

# ‘Book of Bones’ author, editor on need to uphold Genocide literature

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Flore-Agnès Zoa, Boubacar Boris Diop’s editor, addresses the audience during the signing of ‘Murambi, the book of bones’ at Norrsken House in Kigali on July 15. Photos : Courtesy.

Surely the world has learnt about Genocide, but no words can give a clear picture of what happened at the technical school in Murambi, a town located in Nyamagabe district, Southern Province.

A few have tried telling this story nonetheless. One of them is Boubacar Boris Diop, a Senegalese novelist, who came to Rwanda four years after the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi under the ‘Writing by Duty of Memory Project’ which had brought together 10 writers from across Africa.

Diop got interested at what was then a memorial centre for the more than 50,000 slain Tutsi of the Genocide that he decided to go back twice after his first visit.

“As a novelist, I was interested by the difference between Murambi and the other places where killers did very quickly their infamous ‘job’. They arrived completely drunk, yelling obscenities to their victims and some hours later almost no one was alive.

“In Murambi, there was a relatively long face to face between perpetrators and victims. I noticed also the duplicity of a ‘man of God’, Augustin Misago, the important role of genocide masterminds like Aloys Simba, Bucyibaruta and the presence of French foreign troops via Operation Turquoise. To me, Murambi was a microcosm of the whole Rwandan tragedy,” Diop said.

He ended up publishing a book in 2000 ; ‘Murambi, the book of bones,’ a name he already knew he would give it the moment he first visited the place in September 1998.

“In Murambi, the dead bodies seemed to me almost alive. I could see their last gesture to protect their face from the machetes and I really got the impression that they were telling their personal story, what they had been through at the very moment they were killed,” Diop added.

This book, originally in French, has played a vital role in informing people about the Genocide. It also received the 2021 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, a prestigious award for literature by the University of Oklahoma.

However, until this year, the first and second editors of this novel- who were based in France, only availed a total of 500 copies for readers in Africa. Not only was this insufficient for the continent, it was also not enough for the Rwandan audience.

Flore-Agnès Zoa, the founder of La CENE Littéraire (the Circle of Friends of Engaged Black Writers) which aims to promote and defend the literature produced by African and Afro-descendant writers, bought the rights to re-publish Diop’s novel on Murambi.

Zoa’s main intention was to make the novel available for the African

audience, and she says it was not easy for her legally and financially.

“That is when I printed out 8,000 copies for Africa and offered 1,000 of them to Rwanda, for free, to be distributed to high school and university students,” Zoa explained to *The New Times*.

She also noted that some readers in the 10 countries where the books have been distributed have started reading and discussing it in book clubs. Some of these include Cameroon, Senegal, DRC, and Benin.

Also, the republished edition’s preface was written by a Rwandan scholar, Jean Pierre Karegeye, who is also the founder of Interdisciplinary Genocide Studies Centre (IGSC).

The project to republish and distribute this book is something Diop’s team believes is their ‘small’ contribution to inform young people about the Genocide.

“To be frank, I doubted very strongly at the beginning that any book could be useful in any way to tackle genocide ideology. But if you and I are having this conversation today, almost thirty years after the Tutsi genocide, it’s partly because this book was published in March 2000. So, the novel itself can be a pretext to meet people, especially young people, all over the world to make them aware of what happened in Rwanda between April and July 1994 and even before this date,” Diop said.

Karegeye, who spearheaded the project to present the book in Rwanda, paraphrased Diop who reportedly once said that a history book shares facts, while literature helps us to understand what happened.

“Any human being can say ‘this is our story’. The Rwandan story is made universal and the reader will understand that what happened to Rwanda can happen to them,” Karegeye said.

On their trip to Rwanda, this team has had three major events; Connecting with Publishers, where they met with writers with manuscripts and authors who want to get published, Reading and signing *Murambi, the Book of bones*, and a workshop of writers, publishers and librarians on the challenges and solutions on writing and publishing from Africa.

The team is also set to work together to start a new Centre in Kigali, African Bridging Centre (ABC), which is expected to connect Rwandans with editors, foreign researchers and institutions, organise writing workshops, and bridge academic research and African social issues.



Rwandan scholar Jean Pierre Karegeye, the founder of the Interdisciplinary Genocide Studies Centre, speaks during the book signing at Norrskens House in Kigali on July 15.



Boubacar Boris Diop signs books at Norrsken House in Kigali on July 15.

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