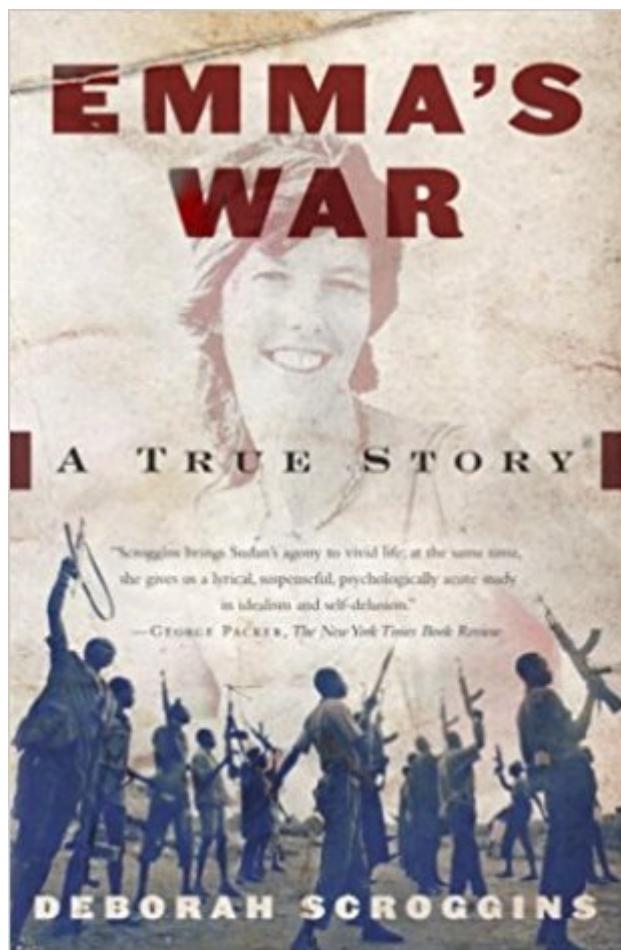


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# Emma's War: A True Story



## Synopsis

Tall, striking, and adventurous to a fault, young British relief worker Emma McCune came to Sudan determined to make a difference in a country decimated by the longest-running civil war in Africa. She became a near legend in the bullet-scarred, famine-ridden country, but her eventual marriage to a rebel warlord made international headlines—and spelled disastrous consequences for her ideals. Enriched by Deborah Scroggins's firsthand experience as an award-winning journalist in Sudan, this unforgettable account of Emma McCune's tragically short life also provides an up-close look at the volatile politics in the region. It's a world where international aid fuels armies as well as the starving population, and where the northern-based Islamic government—with ties to Osama bin Laden—is locked in a war with the Christian and pagan south over religion, oil and slaves. Tying together these vastly disparate forces as well as Emma's own role in the problems of the region, Emma's War is at once a disturbing love story and a fascinating exploration of the moral quandaries behind humanitarian aid.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1991, in the middle of a refugee crisis in southern Sudan, a twenty-seven-year-old British aid worker named Emma McCune scandalized the relief community by marrying a local guerrilla leader; the author describes Emma's brief career as a "First Lady-in-Waiting" as "the kind of surreal sideshow that often accompanies disasters." Formerly a champion of children's rights, Emma

couldn't stop her husband from holding hundreds of adolescent boys in a squalid camp. Although she embraced the hardships of African life (bouts of malaria, water teeming with bilharzia), she was well-fed by local standards, eating fish that her husband's soldiers had stolen from a weaker, starving tribe. Meanwhile, Emma's fellow-expatriates grew less enchanted with her the more "African" she became—sick and constantly in need. Scroggins, a veteran reporter on Sudan, uses Emma's story to examine the failure of Western idealism in Africa. Emma turned out to be an incidental character: she died in 1993, in a traffic accident in Nairobi; the fighting continues.

