***A Long Way Gone* – Themes**

<http://www.gradesaver.com/a-long-way-gone/study-guide/themes>

**Survival**

From the moment he fled the violence at Mattru Jong, the focus of Beah's life became surviving day to day. He learns quickly that in order to survive, he must suppress his true emotions. After the RUF attacks Mattru Jong, Beah lets go of his prior attachments to family and friends, joining up with boys who, like him, are on the run. Even though he welcomes the company, he remains emotionally distant from his newfound friends. When they die or become separated from one another, Beah does not have time to mourn. His goal is to live through one more day, and he can't afford to stop and think about the atrocities around him.

For months, Beah stays alive by overcoming hunger, violence and isolation. When Beah becomes a soldier, he is trained to tap into his rage in order to kill rebels. The officers manipulate the boys into thinking they are exacting revenge on the people who killed their families. Beah acknowledges it is unlikely that he and his fellow soldiers confront those actually responsible for their families' deaths, but the temptation to believe is strong. They accept this as reality - fueled by drugs and violent films - and operate on the assumption that they kill or be killed.

When Beah arrives at Benin Home, he finds it hard to access his true feelings about the loss and the violence he has experienced. After years of subverting his emotions, he is unable or unwilling to speak about what happened because Beah long gave up hope for a real life. Only through therapy is he able to trust others begin to tell his story. Cutting off his emotions kept him alive, but examining those feelings after the war gave him a new life.

**Memory**

Beah weaves memories of his life before the war into his recounting of months on the run from the RUF. In distressing times, Beah calls up happier moments in order to get through another day. Memories of his family - especially those of times before his parents divorced - allow him to keep a glimmer of hope alive in the darkness. His memories of his grandfather help in a more direct way; Beah uses legends and advice from his childhood while alone in the forest. Memory is an aid. When he becomes a soldier, however, Beah no longer indulges in memories of his childhood. After he kills his first man, the memories become a burden as he believes his life will never be the same. When he is rescued by UNICEF, he still resists remembering his family because he is afraid he will have to first reexamine his war years in order to access memories from before. But, Beah uses flashbacks later in the book as he allows his memories to return while he is in rehabilitation. For Beah, memory is the key to survival at the start of the war, then blotted out as a coping mechanism when he is forced to do inhuman things, and a signifier of healing later on.

**Loss of Innocence**

Obviously, since Beah became a child soldier, his tale would incorporate the resulting loss of innocence. The violence and terror is rendered through the eyes of a child and Beah writes plainly and without judgment about his experiences. Though the attacks on his village and subsequent villages he seeks haven in sever Beah from normal childhood activities, he at first maintains his innocence. He holds onto childhood memories and is able to fleetingly rekindle his sense of wonder; for example, he and his companions rejoice when they first see the ocean.

Although the violent pursuit of rebels across Sierra Leone traumatized Beah, it is not until he is turned into a killer that he truly loses his innocence. To emphasize this change narratively, Beah stops utilizing flashbacks to his childhood in the memoir after he is indoctrinated into the army, citing his inability to remember anything good. Beah details the manipulative tactics used by the commanding officers to create killers, which have the cumulative effect of eradicating childlike emotions or actions. Beah's experiences in the war strip him of his humanity but the relief efforts help restore the dreams he had forsaken when he was 12.

**Nature**

Even amid the horrors of civil war, Beah can see a grander perspective when confronted by natural beauty. Beah strives to be like the moon, he is adept at living off of the forest when he is stranded, and he rejoices when he sees the ocean for the first time. In nature, Beah retains his innocence. In his memoir, nature also echoes or foreshadows coming evil. Left alone in Mattru Jong after most of the villagers fled to the forest, Beah notes that the moon does not appear in the sky that night and that the air felt "stiff, as if nature itself was afraid of what was happening." (p. 22) When Beah is traveling with Kanei, Musa, Alhaji, Saidu, Jumah and Moriba, a crow falls out of the sky and the boys, desperately hungry, eat it despite their ominous feelings. The next day, Saidu falls ill and dies shortly thereafter.

