

“BROWN BAG LUNCH TALK” AT WALLA WALLA COLLEGE, FEBRUARY 1999

By David James Duncan

I'd like to talk briefly about the very close link between fiction—what I do—and faith—what we all do. Fiction and faith are, in my view, symbiotic, and mutually strengthening. To explain how this is the case, is, I suspect, at least a three-part process.

1. How Faith Can Become a Complete Lie

I'll be very brief on the first one—because we all experience it so often. And why mess around with examples of it from pissants of faith like me? The classic case is the Rock himself: Simon Peter. Here is a man—the foundation of the entire Christian tradition—who once stepped out of a boat onto deep water at the Son of God's gracious invitation, performed a miracle of faith for a second or two, but then proceeded to earn his nickname—by sinking like a rock. Peter flailed as he sank, cried out for help—“Lord save me!”—and a hand grabbed him and helped him scramble, terrified, back on board ship. The hand was Christ's.

But that episode was nothing. In a second story, which takes place on dry land, in the night, Peter sinks far faster, far deeper. Warming himself at a fire, while behind a nearby wall soldiers are torturing the very one who'd saved him from the waves, the one to whom he'd pledged his love and life, Peter is accused of guilt by association. And again, he plummets like stone: “I do not know that man,” he lies. Peter flees the fire. He weeps with bitter shame and regret. Yet when he is recognized by another enemy of his Lord, the poor guy cowers and sinks *again*: “I do not know that man.” Three times this happens. Three times, the Rock's faith becomes a cowardly, self-saving lie.

I believe Peter may be the Rock *because* of those lies. I believe he's the Rock because we all live each day between the paradox of his two cries: “Lord, save me!” and “I do not know that man.” Peter was nothing but a human being, like all of us. Who better to serve as the first great believer in this oh-so-human tradition?

Even St. Peter's faith can be a lie.

In other words, perhaps: Lord, I believe, help though my unbelief.

2. How Lying Has Nothing to Do with the Creation of Fiction

When fiction is truly fiction, lying has absolutely nothing to do with it. Lying and fiction are two different things. What's more, I don't believe we can incarnate our faith with much success at all, without living lives rich in the creation of certain fictions.

A strange sounding idea. I've got my work cut out for me here. But let's try the idea on for size.

Let me state, first of all, my belief that when wordmakers of any kind—fiction writers, poets, preachers, politicians, ad-people, rhetoricians, science writers—claim to be serving the truth by telling lies, you can be certain of one thing: they're lying.

As a voluntary, professional fiction writer, and an involuntary, amateur liar, I'm here to tell you that fiction making and lying are two very different things. Lying requires imaginative effort; the writing of fiction requires imaginative effort: this seems to cause the confusion of the two. But it's a pitiful confusion. To write *War and Peace* required imagination. To plan a bank robbery requires imagination. It should not be necessary to explain even to Senator Jesse Helms that this does not make Tolstoy any kind of bank robber.

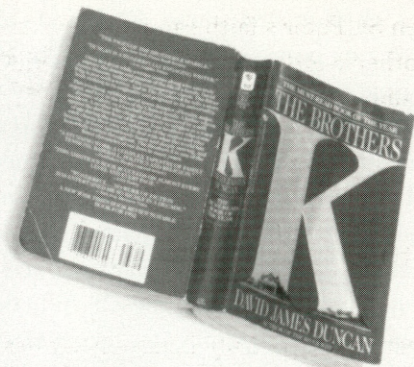
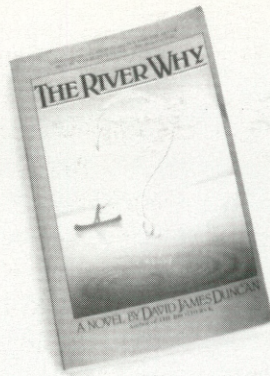
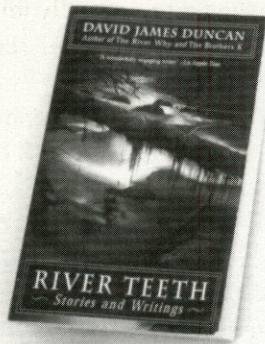
War and Peace is a work of fiction—an imaginative invention—but it is also, from beginning to end, a form of truth-telling. Lying is also an imaginative invention—but *only on the part of the liar*. What a huge difference! In reading *War and Peace* we share so fully in Tolstoy's invention that we forget he's inventing, just as Tolstoy did as he wrote. In hearing a lie, we don't share in the liar's invention at all: the recipient of a lie believes the words of the lie to be true. Only the liar knows he's lying. This a cruelty inherent in all lies. There is no corresponding cruelty in fiction. To lie is to place upon the tongue or the page words carefully designed to

suppress, sidestep, or kill the truth—usually for the sake of some self-serving agenda. This is neither the method nor the purpose of fiction writing.

