

BOOK REVIEW: *Machete Season – The Killers in Rwanda Speak*

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Machete Season: The Killers of Rwanda Speak was written by special correspondent and war reporter Jean Hatzfeld. It serves as a follow-up to his 2000 book, *Dans le nu de la vie*, which chronicles the personal narratives of Tutsi survivors of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. His readers responded that they were curious about the killers and their perspective during the genocide. Their curiosity inspired Hatzfeld to approach the genocide again, two years later, from the perspective of the killers. In *Machete Season*, for instance, Hatzfeld records the personal narratives of a gang of friends who became genocidaires. *Machete Season* won the essay category of the *Prix Femina* in 2003 and the *Prix Jossef Kessel* in 2004.

In *Machete Season*, Hatzfeld portrays the genocidaires as people and gives his readers a sense of who these killers are, including their life histories and personalities. Six years after the genocide, drawing from the accounts of prisoners convicted for their crimes during the genocide, Hatzfeld mediates the killers' realities. Hatzfeld explores their motivations for killing, their techniques and processes, and how the killing affected them. *Machete Season* is a collection of interviews, so readers receive accounts from the killers in their own words. The interviews touch upon basic and profound aspects of the genocide, ranging from the role of executioners and their understanding of the genocide to the killers' first murders and how they reacted to the violence. The interviews are arranged into thematic chapters, including: killing resembling farm life, the responses of wives and victims, the

rewards from looting, relations to the authorities, the international response and God during the genocide, punishment and forgiveness, and remorse and regrets. These themes reflect the conditions that enabled genocide and that maintained it. Obedience is a relevant topic here; reprisals for not supporting the genocidal purge explain partly why obedience was maintained. However, discussions of rewards from looting, the eagerness to kill, and pushing God aside during the genocide reveal the killers' dispositions toward discrimination and violence in some cases. They began sharpening their machetes in response to orders from their authorities, yet soon genocidaires engaged in atrocities independently and continued the one hundred days of killing.

Hatzfeld waits until several chapters in before introducing his readers to the personal backgrounds of his interview respondents. Rather than getting to know each interviewee from the beginning, Hatzfeld first introduces the genocide without connecting the violence to specific personalities. It is later that the readers begin to see how the killers are different from each other, and how their identity as genocidaires isn't enough to encapsulate who they are as people. Getting to know the killers and their personalities is essential for comprehending who they are as human beings. Knowing not only what the killers did, but who they are makes the genocide more "real" from an outsider's point of view. This is expressed by one of the killers: "The truth is not believable to someone who has not lived it in his muscles." It's also noteworthy that lying plays a considerable role in *Machete Season*. According to Hatzfeld, several of the killers lied about their involvement in the genocide and about the atrocities they committed. While the author's claim provides a deeper understanding of the interviews and the killers themselves, it also seems to violate the value of neutrality associated with journalism. Hatzfeld's assertion that some interviewees lied uncovered his own feelings toward some respondents and may, at times, be seen as an intrusion.

As a reader, you ask yourself how the extent of such cruelty is even possible. I wondered whether it was a collective loss of control, like a collective nightmare. I thought it was interesting that

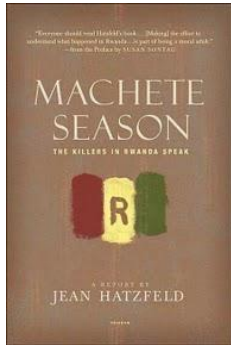
dreams were frequently discussed in interviews, especially since this provides another – unconscious – dimension of the killers. Many of these dreams were referred to in the chapter “Remorse and Regrets,” since nightmares and regrets arose in dreams and perhaps revealed the deeply unnatural state of affairs these genocidaires found themselves in during the 1994 genocide. One killer described his dream as follows:

Other nights dreaming tips into calamity. I see again the people I killed with my own hand. When that happens, every awful detail of blood and terror comes back: the mud, the heat of the chase, the colleagues... Only the cries are missing. These are silent killings, which seem slow but are as dreadful as before. My dreams in prison are of various kinds, sometimes somber, sometimes calm; perhaps they flow from the various situations of my life here, whether I am sick or in good health. Who can tell if they will change when I get out? My hope is they'll forget about me (p. 159).

This book helps us answer, or at least think about, some seemingly impossible questions: “Why did some Hutus kill their Tutsi neighbors?” and “How were they physically and mentally able to do this?” The truth is horrific, and thus the book is sometimes an overwhelming read. However, it gives you valuable insight into the circumstances that allow genocide to take place. Furthermore, the book demonstrates how those circumstances change your perception and your humanity. For instance, one respondent who was a young boy during the genocide said that “my eyes no longer gaze the same on the face of the world.” This book serves as a cornerstone for comprehending both the genocide of Rwanda and mass violence in general.

Although this book is disturbing to read, I agree with Susan Sontag’s review (as featured on the cover): “To make the effort to understand what happened in Rwanda is a painful task that we have no right to shrink – it is part of being a moral adult. Everyone should read Hatzfeld's book.” I have learned a lot from reading this book, and I will never forget it. I have learned the danger of human vulnerability, and that we all have the potential for becoming killers given circumstances that are unique to each individual and culture. This book gives you a strange feeling; you feel compassion for the killers and empathize with them on one page, but on the next page you find yourself despising them and hating

them for all the horrible things they did. These diverse emotions are why this book is very impressively written; it makes you face the varied dimensions of genocide, including the potential for violence within ourselves.



Book Information

Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak

Jean Hatzfeld (2006)

272 pp., Picador (reprint edition), \$16.00

Editor's note: Helena Veum was one of seven Webster University undergraduates who traveled to Rwanda during the summer of 2013. This book review was written to complement that hybrid study abroad experience.

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