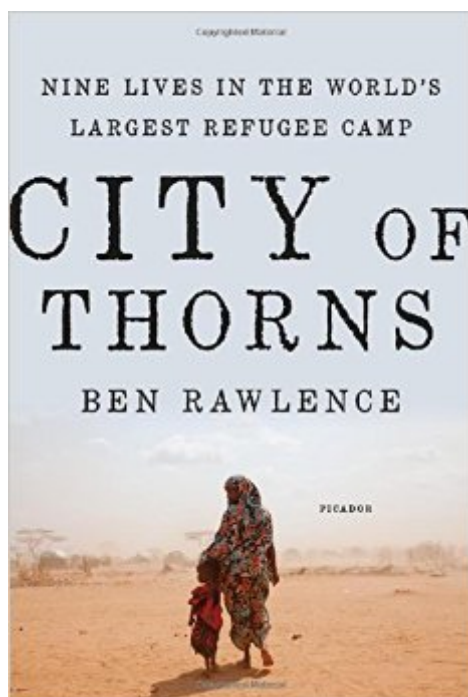


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# City Of Thorns: Nine Lives In The World's Largest Refugee Camp



## Synopsis

To the charity workers, Dadaab refugee camp is a humanitarian crisis; to the Kenyan government, it is a 'nursery for terrorists'; to the western media, it is a dangerous no-go area; but to its half a million residents, it is their last resort. Situated hundreds of miles from any other settlement, deep within the inhospitable desert of northern Kenya where only thorn bushes grow, Dadaab is a city like no other. Its buildings are made from mud, sticks or plastic, its entire economy is grey, and its citizens survive on rations and luck. Over the course of four years, Ben Rawlence became a first-hand witness to a strange and desperate limbo-land, getting to know many of those who have come there seeking sanctuary. Among them are Guled, a former child soldier who lives for football; Nisho, who scrapes an existence by pushing a wheelbarrow and dreaming of riches; Tawane, the indomitable youth leader; and schoolgirl Kheyro, whose future hangs upon her education. In *City of Thorns*, Rawlence interweaves the stories of nine individuals to show what life is like in the camp and to sketch the wider political forces that keep the refugees trapped there. Rawlence combines intimate storytelling with broad socio-political investigative journalism, doing for Dadaab what Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* did for the Mumbai slums. Lucid, vivid and illuminating, *City of Thorns* is an urgent human story with deep international repercussions, brought to life through the people who call Dadaab home.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*City of Thorns* is a profound insight into the lives of people living in a refugee camp. Rawlence

framed this by telling the stories of nine different people and their families. It was a look inside the world's largest refugee camp that is riddled with fear, disadvantage and limited resources. The glimpse into these people's lives are both interesting and literally quite unnerving. At times, it felt like a long story and could have been a little tiring, as Rawlence did an exhaustive investigation into their lives. Yet I'm glad I finished it and it is definitely worth the read. Dadaab is the world's largest refugee camp, spawned in the early 90's, during the Somali government collapse. Originally built to hold approximately 90,000 people on a temporal basis. It is now the home to almost a half million refugees. As I said, it is quite unnerving to soak in this reality. How these people came into the camp, how they live and continue, while under constant threat of rebel forces, is beyond one's imagination. Hope this helps:)

There is a city, home to tens of thousands since 1992, near the Kenya-Somali border, that doesn't officially exist. It is Dadaab refugee camp, established to temporarily house refugees from across eastern Africa. But now a second generation of displaced people are being born in the camp; three generations have no other home besides the smaller camps and towns that make up Dadaab. Somalis, Sudanese, Ethiopians and others live together in the congested camp surrounded by the brutally dry and inhospitable desert, competing for resources and dreaming of a life of security. The political machinations behind Dadaab are complicated and even shady, but Ben Rawlence casts light on them for readers in CITY OF THORNS. His primary aim, however, is to share the lives of some of the inhabitants he got to know while working in and researching Dadaab. Rawlence focuses his narrative on a few individuals, couples and families. There is Tawane, an intelligent leader who came to the camp in 1991 having lost his brothers. Tawane and his wife, Apshira, have lived together in Dadaab since 2003. Guled fled his home in Mogadishu in 2010 and is married to Maryam. Muna, born in Somalia, came to the camp in 1991 when she was just a year old and has lived there ever since. Muna's husband, Monday, is a former Sudanese child soldier and lived in other camps before settling in Dadaab. Nisho was actually born on the way to Dadaab as his parents were fleeing war-torn Somalia in 1991. Kheryo studies for years for a way out of the camp and into a better life. Each person Rawlence introduces has suffered heartache and much worse. Each does their best to survive in the bleak, depressing and corrupt culture of the camp. Some succumb to addiction or apathy, while others fight to immigrate to Italy, Australia or the US. Some pursue education, while others take the most menial jobs to support their families. Some try to return home to find that their position is perilous, both inside Dadaab and outside its borders. The residents of Dadaab live in extreme poverty, struggling for food, clothing and

