Responsibility

As children we learn about responsibility. Our parents, teachers and other adults show us how to be someone others can depend on. In most cases it is a gradual process where children are expected to be accountable for their actions and words a little more with each passing birthday. However, some children are forced to take on serious responsibilities much sooner than their peers. In the novel *A Long Walk to Water* by Linda Sue Park, the two main characters are eleven year old children who take on a lot of responsibility at a young age due to circumstances in their home country of Sudan. We can see this theme of responsibility in the actions of Nya and Salva as they face challenging situations.

The first example of responsibility is in chapter 4 when Nya has to take her little sister to the pond. As the oldest girl, Nya has to fetch water for the family. It is hard work that requires a certain amount of physical strength. Nya has to walk two hours to the pond, fill a large container with water and carry it back to her village. One day Nya’s mother asks her to take her five year old sister, Akeer, to the pond. “She needs to learn,” her mother said. (20) Nya does not want to take Akeer because she is too little and walks too slowly. However, Nya does as her mother asks because she knows her mother is right. Nya understands that girls are responsible for getting water for their families. She knows that Akeer will have to fetch water on her own someday, so Nya accepts the responsibility of teaching her younger sister.

A dramatic example of being responsible is in Salva’s story in chapter 13. After overcoming many obstacles and dangers as he fled the civil war in southern Sudan, Salva finally gets to Ethiopia. He lives in an overcrowded refugee camp for six years. One day Ethiopian soldiers come and force everyone out of the camp. Thousands flee and many die crossing the
Gilo River. Salva survives and realizes he must walk again, this time to a camp in Kenya.

“Crowds of other boys followed him. Nobody talked about it, but by the end of the first day Salva had become the leader of the group of about fifteen hundred boys. Some were as young as five years old.” (80) Salva, now seventeen years old, accepted the responsibility of leading these boys to safety. He guided them, organized them, kept them fed and encouraged them to keep walking. After a year and a half, they reached Kakuma camp in Kenya thanks to Salva’s willingness to take responsibility for this group of lost boys.

A third example is when young Salva takes responsibility for himself. In chapters 2 and 3 Salva has been separated from his family and he feels lost and afraid. He is walking away from the fighting with a group of refugees from his village. One evening the group finds a barn to sleep in, but the next morning Salva wakes up all alone. The group has abandoned him “because he was a child...who might tire easily and slow them down, and complain about being hungry, and cause trouble somehow.” (15) Salva cries and wonders what to do next. Rather than giving up, Salva leaves the barn and finds an old woman who gives him water, food and shelter for three days. He takes responsibility for getting himself through another day by seeking help wherever he can find it.

In these examples Nya and Salva learn about responsibility early in life. Nya is a girl her family can depend on to get water and take care of her younger sister. Salva first learns to take care of himself, and later, he becomes a capable leader who is responsible for the safety of fifteen hundred boys. In conclusion, Nya and Salva may not have had any choice about how or when they learned responsibility, yet both children proved themselves to be someone you can count on.