Another difference between fiction and lying: lying is ugly. A lie can be artful, as can a work of fiction, but it cannot be beautiful, as fiction can. A lie can *appear* beautiful. But the instant someone believes a beautiful-looking lie, that someone has been betrayed—and betrayal is ugly. Remember Robert MacNamara's late-sixties arguments about the need for American troops and weapons to protect Southeast Asian peasants from communism? MacNamara's argument had, at the time, a definite altruistic shine, borrowed from a truly altruistic cause: the Second World War. Some three million Vietnamese and Americans died as a result of MacNamara's ripped-off altruistic argument. Then, in a book published in 1995, MacNamara admitted that his argument was based on lies; admitted that he knew, as early as 1965, that the so-called "domino theory" was a sham, that our country was in no way threatened by North Vietnam, that the puppet Saigon government was hopelessly corrupt, that the war was not winnable, that it was little more than a politco-military experiment with human guinea pigs. Yet *still* he let his argument go on shining, let the young men of my generation, the guys from my high school, go on killing and dying for a lie.

That is betrayal. That's the ugliness of a lie. And MacNamara's was far from unique in its stunning power. Mao Tse-tung's "people's" lie, Stalin's Soviet lie, the British raj's and American Manifest Destiny's "civilizing" lies, the conquistadors' and Inquisition's "Christianizing" lies—the list is terrifying and endless and brings out another difference between lying and fiction making: all the tens of thousands of fiction writers put together are nothing, in terms of destructive power, compared to even a half-dozen of history's greatest liars.

A great fiction writer, Anton Chekhov, once said that lying is dirty. He added that it's worse to lie in a work of fiction than in a conversation. Chekhov didn't elucidate, but I believe I understand: conversation is quick and often chaotic, so a spoken lie is frequently just



a fleeting impulse. But fiction writing is an act of concentration: the lie written into a fiction is therefore carefully calculated.

In a truth-telling work of fiction, author and reader begin with a clear agreement. Both know that the fiction is an imaginative construct, which the reader is free to reconstruct. The fiction is like a symphonic score: the author is the original composer, the reader the later conductor, and the imaginations of both are the orchestra. Author and reader hear the very same music. In lying there is no such sharing; there is a conscious perpetrator and an unconscious victim. The unconsciousness and helplessness of their victims gives liars something in common with necrophiliacs and pedophiles. If that isn't ugly, what is?

3. How the Making of Fiction is Crucial to the Enactment of Our Day-to-Day Faith

There is a common delusion—fed most savagely by television and big media these days—holding that what we experience firsthand is “true” and “real,” and that what we merely imagine is “untrue” and “unreal.” This is dangerously oversimplified. The truth is that firsthand experience can, and often does, lie. And imaginary experiences can open us to truth that would remain inaccessible unto death if we had to wait for firsthand experience to teach this truth to us.

Compassion is a beautiful word in its true sense—which means “to suffer with another.” But compassion is seldom born of firsthand experience. Most often, compassion is born from a distance, in a preliminary emotional state we call “empathy.” And empathy often begins with a purely imaginative act—an act of fiction-making:

What would it be like to be this black girl sitting in front of me? a little white girl wonders at school one

morning. Her imagination sets to work. She starts making fiction. In her mind, she becomes the black girl; fictitiously dons her clothes, her accent, her skin; walks down the street with her friends after school, goes home to her house and family, eats their food, lives that life. In the midst of her imaginative effort, the white-girl-turned-black finds herself sensitized to every nuance of skin color; she might also hear words that she herself uses—words as innocent as, say, “colored,” “black,” and “white.” Yet how different they suddenly sound. And when her imaginary game is over, certain words will *still* sound different. Empathy has begun. Compassion has begun. Yet the white girl has experienced nothing “real.” She has discovered some truth *via fiction*.

