

While the Sun Is Above Us

by Melanie Schnell

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Reviewed by Donna Gamache

While the Sun Is Above Us, by well-travelled Canadian author Melanie Schnell, is a complex story set in Sudan during the long years of bloody civil warfare there – which, it is hoped, may now have ended with the creation of the country of South Sudan in July, 2011.

This novel tells the intriguing story of two women: the first, Adut, from South Sudan, who has spent eight years as a household slave farther north in Sudan, but is now back in the south with her two children, living with her dying father and her aunt; and the second, Sandra, a Canadian whose life in Toronto fell apart when her husband unexpectedly left her. The book is written as a back-and-forth, dual first-person storytelling between the two women, as each tries to explain what has happened in the past, and how, surprisingly, they wound up in the same place at the same time for one brief moment. The reader must adjust to the novel's format, which not only jumps viewpoints from Adut to Sandra, but also from present to past, and back and forth again, covering events from April 2003 to September 1995, events in which the "listener" is not present with the speaker.

At the time of her capture by a warring tribe from northern Sudan, Adut was a simple village girl in Turalei, South Sudan, a Moslem, a married of a three-year-old child. She was taken to a big farm owned by Saleh, forced to work there and to submit to brutal sex with her master. Saleh's "head wife" hates Adut because of Saleh's interest in the slave, and she makes things more difficult for her. An attempt by Adut to escape results in failure and a terrible beating.

In Canada, following her marriage breakup and a car accident, Sandra reads an article about the conflict in Sudan and sees a photo of a slave who has been recently freed. She feels impelled to go to Africa, feels that somehow her life is intertwined with the woman in the photo. Although she never actually does locate the woman in the photo, it has a profound effect on her and leads to a life-changing meeting with Adut. The parallels between the two women's lives are surprising, because they have formerly been so different.

I found this novel riveting, not an easy one to read, due to the content and the frequent time shifts, but insightful and well written. The atrocities of the war in Sudan and the way it has affected innocent women and children is something many of us know little about, but we need to learn. I will recommend *While the Sun Is Above Us* to members of my book club as one of the books we should discuss in the coming year. Although the topic is harsh, the story ends on a hopeful note for both women.

I enjoyed reading about the customs and beliefs of the Sudanese people, for instance the ceremony performed following a girl's first menstrual period, and the custom of marrying off a widow to her husband's brother, even though the widow might not want this. I found both Adut and Sandra to be engaging characters. Adut, particularly, sometimes seems wise beyond her years, especially in her realization that both war and love "can make one do things they otherwise would not do" (211).

To provide accurate background material for her novel, author Melanie Schnell volunteered with a non-governmental agency called Canadian Aid for Southern Sudan, which works to buy back

adults and children enslaved during the war. While there, Schnell also immersed herself in the lives of the Sudanese people. The character of Adut was already in her mind, but she felt she needed to more fully understand life there, particularly that of the women. Although advised by aid workers not to do so, she left the relative safety of the NGO compound and stayed three weeks with a Sudanese family.

Melanie Schnell lives in Saskatchewan, where she is working on a second novel. A book club reading guide for *While the Sun Is Above Us* is available at <http://www.melanieschnell.com/#!/books> 📖

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is *Sarah: A New Beginning*, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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