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This is the author's radio script of this article.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 11 August 2012

While I was reading Majok Tulba’s first novel, *Beneath the Darkening Sky*, the news was full of the Syrian uprising, stories of an oppressive government and valiant rebels who deserve international support. Although I would be the last person to insist that a people should under no circumstances take up arms against their government, and I, probably like most other people, don’t know a great deal about the history of that country and what is going on there now, what I was reading made me shudder at every report of a successful attack, or of a town taken by the rebels.

The narrator of *Beneath the Darkening Sky*, Obinna, is about eleven when the rebels come to his village. He witnesses them beheading his father and raping his aunt, before he and his older brother are forced into a truck crammed with terrified children and taken to the rebels’ camp to be made into soldiers.

What follows is harrowing. Any account of the mistreatment of children is distressing, but it would be hard to imagine anything worse than what these children were put through. Obinna struggles against the constant pressure to become a callous killing machine, and he always retains a core of resistance, but the mixture of terror and brainwashing cannot help affecting him or stop him being forced to do unspeakable acts. I mentioned to a friend that I was reading a book about child soldiers, and she remarked that she had heard that they were given drugs to make them fight. Obinna and his comrades are not given drugs, although clearly some of the officers use them. The rebel leaders want them to know exactly what they are doing, and to want to do it. Drugs might have given some relief from that knowledge.

*Beneath the Darkening Sky* is a subjective view, by a child who rapidly becomes, as he says himself, ‘older than I should be’, of a conflict which no doubt had its own inexorable history and its justifications on both sides. That does not enter the narrative at all. The children know nothing about politics, beyond the rantings of their commander who claims to be the voice, the strength, and the will of the people and insists on their implicit obedience on this basis. If they know the name of their country, it is never thought important enough to mention. There are the rebels and the government forces. Mercy cannot be expected from either.

While I am glad I have read this novel, I couldn’t read it in one go. I had to leave it and read something else – anything, the Union newsletter would do – before I straightened my spine and came back to it. Tulba himself was spared the fate of his character Obinna – he was a few millimetres too short to recruit and escaped when his village was raided. He has been able to make a life for himself in Australia, after years in refugee camps in Africa. *Beneath the Darkening Sky* was written to tell the stories of the tens of thousands of children who were recruited as child soldiers, ‘as well as to imagine my own alternative life.’ Graphic, horrendous, and compelling, it is a one of the strongest arguments against war I have ever read, while at the same time being eloquent and quite magnificently written.