the necessities of life. They are astonishingly vulnerable to illness, violence and rape, not to mention depression, anger and sorrow. Rawlence depicts all this with a journalist's objective style but not without tenderness. In discussing the politics operating within and without Dadaab, CITY OF THORNS occasionally falters. The topic is frustratingly complex, and Rawlence does his best to put the camp in a larger geopolitical and historical context. But readers unfamiliar with eastern African conflicts and culture may get bogged down in the complicated details, acronyms and policies. However, when Rawlence is sharing the lives of the inhabitants of Dadaab, those he came to know over a four-year period, the narrative has a compelling energy and even graceful style. He gives readers a glimpse into the dreams those living in Dadaab have, as well as the terrible obstacles they face in achieving them. All those he writes about do their best to maintain their cultural and religious identities, marriages, family ties and dignity in the harshest of conditions. Their stories and lives, mostly invisible and voiceless to the world, are important yet difficult to read about. CITY OF THORNS is a good introduction to Dadaab in particular and the harrowing lives of refugees in general. Profound, poignant and frequently horrific, it offers a significant and meaningful examination of an oft-ignored and little-understood population. Reviewed by Sarah Rachel Egelman

I completed this book left with a feeling of profound sadness. This was an eye-opening account of what these people endure on a daily basis - war surrounding them, lack of food, privacy, the elements, and stuck right in the middle of the inevitable tug of war regarding politics. This should be required reading. Just this week my church sponsored a family of 13, I believe, who had been living in a refugee camp for 19 years. They now have housing thanks to members of the congregation who answered the call for assistance. The culture shock will be something they will all have to come to terms with, but I can only imagine their joy.

I really enjoyed this book, and found it incredibly educational as well. If you have any interest in the Dadaab refugee camps in northern Kenya, I highly recommend this book. Lawrence provides a small window into camp life by delving into the real-life stories of multiple camp residents. The only "hard" thing about the book is that it ends at present, so although you get attached to all those profiled, there is no "wrap up" at the end of the book (i.e. you want to still follow them and know how they're doing right now). Interesting highlights: \*Reasons why the Al Shabab group movement is of little interest to residents in the Dadaab camps (versus the stereotype that ALL Somali refugees are susceptible to terrorist recruitment). \*Ways in which Kenya's policies (i.e. refusing any long term development, resistance to it becoming a permanent camp, wanting the refugees to return to Somali

despite a continued lack of security) affect the lives of people in the camps on a micro level.\*Ways in which refugees attempt to create informal employment (in the face of a Kenyan ban on any refugee employment) in order to better support the financial stability of them and their families.\*How the economies of the camps are directly tied to the economy of Somalia (i.e. the sugar trade).\*Facts/statistics showing the population growth of the camps over the last decade.\*Details on Kenyan government oppression (and brutality against) refugees in retribution for al-Shabab terrorist attacks in Kenya.\*Details on how Somali refugees (from the camps) attempt to create lives in Kenyan cities (difficulties, benefits, drawbacks, etc.).\*Education (or lack thereof) in the camp\*REALLY interesting facts on what really happened during the al-Shabab attack on the Westgate mall in Kenya (i.e. number of attackers was only four, not the widely understood 15; the Kenyan army looted the mall during the attack; fire from a Kenyan army tank resulted in the collapse of the mall parking lot, NOT a fire started by the attackers, in order to "hide" the number of vehicles stolen by the army during the attack; it took the military 90 minutes to respond to first reports of attacks, and more than four hours to actually enter the mall, so local vigilantes went in to the mall to help victims; the police entered the mall without uniforms and badges, resulting in them engaging in "battles" with the Kenyan army; the attackers likely left the mall the first day of the attack.Lines that stood out to me:The dilemma facing the refugees: "On one side was the Kenyan state that harassed and ransomed the refugees with impunity. On the other side was al-Shabab, from which many had already fled at least once. The refugees were, literally, between the rock and the hard place.""The youth of the camps saw themselves as leaders-in-training; indeed, they had been encouraged in that vision by the rhetoric of countless NGO workshops and trainings. They adopted the political correctness, the bureaucratic habits and even the dress of the NGOs, and they spoke in clichés [democracy, transparency, accountability]." "Having marinated in the UN vocabulary their whole life, they had a naive idea of the outside world; that there was a standard, a normality that existed somewhere, in America, in Europe, in the UN, for which they were practicing. For a democratic future that they would inherit and make real. As though what was missing from the current motley crew of criminals and warlords governing Somalia was simply a proper grounding in liberal principles."Relating to the al-Shabab attacks on civilians in Daddaab (in an open marketplace) versus Kenya (in a mall, where westerners were also killed): "For the victims, the experience of dying abruptly among your weekly groceries was the same, killed by forces you neither knew nor understood, the world had different words for each event. One was collateral damage, the other was a terrorist attack. One could be explained away; the other provoked governments to demand brutal justice."One thing I would have changed: I wish Lawrence had included photo of the refugees

profiled, as well as photos of the Dadaab camps.

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