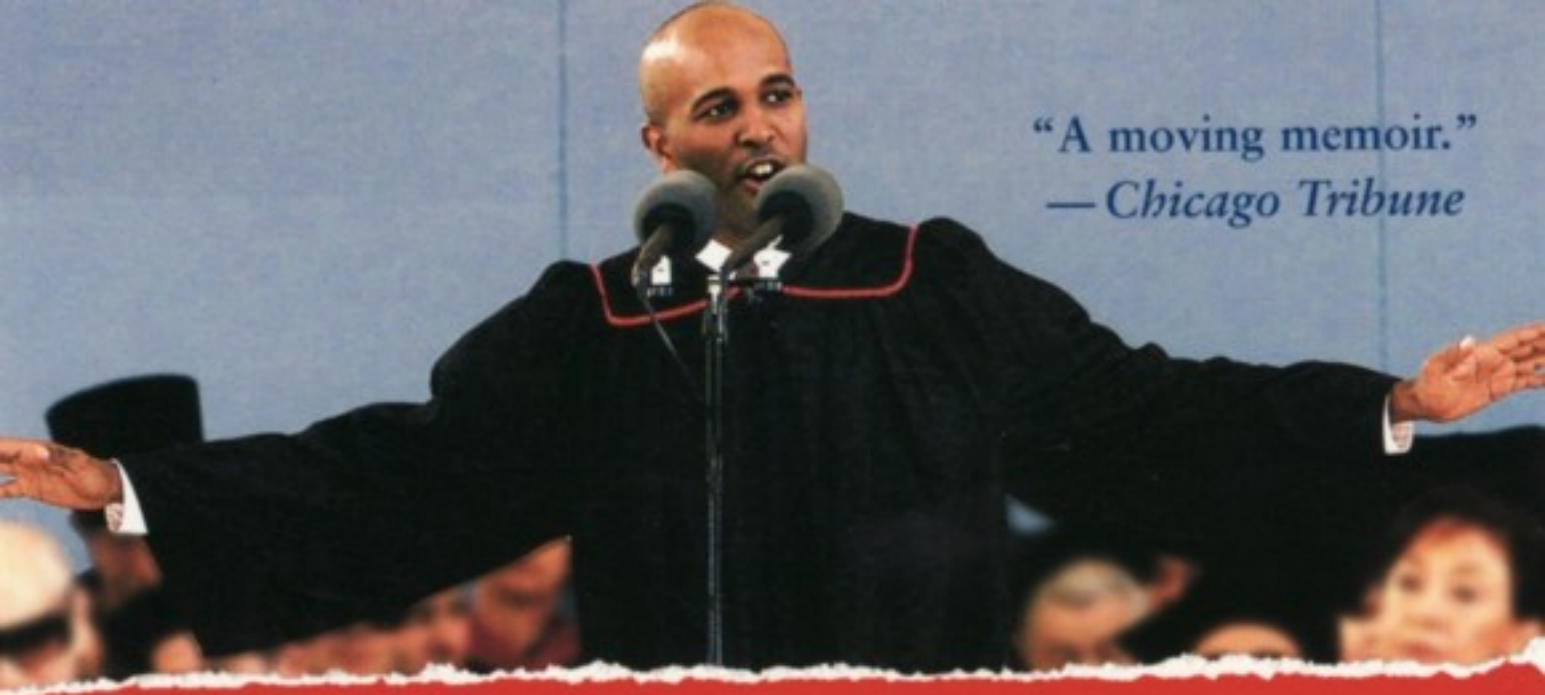
