

talking with { Susan Minot }

# Disturbing & comforting

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Special to Newsday

**T**hirty Girls" (Alfred A. Knopf, \$26.95) is a complete departure for Susan Minot, whose earlier novels ("Monkeys," "Evening") are minimalist modern narratives about family and romantic relationships. Here, her topic is terrorist child abduction in Uganda, based on a true incident that occurred in 1996.

Esther is a Ugandan 15-year-old taken from her Catholic boarding school by the Lord's Resistance Army, a group that abducted about 30,000 children between 1989 and 2012 (the group's leader is currently in hiding in Congo). Jane is an American writer who goes to Uganda to research the story, traveling with a group of friends to the rehabilitation center where Esther is living after her escape. The novel alternates between their two narratives.

In 2000, Minot published a non-fiction piece about the girls, "This We Came to Know Afterward," first in *McSweeney's*, then in "The Best American Travel Writing 2001." We spoke to her about the role of fiction in shedding light on real-world atrocities.

**Talk about your decision to novelize this story.**

It had a big impact on me to do the original article; it was the first time I had written something to get information out there rather to explore a psychological truth. However, there was barely any response. I was disappointed, but I didn't forget about it. I went on, I moved to Maine, I got married, I had a child, I worked on painting and poetry, but I didn't forget about those girls. Five or six years later, when I sat down to write another book, it was still the most important thing.

**There are two threads in "Thirty Girls": Esther's story is a kind of imagined memoir, vocalizing the experience of a victim, sort of like Dave Eggers' "What Is the What." The other thread follows the journalist Jane, a hypersensitive Joan Didion-type character, obsessed not only with the story she's covering but with her own existential issues.**

While the story of the girls is what I was first compelled by, I didn't want to overload the reader with a totally relentless experience, only focusing on horrible things. I



Susan Minot wrote her novel "Thirty Girls" after a trip to Uganda.

wanted to show how alternate stories go on in the same world, the same geographic place. Esther's story is profound because the stakes are so high, and usually that would be the only story told, because other kinds of struggle pale in comparison. I was challenging that notion. A struggle, to the person experiencing it, is a struggle.

Two threads: kidnapped Ugandan children and privileged journalist

**It's a risky choice. Jane expresses it herself at one point: "How could she be thinking so lightly of love, here in a place where people's lips were cut off and girls were snatched out of their beds?" That seems to be one of the central issues of the novel.**

We all operate on many different levels. Our concerns aren't always appropriate, or morally elevated. The standard reaction to Jane is, Oh, you're privileged, what are you worrying about? This girl doesn't know if she's going to live another day. But comparing people's experiences doesn't prove anything or help us get closer to each other in any way.

**It's an exciting moment in the book when Jane and Esther finally meet, and you see them through each**

**other's eyes. Without revealing any spoilers, at the end of the book it's as if their worlds bleed into one another — dramatic events occur that are almost hard to accept.**

There are a lot of things that are unacceptable in the book. Things happen that you cannot believe — but they happen. People live with these things, they survive, but survival is difficult. . . . Even if, morally, people think that children are the first people who should be saved, in the real world, there's no incentive to save them.

One of the things that is particularly touching when you see these children is that even though they are like sponges, taking in everything, their lives altered forever, they also are incredibly resilient. You see how they adjust, how they carry on . . . and it's heartbreaking. Again, a seemingly unacceptable thing.

**Did you feel sad when you were writing the book?**

Not so much sad, but exhausted, and determined to stick with it. Matisse said, "A good painting is like a comfortable armchair." This is not a comfortable armchair. But what's the charge of art? To comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. I'm trying to do both.

## bestsellers

Publishers Weekly's U.S. list powered by Nielsen BookScan for the week ending Jan. 26. Latest list: newsday.com/books

### hardcover

#### FICTION

1. **THE INVENTION OF WINGS**, by Sue Monk Kidd (Viking)
2. **FIRST LOVE**, by James Patterson and Emily Raymond (Little, Brown)
3. **THE GOLDFINCH**, by Donna Tartt (Little, Brown)
4. **SYCAMORE ROW**, by John Grisham (Doubleday)
5. **THE FIRST PHONE CALL FROM HEAVEN**, by Mitch Albom (Harper)
6. **COMMAND AUTHORITY**, by Tom Clancy (Putnam)
7. **CROSS MY HEART**, by James Patterson (Little, Brown)
8. **FEAR NOTHING**, by Lisa Gardner (Dutton)
9. **LOST LAKE**, by Sarah Addison Allen (St. Martin's)
10. **STANDUP GUY**, by Stuart Woods (Putnam)

#### NONFICTION

1. **DUTY**, by Robert M. Gates (Knopf)
2. **SUPER SHRED**, by Ian K. Smith (St. Martin's)
3. **THINGS THAT MATTER**, by Charles Krauthammer (Crown Forum)
4. **THE DOCTOR'S DIET**, by Travis Stork (Bird Street Books)
5. **KILLING JESUS**, by Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard (Henry Holt)
6. **THE BODY BOOK**, by Cameron Diaz (Harper (Wave))
7. **THE DANIEL PLAN**, by Rick Warren (Zondervan)
8. **DAVID AND GOLIATH**, by Malcolm Gladwell (Little, Brown)
9. **GRAIN BRAIN**, by David Perlmutter (Little, Brown)
10. **GEORGE WASHINGTON'S SECRET SIX**, by Brian Kilmeade (Penguin/Sentinel)

### paperback

1. **LONE SURVIVOR**, by Marcus Luttrell (Back Bay Books)
2. **A WEEK IN WINTER**, by Maeve Binchy (Anchor)
3. **12TH OF NEVER**, by James Patterson and Maxine Paetro (Grand Central)
4. **THE MONUMENTS MEN**, by Robert M. Edsel (Back Bay Books)
5. **PEOPLE TOOLS**, by Alan C. Fox (Select Books)
6. **FOUR BLOOD MOONS**, by John Hagee (Worthy)
7. **LIFE AFTER LIFE**, by Kate Atkinson (Back Bay Books)
8. **EAT IT TO BEAT IT!**, by David Zinczenko (Ballantine)
9. **BLUE DAHLIA**, by Nora Roberts (Berkley)
10. **DARK WITCH**, by Nora Roberts (Berkley)