Valentino Achak Deng
Valentino is the main character of *What is the What*. He was born in Sudan, but his village was attacked by Islamist extremists. He begins walking to Ethiopia for safe haven, and many other boys join him in order to escape being attacked. He has to travel further to Kenya, and he remains in a refugee camp for eleven years until he is granted a visa to enter the United States.

Achor Achor
Achor Achor is Valentino's best friend. They meet in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. The two later become roommates when Valentino is allowed to live in Atlanta. Achor Achor has an acute survival instinct, which makes being a refugee easier for him than it is for Valentino.

Deng Arou
Deng Arou is Valentino's father. Though he once was a rebel fighter during the first Sudanese war, he has given up the fight and now tries to get along with everyone in order to run a successful business.

William K
William K is one of Valentino's best friends, despite his predisposition to lying about his family's death. He and Valentino grew up together in Marial Bai.

Tabitha
Tabitha is Valentino's girlfriend in the Kakuma refugee camp. All the grown men are attracted to her, but she is attracted to how different she and Valentino are. Their relationship was slow due to strict rules in the camp, but Valentino still could not understand why someone as beautiful and accomplished as Tabitha would date him.

Dut Majok
Dut is the leader of Valentino's Lost Boys group. Once he successfully leads the boys to the Pinyudo refugee camp, he is responsible for helping create housing and schools for the refugees.

Mary Williams
Mary is the founder of the Lost Boys Foundations and one of Valentino's close friends in America.

Tonya
Tonya is the female robber who initially gets into Valentino's apartment at the beginning of the novel.

Powder
Powder is Tonya's accomplice. He beats up Valentino for trying to protest.