



# **Alek: From Sudanese Refugee to International Supermodel**

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Since the day she was scouted by a modeling agent while shopping at a London street fair when she was just nineteen, Alek Wek's life has been nothing short of a fantasy. When she's not the featured model in print campaigns for hip companies, or gracing the cover of *Elle*, she is working the runways of Paris, New York, and Milan to model for the world's leading designers, including Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. But nothing in her early years prepared her for the life of a model.

Born in Wau, in the southern Sudan, Alek knew only a few years of peace with her family before they were caught up in a ruthless civil war that pitted outlaw militias, the Muslim-dominated government, and southern rebels against each other in a brutal conflict that killed nearly two million people. Here is her daring story of fleeing the war on foot and her escape to London, where her rise from young model to supermodel was all the more notable because of Alek's non-European looks.

A probe into the Sudanese conflict and an inside look into the life of a most unique supermodel, *Alek* is a book that will inspire as well as inform.

## **Alek: From Sudanese Refugee to International Supermodel Details**

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## **From Reader Review Alek: From Sudanese Refugee to International Supermodel for online ebook**

### **Jenny Briton says**

Amazing! Not a long book but covers so much ground. Her journey as a refugee, life in London, move into the fashion industry, experiences of how her skin colour has defined her in all of those environments, wise insights into beauty, why we judge each other and so much more. Although her life has been so different to mine she writes in a way that makes me identify with her, and makes me feel like really we aren't that different.

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### **Kate says**

Sudanese refugee to supermodel, entrepreneur and activist. Interesting first half of the book highlighting her childhood in Sudan. The details of her life's a refugee in London is somewhat sparse but she focuses on her journey to become a model and the triumphs and trials and racism she faced in the industry and in life. Not the best writing ever but an interesting and enlightening story to read.

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### **Steve Dow says**

An engaging story of how a supermodel of the West came from a most unexpected and, at times, terrifying place. Here's my 2007 interview with Alek Wek.

<http://www.stevedow.com.au/default.as...>

Alek Wek never intended to be a model. At 19, she was approached by an agent while walking in a south London park with an English girlfriend, whom Wek considered much prettier. In her memoir, Alek, the 30-year-old Dinka woman from southern Sudan tells the story of her flight from civil war, her time as a refugee in London, and 10 years on the catwalks of Milan, Paris and New York.

Wek may not be on a first-name basis with fame - like, say, Kate - but the regal, 181-centimetre-tall model has been recognisable since 1997, the year Gilles Bensimon photographed her for the cover of American Elle and proved jet black could be beautiful.

It was a milestone for her and the magazine: a black woman who looked unambiguously African. Bensimon said the magazine received scores of approving letters: "One woman said, 'I never expected to see someone who looked like me on the cover of the magazine.'"

Later, when Oprah Winfrey interviewed Wek on her television show, she said: "If you'd been on the cover of a magazine when I was growing up, I would have had a different concept of who I was."

Her brilliant career almost stalled early on when assistants to photographer Steven Meisel advised the agency promoting the beanpole-thin beauty that she should lose five pounds (2.26 kilograms) in preparation for an Italian Vogue photo shoot.

"They think you're too fat," her agent told Wek. The model, who knew what it was to starve, just scoffed.

"You're not going to nourish your body, for what? A picture? The whole weight thing is ridiculous."

Today, the model is talking from the three-storey, red-brick Brooklyn townhouse she bought for \$US395,000 (\$436,900) in 1998, even though it was unheard of in Dinka culture to borrow money.

Her mother Akuol, who had also made it to London with several other of her children, had taught Wek that she should never buy anything she couldn't pay for outright.

She also feared that her daughter's modelling career would lead her to take her clothes off and "put myself in bad situations". And there were times Wek wondered whether her mother's worst-case scenario had come true, as she wriggled in a leopard-print bikini to appear as an "elusive, dark, exotic creature" in a video for Tina Turner's theme song for the James Bond film GoldenEye. Or when she wore black rubber and pranced about in a studio like Dracula for a shoot for The Face. Or took off all her clothes and sat in a giant coffee cup so that her skin could represent the espresso in a Lavazza calendar. But Wek appeared less phased by the fashion industry's racial whims than other black models.

"Fashion is an accounting business," she told black fashion magazine Ebony. "It deals with beauty, appearance, products, perfume and clothes. At the end of the day, it's not rocket science or heart surgery. It was not just me, a Sudanese Dinka girl, who was met by an avalanche of criticism when I walked in the door. Everyone starting out as a model has his or her own share of criticism. We all hear, 'Her nose is too long. She is too much of a red head.' If you listen to everybody, you will go crazy. You will stop accepting yourself. And when you stop accepting yourself, what else do you have?"

