



STORYLAB

PRESENTS



LINDA SUE PARK'S

A Long Walk to Water

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Linda Sue Park's *A Long Walk to Water*



In *A Long Walk to Water*, one person's challenging childhood experience motivates him to help others.

A *Long Walk to Water* is about survival, determination, and the importance of water. There are two story lines that alternate throughout the text. Each tells about a child living in southern Sudan but at different times. At the end, the storylines connect.

Nya's Story (2008)

Twice a day, eleven-year-old Nya walks for two hours to a water hole to get water for her family. The water is unclear but it is the only source for miles. The journey takes Nya all day, so she does not have time to go to school.

The author Linda Sue Park created the character of Nya. Although Nya may be made-up, her experience is based on the true stories of many girls and women across Africa.

Salva's Story (1985)

Salva is an eleven-year-old boy. He is at school one day when war breaks out in his village. Soldiers come with guns. Salva runs for his life, not knowing if his family is dead or alive. For years, Salva walks across dangerous lands filled with wild animals, enemy soldiers, disease, and no food. He lives in crowded refugee camps. Salva becomes one of the "Lost Boys"—the name given to thousands of boys who lost everything in Sudan's civil war.

Eventually, Salva is chosen to come to the United States. He experiences many new things, such as snow, electricity, paved roads, and more food than he has ever seen. As an adult, Salva remembers his life in what is now known as South Sudan. He starts an organization called Water for South Sudan. It digs wells and brings clean water to villages in South Sudan.

Salva's story is not made-up. The author uses facts from his real life to tell his story.

The Amazing Connection

The author imagines a day when Salva and Nya meet in South Sudan. Nya is getting clean water at new well, funded by Salva's organization. The well is close to Nya's home, so she finally has time to go to school.

AN EXCERPT FROM A LONG WALK TO WATER

After walking for weeks through dangerous territory, eleven-year-old Salva and his group of refugees reach a fast-moving river. But they must cross to continue their escape.



“Stunned, Salva realized that being forced under the water had probably saved his life. But there was no time to marvel over this. More crocodiles were launching themselves off the banks.”

The rain was still pouring down and now bullets were pouring down as well. The soldiers started shooting into the river, aiming their guns at the people who were trying to get across.

Why? Why are they shooting at us?

Salva had no choice. He jumped into the water and began to swim. A boy next to him grabbed him around the neck and clung to him tightly. Salva was forced under the surface without time to take more than a quick, shallow breath.

Salva struggled kicking, clawing. He's holding on to me too hard . . . I can't . . . air . . . no air left . . .

Suddenly, the boy's grip loosened, and Salva launched himself upward. He threw his head back and took a huge gulp of air. For a few moments he could do nothing but gasp and choke.

When his vision cleared, he saw why the boy had let go: He was floating with his head down, blood streaming from a bullet hole in the back of his neck.

Stunned, Salva realized that being forced under the water had probably saved his life. But there was no time to marvel over this. More crocodiles were launching themselves off the banks. The rain, the mad current, the bullets, the crocodiles, the welter of arms and legs, the screams, the blood. He had to get across somehow.

It felt like years.

When at last the tips of his toes touched mud, he forced his limbs to make swimming motions one last time. He crawled onto the riverbank and collapsed. Then he lay there in the mud, choking and sobbing for breath.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda Sue Park

It started with a heartbreak. After years of living safely in the United States, Salva Dut learned his father was deathly ill from drinking unclean water in South Sudan. In his home country, people often have no choice but to drink unclean water. In 2003, Salva founded Water for South Sudan and drilled his first well in his father's village in 2005.



Linda Sue Park

The story might have ended there. But it landed in the hands of Linda Sue Park. Park, the daughter of Korean immigrants, became a writer soon after finishing college. In 2002, she won the Newbery medal, the highest award for children's literature in the U.S., for her book, *A Single Shard*.

Park learned about Salva Dut's story from her husband, a journalist, who had written about Salva's journey. After getting to know Salva herself, Park wanted to tell his story to the world.

