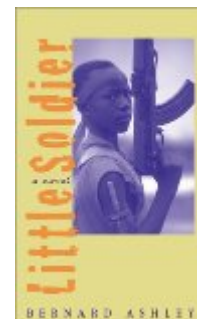


Bernard Ashley. *Little Soldier*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2002. 230 pp. \$16.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-439-22424-6.



Reviewed by Aili Tripp

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The "little soldier" in this novel is Kaninda Bulumba, a child soldier who is rescued from a fictitious country in Africa and taken to live in a foster home in London. There he becomes embroiled in gang violence.

The book contains graphically violent scenes that some may consider too brutal for young readers. The following selection, for example, seems unduly violent. "Kaninda saw his father and mother in their hot, blood-wet heap on the floor, he saw Gifty where her little body had slid down the wall. He smelled the burning flesh of the Kibu teachers at his school" (p. viii). There are fighting scenes in which Kaninda kills a man (pp. 105-106); in which a boatman's head is macheted (p. 223); and a scene in which Kaninda is trained to execute a man (pp. viii-ix).

At the same time, *Little Soldier* does not begin to describe the ways in which children have, in reality, been traumatized by war: the children in Sierra Leone who were drugged and forced to amputate limbs of people in their own communities, even their own families; the children in northern Uganda who have their ears and fingers cut off if

they refuse to fight; and the children in Angola who have been used to clear landmines.

The book draws a parallel between ethnic fighting in Africa and the warfare between London gangs to expose the futility of conflict. Kaninda is motivated by ethnic hatred and the desire to avenge the deaths of his parents and sister. This oversimplifies the motivations of child soldiers in Africa. Over 100,000 children in recent years have been kidnapped and forcibly conscripted into conflicts in Angola, Congo, Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Congo Brazzaville. They make up over half of the fighting forces in these countries. As children, they are considered cheap, expendable, and easily coerced into mindless obedience. The author does not sufficiently account for the fact that the child fighters have largely been pawns, sent as fodder to the frontlines in wars over diamonds, gold, oil, and territory. Children have not enlisted in the fighting to exact ethnic revenge, but have been victims of the designs of more powerful adult politicians, generals, and warlords. The gang warfare in London pales in comparison to children

fighting in wars under such conditions in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where since 1998 roughly 3.3 million people have died as a result of conflict.

Little Soldier is not reader friendly. Much of the conversation is in the street slang of London, which some readers will find challenging. Comments in quote marks are rarely attributed, making it difficult to follow the conversation. The author's own voice often continues in a modified London slang. These problems are compounded by poor grammatical sentence structures and incomplete sentences, which provide little respite for the reader (e.g., "Handy as a pair of boxing gloves was Mal," p. 14). Even the Swahili terms are not translated (e.g., *posho*, *matoke*, *machafuko*). Some parents and educators may object to the frequent use of swear words. In addition, characters are not sufficiently developed. Sometimes basic information about the characters, such as their age, is revealed only at the end of the book after the reader has already formed an erroneous mental picture of the character.

The story unfolds slowly, making it difficult to sustain the reader's interest. I could not get my 14-year old daughter to read beyond page 75, even though she is an avid reader of a wide range of literature.

Although parts of the book are set in the fictitious country, Lasai, *Little Soldier* was inspired by images of Congolese child soldiers. This gives the author license to mix and match the improbable. The children speak English, yet one child from Lasai has a French name.

The combination of graphically violent subject material, distorted contextualization of child soldiers in Africa, and challenges posed by the style of writing make it difficult to recommend *Little Soldier*. Not recommended.

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