everyone sets to work cutting and gathering reeds. Some members of the group know how to use reeds to build boats and flotation devices. Salva finds that gathering reeds distracts him from his hunger and fear. After two full days of work, the group has built a small fleet of canoes. The group is ready to cross the Nile.

Simple tasks help to distract Salva from his despair. Many people who have lived through tragedy have reported a similar feeling: by focusing on small, “local” tasks, they momentarily forget the big, looming tragedies in their lives.



CHAPTER 8

Nya’s family decides that Akeer needs to see a doctor after all. Nya and her mother take Akeer to the clinic, and the doctor treats Akeer. Now, Akeer is her old self again—happy and smiling. The nurse tells Nya’s mother that Akeer got sick from drinking the dirty **water** in the pond. She advises Nya’s mother to boil the water before drinking it. The problem, Nya knows very well, is that water can only be collected from the pond in small quantities—so small that they evaporate when boiled.

The scarcity of resources in South Sudan leads to some unforeseeable problems. Were there more water available, Nya’s family would be able to boil it and sterilize it—however, the dearth of water means that Nya’s family must risk contracting a serious bacterial disease.



Back in 1985, Salva and his group paddle across the Nile River. Salva sits in a canoe with Uncle Jewiir, who paddles hard. After many hours, the boats arrive at an island in the middle of the river. Salva is surprised to see that the island people, fishermen, have lots of food. Some of the members of the group beg for food, but Uncle Jewiir receives food without having to ask. Perhaps this is because he's armed, Salva thinks. Salva enjoys yams, fish, and sugar cane. But the food also saddens Salva; it reminds him of being back at home, where he was always well-fed.

As night falls on the island, the mosquitoes come out, tormenting the refugees in Salva's group. Nobody sleeps that night—"the mosquitoes made sure of that." The next day, Salva scratches his mosquito bites until they bleed. The travelers climb back into their canoes and paddle onward. The most difficult part of their journey still lies ahead: crossing the Akobo desert.

CHAPTER 9

One day, visitors come to Nya's village. The visitors arrive in a jeep, and speak to the village chief, Nya's uncle. Nya is confused about why the visitors are here. However, Dep informs her that they've come to talk about **water**.

Back in 1985, the group has arrived at the edge of the Akobo desert. It will take them three days to cross it. The first day feels like the longest of Salva's life. The sun is hot, and he has very little **water** left. At one point, he slows down and nearly collapses. Uncle Jewiir uses Salva's full name to urge him to keep walking, a **step** at a time. With great difficulty, Salva manages to stand up and keep moving, even though his feet ache.

The next day seems exactly like the one before. But then, Salva notices a small group in the distance. As he gets closer, Salva realizes that the small group is dying of exhaustion and thirst. One of the women in Salva's group pours some **water** in the men's mouths. But another man yells, "If you give them your water, you will not have enough for yourself! It is useless—they will die!"

The passage points to a recurring theme in the lives of many disaster survivors. Paradoxically, the peaceful atmosphere and abundance of food seem to make Salva feel more depressed. This is very similar to the way that many people who suffer from PTSD behave: in an actual crisis situation, they relax and become eerily calm; in a "calm" situation, however, they become agitated and upset.



Salva endures all manner of problems—big and small—but continues to keep moving forward into Ethiopia, rather than give up.



This passage establishes the direction of Nya's storyline for the rest of the book: Nya plays the part of the observer while mysterious men proceed with their project in her village.



In this important passage, Uncle Jewiir convinces Salva to keep moving by forcing him to concentrate on small, manageable goals—putting one foot in front of the other. This is a tried-and-true method for coping with pain, because it prevents the sufferer from becoming overwhelmed by the magnitude of their task. It's also significant that Jewiir uses Salva's full name—this is another common method for motivating people, since it encourages them to "remember themselves" and push ahead.



In this passage, Park sets up a moral conundrum too profound for an easy answer: do the refugees have a moral obligation to give up some of their water, thereby risking their own lives? Or are they morally justified in saving their water, protecting their lives but effectively ensuring the deaths of the other wanderers?



