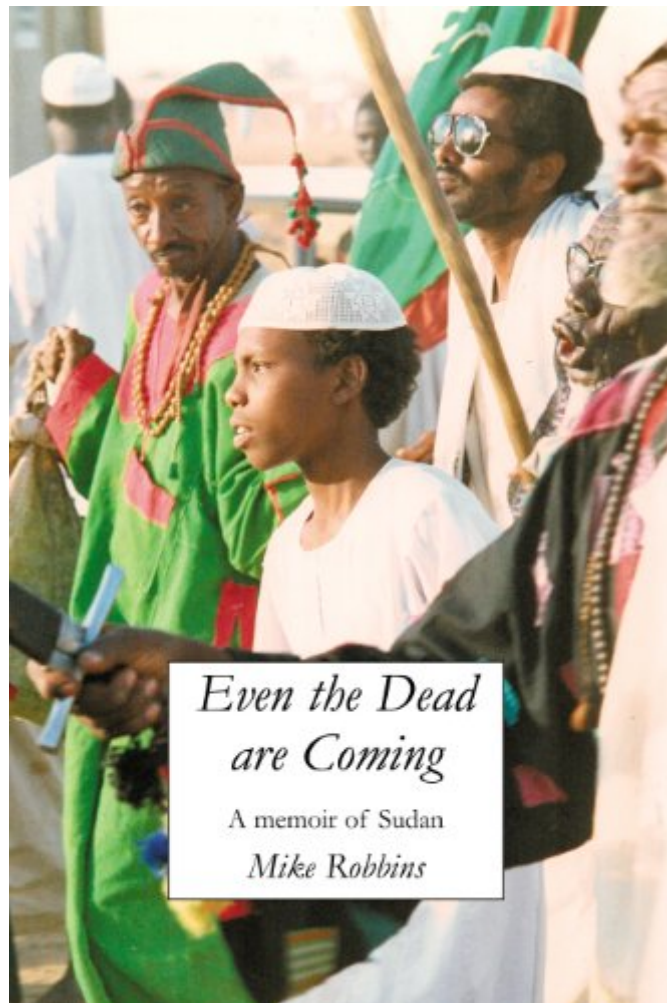


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Even The Dead Are Coming: A Memoir Of Sudan



Synopsis

In 1987 Mike Robbins, a 30-year-old London journalist, decided on a change of lifestyle and signed up for two years as an overseas volunteer. Some weeks later he found himself standing with his luggage in the middle of a featureless baked-earth plain in Eastern Sudan. It was over 100 deg F in the shade. And there was no shade. This is Robbins's account of the two years that followed, working with the Sudan Government in the last months of a failed democratic experiment, as the country coped with hundreds of thousands of refugees in the aftermath of the 1980s famine. But it is also a personal account of life as a development volunteer in a surprising, sometimes inspiring, country.

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Customer Reviews

I find it extremely difficult to review this book. I don't even know where to start. So let's start with the book cover and the title: Both are great, wonderful, perfect! Could not be any better. Then, let's continue with the contents: The author spends (almost) two years in Sudan as a voluntary aid worker. Sounds interesting. IS interesting. Now, how

