

Fixing Blame

by Michael O'Donnell

Review of *Machete Season:
The Killers in Rwanda Speak*
by Jean Hatzfeld.
Farrar, Straus, & Giroux,
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To date, the best literature on the Rwandan genocide of 1994 has focused on the failure of the international community to intervene and stop the majority Hutu from hacking to death the minority Tutsi. For instance, Michael Barnett's *Eyewitness to a Genocide* lays blame on bureaucrats in the United Nations for withholding information from member-states. Samantha Power's *A Problem from Hell* damns the United States for withdrawing its support for peacekeeping just when things heated up. Philip Gourevitch, in *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*—perhaps the best book on the genocide—pillories the French for their scandalous political and military support of the Hutu.

But Jean Hatzfeld, a French journalist, seeks moral accountability in more obvious quarters: from the butchers themselves. His extraordinary new book, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak*, presents his interviews with ten Hutu friends from rural Rwanda who took up machetes in April 1994 and helped cut down five of every six Tutsis in their district. The men were prisoners at the time of the interviews, serving sentences and in one case awaiting execution. The latter was a local leader of the *inter-ahamwe*, the Hutu militia that enlisted citizens to join the melee, but the rest were simple farmers. One was a Catholic deacon. Another has a Tutsi wife. What drove these average people and countless others like them beyond all boundaries of humanity?

The answers are maddening. Several of the profiled killers, anxious to avoid the jibes of bloodthirsty friends, were pulled along by simple peer pressure. Others, spurred to action in the uproar that followed the assassination of their Hutu president, decided to keep at it because of the "beautiful" idea of "complete success." None expressed a real hatred for Tutsis, save perhaps the oldest of the group, who blames the killings on the victims for not fleeing the country. But Hatzfeld does detect in his subjects a mistrust and resentment of Tutsis, based largely on groundless stereotypes inherited from previous generations, that mirrors European anti-Semitism in the 1920s and '30s.

The killers' matter-of-fact descriptions of daily life during the summer of 1994 will prove too much for some readers. Killing (or "hunting" or "cutting") was a welcome change of pace from farm work. The men ate hearty breakfasts for their long days chasing down Tutsis, and expected sex from their wives on returning—if they hadn't already gang-raped their fill that day. Looting was a boon, affording liquor and meat for parties that howled into the evenings. In a nearly unbearable passage, we learn of fathers teaching youngsters on the machete, using corpses or Tutsi children for practice.

The demeanor of the group members often speaks more than their words. While the genocide's survivors, whom Hatzfeld interviewed for another book, weep freely and lose control when reliving the past, the killers speak in an impassive monotone. Most express remorse only in hopes of an earlier release. Few have nightmares. Hatzfeld, who mostly contains his outrage, at times justifiably explodes at their "overpowering" egocentrism, asking, "Are their victims truly so absent from their nightmares? . . . To what do they owe the indulgence of their unconscious minds?" While certain of the killers are less strident than others, by the end the reader loathes them all.

Hatzfeld arranges the interviews by topic and intersperses them with lyrical reflections and bits of context, providing just the right amount of narrative to relieve the reader from the killers' ugliness. His opening chapter sets a tone of dread with its description of "an endless stream of men" walking to a gathering point early one morning in April. His legal judgment is less keen: he suggests, by way of comparison, that the 1995 Bosnian massacre at Srebrenica was not a genocide because male but not female Muslims were slaughtered. This ignores that genocide includes acts designed to destroy an ethnic group in whole *or in part*, a standard Srebrenica unquestionably meets. But putting aside this misstep, Hatzfeld has produced a powerful and highly important book. The world's failure to intervene in Rwanda is inexcusable, but blame belongs first of all with these monsters.