CHAPTER 10

The visitors to Nya's village finish their meeting with the village chief. They walk through the village toward a tree, speaking a language Nya can't understand. Then, they tell the chief that there should be **water** underneath the ground, at the point midway between the two biggest trees. Nya finds this unlikely—there's no water above ground in this area, so why should there be anything beneath it?

Salva and the rest of the group have stopped to nurse the dying men in the middle of the desert. Salva is tempted to share some of his own **water** with the men, but Jewiir prevents him from doing so—Salva is too young to give up his water. After a time, some of the men are able to stand and join the rest of the group. But they leave five dead companions behind—there's no time to bury them beneath the ground. Salva is petrified by the sight of the dead bodies. He wonders if he would have given the men some of his water had he been older and stronger, or if he would have kept the water for himself.

On the third and final day in the desert, Salva talks to Uncle Jewiir about his family. He wants to know if he'll be able to find them, and if his family will be able to find him. Jewiir tells Salva the truth; the village of Loun-Ariik was attacked and burned. He says, "Your family..." but then falls silent. Jewiir then tells Salva that he's going to take him to a refugee camp, and then go back to Sudan to fight. Salva is shocked, but he also realizes that Jewiir is doing the right thing. Jewiir doesn't want to leave his nephew, but he knows he has to go back to fight.

The group is on the verge of collapsing. Nobody has eaten anything in days, and there's almost no **water** left. By afternoon, the group notices trees and puddles of water, but the water is unfit for drinking. Then, suddenly, a group of six armed men arrives and orders Salva and his peers to surrender. The men demand to know where the group is headed, and if they're "with the rebels." Uncle Jewiir denies this, and explains that they're headed to a refugee camp. The men tie him up and confiscate his gun. The men also force the others to surrender their clothes and possessions.

Salva is terrified, but he hopes that the soldiers will leave now that they've stolen everything they can. But one of the soldiers fires three shots at Uncle Jewiir, and only then do the six soldiers run away.

The mysterious visitors appear to be designing a well in the center of the village. This well could save Nya huge amounts of time every day, since she wouldn't have to walk miles to the pond; however, Nya seems skeptical that there's actually water underneath the village.



Very bravely, some of the refugees sacrifice their water to help the dying men, in the process endangering their own lives. This is a striking example of how, at times, people choose to do the "right thing" instead of the smart thing—they help others, even if it means hurting themselves. It's important to note that Salva doesn't know what he would do if he were older. By the same token, Park suggests, the moral dilemma presented in the passage is too serious to be resolved here.



Evidently, Jewiir believes that Salva's parents and siblings are dead. Their village was burned, meaning that most of the villagers who were living there were probably murdered. Salva doesn't seem to grasp the truth about his family—the notion that his parents and siblings are no longer alive seems too grave for him to accept so quickly. But Salva receives news of Jewiir's plans maturely: he sees the situation from Jewiir's point of view instead of begging Jewiir to stay and take care of him.



The presence of trees and water puddles suggests that the refugees are almost out of the desert, and therefore almost to safety. The armed men described in the passage appear to be soldiers from North Sudan (which explains why they ask if Jewiir and the refugees are working with the rebels).



Uncle Jewiir's death is a horrific tragedy. Jewiir was a kind man who took good care of Salva. Now, it's as if Salva has become orphaned a second time—after being separated from his parents, he's lost his new father-figure as well.



CHAPTER 11

In Nya's village, people are hard at work clearing the land between the two biggest trees. Meanwhile, Nya continues with her daily trips to the pond. She still doesn't see why the villagers think they might find **water** beneath the dry earth between the two trees.

Salva and the others bury Uncle Jewiir in a hole. The group doesn't walk anymore that day. Instead, they stop to pay their respects to Jewiir. After dark, they begin walking again. To his own surprise, Salva walks more quickly than he did before. He feels numb, and yet he also knows that Jewiir would have wanted him to fight to survive instead of despairing.

Now that Jewiir is dead, Salva has no choice but to beg for food. The other people in the group sometimes give him food, but always begrudgingly. Salva senses that everyone thinks he's a waste of food and energy. But Salva looks forward to proving them wrong.

