

BOOK REVIEW

Tharcisse Seminega. *No Greater Love: How My Family Survived the Genocide in Rwanda*. Davenport, Iowa: GM&A Publishing, 2019. xxiv + 294 pp. Photographs. Appendices. Bibliography. Index. \$19.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781937188030.

Over the twenty-five years following the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, countless memoirs, autobiographies, and autofictional works have been published about this period and the events leading up to it. Tharcisse Seminega's *No Greater Love: How My Family Survived the Genocide in Rwanda* is a welcome addition to this body of literature, in that it features multiple new perspectives on and experiences of the genocide. However, the memoir also captures some of the inherent difficulties inherent in representing the genocide.

In *No Greater Love*, Seminega interweaves his account of Rwanda's history with more personal memories of his experience growing up in the Belgian colony. While he acknowledges that inequality existed, insofar as Belgian colonizers favored Tutsi people and Tutsi, on occasion, exploited Hutu people through the long-standing practice of cattle clientship, he maintains that Hutu and Tutsi people lived in relative harmony during this time. Seminega reflects on how this changed as Rwandans gained independence. With the death of the king, the formation of multiple ethnic-centered political parties, the rise of Hutu Power, and repeated outbreaks of violence, his own family was forced to leave Rwanda; he experienced ethnic discrimination as a Tutsi person for the first time; and his scholarly pursuits were disrupted.

Nevertheless, Seminega studied to become a priest but became disenchanted with Catholicism. He left the seminary and earned a doctorate in Europe, married and had five children, became a Jehovah's Witness, and returned to Rwanda with his family shortly before the genocide began. While Seminega's family was targeted to be killed, they survived with the help of fellow Jehovah's Witnesses and other Hutu allies who sheltered them.

While Seminega's experience as a Jehovah's Witness is unique among memoirs about the 1994 genocide, what sets *No Greater Love* apart from other autobiographical works is its inclusion of multiple perspectives. Throughout Seminega's memoir are narrative interludes featuring the words of his wife and his father, as well as lengthy appendices presenting the stories of

Seminega's five children along with their helpers and rescuers. At the onset of the memoir, Seminega admits that he must "fill in small gaps and condense events to explain things," but that the narrative is as "clear" as he can make it (xix). The transparent incorporation of multiple voices in the narrative is an effective way to "fill in small gaps," but short of that, Seminega's willingness to recognize when his memory or knowledge falters is admirable. For instance, when reflecting on life at the seminary prior to Rwanda's independence, Seminega reports that though "Hutu were still a minority in schools," they "did not act as if they felt discriminated against" (20). By addressing only what he witnessed and perceived, rather than making unilateral claims about how others felt, Seminega acknowledges that he can only account for his own perspective.

At the same time, Seminega includes occasional references to scholarship and media reports about the genocide; however, there is far more exposition than there are sources accounting for it, making it difficult to determine whose perspective is being represented. Explicit clarification about which claims are Seminega's and which are based on research would have been helpful, if only to help the reader know whom to question or whom to cite.

Throughout the memoir, Seminega also captures processes of identification in a largely nuanced way. He indicates that ethnic identity is not fixed nor understood in the same way by everyone. For instance, when describing his Hutu "Brothers" and "Sisters," he reveals that their identification as Jehovah's Witnesses superseded their identification as Hutu, suggesting that individuals determine which identities are important to them, rather than identities determining individuals' actions and beliefs. Seminega further represents Hutu participation in the genocide as complex, for just as he reveals that not all Hutu people killed during the genocide, he also indicates that while a Hutu individual may have killed in one instance, that does not preclude the possibility that the same individual may have helped or rescued in another (109). There are moments, however, where Seminega offers confusing representations of ethnic identity. For instance, when he mentions "real Hutu" and "'Hutu' [who] happened to be Tutsi who changed their identity cards," he lends credibility to the understanding of ethnicity as a corporate identity (47–48). Furthermore, even though Seminega maintains that Rwandans did not directly refer to each other as Hutu or Tutsi, the fact that they could identify others as such implies that these identities were more significant and widespread than his narrative suggests (6).

In Seminega's favor, however, talking about the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and ethnic identity, in particular, is incredibly difficult. *No Greater Love* presents an appropriate balance of perspectives, reflections, and interpretations that will benefit both scholars and members of a general audience who are interested in the 1994 genocide, in particular, or in genocide more broadly.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Lemarchand, René. 1998. "Genocide in the Great Lakes: Which Genocide? Whose Genocide?" *African Studies Review* 41 (1): 3–16. doi:[10.2307/524678](https://doi.org/10.2307/524678).

Rettig, Max. 2008. "Gacaca: Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation in Postconflict Rwanda?" *African Studies Review* 51 (3): 25–50. doi:[10.1353/arw.0.0091](https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.0.0091).