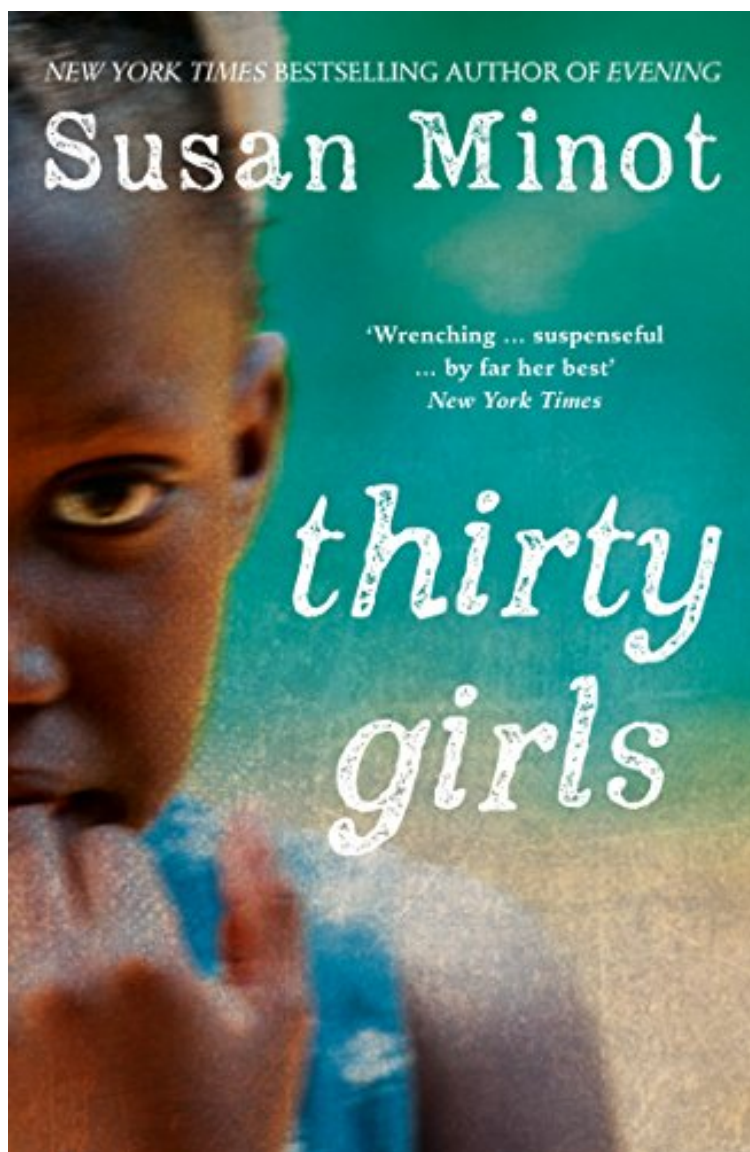


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Thirty Girls



Par Susan Minot
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe long-awaited novel from the bestselling, award-winning author of Evening is a literary tour de force set in war-torn Africa.The Lords Resistance Army, led by warlord Joseph Kony, has terrorised northern Uganda for years, mutilating and murdering people as they raid villages, kidnapping and raping children to expand Konys family.This is the fate in store for Esther. She is one of 139 students abducted from St Marys School. When their headmistress tracks them down she must accept a dreadful bargain; most of the girls will be released, only if thirty remain with the rebels. Esther is one of the thirty. And eventually she will have to learn to live with all she has seen and done to survive.Jane is an American writer, observing the glamour of Kenyan ex-pat life while she waits for transport to the border. She has come

to write about what's happening to Uganda's children. But her fragile emotional state will be sorely tried by her experiences. In unflinching prose, Minot gives us razor-sharp portraits of two women struggling to wrest meaning from events that test them both in unimaginable ways. Intense and stunningly evocative, *Thirty Girls* is Minot's most ambitious novel yet.

