

Discussion Questions for *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*

1. *A Long Way Gone* has been heralded as “one of the most important war stories of our generation.” The book is a memoir about the children who are trapped in a cycle of brutality and abuse during the Sierra Leone civil war. At its core, however, it is also a story about community, family, and survival. Would you consider *A Long Way Gone* a war story? Why or why not? Why should this be an important story for our generation? What lessons should we learn from this story?
2. Ishmael Beah opens his memoir with a dialogue between his American high school friends and himself in New York. What is their perspective on war? How does it compare to the perspective that Beah provides in the book? Are there similarities in how they view war?
3. Although most of the book’s events occur in Sierra Leone, American culture is a pervasive theme in the memoir and in the author’s life. What positive influences does American culture have on Beah? Negatives?
 - a. What role does rap and hip hop play in Beah’s life? On more than one occasion hip hop saves Beah’s life. How? Consider pages 38, 67, and 169.
 - b. Throughout the book, the children imagine themselves as *Rambo*. *Rambo* is a movie about a Vietnam War veteran who returns to America after the war and is unable to separate his Vietnam War experience from reality. What role do American movies play in child soldiering?
 - c. Why is Shakespeare important to Beah? What plays does he discuss in the story? How are they relevant?
4. What role do parables and storytelling play in the community? Can you identify any themes or messages in the parables that the author included? Consider the following parables and discuss what lessons the author learned from the stories. What lessons can we learn from these stories?
 - a. The wild boar parable (p. 53)
 - b. The Bra spider (p. 72)
 - c. The trickster monkey (p. 217)
5. Changes in weapons technology have vastly changed warfare in the 21st Century, and as a result have blurred the distinction between combatants and civilians required by international humanitarian law (i.e., the law of war). One result of these changes is an increased use of child soldiers. Presently there are more than 500,000 children like Ishmael Beah who are actively engaged in armed conflict in more than 20 countries. For further related questions, see Discussion Questions 19-23, below.

6. Throughout the book, Beah discusses the impacts of child soldiering in villages throughout Sierra Leone. What are they? What impacts do you think child soldiering have on the international community? Discuss both the short-term impacts as well as the future consequences.
7. At the end of his book, the author includes a chronology of events in Sierra Leone. How is this information helpful in understanding the context of the civil war? Did any event particularly surprise you? Did the arrival of Portuguese slave traders or the later colonization by the British contribute to Sierra Leone's 20th Century problems? Does this history shed any light on the motivations of the army soldiers versus those of the rebels? Do you think that it had any influence on the Revolutionary United Front (RUF)?
 - a. On page 14, the author explains that Sierra Leone was a British colony from 1808 until 1961. Do you think colonialism was part of the cause of the civil war? Why? Why not?
8. Nature plays a predominant role in Beah's life and throughout the book. For example, the moon is very important to young Ishmael. Consider the conversation he recalls with his grandmother (p. 15-17) where she tells him that "we must strive to be like the moon." What does she mean by this? How does Beah try to achieve this in his past and present life? How can we? What other aspects of nature does Ishmael notice? What roles do they play? Consider crickets, trees, the sky, and animals.
9. To survive, Beah and the other children must endure the most unimaginable things. Early in the book, Beah hints at what the boys must learn to survive:

"It was a typical aspect of being in the war. Things changed rapidly in a matter of seconds and no one had any control over anything. We had yet to learn these things and implement survival tactics, which was what it came down to. That night we were so hungry that we stole people's food while they slept. It was the only way to get through the night.

Aside from stealing food, what tactics do these boys learn in order to survive? Did they have any choice?

10. In Sierra Leone, old men are symbols of wisdom and respect. However, early on, Beah encounters a rebel threatening an old man and says: "before the war a young man wouldn't have dared to talk to anyone older in such a rude manner. We grew up in a culture that demanded good behavior from everyone, and especially from the young. Young people were required to respect their elders and everyone in the community." (p. 33). The disrespect of elders shows to young Ishmael that the foundation of his

community is being broken by war. What other parts of the community are affected by the war?

- a. Throughout his journey, Beah encounters many old men that do not have a name. Why is this? What role do they play in his life? Consider the encounter on p. 55 – 57.

11. Although Beah encounters death early in his life, the death of Saidu was very difficult for all of the boys. The night before Saidu passes away, the boys encounter what they think are ghosts on the bridge (p. 81). What are they? What causes Saidu to faint?

- a. Before Saidu dies, Beah remembers that Saidu had spoken about parts of him slowly dying each passing day. Why would he say this? Do you think he is right?
- b. When Saidu dies, Beah and the other boys help with his funeral. This is the only funeral that the author shares with us. Why do you think he chose to share this memory with us? What purpose does it serve in the book?