about the writing style? And here, I am running into problems. The author is clearly a talented writer. There are passages in the book that are wonderfully written. I especially admired the descriptions of the weather, the colors of the sky, and how the morning light and evening light affected the landscape. Yet I feel bound to criticize the unclear writing. Not only do certain sentences not fit properly together, there are also sentence structures which left me pondering after reading the sentence several times, and there are unclear and even wrong modifiers. Besides, there are numerous typos, which didn't bother me too much but might raise the eyebrows of other readers. What annoyed me the most was the frequent jumping back and forth with locations and time. It may or may not be my age, but I kept getting confused. The ample use of untranslated Arabic words didn't help either. (I assume that only very few readers of this book happen to understand Arabic.) Add to this that the book has no maps. All this resulted in me getting the feeling of being lost in the Sudanese desert without a compass. Something else that bothered me: It wasn't until I was quite far into this book before the author revealed what he was actually doing in Sudan. I eventually learned that he was producing a newsletter and later a magazine. Notwithstanding its flaws, this book provided me with a knowledge about Third World countries, particularly Sudan and its neighbors, that I didn't have a clue about before. It also let me count my blessings that I didn't proceed with the idea I had nourished for a short while during my late teens to become a voluntary aid worker on some exotic part of this planet. This wouldn't have been for me. Yucky toilets and sewage pits, no toilet paper, myriads of mosquitoes (carrying malaria), various other nasty stinging insects, lack of hygiene (for instance, the habit of people sharing food, using hands), food I don't think I would have wanted to even try, above 100 F temperatures and no air condition in aid workers' living quarters, and, and, and, and no electricity, hazardous road conditions, and hazardous driving •no siree, not for me! I must say, however, that I would not have had problems coping with the alcohol prohibition, which seemed to give the author some trouble. Conclusively, I would like to state that I am glad that I read this book. Maybe the author will consider giving this book an overhaul. With a (mind you, rather extensive) work-over, this book could easily deserve 5-star ratings. And by all means, Mr. Robbins, ADD SOME MAPS!

In the 1980's Mike Robbins worked in Sudan helping out with the refugee issues they were experiencing. I was too young at the time to be aware at what was going on over in Sudan. When Mike went over there the country was at breaking point, for a number of years due to famine and war refugees had been gradually crossing over into Sudan. Mike's writing style is more like listening to a man "talk" about his experiences, his writing has quite a distinct voice, he quite often goes off on a tangent but soon gets back on track, the topic is so interesting and his way of talking is so engrossing that you don't always notice these tangents. He includes a good deal of information on the state of the country and it's people, it's history and even it's climate. Mike goes through a lot whilst there, plenty of danger, quite often hungry, suffering from malaria and he drinks some of the dodgiest booze ever, how he survived is beyond me. This was a fascinating read, I feel I've learnt a lot about Sudan, it is a shame that so few have read it.

Prospective readers should not let themselves be put off by the title: "Even the Dead are Coming" is a nuanced, evocative snapshot of life in Sudan right before the 1989 coup. Like an impressionist painting, it suggests a myriad of details from daily life there--cultural, geographic, historical and political--set loosely along the timeline of Robbins' stay there as a VSO volunteer. Robbins' attention to details bring the country to life--buying early morning bread, Bollywood movie viewings, busses still affixed with Dutch city routes, boys washing trucks in the river early mornings, shopping in the souks--as he experiences the often frustrating role of a Western volunteer. He also includes observations on the culture, such as the difference between public and personal space in Sudan, and religion. His descriptions are almost poetic but never heavy-handed. For instance, he describes an evening during Ramadan when the men go to pray, "not mindless rhythm, but something more graceful," or watching the "vast yellow moon tipping liquid gold across a river" lined with date palms. The book's strength is in its description, not in delivering emotional reactions or political judgment on the role of the ever-growing subculture of Western aid organizations that feed on such African countries. It presents the place in all its complexity and leaving readers to draw their own conclusions. For instance, he writes: "The fact remained that there sometimes seemed to be a curious lack of will to change things in Sudan, a strange acceptance of things as being unavoidable when they weren't." Traveling or living in an African country for the first time is an overwhelming experience for a Westerner--there are so many contrasts and facets of life that are not what they seem in the beginning. Mike Robbins' book is an excellent primer and a pleasure to read.

For anybody contemplating a visit to Sudan or working overseas in a volunteer capacity this

makes a very interesting and worthwhile read. The author presents an interesting and engaging narrative that is not without both humour and the occasional moment of sadness. Whilst informative, it is also a good read, and the author manages to capture the human side of Sudan. The mix of political history and comments on old 1950s taxis and trucks was a juxtaposition that actually worked well, and made me chuckle in places. Even if you never intend to travel to Sudan, but simply want an interesting read, I would recommend this. My only criticism would be that the occasional map might have been useful.

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