Extrait | *They Took All of Us 1 / Thirty Girls*

The night they took the girls Sister Giulia went to bed with only the usual amount of worry and foreboding and rubbing of her knuckles. She said her extra prayer that all would stay peaceful, twisted down the rusted dial of her kerosene lamp and tucked in the loose bit of mosquito net under the mattress. The bed was small and she took up very little of it, being a slight person barely five feet long. Indeed, seeing her asleep one might have mistaken her for one of her twelve-year-old students and not the forty-two-year-old headmistress of a boarding school that she was. Despite her position, Sister Giulia's room was one of the smaller rooms upstairs in the main building at St. Mary's where the sisters were housed. Sisters Alba and Fiamma shared the largest room down the hall and Sister Rosario who simply took up more space with her file cabinets and seed catalogues had commandeered the room with the shallow balcony overlooking the interior walled garden. But Sister Giulia didn't mind. She was schooled in humility and it came naturally to her. The banging appeared first in her dream. When she opened her eyes she knew immediately it was real and as present in the dark room as her own heart beating. It entered the open window, a rhythmic banging like dull axes hitting at stone. They are at the dorms, she thought. Then she heard a softer knocking, at her door. She was already sitting up, her bare feet feeling for the straw flip-flops on the floor. Yes? she whispered. Sister, said a voice, and in the darkness she saw the crack at the door widen and in it the silhouetted head of the night watchman. George, I am coming, she said, and felt for the cotton sweater on the chair beside her table. Sister, the voice said. They are here. She stepped into the hall and met with the other nuns whispering in a shadowy cluster. At the end of the hallway one window reflected dim light from the two floodlights around the corner at the main entrance. The women moved toward it like moths. Sister Alba already had her wimple on she was never uncovered and Sister Giulia wondered in the lightning way of idle thoughts if Sister Alba slept in her habit and then thought of how preposterous it was to be having that thought at this moment. Che possiamo fare? said Sister Rosario. What to do? Sister Rosario usually had an opinion of exactly what to do, but now, in a crisis, she was deferring to her superior. We cannot fight them, Sister Giulia said, speaking in English for George. No, no, the nuns mumbled, agreeing, even Sister Rosario. They must be at the dormitory, someone said. Yes, Sister Giulia said. I think this, too. Let us pray the door holds. They listened to the banging. Now and then a voice shouted, a man's voice. Sister Chiara whispered, coming from the back, The door must hold. It was bolted from the inside with a big steel beam. When the sisters put the girls to bed, they waited to hear the giant plank slide into place before saying good night. Andiamo, Sister Giulia said. We must not stay here, they would find us. Let us hide in the garden and wait. What else can we do? Everyone shuffled mouse-like down the back stairs. On the ground floor they crossed the tiled hallway past the canning rooms and closed door of the storage room and into the laundry past the tables and wooden shelves. Sister Alba was breathing heavily. Sister Rosario jangled the keys, unlocking the laundry, and they stepped outside to the cement walkway bordering the sunken garden. A clothesline hung nearby with a line of pale dresses followed by a line of pale T-shirts. Dark paths divided the garden in crosses, and in between were humped tomato plants and the darker clumps of coffee leaves and white lilies bursting like trumpets. A three-quarter moon in the western sky cast a gray light over all the foliage so it looked covered in talc. The nuns huddled against the far wall under banana trees. The wide leaves cast moonlit shadows. The banging, it does not stop, whispered Sister Chiara. Her hand was clamped over her mouth. They are trying very hard, Sister Alba said. We should have moved them, Sister Rosario said. I knew it. The headmistress replied in a calm tone. Sister, we cannot think of this now. They'd put up the outside fence two years ago, and last year they'd been given the soldiers. Government troops came, walking around campus with guns strapped across their chests, among the bougainvillea and girls in their blue uniforms. At night some were stationed at the end of the driveway passing through the empty field, some stood at the gate near the chapel. Then, a month ago, the army had a census taking and the soldiers were moved twenty kilometers north. Sister Giulia had pestered the captain to send the soldiers back. There was never more than a day's warning when the rumors of an attack would reach them, so the nuns took the girls to nearby homes for the night. They will be back, the captain said. Finally, last week, the soldiers returned. The girls slept, the sisters slept. Then came the holiday on Sunday. The captain said, They will be back at the end of the day. But they didn't return. They stayed off in the villages, getting drunk on sorghum beer. The Jeep had been out of fuel, so Sister Giulia took the bicycle to Atoile. From Atoile someone went all the way to Loro in Kamden to see if the soldiers were there. No sign of the army. She sent

