

Colonel Étienne Perrin	114
Jessica	130
Part 4. <b>Murambi</b>	133

*Foreword: An Urn for the Dead,  
an Hourglass for the Living*

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In April 2004, when the infamous photos from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq appeared in U.S. and international media, I was introducing my class's next reading assignment, a not-yet-published translation of *Murambi: The Book of Bones*, by Senegalese journalist and novelist Boubacar Boris Diop. *Murambi* had been written to bear witness to the Rwandan genocide. It was now the tenth anniversary of those horrific ninety days in which perhaps a million people or more were maimed and killed, as the world stood by. Abu Ghraib was remote from *Murambi* in its causes and effects, but the cruelty that was perpetrated at the prison and the headiness of those who had the power to be cruel to other human beings had been produced by similar processes of demonization. I knew that *Murambi* was a book we must read.

What does a novel such as this bring to the awful violence of genocide that journalistic accounts and histories cannot? These forms of narrative are held to a well-known standard of truth. They are meant to establish and report facts, to offer an accurate and balanced, if not objective, representation of events. *Murambi* does contain such elements. It makes plain that the slaughter was premeditated and prepared and that it had external support. But it does not delve into pre-colonial and colonial history to explain the shifting relations of domination that helped consolidate the divisive identities of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa and fuel violent ethnic hatred. Nor does the novel propose the definitive and unambiguous an-

swers we may be looking for—Why did the slaughter take place? What was the chronology? Who shall we blame?

*Murambi*'s significance lies elsewhere. It does what a creative and transformative work alone can do. It distills this history and gives voice to those who can no longer speak—recovering, as best we can, the full, complex lives concealed in the statistics of genocide and rendering their humanity. In thinking about the gruesome murder of hundreds of thousands of people and this book—a frail object—we confront the enormous disproportion between the work of art, as beautiful and powerful as it may be, and the terrible events it symbolizes. Yet it is through the work of imagination and language that the novel reconstitutes those unique human beings, now lost to us, and allows them nonetheless to survive and to be heard. Their stories may lead us to reflect on the practice of evil and help us claim our very own humanity amidst the routine banality of violence, the numbed indifference or silent acquiescence of which we are all a part.

*Murambi* depicts and interweaves two moments: the atmosphere of menace as the genocide coalesces and unfolds and the aftermath in which Cornelius Uvimana, a Rwandan teacher who has lived abroad for twenty-five years, returns home to come to terms with this terrible history. The time, place, and mood of the genocide are created through a concert of voices. We readers simply “overhear” the thoughts of fictive victims and killers who lived through those terrifying and horrific days. We come away with a profound sense of the feelings that lay beneath the events—the “fear and anger,” as Diop has entitled the opening section. Then, with Cornelius's return, his rediscovery of childhood friends and the reliving of their shared memories, his visit to his uncle Siméon Habineza and the school at Murambi—the site of a particularly gruesome massacre—the novel opens a space of reckoning, calling on us readers, like Cornelius, to reflect and weigh the question of responsibility, to imagine a new future.

*Murambi* obviously does not condone what the murderers did in the name of ethnic nationalism, yet it presents their voices plainly, without prejudice or indignation, affording no moral superiority to

us who now observe in hindsight and from afar the unspeakable pain and loss of life. The novel's multiple voices are critical to a complex understanding of that time and place and the everyday logic of evil. We may read them also as a sign of the self-reproducing, never-ending spirals of violence; they intimate the complicated history that preceded the atrocities of 1994 and the ongoing repercussions of the genocide that continue to spill over Rwanda's borders.

Those ninety days in Rwanda are the focus of the novel, but in every sense the full story exceeds that frame, taking in us readers, too. Addressing a crowd of survivors, feverish to seek revenge, old Siméon insists: “You have suffered, but that doesn't make you any better than those who made you suffer. They are people like you and me. Evil is within each one of us. . . . you are not better than them.” These remarks are directed toward Hutu and Tutsi survivors. But they are surely meant for us readers also. *Murambi* is indeed a cautionary tale, an African story with wide application: what happened in Rwanda in 1994—the scapegoating, the murderous objectifying of “the others”—could happen here or anywhere. In the twentieth century it has happened—in Germany, in Cambodia, in Bosnia. . . . But *Murambi* insists also that the Rwandan genocide is more than a “parable” for those on the other side of the world or continent. It is already and from its beginnings *our* story, a story that implicates the rest of us. For even as the novel and its characters grapple with Rwandan responsibility, *Murambi* also points a finger at those who looked the other way—because Africans have always been portrayed as hopeless and expendable, perennially consumed by ancient “tribal” hatreds.

One of the most haunting voices of *Murambi* belongs to Michel Serumundo, a Tutsi who will be slaughtered. He says in the opening pages of the novel:

I've seen lots of scenes on television myself that were hard to take. Guys in slips and masks pulling bodies out of a mass grave. Newborns they toss, laughing, into bread ovens. Young women who coat their throats with oil before going to bed. “That way,” they say, “when the throat-slitters come, the blades

of their knives won't hurt as much." I suffered from these things without really feeling involved. I didn't realize that if the victims shouted loud enough, it was so I would hear them, myself and thousands of other people on earth, and so we would try to do everything we could so that their suffering might end. It always happened so far away, in countries on the other side of the world. But in these early days of April in 1994, the country on the other side of the world is mine.

Mindful of the awful challenge and responsibility in writing this particular work, Boris Diop has expressed the hope that his work of fiction will not betray the suffering of the Rwandans who agreed to tell him of the horrible things they saw and through which they lived. Cornelius echoes that hope when he reaches the conviction in the final lines of the novel "that the dead of Murambi, too, had dreams, and that their most ardent desire was for the resurrection of the living." This quiet and stunning novel, the voices of *Murambi*, call on us as readers to fulfill that hope, to resist the temptation of complacency. *Murambi* leaves us with this question: How do we live responsibly in our violent world?

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