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Sonia Levitin. *Dream Freedom.* San Diego: Harcourt, 2000. xii + 178 pp. $17.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-15-202404-8.

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Against the Demons

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Dream Freedom is a novel intended for children aged 9-12, and deals with the difficult subject of slavery in contemporary Sudan. As Levitin declares in the first sentence of her Foreword, "this book was born from emotion" (p. ix). It is indeed an emotional book on an emotional subject, calculated to arouse an emotional rather than an analytical response as one might expect from a novel. It ends with a page headed "What you can do," and amongst the suggestions are writing to representatives and senators in Congress and raising money to free slaves in Sudan (p. 174), which is exactly what Marcus (the book's hero) and his school class did. Marcus's activities at school and at home provide the narrative thread that ties the book together; these scenes are interleaved with self-contained scenes from Sudan, mostly set amongst the Dinka in the South. These scenes describe Southern life (which emerges as something of a pastoral idyll) and Northern brutality.

Dream Freedom, then, is a call to action, and as such should be used with great caution, if at all. The suffering of the Southern Sudanese is conveyed with power and feeling, but more complex issues are largely ignored, and the Northern Sudanese are demonized–quite literally. "So I thought maybe they are a different creature altogether, not really human. Maybe they are demons," (p. 144) muses Adot, a Southerner who escapes from Northern captivity. No doubt this is how the Northern Sudanese appear to some Southerners, and to this extent Levitin's portrayal is accurate; it is a portrayal, however, of a myth not a reality, and is hardly calculated to help "the peoples of the world work together" as Levitin hopes they will at the end of the book (p. 171). Only two of seventeen chapters deal with Northern Sudanese other than as soldiers described from a Southern perspective, and one of these portrays the Northern slave-owner Ibraim [*sic*–the name is actually "Ibrahim"] in ways that owe much more to the U.S. experience of slavery than the current Sudanese experience. Contemporary Khartoum does not, in fact, resemble an old Southern plantation, and the difference between Northerner and Southerner is not one of color, as Levitin often suggests. Slavery can now be found in Sudan, but it is very far from ubiquitous. Most Northerners are not aware of its existence, and would wholeheartedly condemn it if they were. The conflict between Northerner and Southerner is actually about many things notably economics and oil, culture and ethnicity and religion–but not about color. Northerners and Southerners can be distinguished by physique, but only in very rare cases by color.

Almost the only controversial issue acknowledged anywhere in the book is the risk that foreign funding for the redemption of slaves may actually translate into increased demand for slaves and so increase rather than decrease the problem. In the book, a maintenance man tells Marcus that he read a newspaper article to this effect; Marcus replies that "the leaders in Southern Sudan don't think so," and adds that this can't be true since "the price [of slaves] hasn't gone up in two years" (pp. 141-42). The maintenance man is suitably impressed. Marcus's economics teacher might be less impressed: increased demand only translates into higher prices if supply is held constant, and it is precisely the risk that increased demand may increase supply that concerns many observers.

One other issue is raised in a final Author's Note: "While war is the primary cause of [the] human catastrophe, slavery is its most horrifying consequence" (p.171). That slavery derives more from the civil war than from the innate beastliness of the Northerners is not, how-

ever, the message that the rest of the book gives, and it is nowhere suggested that the Northerners themselves might also suffer as a consequence of the civil war and of a military regime that few of them chose and many, if not most, would change if they could.

Slavery is of course by its nature horrifying, but it is not clear that it is actually the *most* horrifying consequence of a war that has produced many horrifying consequences. The civil war is itself of course a consequence of something in its turn, and like many of Africa's wars is fueled by outside assistance to the various parties involved. That the leaders of various Southern independence groups (in Northern terms, the rebels) seek U.S. assistance for their cause is to be expected, but this does not mean that outside assistance for them is in the long run a good thing for anyone.

Dream Freedom, then, is a powerful appeal for action, in effect an appeal from one of the parties in a prolonged conflict that has caused tremendous suffering to all involved–though more to the civilians inhabiting the regions where the war is actually fought (the South) than to civilians in the North. It is a good book as a story–though some children might find some of the Sudanese scenes, especially at the beginning of the book, overly lyrical–but it is a heavily partisan work which does nothing to facilitate consideration of the deeper issues, and strongly encourages the view that the Northern Sudanese, *all* Northern Sudanese, are indeed different creatures–demons. This is a view that is not going to get anybody anywhere.

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