a message to Salim Salee, the captain of the north, who was in Gulu. Must we close the school? she asked. No, do not close the school, he answered by radio. When she arrived back at St. Marys it was eight o'clock and pitch black and still nothing was settled. Sister Alba had the uneaten dinner there waiting for the soldiers. Sister Rosario had overseen the holiday celebrations and gathered the girls at the dorm for an early lights-out. The banging had now become muted. The garden where the nuns stayed hiding was still, but the banging and shouting reached them, traveling over the quadrangle lawn then the roof of their building and down into the enclosed garden. Across the leafy paths at the entrance doors they could see Georges shadow where he had positioned himself, holding a club. I don't hear any of the girls, said Sister Fiamma. No, I have not heard them, said Sister Giulia. They could make out each others faces, and Sister Giulias eyebrows were pointed toward one another, as they often were, in a triangle of concern. Whats burning? Sister Guarda pointed over the roof to a braid of red sparks curling upward. Its coming from the chapel, I think. They wouldnt burn the chapel. Sister, they murder children, these people. They heard the tinkling of glass and the banging stopped. Instead of being a relief the sound of only shouting of orders being given and the occasional sputtering of fire was more ominous. I still do not hear the girls, said Sister Chiara. She said it in a hopeful way. They waited for something to change. It seemed they waited a long time. The shouts had dropped to a low calling back and forth, and finally the nuns heard the voices moving closer. The voices were crossing the quadrangle toward the front gates. They were nearby. The nuns faces were turned toward George where he stood motionless against the whitewashed wall. Sister Giulia held the crucifix on her necklace, muttering prayers. The noise of the rebels passed. The sound grew dim. Sister Giulia stood. Wait, Sister Alba said. We must be sure they are gone. I can wait no longer. Sister Giulia took small steps on the shaded pathway and reached George. Are they gone? It is appearing so, George said. You remain here while I see it. No, George. She followed him onto the porches platform. They are my girls. He looked at her to show he did not agree, but he would not argue with the sister. Behind her he saw the pale figures of the other nuns moving across the garden like a fog. You walk behind me, he said. George unbolted the doors of the breezeway and opened them to the gravel driveway lit by the floodlights. They looked upon a devastation. The ground was littered with trash, burned sticks and bits of rubber and broken glass. Scattered across the grass of the quadrangle in the shadows were blankets and clothes. George and Sister Giulia stepped down, emerging like figures from a spaceship onto a new planet. In front of the chapel, the Jeep was burning with a halo of smoke. Dark smoke was also bellowing up in long tubes out of the smashed windows of the chapel. But she and George turned toward the dormitory. They could see a black gap in the side where the barred window had been. The whole frame had been ripped out and used as a ladder. Thats how theyd gotten inside. Bits of glass glittered on the grass. There were soda cans, plastic rope, torn plastic bags. The second dormitory farther down was still dark and still. Thank the Lord, that appeared untouched. Those were the younger ones. The girls..., Sister Giulia said. She had her hands out in front of her as if testing the silence. She saw no movement anywhere. We must look, George said. They stood at the gaping hole where the yanked window frame was leaning. The concrete around the frame was hacked away in chunks. One light shone from the back of the dormitory, the other bulbs had been smashed. From the bushes they heard a soft voice: Sister. Sister Giulia turned and bent down. Two girls were crouched in the darkness, hugging their nightshirts. You are here, Sister Giulia said, dizzy with gratitude. She embraced the girls, feeling their thin arms, their small backs. The smaller one it was Penelope stayed clutching her. You are safe, Sister Giulia said. No, Penelope said, pressing her head against her stomach. We are not. The other girl, Olivia Oki, rocked back and forth, holding her arm in pain. Sister Giulia gathered them both up and steered them out of the bushes into some light. Penelope kept a tight hold on her waist. Her face was streaked with grime and her eyes glassed over. Sister, they took all of us, Penelope said. They took all of you? She nodded, crying. Sister Giulia looked at George, and his face understood. All the girls were gone. The other sisters caught up to them. Sister Chiara embraced Penelope, lifting her. There, there, she said. Sister Fiamma was inspecting Olivia Okis arm and now Olivia was crying too. They tied us together and led us away, Penelope said. She was sobbing close to Sister Chiaras face. They came to know afterward that Penelope had been raped as she tried to run across the grass and was caught near the swing. She was ten years old. Sister Giulias lips were pursed into a tighter line than usual. George, she said, make sure the fire is out. Sister Rosario, you find out how many girls are gone. I am going to change. There is no time to lose. No more moving tentatively, no more discovering the damage and assessing what remained. She strode past Sister Alba, who was carrying a bucket of water toward the chapel. Sister Giulia re-entered the nuns quarters and took the stairs to her room. No lights were on, but it was no longer pitch black. She removed her nightdress and put on her T-shirt, then the light-gray dress with a collar. She tied on her