"But I had to learn that. When I began, I was like, 'This doesn't make sense'. It was very overwhelming. That's when I had to say, 'OK, Alek, is this something you are comfortable with? Who are you going to work with?'"

Recently, Wek took a picture of the lifeline on the palm of her hand, had it replicated on canvas, and turned the image into the lining of one of the items in her handbag range, WEK1933, named for her father's birth year.

"I'm not really into palm-reading," she says, "but it's quite interesting actually how everyone's palm and lifeline is different."

Her inspiration for the designs - sold in Australia through Marais boutique in the Royal Arcade - came from the brass-clasp briefcase carried by her father, who never made it out of Sudan.

Art is another way to tell her story, but also makes her feel at home: "Whenever I'm in town and have down time, I like to just sit here with my cat, have a cup of tea and choose my subjects from whatever's around me, and make it abstract."

Wek was born in the village of Wau, the seventh child to father Athian, a middle-class administrator with the local board of education, and mother Akuol, an entrepreneurial woman who made liquor and raised peanut crops.

Wek was a six-year-old tomboy when the civil war broke out, and her mother urged her to stay indoors and not wander too far, in case she was caught by rogue militias who sold children into slavery.

When Wek was nine, convoys of soldiers turned the village into a military zone. The Dinka people were increasingly blamed for trouble, and Wek says that, while her family did not take sides, they probably were

more inclined to support the Sudan People's Liberation Army, which included many fellow Dinka, rather than the northern Muslims.

The family fled south through the jungle, fearing they might be killed, her father hobbling because of a bad hip, while Wek and her sister Adaw suffered malaria. They crossed crocodile-infested rivers in dugout canoes and survived on stewed leaves and roots.

"I learned just how little it takes to survive," Wek says, "which is why I don't waste things - food, money, friendships or opportunities." Nor does she take anything for granted: "I had seen so much death and destruction that I could never believe that tomorrow was guaranteed."

At 10, Wek told her mother she was fleeing on her own. She posed as the daughter of another Dinka man to get on an army flight to stay with relatives in Khartoum, where her father was in hospital: he'd had a stroke.

Wek was at her father's deathbed two years later when he told her, "Alek, you must go to London. Live at peace for once. Get an education. Do well."

Two years later, aged 14, Wek and her older sister Atheng flew to London as refugees. Wek cleaned toilets and swept up hair at a salon to pay the tuition fees for art courses.

In 1995, four years after arriving, Wek was spotted by a female talent scout from a modelling agency, but she resisted the idea of having test shots taken.

"It's so strange that I grew up to make my living off my looks," she writes, "after so many years of looking like a monster." (All her life, Wek had suffered from psoriasis all over her body, including her face - her flaky, itchy, bleeding skin making her feel repulsive. It cleared up in London's cooler climate.)

Wek hasn't remained at the top of her profession by making trouble: she is circumspect on political issues and conciliatory about race. Does she see the US as a particularly racist country?

"I don't think it's just an American problem. If it only existed here then I wouldn't have accomplished the work I do. Racism was even there in Sudan. It was ridiculous. The conflict has taken people who had gotten along and appreciated the differences in culture and pitted us against each other. Racism is everywhere. Am I going to feed into it? No. Is it everyone? Absolutely not!"

Wek says she feels "really terrible" to hear that the Australian Government has banned visa applications from Africa until June 2008, and is saddened that Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews has singled out Sudanese refugees for criticism. But she declines to comment further on foreign politics. She describes US Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton as "inspiring", but won't say whether Clinton is her preferred candidate over, say, Barack Obama.

While she is cautious about saying anything overtly political, she is quick to point out the small ways that race issues affect day-to-day life. In her book, she questions the "unconscious judgements" of her boyfriend, Italian-born property developer Riccardo Sala. Wek recalls how, one day, she was choosing images of her family to frame. "These are nice," Sala remarked. "But when you put them up, you'll have nothing but black people on your wall."

How did Sala feel about her including that anecdote in the book?

"He didn't say it in a bad way," Wek says, more circumspect. "It was quite innocent. After a year or so together, he wanted to see more of me and him among the pictures, and his little nieces, whom I adore."

Wek writes about being constantly harassed and detained by US immigration officials when leaving or returning on international flights, raising suspicions even though - or perhaps because - she travels business class.

