

The Other Side of the Ocean

Beverley Bell

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The Other Side of the Ocean is a powerful historical novel about surviving the traumas of civil war and the struggles of refugees abroad.

Heartrending and hopeful, Beverley Bell's historical novel *The Other Side of the Ocean* covers the horrors of the Sierra Leone Civil War as a refugee rebuilds his identity.

While staying at his sister's house, Saah is awakened by piercing screams and the sounds of gunshots. The war, which started in 1991 and has spread throughout villages, has reached Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown. Separated from the other members of his family, Saah escapes with his brother-in-law—first to Guinea, and later to a refugee camp in Ghana. He later relocates to Australia, where he struggles to acclimatize and to reconcile his old self with his new identity.

Emotive, moving scenes portray the brutality of the war. A soldier shoots a man who's on his knees in the face; Saah's left hand is amputated by a vicious soldier; ordinary citizens are killed in cruel, indiscriminate ways; and torture is inflicted on women. But despite these circumstances, the characters are thoughtful, resilient, and inspiring. Saah's brother-in-law, Musa, is a source of guidance and wisdom; the two devise ways to escape war-torn Sierra Leone together. Musa's keen business sense and determination lead to the start of a pork-selling business to supplement their food and income while they are in the refugee camp. And, despite many changes in his life, Saah moves to Australia by himself in the hope of a better future.

Joyous developments, as when Saah is reunited with other members of his family, inject hope into the narrative, helping to balance its more heartbreaking scenes. Descriptions of Saah's time in Australia cover the challenges of communicating with new people, resulting in compassion for him and his fellow refugees. Saah is subjected to constant racist attacks; he's isolated as he adjusts to his new culture, and to expectations such as that he perfect his English with speed. The loss of his very name deepens his identity crisis.

But some plot developments are not followed through: though Saah, Musa, and Saah's sister all hope to relocate to Australia, only Saah travels there; why Musa and Saah's sister stay behind is not explained. The book's adherence to its central themes is more constant, helping to hold disparate plot points together. Its primary concern is the zeal of Sierra Leone's people, who, despite scars inflicted by the civil war, are seen working to move forward. This is emphasized in a touching scene, wherein a soccer team, many of whose players are amputees, receive Saah with joy when he makes a return visit to Sierra Leone.

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EDITH WAIRIMU (February 4, 2021)

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