12. Beah shows us how children are turned into child soldiers. Discuss these techniques. In your discussion, consider the following passages:

- a. “Over and over in our training he would say that same sentence: Visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you.” (p. 112)
- b. “A young soldier came by with a plastic bag full of some kind of tablets. They looked like capsules, but they were plain white. He handed them to each of us with a cup of water. The corporal said it will boost your energy,” the soldier announced with a secretive smile on his face.” (p. 116)
- c. “In the daytime, instead of playing soccer in the village square, I took turns at the guarding posts around the village, smoking marijuana and sniffing *brown brown*, cocaine mixed with gunpowder, which was always spread out on the table, and of course taking more of the white capsules, as I had become addicted to them.” (p. 121)
- d. “They have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country.” (p. 108).

13. Early on, Beah’s families are separated from him and later are killed in the war. Along his journey, Ishmael develops relationships with others who are surrogate family

members, including his friends: the Lieutenant, Esther, Mohammad, his Uncle, and Laura Simms. What role do these people play in his life? How do they help him along the way? Discuss the ways in which the idea of “family” is configured, re-configured, challenged, and re-affirmed throughout the book.

14. After the children are taken from their units, they are placed in a rehabilitation center in Freetown. What happens upon their arrival? Why do you think that the children are so frustrated at the “civilians”?
 - a. Do you think that the rehabilitation center was helpful to Beah? Why? Why not? Do you think that there could be anything done to improve the rehabilitation process?
 - b. Towards the end of the book, we learn that many of Beah’s friends return to soldiering even after living at the rehabilitation center. Why do you think that this happens? Is there anything that can be done? Do you think that if Beah had not been able to move to the United States he would also have returned to soldiering? Why or why not?
15. When Beah is at the rehabilitation center, Esther helps him discuss what had happened. At the end of every discussion, she always sternly tells him that “none of these things are your fault.” Why does she say this to him? What does she mean when she says these things are not his fault? Does he believe her right away? Why or why not? Did young Ishmael have any choice in what he did? Did any of the children? In your discussion, consider the following passage:

We were now at the top of a bushy hill immediately behind the swamp, in a clearing just before the escape route. Seeing the civilians all about to make it out, the rebels fired rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), machine guns, AK-47s, G3s, all the weapons they had, directly into the clearing. But we knew we had no choice, we had to make it across the clearing because, as young boys, the risk of staying in town was greater for us than trying to escape. Young boys were immediately recruited, and the initials RUF were carved wherever it pleased the rebels, with a hot bayonet. This not only meant that you were scarred for life but that you could never escape from them, because escaping with the carving of the rebels’ initials was asking for death, as soldiers would kill you without any questions and militant civilians would do the same. (p. 24)

16. The structure of the story is in three worlds: past, present, and dreams. Why do you think the author chose to write the book in this manner as opposed to chronologically? How do you think it enhanced the story? What does Beah mean when he writes on page

20 that “these days I live in three worlds: my dreams and the experiences of my new life, which trigger memories from the past”?

17. Children play many roles in war. Some are involved in direct combat while some serve as cooks, spies, and messengers. Do you think any role is less dangerous than others? Why? Why not? Consider page 106.
18. UNICEF operates on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive. It is the world’s largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, supports child health and nutrition, and provides education. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations, and governments. What role does UNICEF play in Beah’s life? How do you think UNICEF found him? Why do you think the lieutenant chose Beah? Is Beah happy that he was chosen? Why? Why not? To aid your discussion, see page 129.
19. Post-World War II history provides a useful guide to understanding the development of international humanitarian law (also known as “the law of war” or “the humanitarian rules of armed conflict”). In 1949, four conventions (or treaties) were adopted by the major powers in Geneva to provide standards of humane care and treatment during war. Common Article 3 among these Geneva Conventions holds each state party in armed conflict to minimum standards of care, including prohibition of “violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture . . . and outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment.” Are these proscriptions followed? By all states? By the major powers? By the United States? Why? Why not?
 - a. The protections of Common Article 3 are limited to conduct during armed conflict. Is this problematic? How do you define armed conflict? Is terrorism considered armed conflict?
20. Common Article 3 was the only protection of children’s human rights in armed conflict until the 1977 Additional Protocols to the 1949 Geneva Conventions. Even then, however the threshold age to take part in hostilities was only fifteen. International non-governmental organizations expressed dissatisfaction with the limited applicability of the Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols; particularly because they failed to take into account the special circumstances and needs of children. As a result, on November 20, 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted. Entered into force less than a year later on September 2, 1990 and as the most widely adopted human rights treaty in history (193 states parties as of this writing), the CRC provides that the best interests of children must come first always, in good times and bad, in poverty and prosperity, in war and peace. However, while President Clinton signed the CRC in 1995, he did not submit the treaty to the U.S. Senate for advice and consent to ratification, and the Bush Administration has persistently objected to the treaty ever since. At present, only the United States and Somalia (an essentially “failed state”) have

not ratified the CRC. What does this say about the United States' commitment to international human rights? What does this say about treaties?

