

what is the what by dave eggers

Introduction to "What Is the What" by Dave Eggers

What is the What is a poignant and powerful novel authored by Dave Eggers, published in 2006. The book is a fictionalized autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, and it explores the harrowing journey of a young boy from Sudan who is forced to flee his war-torn homeland. Through its compelling narrative, the book brings to light the struggles faced by refugees and the broader humanitarian issues related to war, displacement, and identity.

The Background of the Novel

"What Is the What" is not just a story of survival; it is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Dave Eggers undertook extensive research to present an accurate depiction of Valentino's life, interviewing him and immersing himself in the historical context of Sudan's civil wars. The novel blends fact and fiction, creating a narrative that is both personal and universal.

The Historical Context

To fully appreciate "What Is the What," it is essential to understand the background of the Sudanese conflict:

- **The Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005):** This prolonged conflict led to the deaths of millions and forced countless individuals, including children, to flee their homes.
- **The Lost Boys:** A group of over 20,000 boys who were orphaned or separated from their families during the war, many of whom undertook treacherous journeys to refugee camps.
- **Refugee Camps:** The challenges faced in these camps included poor living conditions, lack of food, and the struggle to maintain a sense of identity and community.

Understanding this backdrop enriches the reader's experience and emphasizes the gravity of Valentino's story.

Plot Overview

The novel is structured around Valentino's life story, which is interwoven with his experiences in the United States. The narrative begins with Valentino being held at gunpoint in Atlanta, Georgia, where he recounts his past as a boy in Sudan. This dual narrative structure allows readers to see the stark contrast between his traumatic childhood and his current life in America.

Key Plot Points

1. **Childhood in Sudan:** Valentino's early life in Sudan is marked by happiness and family, but it is soon shattered by the outbreak of war.
2. **The Journey to Safety:** Valentino embarks on a harrowing journey across Sudan, facing hunger, danger, and loss. He walks for months with other children, navigating through hostile territories and perilous conditions.
3. **Life in Refugee Camps:** After a long and arduous trek, Valentino reaches a refugee camp in Kenya, where he faces new challenges, including the struggle for education and the longing for home.
4. **Resettlement in the United States:** Eventually, Valentino is granted asylum in the U.S., where he grapples with cultural differences, loneliness, and the complexities of life in a foreign land.
5. **Confronting the Past:** The novel culminates in Valentino's struggle to reconcile his traumatic past with his new life in America, as he confronts the memories of loss, family, and identity.

Thematic Exploration

"What Is the What" delves into several profound themes that resonate with readers on multiple levels:

1. The Human Experience of War

The book starkly portrays the impact of war on individuals and communities. It highlights how conflict can disrupt lives, leading to displacement and the loss of family and home.

2. Identity and Belonging

Valentino's journey raises questions about identity—how it is shaped by experiences,

culture, and environment. His struggle to find belonging in America juxtaposes his memories of Sudan, emphasizing the complexities of identity for refugees.

3. Resilience and Hope

Despite the trauma and adversity, Valentino's story is ultimately one of hope. The narrative showcases the resilience of the human spirit and the capacity to overcome even the most daunting challenges.

4. The Role of Compassion

Eggers uses Valentino's experiences to illustrate the importance of compassion and empathy. The support he receives from various individuals throughout his journey highlights the positive impact of kindness in the face of suffering.

Stylistic Elements

Dave Eggers employs a distinctive narrative style that combines lyrical prose with raw emotion. The use of a first-person perspective allows readers to intimately connect with Valentino's thoughts and feelings. This immersive storytelling makes the reader feel the weight of his experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of the refugee crisis.

Symbolism and Metaphor

Eggers makes effective use of symbolism throughout the novel. For instance, the concept of "What is the What" serves as a metaphor for the search for meaning and understanding in a chaotic world. Valentino's inquiries into identity and existence mirror the larger questions faced by many in the diaspora.

Reception and Impact

"What Is the What" received critical acclaim and was nominated for several awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award. Its impact goes beyond literary recognition; the book has raised awareness about the plight of refugees and has inspired various humanitarian efforts.

Educational and Advocacy Efforts

The novel has been used in educational settings to foster discussions about global issues,

human rights, and the experiences of refugees. Additionally, funds generated from the book have been directed toward initiatives that support Sudanese refugees and promote education in war-torn areas.

Conclusion

In "What Is the What," Dave Eggers presents a deeply moving account of one man's journey through the ravages of war and the quest for identity in a new world. The novel serves not only as a narrative of survival but also as a call to empathy and action. By shedding light on the experiences of the Lost Boys of Sudan, Eggers invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of conflict, displacement, and the enduring human spirit. The story of Valentino Achak Deng is one that resonates on both personal and universal levels, making "What Is the What" a vital contribution to contemporary literature and humanitarian discourse.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'What Is the What' by Dave Eggers?

The main theme of 'What Is the What' revolves around the struggles of Sudanese refugees, particularly focusing on identity, resilience, and the impact of war on individuals and communities.

How does Dave Eggers blend fiction and non-fiction in 'What Is the What'?

'What Is the What' is a fictionalized autobiography that tells the true story of Valentino Achak Deng, a Sudanese refugee, while incorporating narrative techniques typical of fiction, which helps to convey emotional depth and the broader human experience.

What role does Valentino Achak Deng play in 'What Is the What'?

Valentino Achak Deng is the protagonist and central character of the novel, whose experiences as a Lost Boy of Sudan illustrate the challenges faced by refugees, as well as themes of hope and survival amid adversity.

How does 'What Is the What' address the issue of displacement?

'What Is the What' addresses displacement by detailing Valentino's journey from Sudan to the United States, highlighting the trauma of leaving one's homeland, the struggles of adapting to a new culture, and the ongoing challenges faced by refugees.

What impact did 'What Is the What' have on the perception of Sudanese refugees?

'What Is the What' significantly raised awareness about the plight of Sudanese refugees, humanizing their stories and experiences, and fostering empathy and understanding among readers who may be unfamiliar with the realities of war and displacement.

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