

# WORLD-CLASS DISCOVERY

## How one man's tale of tragedy and triumph in Darfur inspired a classroom

By JOY DUSTIN  
For the Monitor

A few summers ago, I picked up a book at the bookstore on a whim, mostly because it took place in Sudan, and we had just added that country to our World Studies curriculum at Bow High School where I teach. It was an autobiography, which hasn't always been my favorite genre, but the back cover sung its praises quite loudly, so I thought I'd give it a try. Little did I know I would start reading it one night and finish it the next. I forsook household chores, ordered dinner in, and made sure my kids had a lot of arts and crafts to keep them busy. The genuineness of the author's voice, combined with the horrific atrocities he described, created an awareness in me I thought had already existed, but I was not nearly as realistic and worldly as I believed. It also stirred in me a need to share this literature with my students, hoping they would be equally as moved by this work.

The book was Daoud Hari's *The Translator*. It tells the story of Hari, a Zaghawa tribesman whose life is shattered when Sudanese government-backed militia groups arrived in his village in 2003, raping and murdering his family and friends and burning his and other villages to the ground. Though he is able to escape and lead others to safety, he willingly returns to the Sudan, leading international aid groups and reporters back into his massacred country as a translator. He risks his

life again and again, willing to sacrifice himself in hopes of not only exposing the genocide bearing down on his country but also saving his people from further violence and despair.

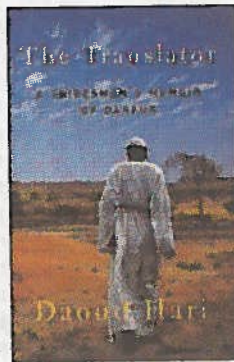
That fall, we added the book to our list of those we have juniors read in World Studies class. I found the book's content so powerful and overwhelming that a traditional approach to teaching did not seem to do it justice. And so I had kids journal after every section of reading, providing them a place to express what they felt as the author's story unfolded. Every week, I asked them to write at least a page in response to a few chapters of reading.

This was a chancy expectation. Asking high-schoolers to write at least a page a week is asking a lot, in addition to having to read 30 pages or so. I wasn't

sure how they would handle the assignment, let alone the book's content. But my desire for them to read what I found to be truly an astounding work overrode my trepidation, so I handed the assignment out, and held my breath.

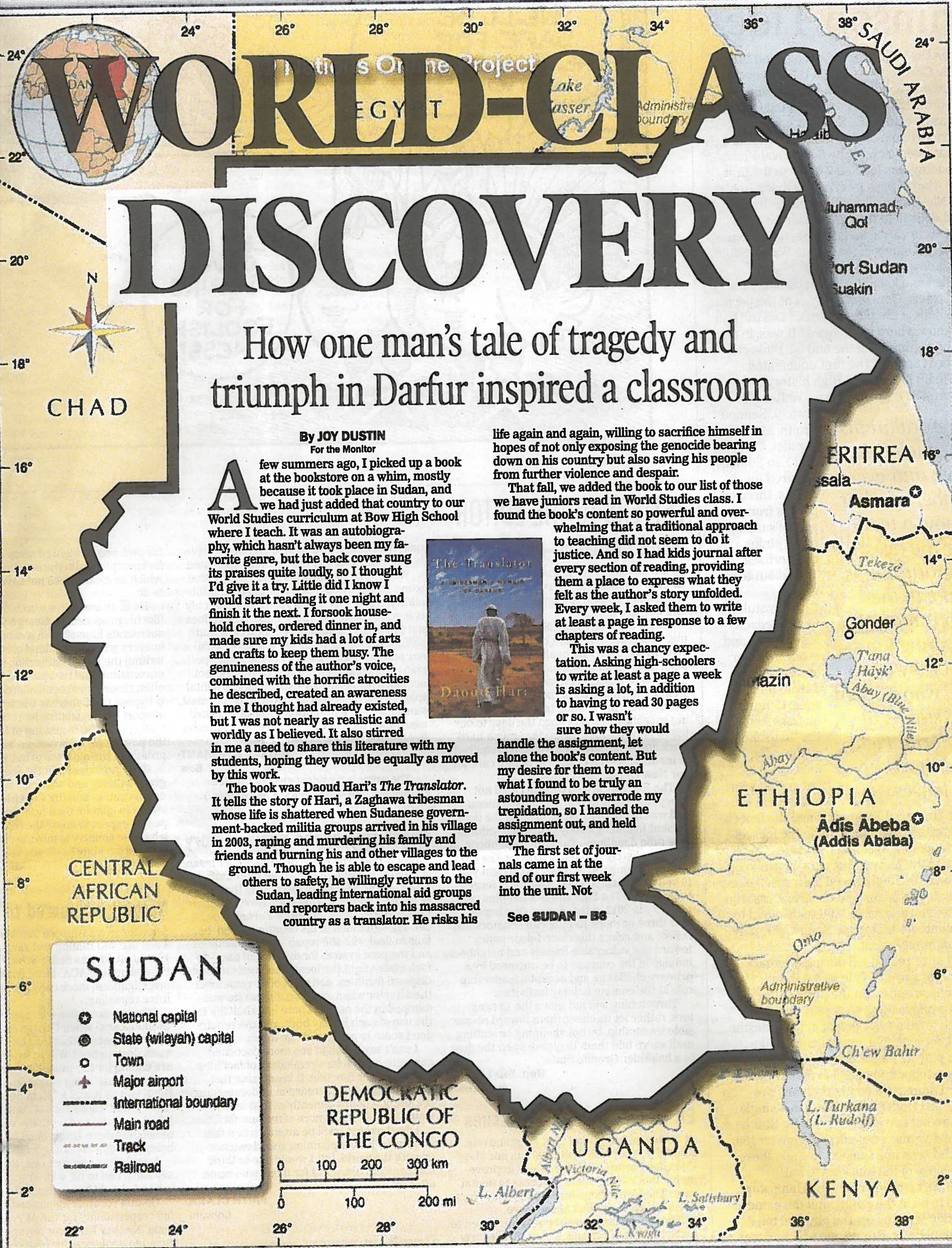
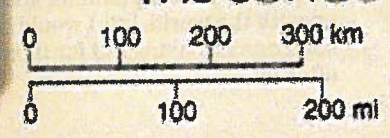
The first set of journals came in at the end of our first week into the unit. Not