"I've been detained so many times," she says. "I've come to realise that, as a successful black woman - and a tall one at that - I represent something that triggers the hostility and suspicion of a lot of people, black and white, male and female."

Towards the end of her book, she writes of returning to Sudan in 2004 with her mother to find buildings torn down and roads pitted, neighbours and friends among the missing, and children starving. A new family was living in their old home, but the garden was dead, the fruit trees gone. Wau had become a refugee town.

Still, Wek sounds a note of hope: "These people weren't begging for hand-outs," she says. "They wanted tools and the possibility of doing something. Anything. They would find it."

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## Liralen says

*I noticed that journalists often liked to say that I'd been discovered in 'the bush,' in Africa. As if I had been a primeval innocent afoot in the forest when the great model agent plucked me from the muck and tamed me, without destroying my savage beauty. I mean, I was wearing jeans in Crystal Palace Park when I was 'discovered.' The closest bush was a well-manicured azalea. I am African, but I am not primitive. (page 159)*

Wek handily puts paid to more than a few stereotypes in this book. She's African, yes; she also grew up in a town with white-collar parents. She's a model; persistent psoriasis as a child taught her to look beyond the outer layer. She's beautiful; she's also clearly smart.

Sensibly, Wek focuses less on her adult life (London, being a model, etc.) than on her childhood in Sudan (now South Sudan). Her parents -- who had themselves been refugees numerous times before -- were comparatively\* middle class; her childhood was a happy one. When war came, her parents did their best to stay out of it, but there was only so much they could do. Wek found herself displaced first internally and then outside the country -- though obviously she managed to build quite a life for herself in London and later New York.

Towards the end of the book she talks about going back to Sudan for the first time since fleeing the effects of war; even then she knew that peace was tenuous. It's sad to read it now, given that South Sudan *has* achieved independence -- but not yet peace.

\*I am reluctant to use the word 'comparatively', but I do so because the middle class in Wau means something different than the version of middle class I'm used to. In any case, they had enough; they had a good life.

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## Gina says

Wow! The first 3-4 chapters are raw and real. If you find yourself complaining about your life, just read this for a dose of humility. Her story is pretty incredible when you consider where she came from and where she is today.

## Aja says

Wek is both brave and beautiful. A very interesting mix in today's superficial society. But mostly I bought and read this book because I once saw her in NYC in the market with my Mum and my Grammy. Mum and Grammy have no tact so they shamelessly followed her in a casual manner. When she noticed them, she turned around and gave them the sweetest most genuine smile. My heart was won from that day forward.

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## Anke says

It's easy to read and not that special on that case but I really liked to story. Alek writes about herself and her story is a touching and warm-hearting story. She seems like a fighter and is someone people can look up to!

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## Lauren Miller says

In the Memoir, Alek, written by Alek Wek, she explains her story going from a Sudanese Refugee to an international supermodel. Her and her family were forced to flee to Britain to escape the Civil War in Sudan. Although she lived in a very poor area, she was very fortunate to be born into a what was considered middle-class family in her area. Although this memoir is very inspiring, it is very predicable. Even though it was an extremely inspiring story, I hate to say it but it was almost cliché. It was another "rags to riches" storyline. However, Wek's story was a tad different. Instead of becoming wealthy, she became famous for modeling as well as creating her own handbag line which is unheard if you were someone coming from a refugee community in Wau, Sudan.

One of my favorite quotes from her within the whole memoir was actually in the prologue. Wek states, " The thing about being a model is that people expect you to look fresh and bright after a transatlantic flight-- no tiredness allowed" (Wek 3). The reason this quote stuck out to me because it allowed me to notice how she took some of her morals with her from Sudan all the way to New York, Paris, Milan and all the other places she modeled in. In the memoir it always talked about how tired she was moving from place to place in Sudan to escape or hide from the rebels but she would always remind herself that exhaustion was not an option. The only option was to stay awake or simply be defeated instead. It made me happy to know that she had not forgotten where she had come from in the midst of all the glitz and glam.

As I mentioned earlier, Wek's story is a bit different, her successful career didn't come from hours of hard work, it actually happened out of luck. Wek obviously had no experience in modeling, she didn't even have much of an idea of what the modeling industry was like. However, one day this would all change. The day her life changed, she was just nineteen years old. Wek was just strolling the stands of a London street fair and all of a sudden a man came up to her from a modeling agency and scouted her on the spot. This was my favorite part of the whole memoir because people always say that timing is everything, and this truly reflected that. Although I said the book was very predicable, I was not expecting this at all. Something that humored me was in the event of arriving to London, Wek explained her passport struggles. "A street photographer took my picture, which my brother Wek took the police station in the Khartoum business district to get my ID card. They never saw me in person and, looking at the photo of a tall, skinny kid with short hair, assumed that I was a boy" (Wek 116). This all happened when she arrived in the actual modeling studio. The photographers and the rest of the crew of the agency had baffled looks upon their faces because they weren't expecting Alek to have male looking attributes. But even so, something stood out to the scout that one day at the street fair.

