

# *Escape from Slavery*

Review by David Morse

*Bok, Francis (with Edward Tivnan). Escape from Slavery. NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003. 285 pages, paperback \$13.95*

*Escape from Slavery* is the narrative of a South Sudanese Dinka man who was kidnapped by an Arab militiaman when his village was attacked by raiders from the north. Francis Bok was seven years old, entrusted to go the marketplace for the first time alone to sell eggs for his mother, when the attackers swept into the marketplace on horseback, using swords to kill and maim. Francis was abducted, taken north, and forced into slavery for ten years.

At various times he is threatened with death by his master, but he makes himself indispensable as a herdsman for the master's cattle. Through hard work, faith in God, and belief that his parents may still be alive, Bok endures the physical and emotional hardships of his condition, and eventually escapes at the age of seventeen. He is befriended by an Arab truck driver, and on one occasion betrayed by one of his fellow Dinka, so although it is largely a story of racism, his world is by no means divided neatly in two.

Bok's escape is thwarted at various times by the Sudanese police, until finally he realizes he will never be safe in his own land, so he seeks refuge in Egypt. In Cairo he obtains refugee status, and ends up coming to the U.S. From then on it is a Horatio Alger story of further determination as he improves his job skills and turns his considerable talents toward helping free more of his own people. Befriended by Charles Jacob, founder of the American Anti-Slavery Group in Boston, he meets with such luminaries as Jesse Helms and President George W. Bush, helping to raise consciousness of contemporary slavery in Sudan and elsewhere.

The story itself would make an inspiring children's book. Or the same story might inspire young adults. Unfortunately, this book is neither. *Escape from Slavery* is essentially an "as told to" account. The writing is uneven and repetitious. There are also some odd errors of fact. Darfur is repeatedly referred to as being in the "east" of Sudan, rather than the west. The boy fears "lions and tigers," when there are no tigers in Africa. And the Nile runs "up" to Egypt, rather than down. These errors may reflect his childish knowledge of Geography, but should have been flagged at some point in the editing.

Whatever its limitations, *Escape from Slavery* offers readers a credible encounter with contemporary chattel slavery, and for that reason contributes to our understanding of the problem. The fact is that slavery has never disappeared: some 27 million people are said to live in slavery in the world today, many in Mauritania and Sudan

- David Morse