



Commissioner's Book Club:

What Is the What

Discussion guide

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

Author Bio

Dave Eggers is the author of many books, among them *The Eyes and the Impossible*, *The Circle*, *The Monk of Mokha*, *Heroes of the Frontier*, *A Hologram for the King*, and *What Is the What*. He is the founder of McSweeney's, an independent publishing company, and co-founder of 826 Valencia, a youth writing center that has inspired over 70 similar organizations worldwide. Eggers is winner of the American Book Award, the Muhammad Ali Humanitarian Award for Education, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, the TED Prize, and has been a finalist for the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He is the 2024 John Newbery Medalist, for the most distinguished contribution to children's literature for *The Eyes and the Impossible*. Eggers is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.¹

Eggers worked closely with **Valentino Achak Deng**, whose experiences are described in this book, to convey his story, merging real-life events with creative narrative to

¹ Dave Eggers. 2025. "Dave Eggers." <https://daveeggers.net/dave-eggers>.

highlight the enduring strength and hope of those affected by war and displacement. In Valentino's words:

Over the course of many years, Dave and I have collaborated to tell my story by way of tape recording, by electronic mailings, by telephone conversations and by many personal meetings and visitations. We even went to Sudan together in December 2003, and I was able to revisit the town I left when I was seven years old. I told Dave what I knew and what I could remember, and from that material, he created this work of art. [...] We agreed that all proceeds from the book would be used to improve the lives of Sudanese in Sudan and elsewhere.²

Summary

What Is the What is a novel that tells the true story of Valentino Achak Deng, a Sudanese boy who becomes one of the "Lost Boys" after his village is destroyed during the Second Sudanese Civil War, as shared with Dave Eggers. Valentino is forced to escape by walking across Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya, facing threats from militias, wild animals and starvation. His path leads him through refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya, before being granted resettlement in the United States, where he encounters new challenges as he adapts to a vastly different culture.

Deng's story is a horrifying but incredibly compelling view into the experience of a child through war and unimaginable adversity. It is one thing to hear about the impact of war on children through the media or academic books; it is another to hear about it from their own perspective and in their own voice.

—Commissioner Govender

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

[The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) says that all children have the right to safety, education and a chance to grow up without fear. Valentino's experiences show how these rights are not protected equally for all children. His story is a powerful reminder of why protecting the rights of children—especially through war, conflict and migration—is so important.

² The VAD Foundation. 2025. "Book." <https://www.vadfoundation.com/book>



The UNCRC was created in 1989, and Canada agreed to follow these conventions in 1991—which means the government committed to integrating them into Canadian law. Valentino’s journey shows how strong children can be, and how important it is for adults and governments to stand up for children and their rights.

[The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#)

The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (also known as the Geneva Convention), with the 1967 Protocol, establishes the legal framework that defines who qualifies as a refugee and outlines their rights and protections. Canada agreed to the Convention in 1969, committing to provide asylum to individuals fleeing persecution and to ensure their rights are respected.

Valentino’s narrative serves as a reminder of the responsibilities that nations bear in upholding refugees’ rights and well-being, and the serious consequences when protections are not adequately enforced.

Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. Explore the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). Which rights draw your attention when you think about Valentino’s story?
 - Answers will vary.
2. How does the novel address the psychological impact of displacement on individuals?
 - It delves into the enduring trauma and identity struggles that displaced persons often face, emphasizing the need for comprehensive mental health support.
3. How does the novel explore the impact of trauma on children, and what implications does this have for child rights advocacy?
 - It sheds light on the profound effects of conflict on children, emphasizing the urgency for targeted support and protection measures.
4. In what ways does Valentino’s story highlight the importance of cultural preservation amidst displacement? What is the significance of storytelling in preserving history and advocating for human rights?
 - Maintaining cultural practices serves as a source of strength and identity, helping individuals navigate the challenges of assimilation. Sharing



personal narratives like Valentino's raises awareness, fosters empathy and can drive social and policy changes.

5. How does the narrative explore the concept of "home" for refugees?
 - It portrays "home" as a fluid concept, encompassing both physical safety and emotional belonging, which refugees continually seek. Valentino's connection to Sudan weaves threads of trauma and a cherished part of his identity, reflecting the complex emotions of displaced individuals.
6. How does the story challenge stereotypes about refugees and immigrants? How does Valentino's experience reflect broader issues of immigrant assimilation and acceptance?
 - By presenting a nuanced, personal account, it dismantles one-dimensional views and highlights the diverse experiences of refugees. His journey underscores the complexities of adapting to a new culture while facing prejudice, economic hardships and identity conflicts.
7. In what ways does Valentino's story prompt discussions about Canada's responsibilities under international human rights treaties?
 - His story encourages reflection on Canada's adherence to its commitments in protecting and promoting the rights of children, refugees and asylum seekers. Challenges remain in fully upholding rights, mirroring some of the systemic issues Valentino faced.
8. How does the novel portray the intersectionality of identity (for example., race, nationality, refugee status) in shaping Valentino's experiences?
 - It illustrates how overlapping aspects of identity influence the discrimination and opportunities individuals encounter.
9. How would you describe Valentino's emotional experiences and evolution over the course of the experiences described? What do you think about using the word "resilient" to describe him?
 - Valentino's perseverance through unimaginable hardships showcases the innate strength and determination individuals possess when confronted with life-threatening challenges.
10. What role does community play in Valentino's survival and adaptation to new environments?
 - Supportive communities provide essential resources and emotional backing, aiding his resilience and integration into unfamiliar settings.

