



God Sleeps in Rwanda: A Journey of Transformation

Joseph Sebarenzi, Laura Mullane (Contributor)

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A harrowing tale of survival and reconciliation by a Rwandan Tutsi who flees his homeland before the 1994 genocide and later returns to be elected speaker of the Rwandan parliament, only to be forced into exile once again

This memoir tells the story of Joseph Sebarenzi, whose parents, seven siblings, and countless other family members were among 800,000 Tutsi brutally murdered over the course of ninety days in 1994 by extremist Rwandan Hutu -- an efficiency that exceeded even that of the Nazi Holocaust.

Outbreaks of ethnic violence had been occurring in Rwanda since colonial times when the Belgians ruled the region. As a child, Sebarenzi twice hid with his mother during episodes of killing, narrowly escaping with his life. When he was a teenager, his father sent him away to school in Congo, telling him, "If we are killed, you will survive." Sebarenzi returned to Rwanda after the genocide and was elected speaker of parliament. But he then learned of a plot to assassinate him, leading him to once again flee the country in a daring escape.

The poetic title of the book is taken from an old saying, "God spends the day elsewhere, but He sleeps in Rwanda," but this African nation is not alone in having had a shameful history of ethnic violence. *God Sleeps in Rwanda* demonstrates how horrific events can occur when the rest of the world stands by and does nothing. It also shows us how the lessons of Rwanda can prevent future tragedies from happening in that country and other parts of the world. Readers will be inspired by the eloquence and wisdom of a man who has every reason to be bitter and hateful, but chooses instead to live a life of love, compassion, and forgiveness.

God Sleeps in Rwanda: A Journey of Transformation Details

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Fadillah says

If you wanted to know more about rwanda and their history on civil war and genocide, this is the best book by far. Saberanzi spoke right from his heart and it is translated in this book. From the history of hutu and tutsi, his childhood, his father, his term as a speaker and how he ended being betrayed by his own countrymen, all of it really touch the core of my heart. While living in exile, saberanzi continued his effort on reconciliation and forgiveness.

Calzean says

The author was fortunate to be given an education and was able to escape the worse of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. He talks about these early days with sadness and refrains from inundating the reader with tales of gore, revenge, crowd madness, rape and destruction.

Instead he focuses in his role in the new Parliament of Rwanda were he suddenly finds himself to be the Speaker. He is keen to help the country move along a path of reconciliation but his proposed reforms soon gain the wrath of Kagame, leader of the RPF and soon to become President. Forced to flee for his life, Sebarenzi now teaches and talks about the need for reconciliation and the difficult path it takes to obtain. I think this is the first time I have read the various components needed to make reconciliation work - no wonder it usually fails.

It is the failure of the Rwandan government to address reconciliation that Sebarenzi predicts will ultimately see another round of ethic killing in the future. What struck me was that Kagame is internationally viewed as a success because he has help to grow the economy and that a good economy is good for all. But Sebarenzi argues what is needed is a change in behaviours, values and education else the problems of the past will return. A seemingly common problem across the world.

There is a fair bit about his faith and how this supported him to challenge the Government and continues to sustain him today. But overall this insight into the post-genocide Rwandan government and parliament was fascinating.

Elgin says

This book offered a lot. First a very concise description of the history of Rwanda, then an account of the author's experiences in regard to the genocide. Sebarenzi holds the descriptions of actual violence to a minimum. What is amazing is his journey from hatred and a desire for revenge to forgiveness and an amazing effort to bring reconciliation to his country. Joseph Sebarenzi is an incredible man.

Joanna says

For someone who has very little knowledge of the Rwandan genocide, this was fascinating.

It is heartbreaking to see the result of racial discrimination to the point of absolute extreme. Families and neighbours turning against one another all because of poison political ideology.

It was also interesting to learn that the roots of the tension between Hutu and Tutsi were caused by white colonialists (wow shocked..) yet they did nothing to prevent the violence their racism caused.

It is especially devastating yet not at all surprising to see the UN and the US do absolutely nothing to intervene despite having the obligation to do so under the Genocide Convention, and despite having irrefutable proof of the violence taking place. Considering the UN is tasked to prevent these kinds of atrocities, and the US has the power and money to intervene yet refused to do so since they had nothing to gain by helping a tiny landlocked African country with little natural resources.

A must-read for history buffs, and those concerned with the multitude of human rights violations occurring in 2018 and the lack of Western countries doing anything to prevent it.

Ines says

I was expecting this book to be more about the Rwanda genocide, but it wasn't because Sebarenzi wasn't in the country during the genocide, so he has no first-person accounts to tell thereof.

