

DAVE EGGERS

Dave Eggers is a Pulitzer Prize-nominated author and founder of both *McSweeney's*, an independent publishing house in San Francisco, and the 826 Valencia volunteer centers nationwide. He collaborated with Valentino Achak Deng of Sudan on the book *What is the What*; much of his recent work has focused on the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, which provides educational opportunities for Sudanese refugees.

He corresponded with the editors of WAG'S REVUE via email.

Will Litton, Wag's Revue: Can you tell us something about the lengthy and ongoing adventure of writing What is the What? What was it like to transform Valentino's narratives into a novel, and then transform that work of literature into a development project? How do you think this project speaks to the 'potential of literature' in our generation? Also, any anecdotes about your most recent trip to Valentino's hometown of Marial Bai?

Dave Eggers: I guess I've always kept myself open to fairly radical departures from whatever course I've been on. I'm not so interested in mining the same territory for too long. For a few years I'd been working on my own fiction, stories based on people sort of like myself in one way or another—Americans from a certain generation—and then one day I got a letter in the mail from Mary Williams, who had started the Lost Boys Foundation. She had been working with a young man, Valentino Deng, who wanted the story of the civil war in Sudan told by means of his biography. She offered me the job of biographer, and because I come from a journalism background, I was intrigued and thought I should at least look into the project. Valentino and I met in Atlanta and got along really well from the first day. Soon after that, we made a pact to get his story written, but had no idea that it would be quite the thing it turned out to be. That it would turn into a four-year project and would bring

me to Sudan many times, and would give rise to an educational complex in Valentino's hometown... Well, it was beyond our imagining.

At the same time, Valentino and I did plan to dedicate the proceeds to his hometown within the first few months of our working relationship. We hoped we'd bring about a wider recognition of what happened in Sudan, and we also hoped for something tangible to come of the book. I've gotten pretty hooked on the idea of concrete byproducts of whatever art we can make. I don't think books need to be decorative; they can be instrumental in actual results. 826 National has benefited from a bunch of books, too — edited by everyone from Zadie Smith to Michael Lewis. They've created books that have paid the rent on all seven 826 centers. So there can be real, three-dimensional good that can come out of a literary endeavor. Believing otherwise, that writers and books are outside the flow of life and the progress of a society, is proven wrong every day.

WL: With Valentino at the helm, how is your project unique? How would you describe the foundation's approach to development issues, how are community members being integrated into the process, and what are your long-term goals?

DE: Valentino is the Executive Director, the Educational Director (until he hires one), the contractor, the transportation director, the supreme being. During one of our trips to Sudan, back in 2006, we sat with dozens of elders and community leaders in Marial Bai, and let them know of the general plan — that Val's foundation would be building a school in town and would be paying teachers well, equipping the school in every way to be a model school for the region. At the same time, Valentino was very sure to be open to community input. So the elders said, "Sure, a school sounds good. But we have enough primary schools. What

we really need is a secondary school.” So the plan changed right there. So we said, “Okay, we’ll build a secondary school.” And then they said, “A secondary school will be great, but we also need a way to train teachers to teach secondary school.” The region has very few people qualified to teach secondary school. So a teacher-training college became part of the plan, too.

In a dozen ways the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation operates differently than most development projects. It wasn’t drawn up by well-intentioned NGO workers in the U.S. It’s run entirely by Sudanese, starting with Valentino, who has a unique ability to serve as bridge between U.S. donors, local parents and educators, builders, and the government of southern Sudan. Everyone knows and respects Valentino. So it’s the Sudanese helping the Sudanese, with expertise provided by Valentino, a Sudanese-American. It’s been a powerful model so far. And all I do is help make people aware of Valentino’s project, and help fundraise here in the U.S. Otherwise it’s an entirely local project.

Sandra Allen, Wag’s Revue: A lot of your work has striven to use your literary sensibilities and fame to do good, obviously with What is the What and the foundation, but also with the 826 volunteer centers, or the Voice of Witness series, which are novels created from interviews with human rights victims. Did all of these projects originate independently? What forces have influenced this shift in your work?

DE: I guess each project originated independently. Usually there’s some problem or issue that presents itself, and it’s natural to look at our little organization and wonder if we can address it. For example, McSweeney’s had been publishing books for about seven years when I got interested in oral history. My first time in Sudan, in 2003, Valentino and I interviewed three women

who had been abducted and enslaved during the war. We left the interviews thinking we needed to get their stories out into the world. And of course McSweeney's already publishes books, so it was natural and not-so-difficult to then create some kind of imprint that specialized in oral histories. And then there are just lucky coincidences — given that when I got back from Sudan, I was asked to introduce Studs Terkel, the father of modern oral history, at an event at Berkeley. He got me thinking more about oral history, and then, in the lobby after the event, I met Lola Vollen, a physician working with exonerated prisoners here in the U.S. She said, "These people need to be heard." I said, "Well, we have a publishing company. Let's do a book." So all these things aligned. That's how a lot of the projects happen—we stay open to new work, and keep ourselves nimble. And given we operate everything on a tiny scale—usually one staff member for any given project—it makes it all plausible. People don't always realize how little you need to start up any given project.