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“Scroggins brings Sudan’s agony to vivid life; at the same time, she gives us a lyrical, suspenseful, psychologically acute study in idealism and self-delusion.”  
•George Packer, *The New York Times Book Review* "Breathtaking and beautifully written. . . . Deborah Scroggins weaves the greater issues of Sudan around [Emma] McCune’s idealism."• USA Today "Brilliantly penetrating. . . . In [Emma McCune] Scroggins has found a feckless, captivating subject, as insufferable as the white man’s insatiable need for redemption in Africa."• Scroggins undoes every illusion about aid, hunger and rebellion."• Washington Post "A wonderful, challenging book. . . . One of the best that I have ever read on the difficult relationship between the developed world and the Third World."• William Shawcross, *Sunday Times* (London)

Deborah Scroggins wades into the complexities of Sudanese politics and armed strife and makes them digestible through her own personal story and that of Emma, a young British women who is deeply attracted to Africa and African men. It should be required reading for any Westerner who embraces a cause (Darfur, Palestine, the Arab Spring, etc.) to get an understanding of how very little we often understand and how our presence distorts and/or feeds into decades old conflicts. For the most part, Scroggins is quite clear sighted, but gets a bit muddled in her critique of the international aid machine. On the one hand, she criticizes it for lack of long term commitment and seriousness, but on the other finds fault with almost everything it does...so would doing wrong stuff for longer, with more seriousness lead to a better outcome? I think not. Emma's husband, Riek Machar, continues to be a major player in the ongoing conflict in South Sudan - going on for three decades now - along with John Garang, his main rival. For them, civil war isn't something to be resolved; it is what fuels their power.

I work in international development, and this book is basically a handbook of how not to behave while working abroad in an aid or NGO environment. I don't want to be too hard on poor Emma, since she passed away some years ago, but I was just stunned at some of the things she's said to have done. I've known some people who treated international development work as a sort of vacation filled with wild times, but never anything on her level! The author knew Emma, perhaps not on a best-friend level, but they seem to have had a professional relationship, which adds to the quality of the narrative. The author does not just tell Emma's story, but sets the book up as a sort of recounting of the travel and research she did to put the book together. I didn't like that at first, but the conversational style was pleasant and it grew on me. You really get to know the places Emma lived, for instance, because the author describes going there, and the interviews seem more personal when placed in the frame of the author's research. Awesome book, would recommend to anyone.

Welcome to Sudan. The ravaged country, its society torn apart by endless war, as if cursed with every possible curse - Ethnic strife, widespread corruption, religious warfare, famine - and that Modern curse, the one that makes powerful foreigners interested: oil. Deborah Scoggins uses the story of Emma McCune, a young Englishwoman who - obsessed with Sudan, its people, and its men, came to marry a Sudanese warlord, to shed light on the forsaken land, and of the people who populate it - not merely the Sudanese themselves, but also, perhaps especially, the Westerners who come to "save" them. Scoggins sees continuity between the present day Aid workers, Journalists and other do-gooders and the Western Imperialists of the 19th century. Their implicit model was Charles George Gordon, the Victorian soldier and adventurer who led African soldiers in a "campaign" against slavery, and whose mix - of idealism, thrill seeking, and utter ignorance of the country and the people he came to save - they share (This is also a theme of William Easterly's *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*). Like their Imperialists forerunners, the white aid-workers become immediate elite, separated and elevated above the population by the color of their skin. Also like the Imperialists, they get powers above and beyond anything they might have had back in the West. 25 years old Emma McCune, for example, became a school coordinator, essentially an education Minister for the area under the Sudanese Rebels' control. Indeed, one of the most penetrating insights of Scoggins is that a certain nostalgic quality for the days of Imperialism may be a motivating factor for Africa's whites; McCune herself was born in India, where her father had continued his Imperial Era post as manager of a Tea estate up to the mid 1960s. In India, an