I give a lot of readings and lectures around the country, and answer lots of questions afterward. Once every few crowds I can bank on somebody wanting to know which events in one of my novels were “made up” and which “really happened.” This person is usually a bit nervous, as they sometimes admit, because my story has touched them, yet my story was fiction. To be touched by fiction, by something “unreal,” makes some people feel haunted—feel as if they’ve been violated, however, enjoyably, by something that has no physical being—so they want me to tell them which fictitious events *did* have physical being, in hopes that maybe the cute bits, the parts they got a bang out of, will survive this de-fictionalization process and they can still feel legitimately banged.

My reaction to such people is to tell them, in the gentlest words possible, that theirs is a completely wrongheaded approach to literature, if not to life itself. Fiction is everywhere. There is no escape. A dollar bill is a work of fiction. A credit card is a wildly imaginative and dangerous work of fiction. It is sheer fiction that we must drive our cars down the right side of the road, yet if we forget the fiction and choose the left, we die. Forget to reverse the lane choice in England or Australia, and you die for obeying the *wrong* fiction.

We go to the symphony and revel in works of pure fiction—veritable novels built of nothing but

mathematics, rhythm, and sound. Rock and roll, folk songs, dirges, rap, polkas—every piece of music is a purely imaginative, “unreal” construct. Every painting painted and sculpture sculpted, ditto. A lump of clay fashioned into the likeness of a human will never be human in the “hard copy” TV show sense. It is subhuman to expect it to be. The imagination and its works are something to revel in, not to fear or to feel cheated by. To be human is to immerse oneself in fictions—to find navels in oranges, lips on cups, fire in fastballs, meat in a wooden bat. To be human is to be slain by jokes, screwed by lawyers, hammered by beverages, and burned by the IRS. To be human is to enter bellies of beasts, fish mouths of rivers, make heads of state into butts of jokes.

It will never be literally ourselves that we see in a mirror, yet if the nonliteral self in the mirror has dirt on its face, our face, too, will remain dirty until we wash the reflected dirt away. Fiction, at its best, is a mirror made of words that *reflects* what humans and reality are. Some fictions strive for realistic reflection. Some are funhouse mirrors and deliberately distort. A lie, however, is no kind of mirror at all: it is a nonentity, a

complete nothingness made of empty words that nevertheless claim to reflect what is real.

The words *imagination* and *prevarication* are in no way synonymous. Lying requires imaginative prowess, certainly. But faith, love, and truth-telling require much, much more. And now we’ve come to my punch line: we need fiction to incarnate our faith. To be a Buddhist, a Vedantist, a Christian, Muslim, is to immerse oneself in unstinting imaginative effort. Christ’s words, “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” for example, demand an arduous imaginative act. These peculiar words order me, as I look at you, to imagine that I am seeing not you but me, and then to treat this imaginative me, alias you, as if you *are* me! And for how long? Till the day I die! Christ orders anyone who’s serious about him to commit this “Neighbor = Me” fiction until they forget, for good and all, which of the two of themselves to cheat in a business deal or punch in a fight or abandon in a crisis or shoot in a war—at which point their imaginative act, *fiction-making*, will have turned Christ’s bizarre words into a reality, and they’ll be saying with Mother Teresa, “I see Christ in every woman and man.”

The attempt to “imagine thy neighbor as thyself” is the great gift of literature. The attempt to imagine our neighbors is perhaps the only way we’ll ever begin to master Christ’s command to empathize with and love those annoying buffoons, our neighbors. Our first attempts at such a love are, at best, sheer fiction. But some of us, through a steady flow of words and actions that incarnate what initially feels like empty fiction, eventually turn this act of fiction-making into our daily reality. Mother Teresa, for example.

Ernest Hemingway, of all people, once made a wonderfully spiritual statement. “Make it up so truly,” he said, “that later, it will happen that way.”

I love this so much I’m going to say it once more: “Make it up so truly that later, it will happen that way.”

This is great advice—dare I say, Christ-like advice—not just for those practicing a rare art form known as fiction-writing, but for anyone trying to live an honest life, love a neighbor, seek the Truth itself.