For Beah, there's a deeper spirit to nature, one that resists the manmade atrocity. As a soldier, when it rains, he notes that the forest is washed clean, "as if the soil had refused to absorb anymore blood for that day." (p. 150) When his rehabilitation starts to take hold, Beah considers the moon for the first time since the war. For the past several years leading up to this moment, Beah has been divorced from the redemptive power of nature. He has been trained to fight, to kill, and to survive. Now, having broken through his own barriers against trusting nurse Esther and the UNICEF worker Leslie, Beah recovers his sense of family history. He invokes the memory of his grandmother and her lesson about man's communion with the natural world. For the first time since he was inducted into the army, Beah remembers this connection and seeks to make himself whole again.

**Life and Hope**

Hope comes in the starkest terms for Beah during his ordeal. When on the run from the RUF, Beah is able to comfort himself with memories of his earlier life. His father's saying, "If you are alive, there is hope for a better day and something good to happen. If there is nothing good left in the destiny of a person, he or she will die" is enough to push him towards another day. (p. 54) Being alive one more day is proof that all is not yet lost.

When he is a soldier, however, Beah forfeits a connection to his life. Hope dims in the haze of drugs and violence. Beah gives up any dream of a future beyond simply surviving. However, his father's adage rings true once rehabilitation begins. After speaking at the UN, Beah's hope is rekindled. He meets many children like him and sees that his experiences can have an impact on the world. For once, he realizes that someone will care if he lives or dies. Far away from the civil war, Beah's life has meaning again. In New York, also meets storyteller [Laura Simms](http://www.gradesaver.com/a-long-way-gone/study-guide/character-list#laura-simms) who offers him a lifeline out of Sierra Leone - which he eventually takes.

**The Damages of War**

Beah's memoir sheds light on the multifaceted damage done by civil war and terrorism. The anguish of losing his family and friends is compounded by the uncertainty each day brings. Although they attempt to find a safe haven from the war, the boys know from bitter experience that no such place seems to exist in Sierra Leone. Each new village brings either hopelessness - in the form of desolation and isolation - or hostility on the part of the frightened inhabitants. Beah feels that there is no place for him to call "home" any longer, and fears that such a place may never exist in his future. Whatever dreams or goals he had set no longer seem possible.

As a soldier, the fear subsides and he is forced to tap into rage and vengeance in order to survive. The constant violent acts Beah is subjected, as well as the drugs he becomes addicted to, tamp down his fear - but also his humanity. The war also breaks down civilization. Beah notes that before the war, kids his age would never raise their voice against adults. But the rebels and soldiers respect no one. Because of this, when Beah travels in packs of other lost boys, they are assumed to be devils. The civil war leads to chaos and mistrust on both personal and community levels.

**Family**

Beah loses his mother, father, brothers and grandparents in the war. Family is the most important thing for Beah, and he struggles to keep his family alive any way he can. At first, he is stranded along with his brother [Junior](http://www.gradesaver.com/a-long-way-gone/study-guide/character-list#junior) in Mattru Jong. Their bond deepens despite the tragedy that has befallen them. Ishmael and Junior try to protect each other as best they can, as they had when they were "misfits" at school. However, when they become separated, Beah is unable to mourn for him as he must focus on staying alive.

Each pack of boys Beah ends up with during his travels becomes an ad hoc family; family becomes situational rather than genetic. But each boy realizes that something irreplaceable has been lost. When Saidu dies, Kanei must represent his family at the funeral. The villager who accompanies them say that they will always know where their friend is buried and can return; but each boy knows they will never return. Later, Beah's squad becomes his family. Even at Benin Home, the ex-RUF boys clash with the rescued army boys. Likely orphaned, each boy desperately clings to one another. Family is something to fight for.

At Benin Home, Esther offers to be Beah's sister but he can only grant her familial status on a temporary basis. He has been jaded by war, but he still seeks connection. Beah eventually finds a home with [Uncle Tommy](http://www.gradesaver.com/a-long-way-gone/study-guide/character-list#uncle-tommy) - who, like Beah during the war, takes care of children other than his own despite not being blood - but he is wary of opening up about his wartime experiences. Beah does not want to alienate his cousins. Beah has learned that family is precious but can be fleeting.

The memories and stories of Beah's childhood are interspersed throughout the memoir, typically at times when Beah is most afraid. Within the story, they are a comfort to child Beah, but they also serve a greater, narrative purpose. With Esther, Beah bemoans the fact that as sole survivor, no one else will be able to tell stories of his childhood. His memoir is a way to keep his family alive in some way.