



## Son of a Gun

*Anne de Graaf*

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Based on true stories of former child soldiers interviewed by the author in Liberia, Son of a Gun describes the journey of a brother and sister, ten-year-old Lucky and eight-year-old Nopi, who are kidnapped from school and forced to become child soldiers.

Lucky and Nopi manage to escape with the help of older children. They track down their parents, but then must flee again. In the end Lucky and Nopi are reunited with their parents, but they both know the pieces of their lives will never fit back together again like they used to. When will the war really be over, and when will they get to be the children they still dream about?

## Son of a Gun Details

Date : Published April 18th 2012 by Eerdmans Books for Young Readers (first published September 1st 2006)

ISBN : 9780802854063

Author : Anne de Graaf

Format : Paperback 125 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, War, Cultural, Africa, Realistic Fiction, Young Adult, Childrens, International, Adventure, Survival, Fiction

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## From Reader Review Son of a Gun for online ebook

### **MaryannP says**

This book is based on a true story of a brother and sister who were captured when they were 8 and 10 years old to become soldiers during the Civil War in Liberia, Africa. This book did not win any awards, but it got an excellent review from School Library Journal and has been recognized by The American Library Association, The Poetry Center, and the United States Board on books for young people in 2013.

Nopi and Lucky, nicknames, are brother and sister. They are captured in school after their teachers are beaten. They were tied up and connected by rope with other children. They had to obey all orders from the soldiers or they would be killed. Nopi becomes deaf after being tortured, trying to save her brother from the cruel treatment he was receiving. They end up proving themselves to the soldiers so they could hold guns. They end up escaping to try and head back to Monrovia, where they hope to find their parents. They find their home, see their parents, but then their parents and grandma leave and they don't know where they went. Soldiers show up and rob houses nearby. They raid their house, so Lucky hides Nopi in the cupboard so nothing happens to her. The soldiers like the extra rooms and food, so they stay for a couple weeks. Nopi and Lucky run away from their home to get away from the soldiers.

When out searching for their parents and somewhere else to stay, they end up sleeping in a tall tree, right in the middle of the fighting with some other children. They all had to flee so they wouldn't be caught, but Lucky is captured by "Peanut Butter" and his side man, "Frog." Nopi is captured by someone else who treats her like a 3rd wife.

Nopi ends up running away and finds a river with a few people and a boat. She manages to join them and sets sail to a refugee camp to be safe, which also has food and water. Lucky ends up fighting for one side of the war, doing whatever "Peanut Butter" tells him to do. He ends up coming face to face with his friend, James. James was captured and taught to fight for the other side, the rebels. Read to find out what happens to Lucky and James. And what about Nopi? Will Nopi and Lucky ever find their parents and grandma, or even each other?

This was a great book that told the story of children soldiers during this time period. This was told by two people who lived these accounts and went back and forth between their memories, set up like a journal. This text allows the reader to think and feel what these people felt and connect with their lives. The last few pages really make us realize what we have and what others have done for us in order to have it. It definitely puts things into perspective and is a page turner. I rated this book 4 stars because it is a powerful text with rich language and a story line that is easy to follow and understand. I would recommend this for 6th-8th graders, or even high school students learning about this time in history.

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### **Suzanne says**

Citation: Son of a Gun, by Anne de Graff. (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2012). 125p. Realistic Fiction.

Summary: Eleven year old Nopi and her eight year old brother Lucky are kidnapped and forced to fight for years in Liberia's tribal warfare during the mid 1990's.

Critique: (a.) In this short juvenile fiction novel it is author Anne de Graff's writing style and her choice to use the voices of children affected by the surrounding African warfare that brings this world to life. (b.) How are children supposed to process being kidnapped and forced to walk year after year without end from gunfight to gunfight? De Graff illustrates this relentless world for the reader through her very believable, simple diary entries from Nopi and Lucky. (c.) She begins with a brilliant use of figurative language from Nopi that connects the reader to this world in Liberia that seems so far removed from our own. "If I start by talking about the sun and trees pressed down by the weight of the sky and yellow grass and red dust and crickets at night and laughter and the roar of the waves at the beach, can you hear Africa? Can you taste my Liberia in the salt-scented air? Can you feel the dust between your teeth? Can you hear the laughter of the children? Hey, we're just like you, you know." (p.8-9) But it is the voice of Lucky that is the most compelling throughout the story as he tries comprehend what is happening to them. "James and I no longer talk about soccer. We do not argue about AC Milan and Real Madrid. We stay very close to each other and talk about school. We name our teachers and recite the alphabet to each other because that was what we were learning when the soldiers came and kidnapped us." (p.45-46)

Curriculum Connection: This book has a great supplement section at the end with information about Liberia's history and current facts. The book could be used to help illustrate Virginia SOL WHII.14 "The student will demonstrate knowledge of political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of independence movements and development efforts by b) describing Africa's achievement of independence."