The group arrives at the refugee camp, where there are thousands of people of all ages. Salva desperately tries to find someone from his family. He also begins to feel restless—since, after walking for so long, it feels odd to be in the same place all day. Nevertheless, he's glad to be in a safe place where he's fed twice a day.

On his second day in the camp, Salva notices a woman in an orange scarf who might be his own mother. He pushes through the crowd, trying not to lose sight of this mysterious figure.

Nya is so used to walking the many miles to the pond that she finds it hard to accept the idea that there may have been water beneath her the entire time.



Even though the group wants to get out of the desert as soon as possible, they stay behind to honor Uncle Jewiir. This is a clear sign of the refugees' respect for Jewiir: Jewiir was a protector and provider, not just for Salva but for the entire group, too. But Salva doesn't give up hope, even after his beloved uncle has been killed. Under immense the pressures of hunger and the threat of violence, he rises to the occasion and summons the strength to keep moving toward safety.



In the last month, Salva has been through one trauma after another. But instead of giving up in despair, he has the opposite response: he makes a promise to himself to be strong and survive.



The passage underscores how quickly Salva's way of life has changed—after a traumatic month of fear and uncertainty, a life of relative stability, with food and water, feels utterly alien to him.



Even after all the horror he's lived through, Salva wants to believe that his mother is still alive. He hopes for the best—and, Park implies, his hope gives him the strength he needs to survive in war-torn Sudan.



CHAPTER 12

The visitors have returned to Nya's village with an "iron giraffe"—a huge drill designed to create a well. The villagers spend their days breaking rocks to make gravel. Nya still doesn't understand what the visitors hope to accomplish.

Nya's storyline picks up right where it left off, with Nya wondering what the mysterious men hope to accomplish by drilling in the dry earth. Her wonderment at the "iron giraffe" further reinforces her childlike perspective on events.



In 1985 in the Ethiopian refugee camp, Salva calls after the tall woman, praying that she's his mother. But as Salva chases after the woman, he suddenly realizes what Uncle Jewiir had been hinting at: that his family is dead and he's "all alone." He wonders how he could possibly live without his family. But then he realizes, "How can I not go on? They would want me to survive." The passage concludes, "If someone had told Salva that he would live in the camp for six years, he would never have believed it."

The year is now 1991, and the Ethiopian refugee camp is about to shut down. Salva is nearly seventeen years old now. He's learned from the camp's workers that Ethiopia's government is on the verge of collapse, and the new government may not be so welcoming to foreign aid workers.

One morning, soldiers show up at the camp and order everyone inside to leave—not just the camp, but Ethiopia itself. The soldiers fire their guns in the air, forcing the people to run toward the nearby Gilo River, which separates Sudan and Ethiopia. Salva knows that the Gilo has dangerously strong currents and crocodiles.

CHAPTER 13

The year is 2009, and Nya's village is still busy trying to draw **water** up from beneath the ground. The drilling crew has been moving very slowly, due to frequent setbacks.

In Ethiopia in 1991, the refugees rush to the river. Soldiers force some of the refugees to jump into the **water**, wanting to push them out of the country. Salva sees a crocodile attacking one man who's jumped in the water. The soldiers begin shouting and firing their weapons. Faced with no other choice, Salva jumps in the water. He gasps and coughs, but manages to paddle and keep breathing. After what feels like hours, he finds that he's paddled to the other side of the river. Later, Salva will learn that more than a thousand people died trying to cross the river.

Salva, along with the others who've managed to cross the river, proceeds onward. The groups seems to have no idea where they're supposed to go. They decide to move toward Kenya, where there may be some more refugee camps. Salva, who is one of the older boys in the group, quickly emerges as the leader of the younger boys—as many as fifteen hundred of them.

In this important moment, Salva accepts the truth that, in all probability, his family is dead—but he refuses to despair. This proves how important Uncle Jewiir's support has been for Salva: Jewiir teaches Salva how to carry on despite difficulty, concentrating on moving forward one step at a time. It's partly because Jewiir has the willpower to live his life in this way that he survives the bloody Sudanese Civil War.



