

YA Book Review

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# FROM TRIBAL WAR TO COLOR WAR: A MESSAGE OF SURVIVAL AND BELONGING IN *HOW DARE THE SUN RISE*

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Studying a memoir provides middle and secondary school English students the opportunity for reflection on reality and analysis of literary elements in the same way a novel does. The genre, then, should be accessible to students. Selected for the New York Public Library's "Top Ten Books of 2017 for Teens" and the Junior Library Guild, *How Dare the Sun Rise: Memoirs of a War Child* (2017) by Sandra Uwiringiyimana (with Abigail Pesta) is more than a memoir; it's a story about race in America from the perspective of an African immigrant who fled the 2004 Gatumba massacre in Burundi. In just one night, over 150 Congolese refugees from the Banyamulenge tribe were killed by the National Forces of Liberation of Burundi, while another 106 were left wounded. These men, women, and children were killed solely based on their ethnicity and have yet to receive the justice that they and their surviving family members deserve.

After being displaced from tribal wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, young Sandra survives this massacre. Her younger sister Deborah does not. After spending two months in a United Nations refugee camp, Sandra's family immigrates to New York. While martial conflict is averted, she realizes that she has been dropped in the middle of a different type of war: a color war. Sandra's disillusionment with the "land of opportunity" grows as she experiences the social and cultural minefield that is an American middle school. She wants to belong, but her social currency has a different currency than in Africa. Navigating microaggressions founded upon historic racial oppression, Sandra ultimately embraces her reinvented identity as an African woman of color in America.

From survivors to celebrities, Uwiringiyimana's cast of characters will appeal to students. Sandra experiences an unforeseen meteoric rise from unknown refugee to celebrity youth activist. What starts as an art exhibit in Rochester dedicated to survivor stories of the Gatumba massacre leads to domestic and international speaking engagements with high-profile activists such as Angelina Jolie and Michelle Obama. Much like her Congolese refugee community, students will likely view Sandra as an emerging celebrity or social media influencer. However, Uwiringiyimana

does not exploit this part of her journey and primarily weaves her transatlantic experiences together with details about her family. Rather than touting her accomplishments as an activist, the memoir serves as therapy for Uwiringiyimana to grieve the loss of her beloved sister Deborah, whose murder takes a massive toll on Sandra's mental health.

Flashbacks from the Gatumba massacre begin haunting Sandra in college as she struggles to find her place in a racially homogenous campus. She thought America would be a place to recover from the loss of Deborah in Gatumba; instead, she is forced to deal with her PTSD from the massacre without a strong support system. Sandra explains her frustrations in communicating with her family because Congolese culture does not promote open discussions of mental health. Sandra must develop her resilience independently throughout a period of time away from her family and friends while relying upon her Italian boyfriend and his family for emotional support. Eventually, her sister Adele's wedding provides a reconciliation with Sandra's parents with whom she once again grows close. Once they finally talk about their shared experience as survivors, Sandra and her mother form a special bond, creating space for Sandra to return to her roots while still maintaining her distinct personality.

The inevitable violence of the Gatumba massacre recounted in Uwiringiyimana's memoir must be acknowledged when introducing the book to students. In the secondary classroom, the need for a refugee story like this becomes evident when Uwiringiyimana uncovers the apathy her peers felt toward students of other nations, tongues, and skin tones. As a high-interest-low-level book, *How Dare the Sun Rise* appeals not only to non-native English speakers or reluctant readers, but also to teachers wishing to incorporate an engaging text in a thematic unit over social justice, activism, or race relations. Writing the memoir was a way for Uwiringiyimana to process her grief from all she had lost: shelter, clothing, security, family, belonging, self-esteem, and status. Thus, the book may also work well in the context of mental health, grief, or personal growth.

If using the book in a regular English core or ELA elective class is not an option, teachers may also consider using this book in an extracurricular setting such as a book discussion or book club, which is the method I currently use to share the book with students. The memoir exhibits a young woman's well-articulated perspective of race relations in America, a topic that is certainly relevant today and will remain relevant to students for years to come.

### **Author Biography**

Lindsey Viets teaches sophomore English and reading at Webb City High School in Webb City, Missouri, and serves as the WCHS Book Club sponsor. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Education from Pittsburg State University in 2017, where she was a Presidential Honor Scholar and student abroad with the PSU Honors College. Currently, she resides in Pittsburg, Kansas, with her husband and two dogs and will continue her education with a Master of Arts in English at Pittsburg State University beginning in the Fall of 2021. She can be reached at [lviets@wcr7.org](mailto:lviets@wcr7.org).