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### **Kelsey Borchers says**

Wow this book was amazing! I really was not sure what to expect from this book because I had not previously heard of it before. However, I had studied a little bit about the child soldiers and have found it to be a very powerful story. This book proved to be very moving and perfect for a young reader. The story is told through the eyes of a brother and sister who have different experiences during this horrible time of war in their tumultuous home country. They are separated from their own parents and each other for an extended period of time and forced to do things that no child would ever have to think about in our day and age in America. I think this is a great book to introduce children and get them interested in such a horrific time, but that interest leads to them making a difference and making sure that preventive action is taken so that such violence is not allowed in countries world wide. This book is realistic fiction because it did not really happen, but true stories were used to create this book. There are many themes for this book. The main theme is one of survival. In addition, there is a theme of family and trying to keep that family together. The tone of this book is dark, but also at times reassuring and hopeful. The story is told from the brother and sister's point of view. The narration switches between the two by chapter. I found this to be very interesting because you were able to look inside two different character's thinking and thought processes. The author's style is one of urgency. It is meant to draw attention to the issue of child soldiers. I really enjoyed reading this book on my iPad mini through the Kindle application. I did not think I would enjoy since I do not enjoy reading on the computer, but I found myself pulling it out whenever I had a few seconds to spare. It was a lot more convenient than lugging around a book. This is the book for the fourth literature circle discussion and the resource is Kimmel. I read this book as an ebook and loved it! Will be reading more books this way in the ear future!

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## **Chris Connolly says**

Category (Literature Circle Book)

No page for this book

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### **1. Description**

The 14-year war that occurred in Liberia during the early eighties and nineties prompted rebelled forces to not only kill many innocent people but raid their homes and steal goods and food and even use them for shelters. Many innocent children had the misfortune of being chosen to be captured and forced to learn how to use weapons for warfare. What happened to these children was something that no American child could remotely understand.

### **2. Setting**

The details in this story bring this terrible and true story to life as action and suspense occur on every page. As Nopi and Lucky run from the rebels, the reader understands and experiences the tension that these children are feeling.

### **3. Plot**

The conflicts, which happen throughout the story, seem very appropriate for the time period as the country was in turmoil during this time; for example, Nopi and Lucky are continuously leaving their environment to travel to another as they run from the enemy.

### **4. Characters**

Lucky and Nopi are characters who convey to the reader that they grew up during the time when the war was about mid-way through. These children accurately depict the belief of those innocent children who were forced to take sides and even fight one another.

### **5. Style**

The language that Graaf uses is easy to read and understand; even a young reader could read this story without any issue although the content within it is meant for intermediate readers. Since the language is very understandable, the reader identifies the plot of the story.

### **6. Theme**

Graaf creates a theme of independence in her novel as people in the story cannot vote for a leader, and women are not allowed to hold public office. All Nopi and Lucky really want is to be able to have freedom from these tragic events and live normally as children.

### **7. Accuracy**

The accuracy of events that were written and crafted by Graaf depict an authentic and historical view of the trouble the country was experiencing during the 14-year war. In fact, Graaf incorporates the use of her data

collections to tell the reader about her experience. With pictures, personal letters, and maps, Graaf seems to have the necessary credentials to write her story.

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### **Bruce says**

When he was eight, soldiers invaded Lucky's school, killed his teachers and forced him and his ten-year-old sister Nopi to become soldiers in the Liberian Civil War. They were beaten, drugged, and armed with AK-47s forced to kill or be killed.

De Graaf's novel for children, told in alternating first person accounts addressed to the reader by Lucky and Nopi, gives a simple, stark and often gruesome account of warfare in the eyes of the young combatants. The book is based on stories she heard from now teenaged veterans of their experience. As she says in her author's note, "Some people say children should be protected from the truth when it is painful. But civil wars and other terrible things do happen in the world. ...it is in these dark places that the gift of hope shines."

The book is powerful, but not quite as powerful as the accounts of former child soldiers like *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah and *War Child* by Emmanuel Jal, books written for an older audience.

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### **Nicole Glaser says**

I'm torn on what age I think this book is best suited for. Can young readers identify with Lucky and Nopi? Is it imperative that they do? It was a hard read as a parent and a lover of children. This concept of child soldiers seems so foreign to me, even after acknowledging that it happens more often than I'd like to read about. I liked how the narration changed and I like how every once in a while you knew you were reading the words of an older narrator, not the young child soldier. I couldn't help but compare Nopi to Anne Frank when she's hiding in the cupboard, so in that way, I can see how it might be suitable for 7th or 8th graders too. More mature readers can infer what happens in some parts when the author speaks of "a new hardness" in Lucky. I think maybe older readers could benefit from it more because they can draw more conclusions and synthesize a better understanding of why it's important to be exposed to global issues and social awareness. Right now, all my students can reference is Kony 2012. You have to be older than ten to understand why the boys laugh at her when she talks about wanting to be president. I can also see how this book would make a good supplement for a World History class.

