

Strength in What Remains

By Tracy Kidder, 2009

When Deogratssis took the author with him, back to Barundi in 2006, it was to visit the rural area where Deo grew up before immigrating to New York with \$200 in his pocket in 1994. Deo taught Kidder to never mention the dead by name while in Barundi. While in America they try to remember, he said, but “here in Burundi they try only to forget.”

Deo knew absolutely no one when he arrived in New York with a one-way ticket and a commercial visa, both supplied by a rich friend from neighboring Rwanda. The friend ran a coffee export firm, and somehow Deo convinced immigration authorities that he should be admitted. He knew no one, however, and quickly gravitated to one of the then slummiest parts of Harlem. When that became too dangerous for him, Deo camped, homeless, in Central Park for the next few months.

Deo got an abusive job delivering groceries from a local market by pushcart to doormen at rich homes along Park Avenue, etc., but the good tippers were always assigned to other delivery people. All but destitute, he struggled from gross malnutrition, complicated, apparently, with parasites within his intestines, and growing dental problems for which he had no money to obtain help.

Eventually, Deo began to learn a little English to go with his good French, and he acquired several friends. They helped him immensely, eventually getting him into ESL classes at Columbia University, which in time got him into credit-earning classes in Columbia, including Philosophy and, eventually, a Bachelor’s degree. Deo had actually been a medical student in Rwanda, in a primitive school there.

The basic style of the book is “flashbacks” to Deo’s terrible ordeal in Africa, superimposed on his growing knowledge and familiarity with America. When the genocide hit, Deo trekked for hundreds of miles through his homeland, and described the ultimate horror of hundreds of thousands of first Hutus, the majority, and then **many** hundreds of thousands of Tutsis.

Every manner of slaughter was employed, most notably the machete, with limbs and heads topped off all comers. If the men were away, their wives and children’s were ritualistically slaughtered. If the men were present, they were slaughtered first, ideally in front of their horrified families.

Back in New York, Deo had developed a few American friends and they helped him first through his degree at Columbia, and then, with the aid of Paul Farmer, (see Mountains Beyond Mountains), Deo made it into Dartmouth Medical School. Later, after going home to visit he began a campaign to build small hospitals in some very remote areas.

Kidder seems to leave lots of things hanging in this book, and certainly doesn’t presume to weave any answers into the story about the reasons for the genocide. He points out that first the Germans and then the Belgian’ Colonists used the animal-owning Tutsis to control the much more numerous Hutus who were repeatedly subjected to great depravation over many decades.

Even when worldwide aid was delivered to Rwanda and Burundi, that aid itself was largely gobbled up by a small percentage of the population who supposedly controlled its distribution.

A few supplementary pages at the end of the book contained many interesting facts of an historical nature, but were nearly what they could have been with very little more effort.