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David James Duncan graduated from Portland State University and then took a long apprenticeship of manual labor combined with fiction writing. He moved lawns, drove delivery truck and produced two novels: *The River Why*, *The Brothers K*, and a book of essays, *River Teeth*. He now lives in Lolo, Montana where he writes, fishes, and hangs out with the local intelligensia and artists.

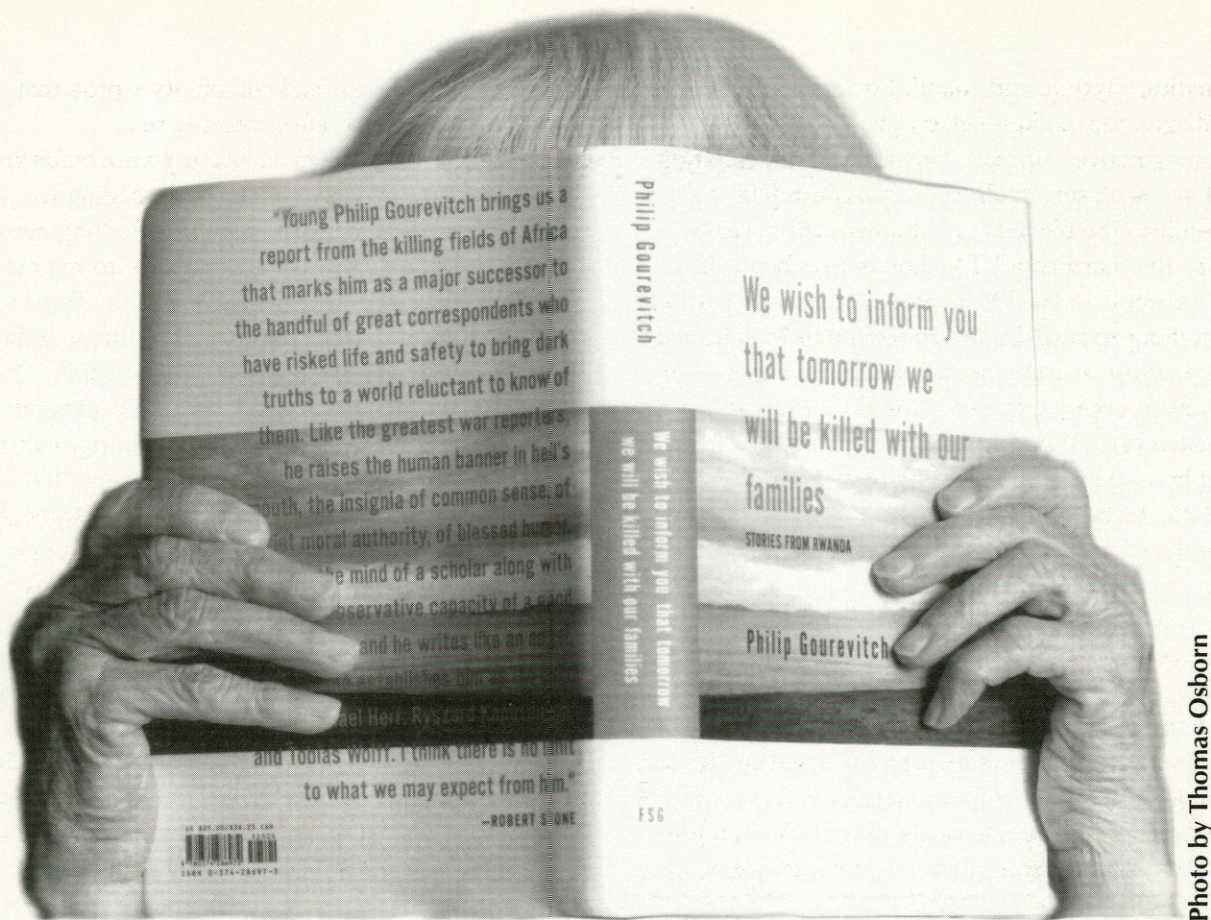


Photo by Thomas Osborn

We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda. By Philip Gourevitch. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999; 356 pages; \$25.00.

Reviewed by Donald R. McAdams

This is a very disturbing book. It does not make me proud to be a human being or a citizen of the United States. Philip Gourevitch, a young staff writer at *The New Yorker*, spent nine months in Rwanda between May 1995 and April 1998 visiting places of slaughter and interviewing large numbers of Rwandans who survived or participated in the horrors of 1994. His report, grounded in wide reading of published and unpublished works, is journalism at its best: thorough, focused, understandable, and compelling.