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### **Myhiah says**

Audience: Intermediate

Genre: Biography

Discussion Questions:

REMEMBER: Who were the main characters?

-The main characters were Lucky and Nopi. Nopi was the older sister to Lucky, her younger brother.

**UNDERSTAND:** What was the main idea?

-The main idea was to share the story of how Lucky and Nopi survived the war in Liberia. It explained how the kids stayed together and found their parents until again their parents were kidnapped and the second time around they got separated. It's a great ending, where they all found each other again after the war had ended!

**APPLYING:** Think of a situation that occurred in the story and explain what you would have done?

-After Nopi was beat up by the soldier in the beginning of the book she lost her hearing. I don't think that I would have had her courage to continue to watch out for her brother and risk her life trying to save him. I mean, it was already really difficult when she could hear, but now not being able to hear just made her more of a hero after doing all she did to save her brother.

**ANALYZING:** What was the most exciting part?

-The best part of the book I think was when the two children found their parents at their grandparents house the first time. I'm glad that they found their parents again a second time and for good, but when they found their parents the first time, it was so unexpected. I was only in the middle of reading the book when they found their parents for the first time and it was just a huge shock!

**EVALUATING:** Do you agree with what the soldiers did to the Liberia children? Why or why not?

-I definitely don't agree with what they did. Not only were they taking these children away from their families; they were forcing them to be apart of and do things that the children did not want to do. It was definitely not fair to punish the children for the soldier's greed. It was all unjust and a sad situation that occurred.

**CREATING:** How could you improve on how the book was written?

-It was a little difficult reading the book in how both characters went back and forth. But I also know that the author did this for a reason because she wanted to take into account how everything was told to her. I think an idea to improve the book would be to have all of it written from Luckys point of view first and then the second half of the book would all be written by Nopis point of view.

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### **Jordan Varey says**

I read this in preparation for welcoming a Liberian family to Canada. It is difficult to imagine growing up in such a tumultuous environment as a Child. My hope is that the family we are welcoming have not had to experience everything depicted in this short book.

I would say the content is best suited for kids 13 and up. I would recommend that young readers have an adult to process with while reading. This book deals with some heavy stuff that is almost unimaginable from the perspective of a child raised in Canadian suburbs.

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## **Moe says**

Although it was not my kind of book, I'm sure many people would like it. It refreshes your mind on how awful it is for families living in Liberia. The villages are attacked and burned down, and families have spread apart. I learned that the kids are forced into joining the army and have to learn about how to shoot a gun and kill other kids at the earliest age of 10. I was horrified and I think this is a good quick book to read if you want to be educated on today's world issues.

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## **Ginta Harrigan says**

“Son of a Gun” is a true story of children in Liberia forced to be soldiers and fight in battle.

“Son of a Gun” was written by award-winning author Anne de Graaf. Ms. De Graaf interviewed the former child soldiers and compiled their stories into a book. Parts of the book are very descriptive and well written. For example, de Graaf writes in the prologue of Lucky turning in his AK-47 (also known as his God) in the United Nations gun buyback program. She describes him placing it on the pile of weapons (“It clattered down the side and sent up a little cloud of dust.”). And Lucky mumbles to himself, “Won’t hear no more voices from that gun.”

The first chapter of the book introduces Lucky and his sister Nopi. She talks about the war but I was left wondering what war. The author did not explain why there was a war or who was fighting whom. The book seemed to be a compilation of notes pieced together to form a book.

De Graaf writes the text as if the children are talking to the reader. I suppose this was done so the reader would feel the children are actually telling their story. However, I did not like this style of writing for this story. I would have preferred de Graaf to write the book in narrative style. The way the book was written left me wanting information such as who was fighting who and why. The children do not know anything about the war and they express that in the text. In fairness, I think de Graaf wants the reader to see the children’s lives through the children’s eyes but the story would have been more meaningful for me if I was not left asking questions throughout the reading.

Ms. de Graaf provides a lot of information about Liberia at the end of the book and that helped me understand life in Liberia a little better. I wish she could have incorporated some of that information into the story.

In terms of it being culturally accurate, it obviously is because de Graaf wrote the book from the stories told to her by the former child soldiers. She also gives factual information about Liberia at the end of the story; facts can be debated but not disputed.

“Son of a Gun” is a book that should probably be read during independent reading time. Parts of the story are a little graphic for middle school and require teacher explanation but students can glean some information about a country that they likely are not familiar.

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## **Kirsten says**

It was a good story, but I felt it was too basic.