21. Recognizing the special concerns of child soldiers, an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 2000 with the following five goals:
- a. Establish an international standard for employment of children in conflict;
 - b. Codify a legal norm for states to be held accountable;
 - c. Set a minimum age requirement for children employed in armed conflict;
 - d. Encourage states to implement national laws or policies to reflect the standards enunciated in the statute; and
 - e. Raise public awareness regarding child soldiers.

Do you believe we have met these goals? What might you do to encourage countries to meet these goals? To encourage the United States?

22. The 2000 Optional Protocol to the CRC increased the minimum age for recruitment and participation in hostilities from 15 to 18. As of September 2008, 117 states have ratified the Protocol, including the United States. Discuss the obligations Sierra Leone has under the following three provisions. The United States? Great Britain? Are any of these countries meeting these obligations? How? How not?

- a. Under Article 1, "all State Parties must take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of eighteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities."
- b. Article 2 requires that "State Parties shall ensure that persons who have not attained the age of eighteen are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces."
- c. Finally, Article 4 requires that "armed groups that are distinct from the armed forces of a State should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of eighteen years. States shall take all feasible measure to prevent such recruitment and use, including the adoption of legal measures necessary to prohibit and criminalize such practices."

23. The 2000 Optional Protocol to the CRC also requires all states parties to assist in the rehabilitation of child soldiers. Article 6 (3) provides as follows:

States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons within their jurisdiction recruited or used in hostilities contrary to this Protocol are demobilized or otherwise released from service. States Parties shall, when necessary, accord to these persons all appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social reintegration.

24. How has Sierra Leone met this requirement? How have they not? Does the United States have any obligations under Article 6? Why? Why not? At a media conference with the United Nations in May 2008, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers published the third edition of the Child Soldiers Global Report. The Report shows that while substantial attention and resources have been devoted to child soldiers internationally, the results to date fall far short of what might have been expected since the last report published in late-2004. Child soldiers continue to be used in armed conflicts by some governments. Governments also use captured children for intelligence gathering, or detain them rather than supporting their rehabilitation and reintegration. A wide array of armed groups—with diverse aims, methods and constituencies—continue to use children as soldiers and they have proved resistant to persuasion or pressure to stop the practice. Why do you think that child soldiering still occurs even though the United Nations has denounced the practice? What do you think can be done about the problem? Who is responsible for its continuation? Who should be held accountable? How?
25. Although the United States has publicly denounced the use of child soldiers and sworn to take all measures possible to prohibit child soldiering, the U.S. Department of State continues to provide military funding, training, and defense equipment to countries known to be violators of the 2000 Optional Protocol to the CRC in the name of the “war on terror.” Since 2000, more than \$25 billion dollars in military aid has been distributed to countries that permit child soldiering, including: Burundi, Chad, Columbia, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Uganda.
- a. Why does the United States continue to provide funding to countries that use child soldiers? What are the benefits, if any? The burdens?
 - b. What can be done about this situation? What can you do to help stop United States’ funding of child soldiering?
 - c. Is the United States obligated to do anything about child soldiering if it does not occur in the United States? Consider Article 7 of the Optional Protocol, which the United States is a party to:

Article 7(1); States Parties shall cooperate in the implementation of the present Protocol, including in the prevention of any activity contrary to the Protocol and in the rehabilitation and social reintegration of persons who are victims of acts contrary to the Protocol, including through technical cooperation and financial assistance. Such assistance and cooperation will be undertaken in consultation with concerned States Parties and relevant international organizations.

Article 7 (2); State Parties in a position to do so shall provide assistance through existing multilateral, bilateral or other programs, or, inter alia, through a voluntary fund established in accordance with the rules of the General Assembly.

26. In April 2007, Illinois Senator Richard Durbin and Kansas Senator Sam Brownback introduced the Child Soldier Prevention Act to the U.S. Senate. If passed, the Act would prohibit funds from being appropriated or otherwise made available for specified military and related areas to the government of a country that is identified by the U.S. Department of State as having governmental armed forces or government supported armed groups, including paramilitaries, militias, or civil defense forces, that recruit or use child soldiers. It also would direct the Secretary of State to notify any government identified as using child soldiers. Under the proposed Act, the President could reinstate assistance after certifying to Congress that a government is implementing: (a) “compliance measures”; and (b) “mechanisms to prohibit future use of child soldiers” and to ensure that “no children are recruited, conscripted, or otherwise compelled to serve as child soldiers.”
- a. Do you think that this Act would be helpful? Why? Why not?
 - b. Aside from this Act, what else could the United States do to help prevent the use of child soldiering?
27. Ishmael Beah gives credit for rescuing him to relief workers such as Esther in conjunction with organizations such as UNICEF. As a result, Beah has dedicated his life to their cause, studying political science and speaking before a broad variety of groups, ranging from the Council on Foreign Relations to the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities at the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory. What steps has he inspired you to take to help end the use of child soldiers? How can each of us join in Beah’s cause? Do you believe we have a moral obligation to do so?