She chose to tell Salva's true journey as a refugee alongside the fictional story of a girl whose job is to get her family water in present-day South Sudan. The result was *A Long Walk to Water*.

It was important for Park to work closely with Salva to tell his story accurately. She did just that, as Salva Dut describes at the end of the book.

Park turned Salva's incredible journey into a story about survival, hope, and finding water. Millions of people read it, but it was students who really connected with the book—and many were inspired to take action.

Across the United States and in 50 other countries, students and teachers began raising money. As of 2024, more than 500 schools have contributed over \$1 million to Salva Dut's organization, Water for South Sudan. This money has been used to drill hundreds of wells that provide clean water to over thousands of people. Middle school students alone now fund about a quarter of the yearly budget of the organization, Water for South Sudan. With nearby wells, girls now attend school instead of making long trips to distant water sources, and whole communities can now stay healthy.

And it all began with a book. Students read *A Long Walk to Water*, met Salva through its pages, and saw how they could help. This illustrates how reading can be more than an academic skill. It can be the spark for real-world change.

BUILD BACKGROUND

Salva Dut: From Refugee to Water Hero

Salva Dut has a remarkable life story. Born in a small Sudanese village in 1974, Salva's childhood ended abruptly when he was just eleven years old. While sitting in his classroom in 1985, gunshots erupted as a civil war reached his village. In that terrifying moment, Salva's ordinary life became an extraordinary journey of survival.



Salva Dut

Separated from his family and believing them dead, Salva joined approximately 20,000 boys who became known as the "Lost Boys of Sudan." Overall, Salva spent 16 years as a refugee, separated from his family with no permanent home. He walked more than 1,000 miles across three countries in his search for safety—enduring hunger, disease, and dangerous wildlife along the way.

Over this journey, Salva demonstrated great leadership. He guided 1,500 younger boys on an 800-mile trek across the desert to Kenya. The journey took 18 months and they faced extreme heat, no water, dangerous animals like lions, and armed rebel soldiers. About 300 boys died along the way.

In 1996, Salva was selected for resettlement in the United States. Arriving in Rochester, New York, he faced new challenges including culture shock, language barriers, and harsh winters. The Moore family welcomed him, helping him adapt to American life while he attended Monroe Community College.

A turning point came in 2002 when Salva learned his father was still alive, but seriously ill from drinking unclean water. He flew back to South Sudan and saw his father for the first time since 1985. This heartbreaking reunion inspired Salva's life mission.

In 2003, Salva founded Water for South Sudan. He worked hard to raise the \$50,000 to drill a well in his father's village, which was completed in 2005. Today, his organization has drilled over 600 wells serving more than 500,000 people across South Sudan.

Salva's philosophy of "Keep Walking" embodies the resilience that carried him from a lost boy to a great leader. He proves that determination and hope can overcome obstacles.

TEXT CONNECTION

How The Global Water Crisis Affects Girls and Women

For 2.2 billion people around the world, walking for hours every day to get water is a reality. The global water crisis affects nearly one in three people on Earth. It hits girls and women the hardest.