Nevertheless, the book was really interesting, and the writing flowed in a way that made it an enjoyable read. The greater part of the book focuses on Sebarenzi's political career as parliamentary speaker after the Rwandan genocide. He speaks a great deal about political corruption, fear, and autocratic rule.

He does an excellent job of portraying the inner workings of Rwandan politics, and control by the RPF. I can't help but wonder, though, how much personal bias plays a role in what was written. There are always two sides to a story, and it's difficult to form an informed opinion when one has only read one account of one side of the story. It definitely is an eye opener to the struggle that happened within the country, but I would like to read more on the subject from other authors to understand their take on the political situation.

Also, this is my personal view, but the book could have ended 20 pages before the end, when Sebarenzi chooses to finish his personal struggle. I can understand why he decided to include 20-pages full of learnings to explain what he sees as the road to overcoming diversity and achieving acceptance. And while the last couple of pages were an interesting and insightful read, I didn't feel like it contributed to Sebarenzi's personal story; it was more like an addition to the book.

Overall, though, I would recommend this read.

Jon says

A solemn reminder that, even in the aftermath of the Holocaust when people said, "Never again!" It did happen again, and the world didn't care.

Salem Lorot says

A sad and beautiful book. Of slaughter, of ascension to power (Sebarenzi becomes the Speaker of Rwanda's Parliament) and flight to exile, of hunger for power and depravity, betrayal, of love and hate, of peace and reconciliation. And at the end of it all, we learn to forgive and to work towards our better selves.

Well written. And there are important lessons and revelation of what happened in Rwandan Genocide and what Rwanda is truly is. The book exposes the facade that is Rwanda's economic transformation yet beyond the thin veneer are festering wounds that need true healing. You get good insight into who President Paul Kagame is.

Sebarenzi, who now lives in exile in US, proposes that Rwanda's future lies in peace and reconciliation. Gacaca courts failed.

"Like the gazelle who doesn't know the rustle in the grass is a leopard, we didn't know what hit us until it was too late," he writes.

I have never posted anything hateful on my wall since I opened any of my social media accounts. I see my fellow citizens spew ethnic venom and I only wish they were able to read this book or live in exile as refugees.

Allow me to share with you an excerpt from the book (page 212):

"During my speeches, I often share with the audience the story of an old rabbi who once asked his pupils how they could tell when night ends and day begins. "Could it be," asked one of the students, "when you can see an animal in the distance and you can tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?"

"No," answered the rabbi.

Another asked, "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?"

"No," answered the rabbi.

"Then what is it?" the pupils demanded.

"It is when you can look in the face of any man or woman and see that it is your brother or sister. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night."

Mafoya Dossoumon says

This book provided a completely new perspective on Rwanda and the leadership style of President Paul Kagame. If the author is to be believed, the president of Rwanda ruthlessly deals with any dissent including physical elimination. I liked the fact that the author proposes solutions on how to foster sustainable peace in Rwanda. The author's life story is enthralling and gives food for thought.

Emily Emerick says

I almost didn't make it through the book. I'm glad I did. It was heartwrenching to hear of the heartache and betrayal he (and many others) suffered. He has infinite wisdom and perspective in how he views these tragedies. It was a good story.

Benjamin says

I loved this book. Sebarenzi recently visited our university to participate in a panel on forgiveness, so I was lucky enough to spend some time with him. As a person, I found him incredibly kind and wise, so I really enjoyed reading about his life and experience in Rwanda. While he is critical of Kagame and his administration, he voices concerns in a compassionate, forgiving way, holding out hope that better times are ahead for Rwanda.

Azwa Ahmad says

Genocide-themed stories have always been my liking. However for this particular book, Sebarenzi has kept the violence best at minimal and educate the readers heavily on post-genocide reformations initiated by the government to rebuild the battle-scarred country.

For the first few chapters, he thrilled the readers with tidbits of his childhood memories –the description of Lake Kivu and his appreciation towards the lake and also the honor he felt derived from raising cows were few that I found warm and the missing precious relationship between human and nature in today's context. He had so little (like his new shoes), yet little Sebarenzi felt most content with what he once had. It works as reflection for my part to know the real worth of the little things surrounding me.

I appreciate Sebarenzi's attempt to share his experience as the Parliament's speaker and gave us the truest account on how a government actually works- either for the people, or succumb to their own selfish desires- in an extreme case it is gruesomely titled heavily towards the latter unfortunately. It is disheartening to see that power and money can be so corruptive, and how men heavily consume to the idea that power is central. The strength of few who claimed for reformations, social justice, equality, could not possibly overthrow the more powerful majority who were gravely against it to protect their interests, and the good men who chose to silence themselves aggravated the situation even worse. A quote by Frank Kent reflected this precisely: "The evils of the government are directly proportional to the tolerance of the people."

