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**The Fog of Memoir: The Feud over the Truthfulness of Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone***

By Gabriel Sherman (March 6, 2008, *Slate Magazine*)

On Jan. 19, the *Australian*, Rupert Murdoch's Aussie broadsheet, published a 4,600-word investigation challenging the credibility of the child-soldier memoir *A Long Way Gone*. Author Ishmael Beah's heart-wrenching account of Sierra Leone's civil war and the two years he spent as a cocaine-addicted teenage killer achieved instant literary acclaim after its publication last winter and was selected as the inaugural title in Starbucks' reading club. Into its 35th printing, *A Long Way Gone* has sold more than 600,000 copies worldwide. Beah, 27, now travels the world as a UNICEF ambassador raising awareness for the plight of child soldiers.

If you believe the Australian, much of the memoir is bunk. In a dozen scathing articles published since mid-January, a trio of Australian journalists alleges that Beah grossly exaggerated his story: Beah served as an orphaned child soldier for little more than two months, not the sweeping two years his memoir chronicles. And, according to the journalists, the book's most dramatic plot twists—the time Beah was shot three times in the foot by an AK-47 and the moment Beah witnessed six murders in a UNICEF refugee camp—don't check out at all.

Beah, his editor, Sarah Crichton at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and his agent, Ira Silverberg, vigorously deny the allegations. In the book, Beah claims to have a photographic memory. He says he has documented his tragic story with infallible accuracy, and lucidly recounts scenes of violence, executions, and torture. But these denials haven't stopped the Australian from waging one of the fiercest, knock-down, drag-out literary feuds in recent memory. The fight pits three Australian reporters, Peter Wilson, David Nason, and Shelley Gare, against Beah, Crichton, and Silverberg. The standoff has spanned four continents and bled into cyberspace, as both sides have entered competing changes into Beah's Wikipedia page. Last month, Wilson tracked Beah around London during his European book tour, trying to land an interview after repeatedly being rebuffed by FSG. Wilson even planted questions with a student reporter from the Oxford University newspaper after the Oxford Union banned him from attending Beah's reading there. Throughout the onslaught, FSG hasn't budged.

"The whole idea that these f-----g muckraking hacks are wagging their fingers at FSG is ludicrous," Beah's agent, Ira Silverberg, told me. "It's been three months of dealing with these people. When they couldn't get one thing, they went looking for something else. I've never witnessed anything so lowbrow as an endeavor to disgrace a really well-meaning and lovely person, who actually did suffer enormously."

"Exactly," Wilson counters. "I'm sure he went through a terrible ordeal, but the truth matters. It is plain to anyone who wants to look at this objectively that he did not experience what has been sold as the truth to hundreds of thousands of readers. The truth matters. It sounds naive, but the shocking thing is: the publishers don't care about this. They've made millions of dollars."

Just how did this whole brouhaha start in the first place?

The story begins last fall when an Australian mining engineer stationed in Sierra Leone named Bob Lloyd learned that one of his employees at the Sierra Rutile mine near Beah's village claimed to be Beah's father. Lloyd had read A Long Way Gone and was especially moved by Beah's tragic account of his parents' deaths in a rebel attack on the village of Yele. Elated at the possibility of reuniting Beah with his father, Lloyd tried contacting Beah. He sent e-mails to Beah's Australian publisher, HarperCollins, FSG, and Beah's adopted American mother, a New York-based human rights activist and professional storyteller named Laura Simms. In addition, Lloyd explained in his e-mails that workers at the mine were telling him that the book's chronology was wrong: Rebels had taken over the mine in January 1995, not 1993 as Beah describes in *A Long Way Gone*. If true, that would mean Beah served as a soldier only for several months when he was 14 going on 15.

