

TRACKING THE CHILD WARRIORS

Local author **SHARON MCKAY** traveled to Uganda to research a tragic war. She was unprepared for what she found. **PHOTOS BY JULIA BELL**

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May 2007. I'm standing in a displacement camp (DP camp) on Planet Africa, in Northern Uganda. The toilet facilities in the camp consist of three and a half concrete slabs surrounding three putrid holes that plunge into the middle of the earth. There are things moving down there. Not for the first time I ask, how the hell did I end up here?

June 2006. The drive up Cedar Springs Road to my village of Kilbride is painfully slow. (Enough with the cops lurking around every bend. Put in a toll.) It's Friday and nearing wine time. The weekend looks good: family dinner tonight, friends will drop by later, neighbourhood deck party tomorrow night, horse show on Sunday.

The car radio is tuned to the CBC. They're playing suspect music. Then an interview: Adrian Bradbury, founder and director of African aid organization Gulu Walk, is talking about 30,000 children in Uganda who walk every night, seven nights a week, to a nearby city for protection. Say what? The children sleep on the streets under the not-so-dependable protection of the government army. No blankets, no food, no toilets. The children are running away from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) commanded by arch-nutbar Joseph Kony. The city the children are running to is called - what? Goo-loo? Go-lo? "Spell it!" I yell at the dashboard.

At home, I have my answer. I Google Uganda and find Gulu, a city in northern Uganda with a population of 113,000. The capital city of Uganda is Kampala, former digs of psychotic strongman General Idi Amin Dada, whose tyrannical rule (1971-1979) drained the country of 300,000 educated elite. While Kampala now prospers under the benevolent dictatorship of Prime Minister Yoweri Museveni in the south, the north has been under siege since 1980.

Kony, a gumbooted mess of a man, claims the Christian God as his personal Big God, but tosses in a few Muslim/Jewish traditions along with a dash of witchcraft for flavour. His rebel paramilitary army is 90 percent children and he knows just how to replenish the ranks of his Lilliputian troops. Under cover of darkness, Kony's troops descends on family farms and

unprotected villages to snatch children from their beds.

In northern Uganda, the bogeyman is real. Since the beginning of this 21-year civil war, over 60,000 children have been abducted. Kony prefers children 8 to 15, give-or-take. He turns boys into soldiers, murderers or slaves and girls into wives, mothers or sex slaves. Girls may also be soldiers, often forced into battle with babies strapped to their backs. Those children who don't make the grade are murdered, often chopped up by other children. It might be considered the worst child abuse ever seen on earth.

The ruling Museveni government promised protection to rural villages and farms if the locals moved into government displacement camps. The camps are immediately overwhelmed. Protection is inadequate, if it exists at all. Dressed in the snappy janitorial wear (maroon shirts and pants), shod in Billy-

brothers couldn't serve in the LRA because we would not perform well. So they tied up my two younger brothers and invited us to watch. Then they beat them with sticks until the two of them died. They told us it would give us strength to fight. My youngest brother was nine years old."

- Martin P., age 13, abducted in February 2002

Sunday night I sit on the deck with my head in my hands. I write for young adults. I do not believe in writing what you know, I believe in writing what you want to know. I've written about life in Newfoundland (a distinct society if ever there was one) and life as a Jew circa 1700. Both books landed on the Governor General's short list and have jockeyed for a raft of other



Displacement camp caption tktktkt tktktkt tktktk tktktk tktktkt tktktkt tktktkt tktktkt tktktkt

boots and bearing odd little wooden pop-guns, poorly trained government soldiers see mad, traumatized, Kony-trained teenagers sporting automatic weapons charging at them and race for the bush. Wouldn't you?

None of this fits into my leafy world of burgers on the grill and chilled Riesling in hand. Between a weekend of and cheering on Son Number Two as he gets his head knocked off in rugby, I read about child soldiers.

"Early on when my brothers and I were captured, the LRA explained to us that all five

awards, most of which I'd never heard of. I've just completed a series on the Holocaust. I can write outside of my culture, but can I write this? What's more, can I do it in a way that is acceptable to Canadian school librarians (and over-achieving parents bent on keeping their kids in a hothouse forever) and still honours the reality faced by these children on the front lines?

The next day I write a story sample page pitched at a young adult audience and e-mail it off to David, my husband

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of 33 years. Between barking at auditors and whatever else financial guys do for fun ten hours a day, he reads. Later, he calls from work. “What the hell is this?” He’s not happy. “Is it any good?” I ask. “It’s the rape of a child for &%\$# sake!” he retorts. Again: “Is it any good?” Silence. I hate it when he goes silent. “Yeah, it’s good.” I e-mail it off to my editor at Penguin and within the hour I have a book deal and the trip to Uganda is in the works.