Reading this book made me think, "All this sounds too familiar." Perhaps, it really is.

I personally think my country is threading on the same string, dancing to the same music as Rwanda is: a resemblance of a democratic country, multiethnic/multiracial, and divisive by its nature. Colonialism broke the people apart, similar to the 'divide and conquer' strategy used by the colonials in my country. Governed by fear, these colonials knew best to keep the local people divided and fragmented by giving power to one party but denied it to another, lest that unity from that part would potentially harm their power. It worked, and the segregated legacy lived on. It seemed that the separation and the broken unity had deeply scarred the

people and the possibility to stitch it back is proven to be impossible. Nevertheless, as decades passed by, as colonialism perished, local people managed to emerge as leaders. Yet divided nations are still, divided. This has been invariably caused by the same system that systematically discriminate the people implemented by the colonials has been adopted by the local leaders. This is the internal division that has been caused by the local people, not outsiders, not colonials. Thus, it greatly ensures that the social landscape remains the same as it was thousands of years ago: divided, oppressed, broken, and scarred.

As Sebarenzi claimed nearing the end of the book, the international communities now look at Kagame's legacy and think that the economic advancements are something worthy to be applauded. Yet, from the worm's eyes view, on the ground level, we would be able to feel the silent, unspeakable building tension between the people. The system and the policies have exacerbated the tension. The government is at fault. This reminded me of the 'quota' or reservation policy implemented in my country, and also another book I currently read on India write about the same reservation policy, a policy that is exercised because it is "essential to reverse centuries of accumulated discrimination." There are some acceptable explanations in regards of such policies, yet I could not stop myself from thinking that this works as a subtle revenge of the people who were once felt discriminated against, who were once felt they were marginalized. Now that power is in their hands, it is their turn to oppress, to be superior and to win.

Discrimination breeds inequality. Inequality expedites tension. I understand the need of peace, reconciliation and equality that have been preached by Sebarenzi in his book. He knew that without peace and reconciliation, people would think that to break free from such discrimination, they need power. Thus, to have power they need to win. When they win, again, without peace and reconciliation, they will be the next oppressor toward the former oppressor. Without peace and reconciliation, this venomous cycle will continue from generation to generation. To break this cycle however, we need to restore equality that will eliminate the notion of discrimination. Thus in order to promote equality, we need to have a system and policies that is parallel to the notion.

I like the idea of peace education, in which my country is lacking now. We, as the older generation need to shoulder equal responsibility to halt violence, hatred and revenge from muddling our minds and put forward the idea of peaceful nation, one agenda that shall not be infiltrated by politics. This idea must be kept sacred and spared from any malevolence. Our children need to learn and understand what peace, equality, respect of one's lives, dignity, and needs mean. We need to teach them exactly that.

Ken Peters says

The dramatic story of a Rwandan man who survived the genocide in Rwanda and then, following his return there, met Jesus Christ in such a meaningful way that God changed the anger in his heart to a powerful sense of forgiveness. Then following this transformation came an unexpected opportunity to fill the third most

powerful seat in the Rwandan government, and with it an opportunity to steer the country toward ethnic reconciliation and long-term peace. But politics in Rwanda was not so simple, and Joseph would eventually need to flee for his life again as he stood for truth amidst power-hungry opponents. It is a story that inspires one to aim high whatever the price!

Ben Babcock says

The Rwandan genocide is one of those events that looms in my mind as something that happened when I was alive but too young to really understand that there was a world outside of my country, or even my community, really. Politics was something that came via the television, an artifact of the history we were studying in school, not a daily fact of life. War and genocide was something that had happened in the past, long ago and far away. I was lucky, because I grew up in Canada, where hardship is visited upon fewer people than most places (though still far too many). I've always had a roof over my head, clean water and plenty of food, not to mention electricity. Oh, and I've never had a mob try to burn my house or kill me simply because I happened to be the unpopular ethnicity de jour. (September 11 was kind of my personal geopolitical moment of awakening. I was in Grade 7. I remember coming home for lunch and my mom telling me someone had attacked the towers in New York.

God Sleeps in Rwanda is about the genocide, and about the efforts to move past it in the late 1990s. It's also an intensely personal tale by someone who was born and raised in Rwanda. Joseph Sebarenzi understands the terror of having one's home and life threatened by a genocidal mob. Although he was not present for the events of 1994, he later returned to Rwanda and became Speaker of the Parliament, where he played an integral role in trying to wrest power back from the hands of the executive branch and restore rule of law. Though his attempts were largely unsuccessful, the struggle itself is moving, even haunting. Sebarenzi and his co-author, Laura Ann Mullane, create a tenuous balance between the heartbreaking recounting of each successive blow to freedom and peace in Rwanda and Sebarenzi's relentless optimism.