From the outset, Lloyd received a chilly reception from Beah's camp. On Nov. 9, Simms responded with a protective e-mail and a list of test questions to help determine whether the man was Beah's father. Two days later, Lloyd sent an e-mail back answering Simms' questions. His reply went unanswered for 10 days, and on Nov. 22, Lloyd replied with a follow-up e-mail that included two photos of Joseph Beah, the man claiming to be the father. Then, the next day, Simms responded to Lloyd with a curious message. Instead of the polished prose that she had previously written, her e-mail on Nov. 23 contained sentence fragments and awkward syntax, as if English wasn't her first language (which it is). "Thank you for pursing this," the e-mail bearing Simms' address replied. "However, Ishmael say that this is NOT his father. …Why you said in my letter that this man came to you and why you told Sarah [Crichton] that you sought out the boy's father." The e-mail concluded with this ominous warning: "We are deeply concerned that this issue not go further than you, and Sarah and myself."

Frustrated, Lloyd contacted a television producer in Sydney named Anita Jacoby with an Australian interview program called *Enough Rope With Andrew Denton*. Beah had recently been featured on the program, and Lloyd thought Jacoby could go around the recalcitrant publishers and guardian and pass along a message directly to Beah that his father might be alive.

Three days later, Jacoby called her friend Shelley Gare, a 55-year-old freelance journalist and former newspaper and magazine editor. Jacoby told Gare there might be a story behind *A Long Way Gone.* According to Gare, Lloyd was reluctant to talk to the press and had no intention of taking his claims to the media. But he was troubled by FSG and Simms' response. Wouldn't a man bearing good news that Beah's father was potentially alive be embraced? In the publisher's cagey responses, Lloyd began to sense there might be a reason they didn't want to know that some facts could differ from the account in Beah's memoir. Lloyd, after some prodding by Gare, agreed to go public.

Gare spent several weeks looking into Lloyd's story that Beah's father was in fact alive, and she called Crichton and FSG's public relations director, Jeff Seroy, for comment on Dec. 11. "It was a very hostile exchange," Gare told me. First, Gare raised the possibility that Beah's father wasn't dead, and then she told Crichton about the discrepancy with the book's chronology and that Beah might have become a child soldier in 1995, not 1993. "After that, there was an incredibly long silence," she said.

Crichton denies this account and says that the Australians were biased from the beginning because they somehow felt slighted by FSG. "They felt dissed by us," Crichton told me. "It weirded us out. Right from the outset, Shelley Gare said 'You were rude to Bob Lloyd. Laura Simms was rude to him.' They felt we weren't taking them seriously as journalists."

Two days later, Crichton wrote Gare a lengthy e-mail both defending the book and detailing her qualifications as an editor and writer: She's a former *Newsweek* editor; she runs her own imprint at FSG and collaborated with Mariane Pearl, wife of murdered *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, on her memoir. To Gare, Crichton's message implied: *Do you know who I am?* On Dec. 15, Gare e-mailed Crichton back. "Thank you for your letter but I need to make some points for the record," she wrote. "One, I have never suggested that Ishmael's entire story is a hoax. Nor have the Lloyds. … Two, it was entirely appropriate for me to bring up the problem of the date on page six. … Please do not try and make it appear that I purposely tried to spring something on you."

Gare also disputed Crichton's assertions that the *Australian* and Bob Lloyd were trying to create a media spectacle of Ishmael's memoir. "The Lloyds came to you, via HarperCollins, with exactly that intention of private celebration in mind," she wrote Crichton. "They were met with a mix of such rudeness, silence and dismissiveness that they finally went to Andrew Denton's website simply seeking to get help. Andrew Denton's people - NB not the Lloyds - eventually got in touch with me after the Lloyds continued to have problems that seemed puzzling. … Ms Crichton, I understand your fierce passion for this book, but nobody at this end has ever tried to do anything except present some key points to Ishmael Beah and to the people who have been working with him. The Lloyds honestly believed and still do that they were going to help unite a father and son."

