



**ONE BOOK
ONE PHILADELPHIA**

Overview and Chapter Lessons for *What Is the What*: Grades 9-12

What Is the What is an epic novel based on the life of Valentino Achak Deng who, along with thousands of other children—the so-called Lost Boys—was forced to leave his village in Sudan at the age of seven and trek hundreds of miles by foot, pursued by militias, government bombers, and wild animals, crossing the deserts of three countries to find freedom. When he finally is resettled in the United States, he finds a life full of promise, but also heartache and myriad new challenges. Moving, suspenseful, and unexpectedly funny, *What Is the What* is an astonishing novel that illuminates the lives of millions through one extraordinary man.

Essential Questions & Themes

These questions can be used to frame discussion, regardless of whether students are reading an excerpt or the book in its entirety.

Home and Immigration. How attached are we to our home? What are some of the reasons that people leave their homes? What would we be willing to give up in the hopes of finding a better life? Have you ever moved homes, and why?

Sudan and The United States. What do you know about Sudan? What do you think Sudan knows about The United States? What kind of relationship do the two nations have? How do the two nation influence the Sudanese refugees like Valentino Achak Deng?

The Known and the Unknown. Can we get comfortable with the idea of a world without televisions or automobiles? How about childhood soldiers and boys being eaten by crocodiles? How can we learn to relate to a person who has had these experiences? Do we have things in common with a person like Valentino?

Storytelling. Why do people tell stories? Why do they feel compelled to tell their own stories? What effect does it have on you, the reader, to hear a story in the first person? How would Valentino's story be different if it were told in the third person, or written about in a textbook?

War and Childhood. What does a child understand about war? What doesn't a child (usually) understand about war? How can Valentino tell the story of the war in Sudan effectively, even though he wasn't an adult at the time? Why do we have special objections to children fighting or experiencing wars?

Chapter Lesson Plans

This lesson guide provides discussion questions and classroom activities for five selected chapters of *What Is the What*. Their main topics are as follows:

Chapter 2: The plight of the Lost Boys while walking through Sudan

Chapter 3: Life in rural Sudan

Chapter 6: The story of the What, and the seeds of the conflict in Sudan

Chapter 15: The troubles that the Lost Boys have in the United States

Chapter 20: Life in a refugee camp

Each lesson plan includes:

- **Background** about the chapter, essentially a plot summary and an explanation of the current situation Valentino/Achak has found himself in
- An **Introductory Activity** to get students engaged with a major theme or idea presented in the chapter
- Questions or Themes to consider **While Reading**
- Suggested activities to be completed **After Reading**

The activities and prompts range from basic reading comprehension to advanced criticism. Students are encouraged to be engaged with the book on all levels, although teachers may find the material too easy or difficult at certain times. For classrooms that aren't reading the entire book, students could read any combination of the chapters here, ideally in order. The lessons themselves don't depend on familiarity with the larger plot, and students can be briefed on the setting by hearing the "background" section of the lesson.

Before beginning the book

- Students should read the preface to the book, or have the format of the novel (fiction based on biography) explained to them.
- Students may also benefit from reviewing the history of Sudan and the current conflict. Students can review the timeline and map in the resource guide, as well as explore the BBC country guide about Sudan:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/country_profiles/820864.stm

If students are reading the entire book, they could list what they know about Sudan (including Darfur) before reading, and then revisit that list once they have finished the book. What have they learned? Did Valentino achieve what he wanted by telling his story?

After completing the book

- Students can read about the more recent events in Valentino Achak Deng's life, and his work in Sudan, at his website:

<http://www.valentinoachakdeng.org/>

http://www.valentinoachakdeng.org/current_life.php

There are short articles, slideshows, and video clips of Valentino, Dave Eggers, and others visiting Marial Bai in Sudan.

- Students can participate in any number of events organized by the Free Library. Activities include book discussions, African storytelling, dance and music performances, as well as multiple screenings of *Dinka Diaries*, a PBS documentary that “follows the lives of three Sudanese refugees who resettle in the Philadelphia area.” Consult the Calendar of Events for more information.

Additional resources, including general discussion questions courtesy of Vintage Press, can be found in the Resource Guide compiled by the Free Library. Questions, comments, etc. can be directed to the author of this lesson guide at Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com

Chapter 3 / pages 25-33

Students will be briefly introduced to the difficulties and horrors the Lost Boys faced while walking between Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

Background

Valentino Achak Deng has been assaulted and robbed in his own apartment. After being knocked unconscious, he wakes up to find he has been bound and gagged. A young boy, presumably related to the robbers, is in his apartment, watching TV. He begins to address this “TV Boy” in his thoughts, telling the boy about his previous life in Sudan.

