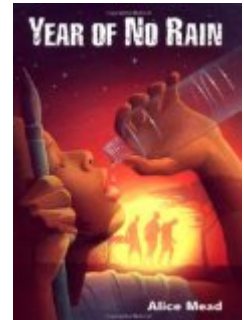


Alice Mead. *Year of No Rain*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003. ix + 130 pp. \$16.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-374-37288-0.



Reviewed by Mark Sedgwick

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Sudan's Civil War

Alice Mead's novel *Year of No Rain* is excellent. It is well written, with just the right amount of suspense to drive the story along, and its didactic elements are rarely obtrusive. Yet teach it does--about the realities of life in Southern Sudan, about the Sudanese civil war, and (to a lesser extent) about the inherent senselessness of war. It successfully avoids the oversimplified understandings of the Sudanese civil war that are all too common in America. And even if the Sudanese civil war may now be drawing to an end (or may not be--there have been false hopes for its end before), the novel remains valuable for its portrayal of a war that is in many ways little different from many of Africa's other civil wars.

Stephen, a young Dinka, lives in a village with his mother and his elder sister, Naomi. His father has vanished, gone off to the war. Stephen's concerns are those of any older child in such a village: his family, the cows he tends and on which the village depends, and his sister's impending marriage.

As Mead's examination of daily life in Stephen's village continues through the first quarter of her novel, the echoes of the distant war build, until suddenly the village is raided by soldiers looking for food. Stephen and two other boys escape to the forest; his sister Naomi hides. The next day, Stephen and the other boys return to find the village destroyed, Stephen's mother dead, and Naomi vanished.

The remainder of the book tells the story of the boys' wanderings through forest, grassland, and swamp, at first heading for a refugee camp over the Ethiopian border, then returning home. Just enough happens to keep the plot going nicely without the book ever becoming tedious or monotonous. This is a real achievement of Mead's, since the boys' desperate journey is one of tedium, monotony, and incipient despair.

Finally, the boys return home to their village, where they find Naomi, who has escaped her captors and has also returned to the one place she can call home. The book ends on a hopeful but realistic note as the children start to try to re-establish life among the ruins.

Mead is to be congratulated not only on an excellent and atmospheric story, but also on the subtlety of her portrayal of Sudan's political and ethnic situation. She does not fall into the trap of seeing a simple struggle between Christian South and Muslim North, often told as a simple parable of good and evil. Mead's Northerners are shadowy and threatening, but her Southern soldiers are also threatening, though less shadowy. At first it is assumed that Stephen's village was raided by Northern troops; later, in a neat and very realistic twist, it turns out that the raiders were probably Southern rebels. The boys have to hide from Southern soldiers in a truck as well as from Northern soldiers in an airplane. The conflicts between different Southern tribes are as much a threat to the boys as thirst and disease. One Shilluk woman the boys meet is kind to the Dinka wanderers, but another Shilluk is indifferent. A Kenyan aid worker saves Stephen's life after he has caught malaria, but it is made clear that neither aid workers nor refugee camps are any real solution. The difficulties of life in the camps become clear to Stephen on his voyage of discovery, and it is in large part this realization that sends him and his friends back to their own village.

Stephen, like Mead's other characters, is almost entirely believable. He and his friends briefly consider revenge, or joining the rebels for the sake of food--an option Stephen rejects because he wants to be a teacher, not a soldier. Perhaps this ambition of Stephen's is a little too good to be true; perhaps it is not. We all need to have hope, and in Stephen, Mead gives us some cause for hope. Because of this, despite the immensely depressing nature of its subject, Mead's book is not in itself depressing.

Year of No Rain does not examine the geopolitical and socioeconomic causes of the civil war. Given the perspectives of her characters, this is not something that Mead could realistically do. Mead's book thereby raises an interesting question: which view of war is more real, the experts'

and analysts' view that seeks to explain root causes, or the participants' view, that sees war as an inexplicable catastrophe?

Year of No Rain is strongly recommended for its target audience, and might well be suitable for older groups, too. Its readers will enjoy it, and--with suitable guidance--will have their understanding of complexity expanded, rather than having their assumption of simplicity reinforced.

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