A lot of time passes in this chapter, but Salva's life seems barely more stable than it was when he was eleven. Just as it did in the past, political strife is about to threaten Salva's safety again and force him to wander across the continent in search of a new home.



The Ethiopian soldiers, acting on behalf of their government, drive the Sudanese refugees out of their country, even though doing so will endanger the refugees' lives.



Nya continues to watch as the men build a well for her village. The slow progress they make underscores how major infrastructural development such as this does not happen overnight.



It's never explained how Salva—who has spent his life living in countries where there's almost no water—learned how to swim. Almost miraculously, Salva manages to survive the crossing, unlike thousands of other unfortunate refugees.



Here, Salva takes on a leadership position similar to the one Uncle Jewiir took six years previously. It's a moment that demonstrates that Salva has experienced a great amount of personal growth and brings him "full-circle" as he takes on the role of one of his own personal heroes.



Salva and the boys travel through a dangerous part of Sudan. There's a constant sound of gunfire in the air, and so Salva orders that the boys will only travel at night, rather than during the day when they might be seen. But traveling at night is very difficult, as the dark makes navigation a challenge. Salva makes sure that everyone has a job—gathering firewood, hunting for food, keeping watch. Salva draws courage and inspiration from his memories of his family. He remembers the way his older siblings would lead him, and the way his sisters and mother would treat him gently. After a year and a half, Salva successfully leads twelve hundred boys into Kenya.

Parents and older siblings are often the first models people have for leadership. Salva is no exception: when trying to become a good, reliable leader, he models his behavior on that of his parents, uncle, and siblings. Salva's calmness and determination are remarkable, especially considering all the pain and trauma he's lived through since the outbreak of the Second Sudanese Civil War.



CHAPTER 14

In 2009, Nya's village is full of the sound of drilling. After three full days of drilling, the workers locate **water** beneath the ground. The entire village cheers. However, Nya notices that the water is muddy.

Even though it's finally been confirmed that there is water beneath the village, Nya is still dubious that the water is drinkable.



It's 1996 and Salva is now twenty-two years old. He has been living in refugee camps in Kenya since arriving in the country. The first camp is a wretched place, almost like a prison, where tens of thousands of people live. After two years there, Salva leaves the camp and goes south in search of better conditions. He leads a group of young men to the region of Ifo. To their dismay, the refugee camp in Ifo is no better than the one they left. In the camp, it's "hard to keep hope alive."

The pace of this chapter is much faster than that of previous chapters, as Salva grows from seventeen to twenty-two. Park emphasizes the hopelessness of the refugee camp, suggesting that hope is an important part of survival—perhaps just as important as food, water, or shelter.



In Ifo, Salva meets an Irish aid worker named Michael. As a result of having living in different refugee camps for so long, Salva has learned to speak a little English. Michael notices Salva's abilities, and offers to teach him to read. Salva quickly learns the English letters, and Michael praises him for his hard work. Michael also shows Salva how to play volleyball.

Salva's life in the refugee camps is hard, but it's not all bad. He makes friends with Michael and learns some valuable lessons from him.



A rumor spreads through the refugee camp: three thousand boys are going to be chosen to go to the United States. However, it seems that Salva's name hasn't been put on the list of boys who are being considered. Many of the boys on the list are much younger than Salva. One day, Salva finds that his name has been placed on the list after all—and he's being sent to Rochester, New York.

By the early 2000s, there were literally tens of thousands of orphaned children in Sudan as a result of the long, bloody civil war. In response to the catastrophic situation, many families—some of them Sudanese, but many of them American, European, or Canadian—volunteered to adopt the children, sometimes known as the "Lost Girls" and "Lost Boys" of Sudan.



CHAPTER 15

In 2009, a well has just been completed in Nya's village. Although the **water** is brown and murky, some of the younger children try to drink it right away—but their parents prevent them. Nya's older brother, Dep, explains that the water is muddy because the men need to drill deeper, down to where the water runs clear.