Introductory Activity

Have students discuss or write about the following questions:

- Describe a time that you couldn't sleep. What were the specific reasons?
- Have you ever been too afraid to fall asleep?
- When you can't sleep, what do you do so you can?

Students can share their reasons for insomnia. Compare their experiences as a class: are the reasons similar, or different? Does the class have much in common on this point?

While Reading

Have students look for answers to the following questions:

- Why can't Achak sleep while he is a Lost Boy walking through Sudan? What were the specific reasons? What method did he use to fall asleep?

After Reading

Students can compare and contrast their sleeping situations to Achak's. Do they feel like they have something in common with Achak's insomnia, or is Achak's situation totally different from theirs?

Chapter 4 / pages 34-46

Students will learn about Achak's home village of Marial Bai by experiencing an imaginary "dream day" from Achak's childhood.

Background

Valentino Achak Deng has been assaulted and robbed in his own apartment. After being knocked unconscious, he wakes up to find he has been bound and gagged. A young boy, presumably related to the robbers, is in his apartment, watching TV. He begins to address this "TV Boy" in his thoughts, telling about his previous life in Sudan.

Introductory Activity

Students can either

- Complete the "Your Life" worksheet.

OR

- Write a brief description of their own "dream day," answering any number of the following questions:
 - o School is canceled. What do you do?
 - o You're hanging out with your two closest friends. Where would you go?
 - o You have a crush. How would you impress this person?

While Reading

Students can either

- Look for the answers to the "Achak's Life" worksheet.

OR

- Look for similarities and differences between Achak's dream day and their own.

After Reading

- Students can discuss how Achak's life in Marial Bai compares to their own lives in Philadelphia. Students should be encouraged to look beyond the material differences and consider the emotions and hopes that drive Achak during his dream day. Do they see a connection between their daily lives? Can they look beyond the potential material differences, and find similarities in their characters?
- Have students write a letter to this young Achak explaining what their "dream day" is like, keeping in mind that he has no experience with American life or most modern technology. How can they explain: an iPod? A three-person family? A subway? A basketball game? Students can read these letters aloud, with the teacher standing in for Achak, asking questions or showing confusion if they don't explain something sufficiently.

Chapter 6 / pages 51 – 71

Students will be introduced to the conflict between northern and southern Sudan, as well as the deeper animosity between the Arabs and the Dinka.

Background

Valentino Achak Deng has been robbed, and is now bound and gagged in his own apartment. While he waits for his roommate Achor to get home, an unknown young boy watches TV in the apartment. Valentino begins to have a mental conversation with this “TV Boy” about his life in Sudan, and the trouble his father ran into running a general store in their hometown.

Glossary

Sharia – Traditional Islamic law, as dictated by the Koran, and sometimes adopted by an entire country as their law code. While Sharia is officially law throughout Sudan, it is more strongly enforced in northern Sudan, where the muslim population is larger.

Dinka – the ethnic group to which Achak and his family belong. The Dinka live mostly in Southern Sudan, and are not muslim.

Khartoum – the capital of Sudan, in the north.

Introductory Activity

1. Divide the students into two equal groups. They can choose names for their groups if they like.
2. Present the class with two choices: one that they can see (candy, extra credit, etc.) and an unknown prize, represented by a sealed envelope or box. Don't say anything about the unknown prize, or say that they can open it.
3. Give group #1 the chance to choose a prize.
 - a. If group #1 chooses the unknown, congratulate them on choosing “the what.”
 - b. If they choose the known prize, “the what” goes to group #2.
4. Make “the what” sound important, even if students claim it's nothing.

While Reading

Have students look for the story of The What. Students should identify the two versions of the story, and determine how are they different.

After Reading

Have students answer the following questions:

- Why does Achak's father change the story of the What for their Arab friend Sadiq?
- Is the story of The What true?
- Why do the Dinka think they are better than the Arabs?
- What is the conflict between the Arabs and the Dinka?

Continuing Activity

To learn more about the war in Sudan, read pages 130-135, where a schoolteacher named Dut explains the historical background of the conflict to Achak and his friend Deng. What do the Baggara—an Arab group—do to the Dinka and their livestock? (133) How does this relate to the story of The What?

Chapter 15 / pages 231-239

Students will read about the bad luck and discrimination Achak has experienced since moving to the United States.

Background

After being robbed, assaulted, and tied up in his apartment, Valentino Achak Deng is saved by his roommate, and they call the police. After taking fifty-two minutes to arrive, the interaction with the police does not go as Valentino hopes it would.

