

# A TIME FOR MACHETES & INTO THE QUICK OF LIFE

BY JEAN HATZFELD

REVIEWED BY ELLEN CLARKE

The events of the Rwandan genocide have generated the creation of a steady stream of non-fiction works; many of them devastating testimonials from foreign aid workers and Tutsi survivors. Generally absent within such publications have been the voices of the perpetrators, whose silences reflect the logistical *and* moral considerations that follow genocide.

In “A Time for Machetes”, French journalist Jean Hatzfeld delivers a compilation of disturbing testimonials from average Hutu participants: men who cut and clubbed their Tutsi neighbours to death during the early months of 1994. The accounts are arranged thematically and are all accompanied by Hatzfeld’s own insights and reflections, an arrangement that ensures no aspect is lost in its neighbouring content. An unfortunate consequence of this is the loss of individual identities and the emergence of a collective voice that dwarfs the speakers’ differences.



As the testimonials move to explore the organisation of the genocide the reader senses that truth has lost its purity as the killers all control their responses in different ways, some clearly fashioning their answers to please the listener. Their most noticeable likeness is devastating; none of the men are genuinely (and continuously) horrified by their involvement in the genocide or the lasting sting of their actions. Any reader will, at some point, feel lost and repulsed by the unremitting dehumanisation of death that tars the pages. The endless hunting analogies are chilling and the interchangeability of the words ‘cutting’ and ‘killing’ inspire open-mouthed reading.

As the men begin to discuss the broader issues of forgiveness and life after genocide, a distressing trend emerges. All hold self-indulgent beliefs about repentance; to some, clemency is their right and forgiveness may be as simple as offering token kindness to a neighbour or surrendering to God. Astonishingly, some suggest that the challenges they have faced during exile or imprisonment can be measured against the suffering of their Tutsi neighbours. At the cessation of the interviews, Hatzfeld surmises that “the killers worry only about

their own fates and essentially feel no compassion for anybody but themselves”.



Sister to “A Time for Machetes”, “Into the Quick of Life” stuns its reader with a collection of testimonials drawn from ordinary Tutsi survivors. Men and women of all ages and backgrounds walk their thoughts back through the marshes to rouse their heartbreaking memories.

For the reader, it is such a privilege to hear these stories – all of which tell us that pain and strength are immeasurable. “Into the Quick of Life”, though similar to many books of its kind, brings us closer to the genocide than “A Time with Machetes”. The survivors are more credible in their roles of historians, as they do not speak from the complex vantage point of the killers. Hatzfeld’s commentary is minimal, as quite simply, the survivor’s stories stand alone.

Through the publication of these extraordinary books, Hatzfeld has thoughtfully harnessed and protected the voices of genocide. Writings like this service the world as they fracture the horror of genocide by bringing it into the living rooms of a public that *needs* to know.



Olivier Roller’s portrait of Jean Hatzfeld reproduced here with permission of the French photographer – <http://olivier.roller.free.fr/contact.html>