In January, the *Australian's* European correspondent, Peter Wilson, traveled from London to Sierra Leone to investigate Beah's story on the ground while Gare finished writing the piece back in Sydney. In Sierra Leone, Wilson discovered that the man claiming to be Ishmael's father was mistaken and was most likely a distant cousin, but questions about the book's timeline remained puzzling. Several locals, including the boarding master at Beah's school and the village chief, confirmed to Wilson that the attack on the village of Mattru Jong that Beah describes in the book occurred in January 1995, not 1993. The incident is a pivotal moment in Beah's narrative: After the rebels occupy Mattru Jong, Beah is forced to flee and begins his months-long exile before being conscripted in the army for two years. "The only way any of us survived was by using a footpath through the swamp which was the one thing the rebels had not noticed," Sylvester Basopan Goba, the acting chief of Mattru Jong, told the *Australian*. "If they had done their reconnaissance properly none of us would have escaped. I can tell you it was terrible and I tell you that none of that happened in 1993.''

The *Australian* published its investigation on Jan. 19. Three days later, Beah released a statement stridently rebutting charges that he embellished his experience. "I was right about my family. I am right about my story. This is not something one gets wrong. The *Australian's* reporters have been calling my college professors, asking if I 'embellished' my story. They published my adoptive mother's address, so she now receives ugly threats. They have used innuendo against me when there is no fact. Though apparently, they believe anything they are told–unless it comes from me or supports my account. Sad to say, my story is all true."

The next day, Gare, Wilson, and Nason issued a 1,000-word statement of their own, rebutting Beah's rebuttal and pointing out, among other things, that they published Simms' business Web site, not personal address. In subsequent weeks, the paper published 10 more critical articles further challenging facets of *A*

*Long Way Gone.*

The reporters have assembled their case by interviewing subjects who claim that the memoir's most harrowing scenes didn't happen, or at least not in the gruesome fashion Beah describes. A Jan. 21 piece states: "A large number of people in Beah's home region, including a local chief, a Catholic priest, medical staff at his local hospital, his family's former neighbours, several local miners and Beah's former school principal have independently confirmed to *The Australian* that the attacks he describes on his home town and region happened in January 1995, not January 1993 as stated in his book." Dan Chaon, Beah's writing professor from Oberlin College, is paraphrased in a Jan. 21 piece agreeing that any inaccuracies in *A Long Way Gone* should be chalked up to "poetic license." The reporters also pointed out that Beah began working on his memoir with Chaon as fiction, suggesting that embellishments remained after Beah recast the project as nonfiction. A follow-up article on Jan. 25 alleges exaggerations in the map at the beginning of the book. A piece on Jan. 26 quotes both UNICEF relief workers and Western journalists who were stationed in Sierra Leone during the civil war stating that they could not recall the deadly fight in which six people died at the refugee camp which Beah portrays in his book. On Feb. 2, Wilson reported that Beah's former schoolteachers had even located academic documents that prove Beah was in school in March 1993, months after he claims to have fled the rebel attack on Mattru Jong.

Despite the allegations, Crichton told me last week that she remains committed to Beah and the truth of his timeline. "The conflict started in 1991. There were successive waves of violence," she says. "That's what Ishmael is writing about." Crichton dismissed the *Australian's* recent reports that Beah was in school in the spring of 1993. "First, the AP sent a reporter to the school and reported the records were destroyed. Then, the *Australian* suddenly said, 'a cache of records proves that Ishmael was there.' First of all, that's pretty amazing that there are all these records. Second of all, who are these men? Thirdly, why did they stay up all night long [looking for the documents]?" she said. Crichton hypothesized, "Obviously, these guys are being paid, they're not doing this out of the goodness of their heart. And even if they do come up with something, it's the easiest thing in the world to falsify something like that."

"That's probably defamatory, apart from anything else," Wilson swiped back. "Does Crichton think the principal is going to take money? They have no reason to lie. They have goodwill towards Ishmael. They went through the records as a matter of hospitality. They were mystified and quite hurt that Ishmael said he didn't know them."

When I asked Crichton if the conflicting accounts by the Catholic priest who said he witnessed the only attack on Mattru Jong in 1995 gave her pause that maybe the book fudged at least some of the timeline, Crichton said no, that she believed Beah's narrative to be true. "I have watched [the *Australian*] publish a systematic distortion of facts. I have heard from too many people who were interviewed by them that their words were taken out of context," she said, citing an aid worker named Leslie Mboka, a former child soldier named Kabba Williams, and Beah's writing teacher Dan Chaon as examples. "I have called people in Sierra Leone, I have done research. I had done research before. Not one of their articles says that there were sporadic attacks before 1995. They started with the supposition that the conflict started then. …They have been cherry-picking their reporting to such a degree that I don't trust them."