Following weeks are spent meeting people, notably Gulu Walk’s Adrian Bradbury. Evenings are spent reading about child soldiers. An insomniac at the best of times, I give up on sleep altogether. As peace talks with the LRA sputter out, I plan my trip. No one knows for sure where Kony is – maybe the Sudan, a few hours from Gulu. I

ity. There is no challenge, no success, no life in timidity. No matter what, I’m doing this.

The prep for this sojourn ain’t cheap. Shots alone cost \$600. I’m given instructions to pop pills so many days before, during and after the trip. Should I not follow through, a gruesome death awaits. Armored-up, I am superwoman. Beri-beri? No sweat. Yellow fever? Bring it on. Days before departure I chat with a man at a party who has a mild case of pink eye. The consequences to catching that nifty little annoyance washes over me like a wave. What if I brought this disease to a DP camp? At what point should someone, anyone, say, “Bets are if you catch anything we can fix it back home, but if you bring so much as the flu to the very poor parts of Africa, you’re going to kill people.”

Then I get a break. Talented and soft-spoken Julia Bell, my preferred illustrator, decides to accompany me to Uganda. Travel plans are fast

dangerous city at night. (Next time, perhaps.) On the flight I make a mental list of fears: not being brave; not holding up my end; illness/accident; screwing up and David having to come and get me. I’d really hate that.

We fly over Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Sahara Desert and clip Israel. I imagine the bottom of the plane is like a glass bottom boat. I want out, I want to see. North of Uganda is the volatile Sudan. To its west, Zaire. South is injured Rwanda and unpredictable Kenya lies to the east. Resplendent, yellow, landlocked Uganda in the heartland of Africa, sits square on the equator. “The pearl of Africa,” according to Churchill. Its most ancient inhabitants, confined to the hilly southwest, are the Batwa and Bambuti Pygmies. It’s all magic and dreams, exotic and horrific.

The Entebbe airport, under construction, is a cavernous airplane hangar. Forget amenities – even the basics here are shaky. Standing in line at passport control, the lights go out. I think I’m reaching out for Julia’s hand but grab a missionary’s butt. Sorry. Outside, we cut through a wall of bugs so dense we can’t talk. The 40-kilometre bus ride from Entebbe into Kampala would put any theme park thrill ride to shame. Fires in tin drums and small generators create pockets of light every few yards along the rutted road. Faces pop out of the dark, all eyes and grins.

The doors in Kampala’s finest hotel don’t close and we change rooms twice. We return to the airport the next day and board an L-410, which seats 19. We fly over the saffron-coloured Savannah; expansive, almost bald but sporadically populated by round mud huts and owii trees. I sit beside a woman whose bronze arm laying next to mine makes me feel like a pot of paste. I pick up a bit of colour when the plane hits an air pocket and drops 100 feet. That beautiful hand latches onto my arm in a vice-like grip. I tell her that I fly this route all the time, that it’s the finest, small airline in the world and its pilots are the best on the continent. My assurances don’t work. I lose all feeling in my fingers. I’d sing if she’d let go.

We deplane on a small airstrip in Gulu. It’s all in the light. Tawny, lemon, golden, flaxen – how many words are there for yellow? In any



Gulu children/school caption tktktkt tktktkt tktktk tktktk tktktkt tktktkt tktktkt tktktkt

start breathing in snatches. Even my sentences become shorter.

David’s worry feeds into my doubt. I’m 52, a grandmother. I consider a stay at a Holiday Inn as camping. What the hell am I doing? Then again, when do we challenge ourselves? When our children are small? When they are in high school and need us most? Do I wait until I’m in a nursing home talking to my bunny slippers and wondering what I did with my life? And I don’t like feeling afraid. Worse than fear is timid-

and furious now. We’ll leave from Amsterdam and fly KLM to Entebbe, Uganda, and hop on Eagle Airlines to Gulu where our trip will overlap for a few days with Bradbury, the guy that started this unlikely adventure. Once he leaves, Jules and I will be on our own.

Our parting is less than happy. It’s raining, I’m crying and the peace talks in Uganda are still off. Jules and I eat sushi in the Amsterdam airport, our last meal. We’ll be landing in Entebbe airport, 30 kilometres outside of Kampala, at night. First rule for women travelling: Do not land in a strange, potentially

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direction the horizon reaches to the beginning of time and to the end of time. LRA ambushes took place on the airport road just two years ago. I know about the attacks and the battles, but standing on the airstrip all the anxiety and self-doubt just float away. I fall in love.