See **SUDAN - B6**



**SUDAN**

- National capital
- State (wilayah) capital
- Town
- ✈ Major airport
- International boundary
- Main road
- Track
- Railroad



one student missed the deadline, and all of them had plenty to say. This pattern continued for the next four weeks. Some students had so much to say they went on for pages and pages.

"I never knew things like this still happened in our world."

"I can't believe this man was able to continue to function after all that he saw."

Some of the most touching comments came from my male students. "I'll admit it, I cried when I read this. Don't tell anyone, but this moved me to tears, no kidding."

Hari writes in a style that reveals atrocity with an ironic sense of gentility and understatement. With simplistic, almost objective language, he communicates to his audience the horrors of genocide. It was these images that agitated many of my students.

"We came upon a lone tree," Hari writes, "... where a woman and two of her three children were dead. The third child died in our arms. ... This woman hanged herself from her shawl, tied in the tree. We gently took her down and buried her beside her children. This moment stays with me every day."

In response to such passages, my students wrote with fervor in their journals. They questioned themselves, they questioned the world, they questioned right from wrong. And slowly, their thoughts began to shift from, "How can this happen?" to "How can this be stopped?"

Our culminating conversation was one I will not forget for a long time. Out of it surfaced not only a genuine frustration with the world, but also a genuine desire to make a change. "I want to make a difference when I get older," a few kids said. When I asked, "What are you waiting for?" there was a momentary silence, and then a shared realization that anyone, at any age, can overcome great difficulty and bring change to the



Courtesy

Daoud Hari, author of "The Translator," tells his story, of being a Zaghawa tribesman whose life was shattered when Sudanese government-backed militia groups arrived in his village in 2003. Though he was able to escape and lead others to safety, he willingly returned to the Sudan, leading international aid groups and reporters as a translator.

world, both great and small. This book and its writer were living proof. It was one of the best moments in my teaching career.

There is a lot to be said for those pieces of fiction that we read in our childhood, and even our adulthood, that have left us shocked, inspired, riveted or amazed. They allow us to enter different minds and different worlds and explore themes and concepts that at times can help us better understand our own world and selves. We can't look beyond the simple fact, too, that they are incredibly entertaining and a well of creativity that sparks the imagination in even the most reluctant of readers.

We tend to forget that works of nonfiction can do the very same things. They can open doors to worlds and cultures we did not know existed. We can get pulled in by characters who are real and intricate and raw - and come to connect and care about them as much as any fictional character we ever came to know and love. We can be horrified, amazed, depressed, overjoyed, outraged - you name it, and nonfiction can provide. Most

important, nonfiction can inspire us to act. Many of the fiction books I have taught have resulted in my students wanting to *say* something about the material, but only this nonfiction book has moved my students to want to *do* something.

There is some fear that spending more time studying nonfiction in the classroom will be doing our students a disservice. It might hinder their appreciation for the great writers of our time who have mastered the art of the creative word. It could squelch students' desire to read. It seems to leave dormant their imagination.

But what I have come to understand, after almost 20 years of teaching and writing, is that all writing is an art. All writing can be beautiful and inspiring. All writing can paint pictures on our mind's

canvas of people, places and ideas, and leave us wondering and imagining. All writing can floor us with its truth, enrage us with its lies, or astound us with the reality it presents before us. And all writing can leave such a mark on us that we will never forget it, perhaps grow from it, and maybe even be so inspired that we are moved to act.

This is a lesson I was thankfully reminded of through teaching a nonfiction book - a book that has not only made me a better teacher, but a better person, simply because it opened my eyes. I suspect many of my students would echo the same sentiment. That is the power of the written word, I believe - a power no less formidable when presented in nonfiction form.

(Joy Dustin teaches at Bow High School.)

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