Will Guzzardi, Wag's Revue: I know a few people who know McSweeney's as 'that website with the funny lists,' who are astonished to find that it's also this beautifully printed, aesthetic marvel of a lit-mag. The Quarterly and the Internet Tendency are pretty different: one is an expertly crafted, painstakingly published magazine that publishes quite 'serious' literature; the other is a collection of jokes, loosely gathered on website. Why do these two share the McSweeney's name? Does the internet have built-in limitations as a medium that restrict it to frivolity?

DE: The internet site started just a few weeks before the journal, back in 1998. I'm not a huge web reader, so I extrapolated a bit and figured that most people wouldn't read long works of fiction on the website. So I decided that the website would be sort of a teaser, a window into the larger world of our books and

journals. But at this point we're becoming aware that people make assumptions about all our publishing via the humor site, which as you're indicating is very different — given we publish very little humor in the journal itself. So we're thinking about clarifying that distinction in some way.

SA: *You published Salvador Plascencia's People of Paper and Robert Coover's A Child Again, both of which experiment with the boundaries of a printed text—leaving holes in pages, printing pages sideways, printing stories on playing cards meant to be shuffled. The Quarterly also does this a lot, like Issue 17 (made to look like a bundle of mail). What is the role of such physical experimentation with the printed text? Is there a point at which*

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such experimentation will exhaust itself? What possibilities do you see with the internet and experimental writing?

DE: Well, people have been experimenting with literary form since the Greeks, or probably earlier. Don Quixote is very experimental, of course, as are thousands of centuries-old texts. It's really a painful moment in American literature, right now, where the critical consensus has gotten a collective case of amnesia, forgetting or discounting Cervantes, Borges, Barthelme, Nabokov, and dozens of other highly experimental writers who were doing it long before any contemporary writers. We're pluralists at McSweeney's. We publish anything of great quality, whether that's experimental or very traditional or somewhere in between. There is and should always be room for all approaches to writing, and whenever anyone closes the door on one — by saying, for example, that experimentation might someday "exhaust itself" (not to put you on the hotseat), it's very saddening. And of course it ignores the entire history of

all art in every form, which is a history of constant innovation, experimentation and evolution. The person who says “Enough innovation, let’s stick with what we have and never change” is pretty much the sworn enemy of all art. Not to overstate it, of course.

SA: *During the momentary optimism which followed Obama’s election, I found myself returning to a story from How We Are Hungry titled, “Your Mother and I.” It’s a long monologue written from a father to his son which recalls the incredible feats that he and his wife have achieved over the years, from permanently ending genocide, to converting all power to wind and sun, to redistricting school districts so that property taxes aren’t tied to school systems. He also recalls some of their funnier accomplishments, like covering Cleveland in Ivory or making penises better looking (“more streamlined, better color”). Would you call this story an optimistic one? Is it meant to inspire optimism?*

DE: It is an optimistic story, but it’s also a sad one, in a way. I’m always frustrated with the gap between what we know should happen to make the world a better place, and what we’re capable of personally and as a society. Right now, for example, in California, all sane beings know that gays and lesbians should have a right to marry. It’s so stupid and exasperating that it’s even being discussed, let alone fought about. And all sane beings also know that sooner or later they will be given the right to marry. But living in this in-between-time is frustrating. We know that public opinion eventually gets around to sanity, but the time when we’re waiting for that glacier to inch along is maddening. So “Your Mother and I” is a bit of fantasy wherein things are changed on the exact timetable they should be—which is to say, the speed of rational thought.

WL: *You're featured on the final track of Beck's album The Information. Your voice comes in at the end, and I think you're attempting to describe what the perfect album would be like. (Is it you or Spike Jonze who insists it must be capable of space travel?) Though you probably haven't encountered perfection yet, which albums do you think come closest to being perfect, and by expansion, which works of literature?*

DE: I don't remember who says what on that song. I'm too horrified by my own voice to listen to it. But you know, I can't think of perfect albums. There are a lot of great albums out there, but there are always songs on them I skip over. Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* is near-perfect. The Beatles' *White Album* is close. Lauren Hill's first album might be perfect. The Flaming Lips *Soft Bulletin* is near-perfect. The Replacements' *Tim*. The Smiths' first album, and REM's. Elvis Costello's *Imperial Bedroom*. That one, actually, might be perfect. XTC's *Skylarking*. Dr. Dog's *Easy Beat*. Fiona Apple's *Extraordinary Machine*. John Legend's *Get Lifted*. I'm just thinking off the top of my head. I could go on all day. In terms of books, it's easier, I think, to make a perfect book, given it's a form that absorbs mistakes better. It's such a big thick soup that a bit extra of this or that is forgiven. *Lolita* is perfect, I think. Saul Bellow's *Herzog* is perfect. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is perfect even in its all-over-the-place-ness. I read a book recently by James Salter called *Last Night* which seemed flawless. Recently, Edward P. Jones wrote a perfect book, I think, in *The Known World*.

WG: *A 'wag' is a rascally, droll, witty individual. Who is your favorite wag and why? It could be a historical figure, a fictional character, or just a friend of yours.*

DE: Christopher Hitchens, whatever you think of his politics, is probably the smartest, drollest guy you'll ever hear at a cocktail

party. Daniel Handler is definitely a wag; he comes up with great bon mots without any effort. Sarah Vowell is like that, too. The best wag of all, probably, was Gore Vidal. I never knew him, but saw him speak a few times. And when he was at his best, he was astounding. Everything out of his mouth was quotable.