We Wish to Inform You may lack balance, but then how does one be fair to Hutu Power, the political movement that, following the death of President Juvénal Habyarimana in a mysterious plane crash on April 6, 1994, mobilized up to one million Hutus to murder at least eight hundred thousand Tutsis in just one hundred days? And how does one be fair to the international community for allowing this to occur?

With full knowledge of what was happening, the Western powers did nothing to stop the slaughter. Then they actively tilted toward Hutu Power, supporting Hutu refugee border camps in Zaire with more than a billion dollars of aid. These camps were nothing less than a rump genocidal Hutu Power state. Hutu militia from the camps continued to slaughter Tutsis until the army of the new Rwandan government closed them down in Novem-

ber 1996. The ensuing civil war in Zaire led to the overthrow of Mobutu Sese Seko, another longtime African dictator that the West had propped up.

The killing in Rwanda was low-tech, performed largely by machetes imported from China specifically for the purpose of slaughtering Tutsis. The killers were mostly neighborhood militias organized by local municipal authorities. Preparations included developing lists of Tutsis and moderate Hutus and learning how to use the machete most effectively. Tutsis were hunted down and killed by neighbors, sometimes even family members. Many were hacked to death at roadblocks or slaughtered in churches where they had gathered for safety. Workers killed colleagues. Doctors killed patients. Schoolteachers killed pupils. Everyone had a responsibility to kill.

The killers were methodical and seemed to enjoy their work. Many took tea breaks to refresh themselves from the hard labor of butchering humans and frequently preferred torture and slow death over efficient murder. One favored method of killing was called "cutting down to size." Taller Tutsis had their arms and legs cut off and were left to bleed to death.

Gourevitch does not dwell on the horror. When he does describe a killing, his prose is commendably lean. The images of purposeful, brutal death, however, are heart wrenching and unforgettable.

One man begged the Hutu militiamen not to dismember his family. Members of the militia instead allowed him to throw his children, alive, down a latrine over forty feet deep. Then he and his wife were thrown in. Three years later Gourevitch could still see the bones.

For a Seventh-day Adventist, the massacre at Mugonero is especially unforgettable. Here, according to witnesses, at the headquarters of the Adventist mission, the president of the mission, Pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, and his son Dr. Gerard Ntakirutimana, worked with the local municipal authorities to organize the slaughter of up to two thousand Tutsis.

Gourevitch takes the title of his book from a letter that seven Adventist pastors wrote to Pastor Ntakirutimana. By April 12, 1994, Tutsis packed the Adventist mission—a large church, small chapel, hospital complex, and nursing school. Dr. Ntakirutimana refused to treat the sick and wounded because they were Tutsis and evacuated all Hutus. The refugees could see Pastor Ntakirutimana and his son driving around the mission with Hutu militiamen and members of the Presidential Guard.

On April 15, seven Tutsi pastors who had assumed leadership of the flock learned that the hospital would be attacked the next morning. They advised the refugees

that all would die, and then wrote the following letter to their president.

Our dear leader, Pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana,
How are you! We wish you to be strong in all these problems we are facing. We wish to inform you that we have heard that tomorrow we will be killed with our families. We therefore request you to intervene on our behalf and talk with the Mayor. We believe that, with the help of God who entrusted you the leadership of this flock, which is going to be destroyed, your intervention will be highly appreciated, the same way as the Jews were saved by Esther.
We give honor to you. (42)

Pastor Ntakirutimana's response as reported by one survivor was: "Your problem has already found a solution. You must die." Another remembered the words differently: "You must be eliminated. God no longer wants you" (28).

On April 16, militiamen and local citizenry chanting the slogan "eliminate the Tutsis" attacked the church, chapel, hospital complex, and nursing school with guns, grenades, and machetes. In the evening tear gas was used to discover survivors. Those who cried were hacked to death. Survivors saw Dr. Ntakirutimana mixing with the killers, and Pastor Ntakirutimana's car was seen passing the hospital and stopping near his office.