David Nason, the *Australian's* New York correspondent, fumed when I told him that Crichton said that he had misquoted Chaon. Nason showed me an e-mail that he sent Chaon on Jan. 29, after Chaon had posted a letter and his version of a transcript on an Australian literary blog. "It seems to me that you guys are awfully naive in accepting your Murdoch produced 'news' as gospel," Chaon posted. "Hmmm. Do you think there might be an agenda in the decision to go after a third world author whose work is making people aware of human rights abuses in his country? Something to think about."

Nason e-mailed Chaon in response: "Dan, after 30 years in journalism I've been called a liar by all kinds of crooked politicians, corrupt police and shonky businessmen. It goes with the job," he wrote. "I've also been called a liar by people like you -- decent, ordinary folk who say things they later regret when they see the words in print and seek salvation by slagging off the reporter. This unfortunately goes with the job too. But I've never in 30 years had anyone actually make up a transcript like you have and then post it on the web. I know you're a creative writing professor but this really is taking things to extremes. Fortunately, I taped our conversation (something I am permitted to do under New York and Ohio law) so there is absolutely no doubt about the accuracy of my report, the inaccuracy of your comments post publication and the fraudulent (and potentially actionable) nature of your invented transcript."

Last month, FSG rebuffed one of the *Australian's* claims. Jeff Seroy, FSG's publicity director, e-mailed me a letter that Crichton sent to the *Australian* on Feb. 14 disputing Wilson's assertion that the map at the beginning of A Long Way Gone exaggerates the length of Beah's journey. For weeks, the *Australian* had claimed Beah himself had sketched out an inaccurate map used in the book's first edition and hyped the duration of his journey to support his narrative. Crichton's letter shows that FSG has fact-checked the locations Beah mentions in the book, and they check out. "I've been a journalist and a writer for a long time now," Crichton told me. "I've never seen anything like this."

The level of vitriol and escalation of rhetoric has surprised both sides. Clearly, as an objective journalistic exercise, the *Australian* reporters have made this personal. The obsessive nature of their coverage can work against their reporting, but behind their dogged pursuit of Beah, there are serious questions about Beah's retelling of his traumatic teenage experiences and the publishing industry's sole reliance on authors to verify their memoirs. In marshaling their defense, FSG has cited witnesses who met Beah after his arrival at the refugee camp, but no former child soldiers who served directly with Beah have come forward to back him. Several characters, including a caring nurse who helped Beah recuperate and find his voice as a storyteller, haven't been identified at all.

Ultimately, though, the truth of what actually transpired might be lost in Africa. Crichton herself told me she recognizes the challenge of re-reporting decade-old events from the fog of one of Africa's most brutal civil wars. "As people who reported from Africa know, it tends to be a difficult continent to cover," she says. "You can't just talk to one person and have your story. That's not reporting." For his part, Wilson says he is willing to go to court to prove he is right. "If I'm maliciously inflicting commercial damage on them, they should sue," he said. "They're not suing because they know I'm telling the truth. And they're hoping we'll just go away. So my response is, sue us, and we'll see you in court."

In August, FSG will release *A Long Way Gone* in paperback. I asked Crichton if the paperback edition will carry a disclaimer or some editorial acknowledgement that the book is based on true events. "There will absolutely not be a disclaimer," she said. "A disclaimer is used when you say I've changed names, he hasn't; moved locales, he hasn't. So, no, there will not be a disclaimer."

Questions:

1. Do you think the *Australian* reporters should have investigated this story? Why?

2. Do you think the response from Beah and his publishers was appropriate? Why?

3. After reading this article, do you think Beah told the truth? Why or why not?

4. Does this article change the way you view *A Long Way Gone* or the plight of child soldiers in Sierra Leone? Why or why not?