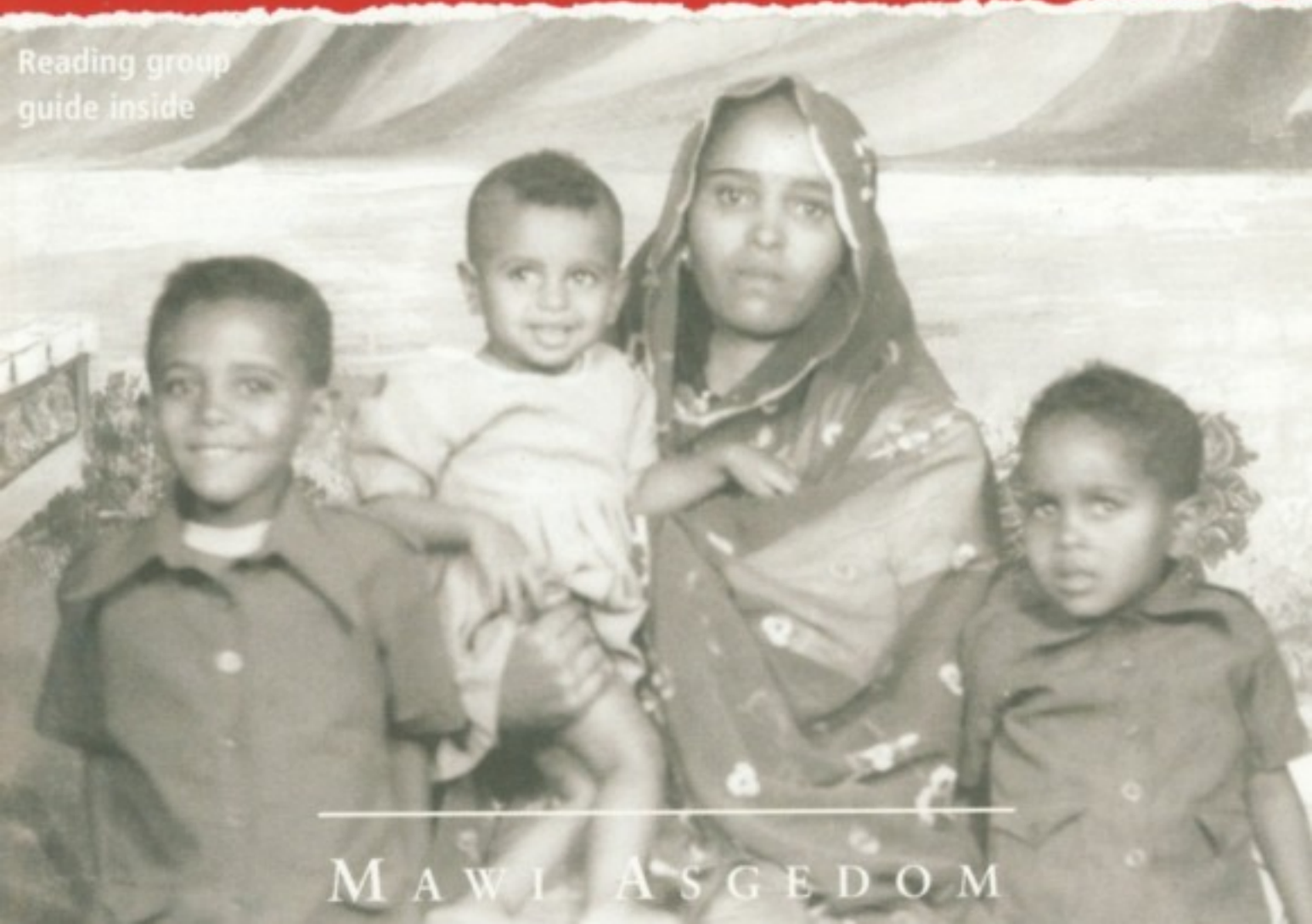