Englishman was a marked aristocrat, and Mr. McCune could never adapt to the bourgeois England he was forced to return to as the British Indian world came to an end. By going to Sudan, wasn't Emma at least partially recovering something her father had had and had lost? And yet this is not quite fair, because for better or worse, Emma identified herself with the Sudanese as the Imperialists never had. She worked, apparently diligently, for them and with them. If she was guilty of Orientalism (a term popularized by Edward Said in "Orientalism" - and heavily criticized by other scholars; see "Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America (Policy Papers (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), No. 58.)" and "Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents") - her brand of romantic, even erotic attraction to Africa lacked the exploitative elements that made the "White Man's Burden" so repulsive. She may have had a fetish for Sudan - and Sudanese men; she may have had an idealized view of them - but I don't think she patronized them, lorded over them with the mystical power of her white skin (the Locals referred to Westerners as Khawajas - white). In Sudan, Emma met, fell in love with, and soon married Riek Machar, an already married, British educated, high-rank commander of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) - a rebel force of Sudan's Southern, Christian and Pagan people. As her relationship with Machar deepened, she came to see things from his perspective, putting her in conflict with her UN colleagues and supervisors. One of the best parts of Scoggins' book is her description of the problematics of the morality of hunger. Machar's men had been stealing food that was going to the camp's starving children. He exhibited the starving children in special camps, with "caretakers", who supposedly were watching after them, but in fact were taking their food. But as horrible as it seems, "it was not easy to tell right from wrong". How different were the rebels and the saviors? "It was not as if the aid workers themselves were going without meals... [the] discrepancy made some people uncomfortable, especially when grain stocks were low and aid workers had to put more than one hundred thousand refugees on half rations. But - face it - food tastes awfully good after a day that begins at five AM and continues until nightfall with all manners of frustrations in between. Who could blame the khawajas if they enjoyed an extra helping of canned fish? Think of what they could be eating if they were at home in Manhattan or Melbourne. True, children were dying. But if the aid-workers didn't keep up their strength, more would die." (pp. 234-235). Her marriage cost Emma her job, and she became a propagandist and an apologist for Riek Machar, who was busy in a war against the SPLA leader, John Garang. As the war deteriorated to a tribal blood-fest, which benefited only the Islamic government in Khartoum, Emma's life became endangered. "There are some people out there who would gladly put a bullet through my head", she said. Machar gave her two bodyguards. And Emma did not believe any harm would come to

her. That Emma's story would end tragically seems inevitable. Yet, astonishingly, Emma died in a mundane car accident; she was never important enough for anyone to kill. She had been five months pregnant. Her death was tragic but meaningless. Scroggins' book tells is really a triple narrative: a biography of Emma McCune; a brutal account of the sad history of Sudan and the naïf and the Westerners who tried to help it; and a sketch of Scroggins's own experience reporting from Sudan. None of the narrative end very effectively - all fizzle out, like Emma, stopping before the tale is over. Scroggins's own reporting is the least satisfying element of it all - chapters upon chapters of her experiences in Sudan (and even, for some mysterious reason, Somalia), which don't add up to much. And yet Scroggins's prose is effective, and her insights, particularly of the mentality and problems of the white aid-workers, quite illuminating. If you're interested in Sudan's sad history, in the colorful life of Emma McCune, or especially in the complexities of aid-work in Africa, you are likely to find 'Emma's War' a useful and readable account.

One of the best written book I have ever read about Africa -- it really captures the mood and the challenges. This book provides both a history of the Sudan and surrounding areas, as well as an interesting story of a young Englishwoman, initially involved in humanitarian aid, who became involved with and married an African warlord. A remarkable story and one that richly increases one's understanding of the complications of providing assistance in Africa. I spent several months in Zaire/Congo right out of college and I finally understand the situation better. A number of my friends have been on missions in Africa. We cannot just stand back; yet, we must be aware of the effects of what we do and how we do it. Excellent account! Kudos to Deborah Scroggins for trying to make sense of it all.

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