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## **Debra Zager says**

This was difficult book for me to read. I can't imagine the horror that those children lived and that haunts them still. I know a family that immigrated from El Salvador after the son of one of their good friends was taken and forced into the army. They left everything in fear that it would happen to their thirteen year old son, as well. In coming to the United States, they faced prejudice and had to give up their careers, a physician and college professor to start here working at a soup factory. Their friend in El Salvador was not able to find her son despite getting tips from friends with military connections. She was always just behind their movement.

I thought that the atrocities were handled well for a young audience. The violence and rapes were not graphic but were not ignored.

I found the background on Liberia at the end of the book interesting. I knew little about the country, and its history of escaped American slaves returning there and enslaving others was beyond my comprehension.

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## **Sandi Rossman says**

I reviewed this book for the literature circle 4 category. The source was Dr. Kimmel.

This book chronicles the experiences of two child soldiers: 10 year old Nopi and her eight year old brother Lucky. Told from alternating points of view, the reader is immersed in a dark world where the innocence of children is stolen and the gun is god of the land. Readers stand in awe at the atrocities these and countless other children witness, participate in, and try to run away from in order to survive.

The writer uses alternating points of view, which I believe helps keep each gender's experience separate in the book. While Nopi and Lucky both have experiences that most grown people couldn't handle, they view and handle those experiences differently. Boys and girls can relate to this book in different ways.

The plot is suspenseful as readers want to keep reading quickly to figure out how or if these children will survive without their parents in the middle of a war and war-torn cities. One theme running throughout the book is the power of the heart to continue to wish and dream in the midst of horrific acts of violence.

My personal reaction to this book was horror. I needed that horror. I needed to be reminded that things like this do happen everyday even though it seems so far removed from where we all live. Students need to be reminded of this also. What I hated was the author's tendency to preach lessons to children about how thankful they should be for school and normalcy. I think the book was strong enough to do that on its own without the author/narrator shouting it at the reader. I wonder if the author questioned the power of the book and felt that she had to preach, also.

I also did not enjoy reading this book online. I prefer the feel of a book in my hand. It seemed like I was reading the book in small pieces on white PowerPoint pages. If I have to read a book online, make it worth my while. Give me something extra!

I would use this book to help students understand what it is like for children living in other parts of the world. I would try to make cross-curricular connections with the history teacher to find current news articles for students to read about a similar topic. Then, we could also have geography lessons as we use maps to find the countries we read about in the news.

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### **Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says**

The subject of this book is child soldiers, in this instance in the country of Liberia, during its civil war. It's a harsh and harrowing topic for a children's book, yet de Graaf manages to convey the horror of it without going into too many of the gory details. The story describes how Lucky and his sister Nopi are kidnapped from school and forced to work for soldiers, eventually becoming ones themselves. This is happening even now in places around the world. What angers me in this instance is that the fighting is over control of diamonds, which the people of Liberia don't get to keep, only mine. Are all the industrialists who use diamonds in manufacturing, and all the wealthy people who wear them as jewelry turning a blind eye to the cost in human lives that their diamonds have brought to others? Fortunately I happen to know that Liberia is in a better situation now thanks to UN troops, a new head of state, and the Christian faith.

At the end of the story, de Graaf provides factual information about Liberia, with pictures and reproductions of artwork and writings that some former child soldiers have created. This lets readers know that the story is based on reality. Discussion questions at the end can make this an excellent choice to use in a classroom. This is a good introduction to the topic for upper elementary children, before they read grittier books like those by Ishmael Beah. Highly recommended!

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### **Angela Bailey says**

#### **Title / Author / Publication Date:**

Son of a gun. / Anne de Graaf. / 2012.

**Genre:** Young Adult - Historical Fiction.

**Format:** Book - print (chapter book). 121 pages.

#### **Plot summary:**

“Eight-year-old Liberian Lucky, his ten-year-old sister Nopi, and their schoolmates are kidnapped and forced to become child soldiers, but even after they escape along with some other children and are reunited with their parents, their lives will never be the same. Includes chapter about Liberia” (NoveList).

#### **Considerations or precautions for readers advisory:**

child soldiers, civil war in Liberia 1986 - 1996, brother and sister relationships

#### **Review citation:**

“Despite the flip title, a harsh picture of civil war in Liberia as seen through the eyes of two children ... De Graaf bases her episodic, present-tense narratives on interviews with Liberian children and adds an informational appendix with photos that not only lays out Liberia's troubled history (up to 2006, when the original Dutch edition of the book was published) but also includes upbeat drawings and letters from young

survivors. "I wonder if there's a place for my story in your world," writes Nopi. Stories like this at least help to ensure that there are"(Kirkus Reviews).

**Section source used to find the material:**

ALSC: 2013 Notable Children's Books

ALSC: Batchelder Award Winners (2013 Honor Book)

**Recommended age:** Ages 9 - 12.

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