"A moving memoir."
—*Chicago Tribune*

Of Beetles & Angels

A Boy's Remarkable Journey from a Refugee Camp to Harvard

Reading group guide inside



Mawi Asgedom

THE CAMP

I don't remember how we avoided the iron nets or reunited with my father. But I do remember seeking safety in a Sudanese refugee camp in Umsagata, a small dusty village of straw-and-mud adobes. Many of my people had gathered there, and for my family it became home from 1980 to 1983.

Most of our village survived on goat milk, eggs, U.N. rations, and whatever we could grow in our small gardens. A Swedish ministry provided health care, and about a mile away sat a schoolhouse.

We took some brutal beatings at the schoolhouse. But these didn't come at the hands of bullies. Our kindergarten teachers were the ones dishing out the pain.

I still remember the jealous, one-armed math teacher, who beat me senseless with his good arm because I had more right answers than his son.

He and the other teachers could punish us for almost any reason. Whereas parents in the U.S. often defend their kids against the teacher, parents in Sudan took the teacher's side.

With few checks on their power, the Sudanese teachers didn't hesitate to pound us.

Get up! Hold your hands together! Now interlock your fingers so the knuckles are exposed.

Lifting the ruler high overhead, the teacher would unwind and slam torture into our naked knuckles, the ruler's metal edge knifing deep into our flesh. *Quiet! Hold your mouth or you will get more.*

Violence wasn't restricted to the classroom, either. Some of the other kids tried to push us around, so Tewolde and I quickly mastered Sudanese-style fighting, where the only object was survival. You used whatever was within reach because you knew that your rival would. Sticks. Stones. Sand. You had to use it, and you had to win. I fought almost daily and still wear the scars. But I decorated a few bodies, too.

During some of the fights, we got help from our dog. I forget his name, but I think it started with an *H*.

H really made a difference one time, when Ahferom, the village bully, came looking for Tewolde and me. We tried to run. But it was too late — Ahferom had grabbed my shirt, and Tewolde had to stay to help me.

Before Ahferom could get started, though, we heard deep-throated snarling, the rapid tearing of fabric, a bloodcurdling human scream.

Ahferom hobbled off, crying all the way home. H had rescued us by biting through Ahferom's pants, right into the dark flesh of his buttock.

We usually didn't believe in pets. How could we feed pets when all around us our countrymen struggled to feed themselves?

No, all livestock — from the goat all the way down to the chicken — had to produce for their living. That's why my fa-

ther strung our first dog on the clothesline in our backyard. My father had caught him killing the chickens one night when he was supposed to be watching them.

After H saved us from Ahferom, though, he assumed near-pet status. We pampered him. We played games with him. We took him with us when we went hunting with our slingshots.

We didn't use store-made, metal-and-elastic slingshots, either. No, we had the same kind of slingshot that David used to drop Goliath. Just a narrow strip of cloth, folded in half the long way, with a stone placed inside the fold. We'd spin the cloth so fast it blurred, and then at maximum centripetal force, we'd release the stone with a quick jerk of our wrist.

Hitting a stationary object, especially one as small as a bird, required skill. Hitting a moving one required tremendous skill and a good dose of luck. My brother had both.

One day he saw a bird flying and instantly let loose. Bird met ground. And then the pan. My mother cooked it up for us, and Tewolde, Mehret, and I gathered around to devour it. But Ahferom came and asked to taste just a little bit.

It is unheard of in our culture to refuse people food, so we invited him to join us. He grabbed the whole bird and ran. He ate our bird!

At the time, we were furious. But in retrospect, I feel no anger. How can I feel ill will toward Ahferom when I know that soon after, he joined one of the Ethiopian liberation movements? And that later, he joined the long list of senseless casualties, able to survive our crazed dog but not his own countrymen?

The desert, I remember. The shrieking hyenas, I remember. . . . I remember playing soccer with rocks, and a strange man telling me and my brother Tewolde that we had to go on a trip and Tewolde refusing to go. The man took out a piece of gum and Tewolde happily traded it for his homeland. . . .

So begins this unforgettable true story of a young boy's remarkable journey: from civil war in east Africa to a refugee camp in Sudan, to a childhood on welfare in an affluent American suburb, and eventually to a full-tuition scholarship at Harvard University. Following his father's advice to "treat all people — even the most unsightly beetles — as though they were angels sent from heaven," Mawi overcomes the challenges of racial prejudice, language barriers, and financial disadvantage to build a fulfilling, successful life for himself in his new home. *Of Beetles and Angels* is at once a compelling survival story and an inspiring model for anyone hoping to experience the American dream.

"Wry and tender. . . . What stays with you is the quiet, honest drama of a family's heartrending journey." —*Booklist*

"Powerful and heartwarming. . . . Our American dream stays alive in part because people like Mawi show up who believe in it."

—Mary Pipher, author of *Reviving Ophelia* and *The Middle of Everywhere: The World's Refugees Come to Our Town*

A BookSense 76 Pick

Mark Brown

MAWI ASGEDOM graduated from Harvard cum laude and delivered the commencement address at his graduation in 1999. This is his first book. Mawi lives in Chicago, where he is a highly sought-after speaker for schools, community groups, and businesses.

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