The three thousand boys being brought to the United States are known as the Lost Boys. Salva will be traveling to New York with eight other boys. They ride from the refugee camp into Nairobi in Kenya. Their photographs are taken and they're given thorough medical examinations. Salva receives new clothes—more clothing than he's ever owned in his life.

The flight from Africa to the U.S. is unlike anything Salva has ever experienced. He enjoys tasting Coca-Cola on the plane, and staring down at the earth from the window by his seat. In Rochester, Salva sees more white people than he's ever seen before. His hosts in the U.S. are a couple named Chris and Louise. As he meets his family for the first time, Salva begins to weep. He feels as if he's leaving his old life, and his old family, forever.

CHAPTER 16

In Nya's village, Nya's father organizes the well-builders. He hints that they're about to build something new.

After a month in Rochester, Salva is still disoriented by his new life. The roads are paved and the cars whizz by at all hours of the day. The buildings have electricity. He focuses on learning English, partly so that he has a way of distracting himself from his memories. His English improves quickly and, remembering Michael's lesson, he joins a local volleyball team.

Six years go by. Salva is accepted to college, where he plans to study business. Someday, he wants to go back to Sudan and help people—even though he doesn't really know how he could do this.

The well in Nya's village promises to change the villagers' lives in profound ways, provided that the water is actually clean enough to drink safely.



Due to the fact that many orphaned Sudanese girls had been living in family units for some time (and therefore didn't technically qualify as orphans), the vast majority of the orphaned children sent from Sudan to America were boys, not girls. Indeed, fewer than one hundred of the Sudanese orphans relocated to America were female.



Salva's new life in the United States is profoundly different from his life in Sudan. Even though Salva's time in Sudan has been extremely difficult, he doesn't want to leave his old life behind completely. He still loves his family deeply, and is understandably anxious about coming to live in a vastly different country like the United States.



The changes in Nya's community don't end with the building of the well; instead, the well seems to be the first of many changes for the better.



Just as he has done in the past, Salva manages to adjust to his new circumstances with impressive grace and maturity. He finds ways of amusing himself, and throws himself into learning a new language, English.



Evidently, Salva feels a strong need to help other people. Park implies that this is part of the reason he was able to lead over a thousand boys to safety at the height of the Second Sudanese Civil War.



One day, Salva receives an email from his cousin, who lives in Zimbabwe. To Salva's utter amazement, the email explains that his father is alive, and is staying in a United Nations clinic in Sudan. After many frustrating months of trying to contact the U.N., Salva manages to arrange a flight back to Sudan. After hours of air travel and riding buses, Salva arrives at a makeshift hospital organized by the U.N., where he greets a nurse and tells her that he's looking for Mawien Dut Ariik.

The chapter ends with the stunning revelation that Salva's father is alive, after all. Previously, it seemed Salva had accepted that his entire family was dead—but now, as if by a miracle, it turns out that he was wrong.



CHAPTER 17

In Nya's village, Nya's father tells her that the men are building a school. With the added convenience of clean **water** nearby, the village children—both boys and girls—will now have enough time to go to school. Nya is excited to learn how to read and write.

Many people have argued that technological development in underdeveloped parts of the world (such as the introduction of wells in Sudan) will cause a "domino effect," meaning one innovation will lead to other innovations. This passage provides a credible example of why this might be the case: with access to water comes more time, which means more time for students to learn in schools. (Although, there are many parts of the world in which girls are forbidden from learning for religious or cultural reasons, not just because of the scarcity of resources.)



In 2003, Salva is standing in the tiny hospital in Sudan, facing his father, Mawien Dut. Salva greets the man, who politely greets him in return. Trembling, Salva says, "I am your son. I am Salva." His father shakes his head—it can't be true. But as he looks closer, he realizes that this is, in fact, his child. Mawien Dut begins to weep with joy—he embraces Salva. The father and son haven't seen each other in nearly two decades.

The reunion between Salva and his father is tearful and highly emotional. Salva has come to accept that his father died in the civil war, so seeing his father alive after all these years comes as a genuine shock.



Salva learns that his mother is alive, too, and still living in the same village. But Mawien Dut warns Salva to stay away from the village, lest soldiers try to recruit him for the ongoing war in the area. Salva also learns that only one of his three brothers has survived the conflict. His two sisters are still alive, however.