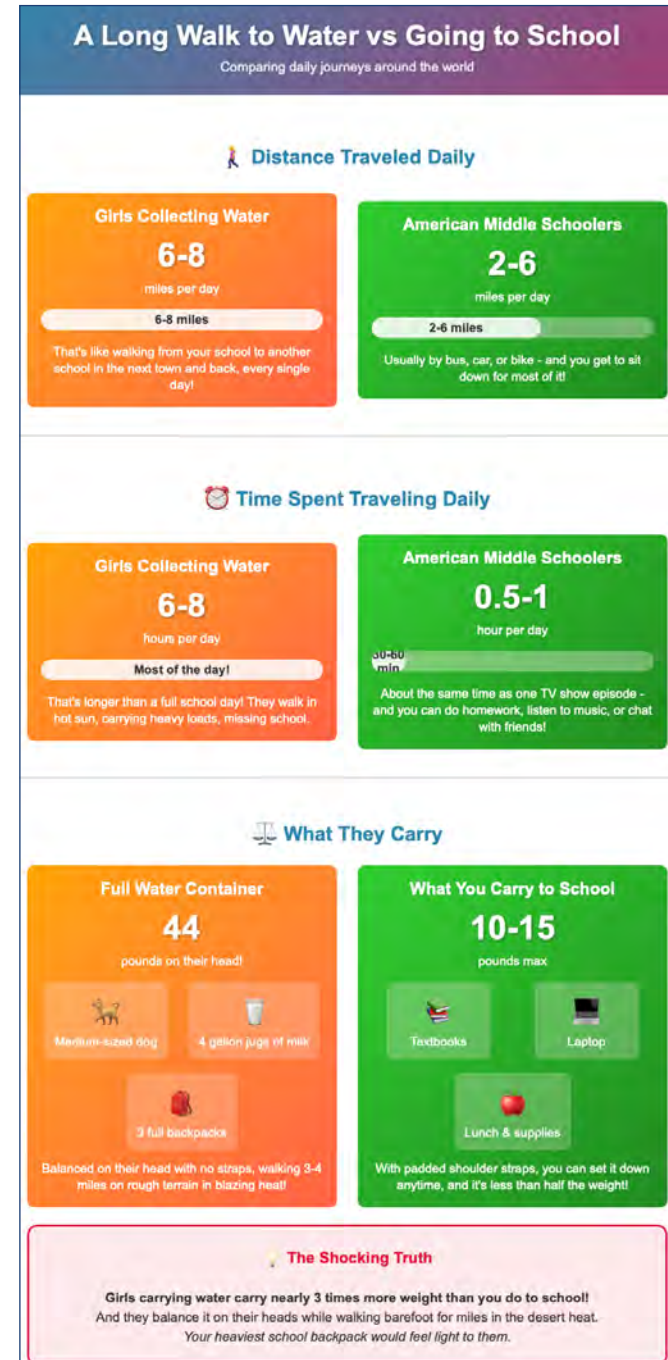
In many developing countries, collecting water is considered “women’s work.” Like Nya in *A Long Walk to Water*, millions of girls and women spend hours each day walking to distant water sources. They carry heavy containers on their heads. Often they must travel dangerous paths where they might face wild animals, fierce weather, and violence from strangers.

This daily water walk steals something vital: their education. While boys often attend school, girls stay home to fetch water for their families. In sub-Saharan Africa, girls are twice as likely as boys to be responsible for water collection. This means millions of girls never learn to read or write.

The health consequences are devastating. When families must use dirty water from ponds or rivers, waterborne diseases spread quickly. Women and girls, who handle water preparation and care for sick family members, face the greatest exposure to these deadly diseases.

The economic impact extends beyond individual families. When women spend entire days collecting water, they can’t work jobs that could lift their families out of poverty. Entire communities remain underdeveloped because half their population is stuck in survival mode.

Comparing daily journeys around the world





This girl is drinking fresh, clean water from a well in her village in Africa.

Organizations Like Salva Dut's Water for South Sudan Bring Hope

But there's hope. When clean water sources are built near communities—like the well that transforms Nya's village—everything changes. Girls can attend school. Women can start businesses. Families stay healthier. Children survive and thrive.

Organizations worldwide are working to solve this crisis. They are drilling wells, building water treatment facilities, and installing pumps in remote villages. Each new water source represents freedom—freedom from the daily water walk, freedom to learn, and freedom to build better lives.

What Is Narrative Nonfiction? Linda Sue Park's *A Long Walk to Water* is considered narrative nonfiction. Narrative nonfiction consists of:

- facts about a topic;
- information in the form of a story; and
- a chronological, or time ordered, text structure.

Keep Reading: Want to read more of *A Long Walk to Water*?

- Visit your library and check out a copy

If you like *A Long Walk to Water*, then you might also like to read these realistic fiction texts:

- *I am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai
- *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer
- *Every Falling Star* by Sungju Lee and Susan Elizabeth McClelland

Start Writing: Inspired to write your own narrative nonfiction?

Consider this prompt to get started:

- “People often say one person can’t change the world, but I started to believe otherwise when . . .”



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