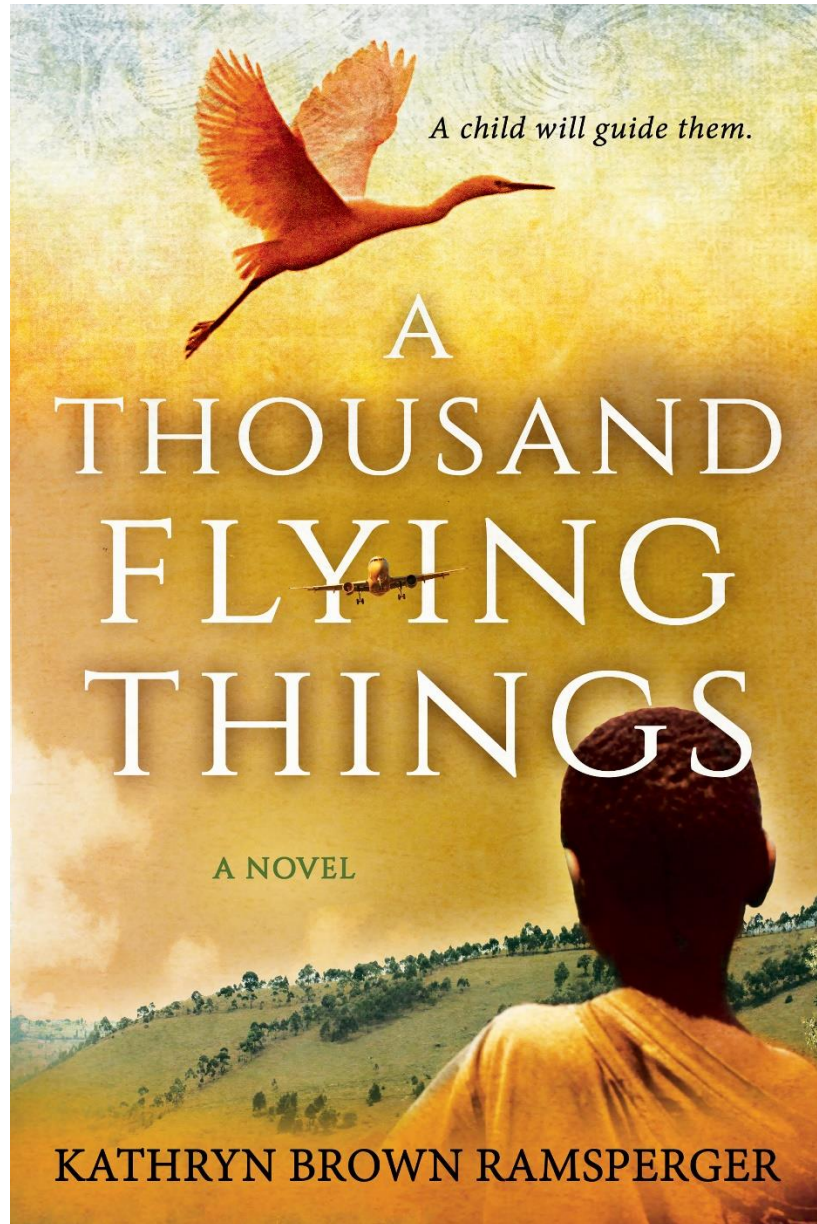


Kathryn Brown Ramsperger Excerpt

A THOUSAND FLYING THINGS





Excerpt from A Thousand Flying Things:

Dianna is hard pressed to determine which makes her feel emptier. This “schoolroom” is not much more than a tent. On rainy days, they must retreat to the tiny cinderblock closet of books, which is even more stifling. At least in North Carolina, she could visit the library. Books could make her forget the heavy air, the heat electrifying up her spine, her mother lying down in the next room, in her own sort of limbo. Books could even rid her of the pain of her monthly cycle or empty stomach when she was sent to her room without dinner. Reading’s more important than running. Reading is more important than food. It fills the emptiness of this place when she longs for love and attention.

Yet would words ever mean as much to these boys as they did to Dianna? Would they lay down their rifles to turn the pages of the books she provided? Her mind pushes against the languid heat that presses her into the earth, and her lungs try to take in more air. The smell of overused cooking oil, reminiscent of the many meals fried in it, cuts the air like a scythe. She longs for just one ice cube. That is when she sees a young child’s hand.

The hand waves at her from behind a large nearby rock. Flat on top, nature’s idea of a throne, the stone hides the rest of the child’s body. The hand itself, though, is a work of art. It is a hand a hyena could tear off with one swift chomp. Tiny, ragged fingernails, dirt caked over hidden fingerprints, flies buzzing this way and that. Yet the wrist is another thing altogether. Smooth and shiny and strong. She takes up her Polaroid and begins snapping. The shutter clicks, and the photos whirl out until the film is gone. They fall at her feet, creating a small dust storm. The specks float suspended in the air, then rest one by one on the photos.