Tragically, Salva is still unable to reunite with his entire family. As Park showed earlier in the book, rebel soldiers in South Sudan force civilians to join the army and fight alongside them. Of course, Salva doesn't want this to happen, so he has to avoid the village.



After a short time, Salva has to return to America. Mawien Dut has been in the clinic for stomach surgery—years of drinking dirty **water** have given him a nasty infection, but now he's ready to walk all the way back to his village. Salva promises to come to the village in the future, when it's safe, and Mawien Dut promises that he'll be waiting for him. The father and son embrace and then part ways.

Visiting his father has reminded Salva of the vital importance of clean drinking water. When there is lots of available water, 1) people are healthier and 2) tribes won't fight over scarce resources to the same degree. Salva's parting words to his father suggest that Salva wants to return to Sudan and, in fact, wants to do whatever he can to make Sudan safe.



On the flight back to the United States, Salva begins to develop an idea. More than anything, he wants to help the people of Sudan. It will be hard to do so, but he has to try. Chris and Louise put Salva in touch with a friend of theirs named Scott, who helps Salva organize fundraisers for the people of Sudan. Salva begins visiting schools to tell students about his experiences in Sudan. He speaks in churches, civic organizations, and universities. Each time, he remembers his uncle's words in the desert—one **step** at a time.

Inspired by his early life experiences and his most recent visit to Sudan, Salva founds a nonprofit organization designed to help impoverished Sudanese villagers. Put another way, Salva—who, by his own reckoning, has been extraordinarily fortunate—chooses to use some of his good fortune to help his fellow South Sudanese villagers. As before, Salva is deeply inspired by Uncle Jewiir's example: instead of allowing himself to become overwhelmed by the magnitude of what he's trying to accomplish, Salva forces himself to focus on smaller, more manageable tasks.



CHAPTER 18

The year is 2009, and Nya is standing in line at her village's new well, holding a plastic bottle. Today is the "opening ceremony" for the well. At the ceremony, her village chief announced that the well had been built with funds from the students of the Elm Street School in America. When Nya finally drinks some **water**, it tastes delicious: it's cool and clear.

At last, it's clear that the engineers' efforts haven't been in vain: the well will provide clean drinking water for all the villagers.



In the coming months, there will be a new school in the village, as well as a market and a medical clinic. People from across the country will come to use the village's well. Nya is overjoyed that she won't have to spend her days walking miles to the pond.

The availability of water causes a domino effect in the community: with all the extra time the villagers now have, they'll be able to design a school, a clinic, and other important facilities. In short, one positive development leads to another.



Dep informs Nya that the operator of the well is a Dinka man. This surprises Nya, since the Dinka and the Nuer have been enemies for hundreds of years. Dep knows that the operator has drilled many wells over the years, some for his own tribe and some for other tribes.

With development in Sudan, Park argues, the centuries-old tensions between different ethnic groups will subside. Since these tensions were largely based on disputes over resources, providing more of these resources may lead to lasting peace. With this in mind, the designers of the well are making a point of providing clean water for both Dinka and Nuer tribes.



Nya notices the well operator, and shyly says hello to him. She thanks him for bringing **water** to her community, and tells him that her name is Nya. The man smiles and says, "My name is Salva."

Here, at the end of the book, the two storylines come together. Salva has realized his dream of providing clean water for the impoverished villagers of Sudan. In doing so, Salva helps to provide opportunities for children like Nya, who would otherwise have to spend much of their waking lives fetching water from a faraway pond. Park brings her book to the optimistic conclusion that, with hope and hard work, people can work together to help improve the lives of those who are most in need.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Arn, Jackson. "A Long Walk to Water." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 31 Aug 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Arn, Jackson. "A Long Walk to Water." LitCharts LLC, August 31, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-long-walk-to-water>.

To cite any of the quotes from *A Long Walk to Water* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Park, Linda Sue. *A Long Walk to Water*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2011.

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Park, Linda Sue. *A Long Walk to Water*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2011.