Alek Wek is a very lucky woman. She experienced the worst in her childhood and preteen years and then was rewarded with an outstanding career. Although she didn't necessarily work for her career to happen, she truly did deserve it. However, if you are someone who believes that success should come from hard work then this book may frustrate you. I really enjoyed this book but I found myself always wanting more about her life in Sudan rather than her career stage. I felt that I should be able to know about her struggles that shaped her into the model she is today.

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### **Sabrina Rutter says**

Alek's family were no strangers to war, but during the first years of her life there was safety and peace. Her family had a nice home, probably middle class to her countrys standards, and though they didn't always have food they were not starving. They simply had enough to sustain a healthy life, and as long as they had that they were happy. then the war began, and Alek's life changed forever. This is the story of how Alek went from being a refugee to an international super model. It's an emotional, and moving account that you'll have a hard time putting down until you have read the very last page.

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### **Aone says**

This book was really amazing because it reminded me how blessed I really am. This book is also suitable for young girls.

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### **Ja'nai says**

This was an excellent book and a fast read.

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### **Petra X says**

From Sudanese Refugee to International Supermodel. Amazing book about a girl who was not at all a beauty, but instead considered ugly, living in primitive villages in the Sudan transformed into a New York supermodel.

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### **Katleen says**

Een simpel goed vlot leesbaar boek.

Interessant om wat historiek over de Soedanese politieke situatie mee te krijgen, een beetje weetjes over de modellen wereld en een inblik te krijgen in het leven van een gezin op de vlucht van geweld en oorlog.

Een goed boek maar het ontroerde me niet. Het is niet zo een gruwelijk verhaal als 'De woestijn' van Waris Dirie dus sowieso minder aangrijpend maar het wordt ook wat oppervlakkig verteld. Soms zelfs

ongeloofwaardig al twijfel ik niet aan de echtheid vh verhaal.

Het tweede deel van het boek, haar modellencarrière, droeg niet echt mijn interesse weg. Wel haar nieuwe leven in een wereldstad, de cultuurverschillen, de manier v leven,... maar dit kwam amper aan bod en te weinig naar voor.

Tot slot praat ze over racisme in de modellenwereld, een terecht punt, al vind ik die wereld op alle vlak discriminerend. Zonder een oordeel, dat is gewoon het spel van mode en commerce. Het gaat nu eenmaal over je uiterlijk, dus ook over zwart of wit, slank of dik, klein of groot.

Drie sterren. Een goed afkooksel van Waris Dirie!

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## **Sarah H. Alshareef says**

Author: Alek Wek

Rating: 3.5/5

The book was very informative about life in Sudan before and after the civil war. I couldn't believe how brutal some people on earth could be!, it's just inconceivable!

The massive loads of struggles Alek Wek had been through made her the successful woman she is now, I become to strongly believe that "what won't kill you makes you stronger"

I extremely felt ashamed of myself after reading her autobiography!, I felt that I haven't accomplished NOTHING in my life.

I was touched by what her father told her, he used to say to her " look, Alek, you don't have to be a scientist or a doctor or a solicitor. But whatever you choose to do, you should really love it. You should focus on it and you must stick with it. Life is not a game, although it can be fun"

Her first steps into modeling world were a struggle also, but she mad it to the top

I'd like to point out that I learned a moral out of this book, our skin color doesn't define who we are, it's our actions, ethics and values!

This book was an inspirational for me, I believe it will be to everyone else who seeks inspirations within struggle and hard times

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## **Elizabeth says**

I think I expected that there would be a chapter about Alek Wek's youth and then most of the book would be devoted to modeling. How wrong I was.

Wek seems to glow with good energy in her pictures, so I wasn't surprised to find out that I liked her very much in this autobiography. What did surprise me was how spoiled I felt as I read about her life in Sudan as a refugee. It's so easy to forget that your own life is so much more comfortable than others. The way Wek

spoke about her youth and her professional experiences as black model was charming and unselfconscious. I think her conclusions were all the more powerful for it.

The level of the writing would probably not be considered literary, but I really enjoyed this book. I learned a few things too...

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