Over the next ten days I would do a 180 on every thought I've ever had about Africa. We have arrived before the rainy season and the temperature is fine. We eat, although not indiscriminately. Our hotel is charming. We drink Bell Beer by the bucket. I score a cell phone and call David every day for a buck and a half. We travel on the back of bodas – scrambler-size motorcycle taxis. I explore the broken city of Gulu on my own. I am safe and genuinely happy. Everyone I meet is kind, funny and whip-smart. I visit schools. By grade six, all the children speak a minimum of three languages, including English. Those who can afford to attend high school often speak French and Italian too. Their curriculum is grueling. The DP camps are another matter. Small children emerge from mud huts. Their skin is charcoal-gray, their bellies distended. Many have red-tipped hair – all signs of malnutrition. And still they smile.

Responsibilities from home reach out and touch me with the grace of taser. A phone call on my Africa cell phone reminds the social workers handling my dad's nursing home placement that I'm "a phone call away." Another quick call: "David, your shirts are in the cleaners on Guelph Line. Don't forget about the winter tires and Joe's extra cleats are in kitchen drawer." Snap the cell phone shut and I'm on a pot-holed road in Gulu watching children circle a termite hill. They poke at the Volkswagen-size mound with reeds of grass and gobble the termites up, a tasty treat.

After two weeks of steady work, Jules and I take a break and discover that the great white hunter is not dead. He hangs out at Murchison Falls National Park Lodge. The lodge boss is a black, elegant woman who wouldn't be out of place on the Champs Elysees. (Some things have changed.) We cruise down Lake Albert River in a boat that could double for the African Queen. We see crocodiles big as my living room, hippos, warthogs and elephants along

the ridge. Our guide points out different massacre sites of the LRA, in case we forget that the war is ongoing. And it's easy to forget.

Back at the hotel, mid-Montezuma's Revenge, I score the interview I'm after. Moses, 24, was abducted from boarding school by the LRA and spent seven years in the bush as a Kony lieutenant. I wait for him in the hotel bar, its leafy fans and large cane chairs evoking Singapore circa 1939. He arrives elegantly dressed, immaculate to the glint on his cuff links. (The dress code for the locals is decid-



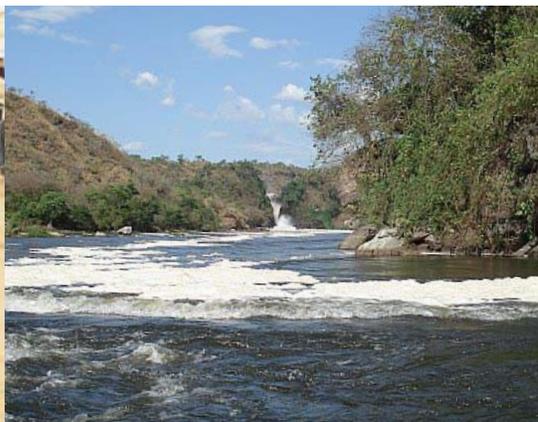
Gulu/Murchison Falls caption tktktkt tktktkt tktktk tktktk tktktkt tktktkt tktktkt tktktkt tktktkt

edly upscale. Only the visitors look scruffy.) He sits, refuses a beer but accepts a Fresca. And the story of life in the LRA unfolds.

Along with 39 other students, Moses, then 14, was abducted on August 22, 1996. After a grueling march through the bush the boys were lined up and according to age, 14 to 20, beaten to bloody pulps. Anyone crying out was shot. His little brother yelped and was killed. "A soldier (i.e. child) caught escaping by the LRA would have their ears, lips and noses cut off, or be killed outright. And if by some miracle they could escape the LRA and not get shot by the opposing government forces, where are their families?" Moses shrugs. He is describing brutality beyond comprehension and yet he presents himself as gentle and deferential. There are even moments when he speaks with something verging on pride. "Kony and the LRA have their principles," he says. "No drugs, no sex. Cigarettes and alcohol are forbidden. If you want to eat, then you kill." His speech

is practiced. He is victim and abuser. After seven years, and with three bullets lodged in his chest, Moses simply walked out of the LRA camp one day. But he's still not safe. Kony and his troops are a few hours away and the peace talks are still madly unstable.

September 2007. The kids have headed back to university. The new roof is on. The house has been painted and I bought a new dog – a standard,



while poodle dubbed the money pit. The charmed life returns. But it ain't over. My days are spent imagining the lives of five abducted boys in Kony's army as I write the novel dubbed *War Brothers*. When I do sleep, I have nightmares. And I want to go back to Africa, the cradle of civilization, home to 800 million people and the birthplace of the written word. Standing in a Tim Hortons in Newmarket, I meet a graduate of Queens, father of two, school principal, Ph.D. student and born Ugandan. I relate my dilemma. I want to go back, now. He smiles and says, "That's how it is with Africa." **HM**

War Brothers will be released in Fall 2008 by Penguin Canada. To learn about the Gulu Walk events happening in Burlington and Hamilton on October 20, visit www.guluwalk.com