She wants to wash his hands to see what lies beneath this grime, so she walks around the rock obscuring the body that owns this miniature man’s hand. It’s the boy from this morning.

“Hello?” She wonders if he will understand even that simple greeting.



“Hey,” he answers, waving his hand in greeting.

Her eyes go wide. How does he know that word? Most boys know “hi” or “hello,” but seldom use it because she greets them in their own language. And this boy looks barely old enough to speak many words at all.

“I teach myself book.” The boy smiles. “You help?”

“Do you speak English?” Dianna fumbles in a mixture of English, Arabic, and Dinka.

“Engoish.” The little boy smiles again, attempting to mimic her sounds. Then, he slaps her hand with his, reaches in her pocket, finds an English tea biscuit, and pops it whole into his mouth. “Tank.”

Dianna laughs at the mispronunciation, wondering how long it took him to learn the sentence he greeted her with. Her heart is in her ears. She may have found her student.

“Name?” she asks.

“Annee,” he answers.

She laughs again, this time a broad, imp-like Dianna laugh, a laugh she barely recollects.

“No, that’s my name. I’m Dianna.” Her fingers point to her chest, correcting him, showing him that this is how to pronounce her name. His beautiful, muddy palm slips around them. “You?” She points at his chest.

“Ka. Leel,” he answers, sounding it out just as she did for him.

She does not know if both words form his name, whether it is a variation of some



Nuer pronoun, or whether he has made it up himself. “You mean this name?” She writes it out for him in the sand, and he nods. “How do you know my name?”

He doesn’t understand the question. He simply stares at her with a certain fascination. Biel must have mentioned her to some of the boys. That was a good sign. He probably couldn’t pronounce her last name, so he tried her first name just to mispronounce it.

He giggles and his broad smile, still with its baby teeth, makes her want to hug him, but she doesn’t. It is possible he was plucked from his village before he even answered to the name his mother called him. Many of these boys were orphans, and still, others were sent away, pawning, they called it. They were lent to others so that they—and the rest of the family—would not starve. The official word was that they were child laborers. Yet turning over this practice to reveal its dirty underside showed a far grimmer picture: slaves, sex slaves, child soldiers. Sacrifices, yet sacrifices with the hope of a fuller belly, and fuller for the conscripts than for their parents.

They walk hand in hand toward the canopy. They plop onto the ground, and he curls his elbow into her lap. Polaroid pictures look up at them through the earth like a faded carpet. Khalil picks up his image and squints. “Khalil?” he asks. “Khalil.” Dianna puts away her camera while smiling at his realization that he is the subject of the photograph. She chooses a book from a nearby stack, opens it to page one, and begins to read. As she mouths each word, he repeats it after her. He points at the detailed illustrations of leafy branches and curvy women in full skirts and stays. He points at the letters. Beatrix Potter’s bunnies and hedgehogs dance in a land of cobras and hippos. He’s interested in books! She wants to get to know him, help him succeed. She has just broken a professional and personal credo—never get close to anyone again, especially not a client or student. She smiles in dazed but sated wonder. She always thought it would be a tall, dark man walking through camp who posed the most risk to her heart. And here, this little boy has grabbed it with one sentence and a few fingers. She will give him a good washing, make sure he is free from parasites, give him a T-shirt and a book all his own. Tomorrow, she will speak to Biel. This boy could not possibly be old enough for military training.

Khalil seems in awe of her classroom, the only one of its kind in the camp. He runs his hands over the one wall and floor, and his deep-set, round eyes rove up and down again. People here at camp reside in thatched mud huts or sleep under flimsy tents. Many boys sleep in the open air. This “schoolhouse” has one cinderblock wall, though the other sides are open to the air. His delicate hands glide over each brick's



cold, rough surface, one by one, as though it were a sculpture. If he even knows what a sculpture is. She fills a vat with all the cold water they can haul, pours soap into it, and orders him in.

Khalil is having none of it. He is not getting his uniform wet. He crouches in the corner, still all smiles, but head wagging from side to side, “No.” She hauls him in his strange uniform, which resembles ragged shorts and surgical scrubs more than fatigues, and dumps him into the vat. He couldn’t weigh more than forty pounds, but he is arms and legs and sharp nails, flailing, no other sound. Then he is still as she pours the soapy water over him—and scrubs, scrubs his work-torn fingernails. He relaxes and blows bubbles. And gradually, the smooth, burnished skin shines through.