I read, and loved, *Shake Hands with the Devil*. Yet Roméo Dallaire's perspective is that of an outsider. He entered Rwanda with certain pre-conceptions and ideas acquired as a result of his upbringing. This isn't a criticism of him or his book, which is an amazing chronicle of the international community's failure to react to the Rwandan genocide. But it's a limitation that makes books like *God Sleeps in Rwanda* a welcome counterpart to *Shake Hands with the Devil*. Sebarenzi exposes us to a viewpoint that isn't Western or Eurocentric. He can cut through the "centuries of tribal genocide" myth or any other colonial misconceptions about life in Rwanda and tell us how it is (if we are willing to listen).

I enjoyed reading Sebarenzi's account of the political machinations afoot following Rwanda's supposed transition to democracy under Bizimungu and Kagame. Sebarenzi was right in the thick of it, actively working to promote rule of law. He also doesn't conceal his own blindness, at the time, towards Kagame's deviousness. He honestly believed Kagame was interested in instituting democratic reforms up until the point where it became clear Kagame was only interested in holding on to power. This kind of insider's account of trying to stabilize a fledgling democracy is fascinating and valuable.

That relentless optimism of Sebarenzi's is what makes the book worth reading. As I said in my review of *Shake Hands with the Devil*, genocide is depressing. Sebarenzi doesn't go into as much detail about the genocide—in many ways, the bulk of the book focuses on the recovery efforts afterwards—but what he lacks in detail he makes up for in the personal connection to some of the victims. Moreover, the Rwandan genocide marked a kind of death of Rwanda as a unified nation ... Sebarenzi has now lost his homeland

twice, and it isn't even being occupied by a foreign power.

So for him to write that he's still hopeful, he still wants reconciliation and forgiveness and reparation ... that's kind of amazing. It reminds me of the Dalai Lama's attitude towards China. Sebarenzi by no means sees what the perpetrators of the genocide did as justified or acceptable—but he doesn't demonize them either. He understands their motivations. And he categorically rejects the idea that revenge is the best thing on offer right now. This kind of fairness and compassion is everything we need in a world increasingly polarized by rhetoric and radicalism ... and now I sound like a movie trailer narrator.

Senor says

Meh - had a difficult time getting past the amateurish writing and contradictory and omnipresent religious observations. Additionally his views are generally one-sided and while I appreciate that this is autobiographical there are ways of presenting alternate perspectives and/or grounding your experiences with historical references outside your bubble - the author was unwilling to do this to a fault and it therefore discounted most of his observations for me. Especially when measured against the myriad books on the subject and how he is completely at odds with most of their narratives. I am not saying I don't believe him, rather I was tired of hearing him grind his axe and make broad accusations without offering a measure of balance.

Finally, the number of times the author 'thanks god' and simultaneously defies all shreds of logic became exhausting and irritating. Yes, 'thank god' that your pal or your wife was spared, 'thank god' that the people searching for you didn't find you, etc - meanwhile you forgot to 'thank god' for the priests who instructed their parishioners to hide in their church and then brought the murders there and joined in the slaughtering. For that matter you forgot to 'thank GOD for the genocide! OK, it may simply be that I am exhausted with religious acrobatics and hypocrisy.

Sipho says

The title of the book comes from a Rwandan saying that God spends the day in other countries, but settles for the night in Rwanda. This is both a tribute to the natural beauty of the Rwandan landscape, but also a subtle diatribe at the apparent absence of divine intervention during the atrocities of the past.

These atrocities, of course, are the genocide of 1994 as well as previous tribe based violence in the 50's and 60's.

Joseph Sebarenzi is a Tutsi, who became part of the post 1994 government. He was eventually hounded out of the country, after trying to reform parliament to make it more independent.

This book then, on top of telling the author's story of growing in the 1960's and surviving ethnic violence, being thrice exiled from the country of his birth and returning after 1994, with most of his family dead, offers a sharp critique of Paul Kagame's regime.

To the outside world, Rwanda is a beacon of stability and economic recovery. Sebarenzi takes the reader behind the veil to show a country where repression, murder, intimidation, propaganda and deference to the all powerful autocrat are but the norm.

In light of the events in my own country, Zimbabwe, there are startling parallels between the 2 countries, which made this book an even more fascinating read.