sneakers, thin-soled ones that had been sent from Italy. She hurried back down the stairs and across the entryway, ignoring the sounds of calamity around her and the smell of fire and oil and smoke. She went directly to her office and removed the lace doily from the safe under the table, turned the dial right, then left, and opened the thick, heavy door. She groped around for the shoebox and pulled out a rolled wad of bills. She took one of the narrow paper bags they used for coffee beans and put the cash in it then put the bag in the small backpack she removed from the hook on the door. About to leave, she noticed she'd forgotten her wimple and looked around the room, like a bird looking for an insect, alert and thoughtful. She went to her desk drawer, remembering the blue scarf there. She covered her hair with the scarf, tying it at her neck, hooking it over her ears. That would have to do. When she came out again she met with Thomas Bosco, the math teacher. Bosco, as everyone called him, was a bachelor who lived at the school and spent Christmas with the sisters and was part of the family. He stayed in a small hut off the chapel on his own. He may not have been so young, but he was dependable and they would call upon him to help jump-start the Jeep, replace a lightbulb or deliver a goat. Bosco, she said. It has happened. Yes, he said. I've seen. Sister Rosario came bustling forward with an affronted air. They have looted the chapel, she said. As usual she was making it clear she took bad news harder than anyone else. Bosco looked at Sister Giulias knapsack. You are ready? Yes. She nodded as if this had all been discussed. Let us go get our girls. Bosco nodded. If it must be, let us go die for our girls. And off they set. By the time they had left the gate, crossed the open field on the dirt driveway and were walking a path leading into the bush, the sky had started to brighten. The silhouette of the trees emerged black against the luminous screen. The birds had not yet started up, but they would any minute. Bosco led the way, reminding the sister to beware of mines. The ground was still dark and now and then they came across the glint of a crushed soda can or a candy wrapper suspended in the grass. A pale shape lay off to the side, stopping Sister Giulias heart for a moment. Bosco bent down and picked up a small white sweater. We are going the right way, she said. She folded the sweater and put it in her backpack, and they continued on. They did not speak of what had happened or what would happen, thinking only of finding the girls.

Revue de presse Wrenching. . . Suspenseful. . . By far her best novel. The New York Times Extraordinary. . . Panoramic. . . Poetic. . . Minot shows her readers that war zones cannot be contained within one country, or one region. When cruelty and violence reign, we are all at risk. NPR A book about the relativity of pain; the grace of forgiveness; and the essential unknowability of a lover. The Daily Beast A novel of quiet humanity and probing intelligence. . . Susan Minot takes huge questions and examines them with both a delicate touch and a clear-eyed, unyielding scrutiny. The New York Times Book Clear and searing. . . Pulls you in from the first page. . . A book that looks hard at trauma, love, and humanity. The Boston Globe Africa described in Minot's muscular, evocative, and unflinching prose offers itself up to Jane in all its beguiling beauty, its unremitting violence, and breaks her open like an egg. MORE Magazine Visually intense. . . Minot's writing is so potent and the story told so tragic, the novel sears the mind. New York Daily News Daring. . . Minot's cleanly sculpted prose and capacity to penetrate and open the mind and heart challenge us to step outside our comfort zone. Finally, there comes this realization: Esther and Jane aren't so different at all. We recognize their stories as ours. . . Minot succeeds, through her fictionalized version, in making us care as much as she does. O, The Oprah Magazine A haunting portrayal of two women. Vanity Fair When there is a story the world needs to know, does it matter who tells it, or just that it gets told? . . . Minot tells both stories with such harsh, lyrical beauty that neither is easy to forget. Grade: A-. Entertainment Weekly Hotly anticipated. . . Wins the reader's heart. Vogue Exquisitely poignant and painfully credible. . . [A] heart-rending story, with [an] honest and bleak view of the power of love to heal so much human wreckage. Minneapolis Star Tribune Exceptional. . . A fragile but unmistakable note of hope. Elle Gripping. . . Sensual. . . Immediate. . . Minot wants to do more than sound a drumbeat of atrocities. . . She wants to use literature to transmute a human horror into something that can be understood and in time healed. The Miami Herald Excellent, evocative. . . Thirty Girls sketches the landscape with impressionist strokes and then burrows in to view the cruelties people can visit on one other and themselves. The Seattle Times Thirty Girls conveys an important story that people need to hear. . . Esther is a stunning character whose strength and bravery is an inspiration to readers. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette A novel as raw, beautiful, and seemingly serendipitous as the politics, landscape, and culture of the sub-Saharan Africa it describes. Shelf Awareness