Introductory activity

Students should write about and/or discuss any of the following prompts:

- Describe one time you had “good luck” and one time you had “bad luck.”
- Do you think that luck is real, or something we imagine? If things don’t happen because of luck, then what causes them?
- Describe an interaction you have had with the police (something that can be shared with the class). Was it a good or bad encounter? Why do you think it was good or bad?

While reading

Create a list (mental or written) of the “good luck” and “bad luck” events that have happened to Achak coming to the United States. Achak describes himself as being “cursed” and focuses mostly on the negative things in this chapter, but students should also try to determine if there are “good luck” events mixed in with the bad.

After Reading

Have students answer the following questions:

- Why does it take 52 minutes for the police to arrive at Achak’s apartment?
- How does Achak feel when the policewoman only knows about Darfur? What do you know about Darfur?
- Why do we sometimes attribute things to “bad luck”? Do you think it is “bad luck” that has made these horrible things happen to Achak?

Continuing Activity

In Chapter 16, Achak goes to the hospital and has to wait in the emergency room for over 10 hours before receiving treatment. Have students describe an experience they have had at the hospital, and then compare their time there to Achak’s. Why does Achak not get the kind of service he expects?

Chapter 20 / pages 318-346

Students will learn about Achak's life as a refugee and the influence of the SPLA (Sudan People's Liberation Army) on the Lost Boys.

Background

After watching his hometown of Marial Bai burn down and walking across Sudan with other boys who have lost their families, Achak and forty thousand refugees are living at Pinyudo, a camp in Ethiopia. Achak lives with a group of boys he traveled with, called the Eleven, and considers becoming a soldier for the SPLA, the rebel army fighting against northern Sudan.

Introductory Activity

Students should analyze--and, if they can be convinced to, sing—their school song, or a fight song or chant used at sporting events. If the school doesn't have their own song, use an American-themed song, such as “You're a Grand old Flag” or “The Star Spangled Banner.”

- What is the song saying, and who is it saying to?
- What kind of emotions do you have when you hear this song?
- When is this song sung? What is it used for?

While Reading

Students should look for the songs that the children in Pinyudo sing, and how the children feel when singing them. Students should also look for the scene of the massacre, and how the children feel during this event.

After Reading

- Why do Achak and the other boys without families have to do so much work at the camp?
- What happens at the massacre? Who is being killed, and who is doing the killing?
- Why does the military think the massacre will convince boys to join the SPLA? Why does their message have the *opposite* effect on Achak?
- Could our songs be used in this kind of situation? Why or why not?
- All of the songs—both the book and the American examples—have the singers expressing allegiance or loyalty to a group. Could a song be written which encouraged the singers to be loyal to *themselves*? Write lyrics to this song.

What Is the What: Chapter 4

My Life

1. How many people live in your house? _____

2. Who is responsible for you, and how many of them are there? (parents, stepparents, guardians, etc.)

3. What would you describe as “the most spectacular object” in your neighborhood?

4. How do you feel about this object?

5. Is there a television in your house? How many? _____

6. When you want water, where do you get it from? _____

Achak’s Life

1. How big is Achak’s family? _____

2. How many wives does Achak’s father have? _____

3. What is “the most spectacular object” in Achak’s town?

4. How does Achak feel about this object?

Is there a television in Achak’s town? _____

5. What does Achak do when he needs water? _____

You’re a Grand Old Flag

You're a grand old flag,
You're a high flying flag,
And forever in peace may you wave.
You're the emblem of the land I love,
The home of the free and the brave.
Ev'ry heart beats true
'Neath the Red, White and Blue.
Where there's never a boast or a brag.
But should auld acquaintance be forgot,
Keep your eyes on the grand old flag!

There's a feeling comes a-stealing,
And it sets my brain a-reeling,
When I'm listening to the music of a military band.
Any tune like "Yankee Doodle"
Simply sets me off my noodle,
It's that patriotic something that no one can understand.

"Way down South, in the land of cotton",
Melody untiring,
Ain't that inspiring?
Hurrah! Hurrah! We'll join the Jubilee!
And that's going some,
For the Yankees, by gum!
Red, white and blue, I am for you!
Honest, you're a grand old flag!

You're a Grand Old Flag
You're a high flying flag
And forever, in peace, may you wave!
You're the emblem of the land I love,
The home of the free and the brave!

The Star-Spangled Banner

Oh, say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars, thro' the perilous fight,
O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof thro' the night that our flag was still there.
O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?