

A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier  
By: Ishmael Beah

*A Long Way Gone* is an autobiographical account of Ishmael Beah's life and experience as a child soldier in Sierra Leone. I chose this book because I visited Freetown, Sierra Leone in High School and hoped I could absorb his memoir in a more real way having visited places where the story took place.

Ishmael was born in 1980 in Sierra Leone; in 1998 he moved to the United States and attended High School at the United Nations International School in New York. The book starts off with a conversation between himself and kids in his class asking about the war, but little is communicated about those six years of his life. The rest of the memoir gives his experience that he was unable to share in a passing conversation.

His experience with the war starts at age 12 when Ishmael and his brother Junior lose track of their family in an attack on their village. Unable to return home, Ishmael, his brother, and friends, wander to different towns—their concerns: feeding themselves, finding their families and escaping the rebels or RUF (Revolutionary United Front). One encounter with the rebels leaves Ishmael and his brother separated forever. Ishmael sets out alone for a month of deep loneliness and a survey of the devastated country—rivers running red with blood, entire villages burned. He joins with a group of boys even though he knows villages will give them a hard time in a group. Ishmael gets a short relief at Yele, a town occupied by the military where he helps them by working in the kitchen. However, the rebels come and he is forced into the army, given an AK47, cocaine & a uniform and told to kill the rebels like they have killed their families. Violence is normalized in the army; Ishmael wins a throat slitting competition.

At age 15, UNICEF takes Ishmael and other boys out of the fighting; the trauma they've experienced is hard for them to shake. Ishmael struggles to remember his childhood before the war. In efforts to connect the children with their families, Ishmael's Uncle Tommy is found and Ishmael joins their family. Ishmael

wins an opportunity to go to New York and tell of his experiences in the war. He returns to Freetown and starts High School there. Fighting breaks out in the capital and the government is overthrown. Uncle Tommy gets sick and he dies in Ishmael's arms. Ishmael illegally leaves the country to get to the U.S. in fear of getting swept up in the war again.

This was a very difficult book to get through—he had me tearing up by the thirteenth page with simple facts about his experience that are so horrendous it's heartbreaking to think of. Beah did a fantastic job communicating his experiences in a world I would otherwise write off as unimaginable.