We Wish to Inform You cannot avoid some stories like this. Gourevitch wants readers to see the work of genocide up close. But he makes no attempt to describe the genocide comprehensively with supporting names, places, and statistics. He does not prepare the reader for the coming of genocide with a thorough review of Rwandan history or an analysis of Rwandan politics. Nor does he show how the mostly Tutsi Rwandese Patriotic Front, which first invaded Rwanda from Uganda in 1990, managed to defeat the Rwandan army and bring an end to the genocide. But he does give enough background to place his stories in context and make them understandable.

We Wish to Inform You is not a political or military history of Rwanda during the 1990s, or even a history of the genocide. It is Gourevitch's first-person story of his travels and interviews in Rwanda and his attempt to understand how genocide could happen. His story flashes backward and forward, and through the words of survivors and killers shows what it was like to be in

Rwanda in 1994 and experience the horrible reality of one people rather cheerfully murdering another. The question that haunts Gourevitch and will haunt his readers is: How could this happen?

There are no satisfying answers. Tribal history played a role. So did a racist myth fostered by Europeans that the tall, light-skinned, pastoral Tutsis, with their narrow noses and thin lips, descended from Shem, while the short, dark, flat-nosed, and thick-lipped Hutu farmers were descendants of Ham. German and then Belgian colonialism exacerbated tribal differences. Tutsis were favored and told they were a superior race. Hutus were exploited and told they were inferior.

Independence after World War II and the Cold War added other burdens. The West supported elections in Rwanda, which meant Hutu power. And the Cold War required the West, or so it thought, to prop up anti-Communist regimes. So Hutu power became the political movement Hutu Power. President Habyarimana, a relatively moderate Hutu, became the front for Hutu Power. And Tutsis became the victims of repeated, widespread political violence. The West objected, but continued to support Habyarimana.

Another explanation for the genocide is that Rwanda had a long, almost overpowering tradition of authority. Leaders were supposed to lead. Followers were expected to follow. So, if the government said Hutus had a duty to kill the hated Tutsi cockroaches, the Tutsis were considered cockroaches and marked for death. Note the deference of the Adventist pastors to Pastor Ntakirutimana. Note how passively so many Tutsis accepted death.

Still there is no answer, especially for the West. Leaders of Hutu Power had planned the genocide for years and people throughout Rwanda knew it was coming. When the killing began, radio announcers broadcast daily encouragement to Hutus to leave no grave half-full, to take no pity on women or children, and to go here or there because more hands were needed to complete a large killing job.

The West knew exactly what was happening and did nothing quite consciously and purposefully. A United Nations force had been in Rwanda since 1993 to support a peace agreement between the Rwandan government and the Rwandese Patriotic Front. The commander, Maj. Gen. Romeo Dallaire of Canada, foresaw the genocide and was there when it began. He declared that with just five thousand well-equipped soldiers and a free hand to fight Hutu Power, he could halt the genocide rapidly. But the U.N. and the White House said no, and instead reduced the force to 270

troops. When the French intervened for a short time a few months later, they tilted toward Hutu Power. Then the West supported Hutu Power for two years by financing Zaire's giant refugee camps.

Though he tries hard, Gourevitch leaves unanswered another question, one with which Rwandans are currently struggling. How can two groups of people live together after one has tried to eliminate the other? All the killers cannot be tried and imprisoned. But how can survivors be expected to live with those who killed their families?

There can be nothing but compromise and enormous pain. The new Rwandan government is both Tutsi and Hutu and committed to ending ethnic identification. It is seeking justice for genocide leaders, including Pastor Ntakirutimana, but allowing most of the killers to go on with their lives. The past must be forgotten, yet it can never be forgotten.

There is one other question that Gourevitch does answer. Early in the book he describes a walk through a genocide memorial, a school where hundreds were killed. To preserve the memory of the event, the killing field was left untouched. Decomposed cadavers covered the floor. Dogs, birds, and bugs had done their work. But no human hand had disturbed the dead. Here was a scrap of clothing, a shoe, a Bible. Thinking of what had happened made Gourevitch uncomfortable. Why was he here looking so intently at the dead? he asked himself.

We Wish to Inform You will make readers uncomfortable, and some readers of this review will ask themselves why they should look more closely at something so horrible. Gourevitch's answer for himself is, I think, a good answer for all of us. As uncomfortable as it is to look closely at Rwanda, it is even more uncomfortable to look away.

Acknowledgments in this book list the authors of selected standard works on Rwanda, but it lacks a bibliography and an index. Both are missed.

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