

Focus Questions for Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*

Consider the following as you read the memoir as a whole:

- What are some of the folk tales, adages, and stories Ishmael recalls from his childhood, and what role do they play in his resilience?
- Similarly, examine the multiple roles that music plays in Ishmael's life. Pay attention to the artists that end up saving his life (some in quite literal ways) from childhood all the way through rehabilitation.
- Research risk factors and symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Which of these does Ishmael display throughout the events recollected in the memoir?
- Take note of any new or unknown words you come across during your reading (e.g. *crapes*, cassava, RUF, RPGs, Bra Spider, etc.).

Chapter 1

- Why do you think Beah chooses to open his memoir with the anecdote from New York, 1998?
- Describe Ishmael's experience with/knowledge of war at age 12 (the very beginning of the memoir)
- Why does Ishmael love hip-hop? Identify some of his favorite artists.
- What are Mattru Jong, Kabati, and Mogbwemo? Describe them. What happens at each?
- "We must strive to be like the moon"—explain this adage's importance to Ishmael.
- How has Ishmael's experience with war changed by the end of Chapter 1? What has he seen?

Chapter 2

- Summarize what happens in the dream Ishmael recalls in this chapter, and explain his reaction to it.

Chapter 3

- What did the RUF do to the messenger who came to Mattru Jong?
- When the rebels attack Mattru Jong, why does Ishmael say that "as young boys, the risk of staying in town was greater for us than trying to escape"?

Chapter 4, 5, & 6

- Identify some of the things Ishmael and his companions have to do to survive.
- How does music save Ishmael's life in the events of Chapter 6?

Chapter 7

- What happens to the imam in the village of Kamator?

Chapter 8

- Ishmael recalls another folk tale told to him by his grandmother, this time about a wild boar. What happens in the tale?
- At the end of the chapter, the boys encounter a very old man. How has the country changed, according to him? According to Ishmael, how have the boys begun to change?

Chapter 9

- Identify some moments of beauty or memories of family and childhood that Ishmael recalls in contrast to the violence of his experiences.
- Explain how Ishmael and his companions escape death when the chieftain of the coastal village mistakes them for rebels.

Chapter 10

- Summarize what happens in the Bra Spider folk tale that Musa tells. What purpose do you think the Bra Spider folk tale serves in Mende culture?

Chapter 11

- Gasemu tells Ishmael: “Your parents and brothers will be happy to see you...Your mother cries every day, begging the gods and ancestors to return you to her.” What happens when Ishmael arrives at the village? What does he find?
- Research “displaced aggression” and explain how it relates to Ishmael’s reactions.

Chapter 12

- Who is Lieutenant Jabati? What do he and Ishmael bond over?
- “They have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as doing a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country.”
Who says this, and why?
- Identify some of the methods Jabati uses to train the young soldiers. How do concepts like “desensitization” and “dehumanization” apply?

Chapter 13

- Describe the transformation that occurs in Ishmael from the beginning of the events of Chapter 13 to the end of the Chapter.

Chapter 14

- What do the soldiers do when they’re not in combat? Why do you think the commanders encourage these activities?
- Explain how Ishmael gets promoted to junior lieutenant. What motivates Ishmael to commit this act and fight the rebels?

Chapter 15

- What happens in this chapter that helps Ishmael escape his life as a soldier?
- Provide an example of something that happens in this chapter that demonstrates Ishmael *can’t* yet escape his life as a soldier.

Chapter 16

- How do the workers at Benin Home attempt to rehabilitate the former child soldiers?
- Describe some of the challenges Ishmael faces during his time at Benin Home.

Chapter 17

- Who is Esther? What role does she play in Ishmael’s transformation from soldier back to child?
- Why do you think Ishmael includes the flashback in this chapter?

- Summarize what happens in the dream Ishmael recalls in this chapter. How does it differ from most of the other dreams he's had since the war? Is this a positive or negative development for Ishmael's recovery?

Chapter 18, 19, & 20

- What public role does Ishmael take on in the rehabilitation center? How might this contribute to his own recovery?
- How does Ishmael end up coming to the United States?
- Who is Laura Simms and what role does she play in Ishmael's life?
- What happens to Ishmael when he returns to Sierra Leone? How does he manage to escape?
- Explain the monkey's riddle. What happens in the anecdote Ishmael tells, and what is his intent in using it to close his memoir?