

BOOK REVIEW

Hélène Dumas. *Sans ciel ni terre: Paroles orphelines du génocide des Tutsis (1994–2006)*. Paris: Editions la Découverte, 2020. 200 pp. Glossary. Bibliography. Notes. Photos. \$30.65. Paper. ISBN: 978-2348057892.

Sans ciel ni terre: Paroles orphelines du génocide des Tutsis (1994–2006) by Hélène Dumas draws on the testimonies of 105 genocide survivors who were children five to fifteen years old in 1994; they originally wrote the texts in Kinyarwanda in 2006, twelve years after the genocide took place. Their accounts of what they saw and felt as children are frank, startlingly graphic, and painful. AVEGA (the genocide widows' association) deserves credit for conducting this careful exercise in memory, which was supported by an unnamed Rwandan clinical psychology professor. The young people reflect on their lives before, during, and after the genocide. This before-during-after divide also structures Dumas' book. What come through are the taste, smell, and feel of death, when killing was a job carried out by neighbors and former friends. The language is raw and at times hard to stomach; it shines a light on the trials and tribulations of those who were children in 1994 and how they survived (sometimes barely) for twelve years afterward. Pre-genocide Rwanda is recalled as a land of milk and honey, though some also recall ritual humiliations of Tutsi children in schools, presaging the genocide.

Putrefaction, predators, scavengers, dogs, vultures, killers feasting on cattle; the sections dealing with the genocide itself depict it as an enormous, macabre—metaphorical and literal—dance on the bodies of the dead. These children survived by hiding under corpses of family members, in trees, marshlands, and even latrines. Some were tricked, and occasionally they were helped. In a country as closely surveilled as Rwanda, there was almost nowhere to hide, as familiar people turned into hunters. With dogs, whistles, checkpoints, machetes, and guns, the Hutu majority inflicted cruel humiliations, sexual violence, and torture before delivering death in front of these children. The survivors are walking miracles, who following the genocide were cruelly taunted for staying alive. After 1994, these children were denied their own property, and with the Gacaca trials, attacks increased on survivors in general, as the last remaining Tutsi witnesses of the genocide.

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By 2006, the profound material and psychic damage done to genocide orphans had barely started to be repaired. It sounds as if almost nobody really cared for those who tried to return home, to find neighbors who mocked them and had taken over their fields. Some became domestic slaves; one young girl was forced to flee to Congo with her “protector.” For many the trauma was so deep they periodically lost their minds. Their accounts also speak of lack of food, shelter, and moral support. Sometimes, they refer to themselves as walking dead. Orphans care for other orphans, since orphanages and adoption are viewed as “colonial” institutions in post-genocide Rwanda. One or two testimonies refer to the relief of finding proper psycho-social or financial support. Yet surely the well-being of genocide survivors is a litmus test for post-genocide Rwanda as a fair and peaceful society. When some accounts recall how neighbors reburied the bodies of dead family members, denying them a proper burial, this reveals an ugly underbelly of post-genocide Rwandan society that even the few acts of heroism and care that are mentioned cannot fully redeem. Several accounts describe how alone these survivors feel, in the world, and in Rwanda.

As a historian, H el ene Dumas was no doubt aware of the inherent importance of bringing this collection of testimonies from those who were child survivors to a wider audience. (Dumas talks about her book here on French TV: France Culture, “Rwanda: le g enocide   hauteur d’enfants,” 20.12.2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9YcLxUngXY/>). Had she co-authored with a Rwandan psycho-social expert, perhaps these testimonies “discovered” in the CNLG (National Centre for the Fight against Genocide) in Kigali might have been interpreted even more sensitively. Dumas quotes a friend, noting: “The interesting archives are always in a disorganized state” (11), which sounds a little like self-justification. I would also have liked to hear more from Dumas as a historian. She occasionally strays into socio-psychological interpretations, which are not always merited or helpful. One example is her repeated reference to Tutsi children as having “internalised” bestial images of themselves. My view would be that, on the contrary, these testimonies show great awareness of the crime of being treated as outside of humanity, as “bare” animal life. I would not view the frequent prism of bestiality and animal life as internalization of Hutu animal stereotypes of Tutsis, but as expressions of the depth of these young survivors’ past trauma.

A few brave Rwandan souls have worked hard to help genocide survivors recover, and I would have liked Dumas to acknowledge their work to a greater extent. One was the Rwandan psychiatrist Professor Neeson Munyandamutsa (mentioned only in a footnote, his name misspelled, near the end of the book). Such missed opportunities are a great pity. Also, what does the phrase “genocidal utopia,” which is repeated several times, actually mean? There is growing awareness that more academic work on Rwanda should be done by and in collaboration with Rwandan scholars. (Felix Mukwiza Ndahinda et al., “Rwandan researchers are finally being centred in scholarship about their own country,” *The Conversation*, May 25, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/rwandan-researchers-are-finally-being-centred-in-scholarship-about-their->

own-country-183142). I was not clear if Dumas wrote this book exclusively for a French-speaking public in “the West.” Overall, the book works, and as I repeatedly picked it up, read it, then put it down, a few pages later, there was a great deal to reflect on. The startling quality of the testimonies written by Tutsi children who experienced the genocide make this study of great potential interest to genocide scholars, trauma experts, and those interested in what the world does to children. The frank realism of childhood memories helps too in countering the persistent denial of genocide.

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