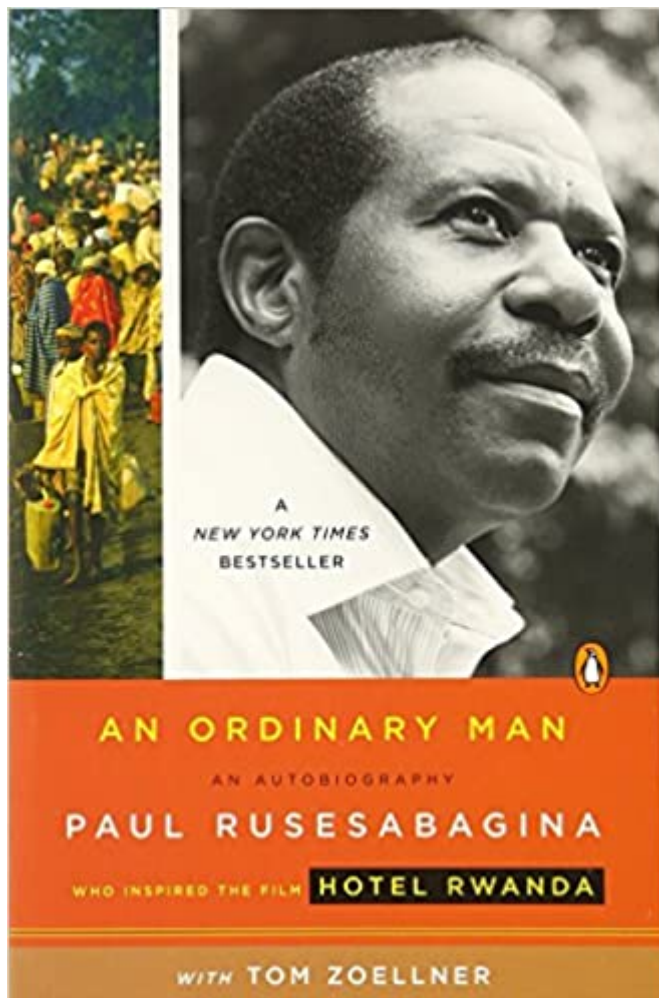


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An Ordinary Man: An Autobiography



Synopsis

A remarkable account of the amazing life story of the man who inspired the film Hotel Rwanda. Readers who were moved and horrified by Hotel Rwanda will respond even more intensely to Paul Rusesabagina's unforgettable autobiography. As Rwanda was thrown into chaos during the 1994 genocide, Rusesabagina, a hotel manager, turned the luxurious Hotel Milles Collines into a refuge for more than 1,200 Tutsi and moderate Hutu refugees, while fending off their would-be killers with a combination of diplomacy and deception. In *An Ordinary Man*, he tells the story of his childhood, retraces his accidental path to heroism, revisits the 100 days in which he was the only thing standing between his "guests" and a hideous death, and recounts his subsequent life as a refugee and activist.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. For former hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina, words are the most powerful weapon in the human arsenal. For good and for evil, as was the case in the spring of 1994 in Rwanda. Over 100 days, some 800,000 people were slaughtered, most hacked to death by machete. Rusesabagina's inspiration for the movie Hotel Rwanda; used his facility with words and persuasion to save 1,268 of his fellow countrymen, turning the Belgian luxury hotel under his charge into a sanctuary from madness. Through negotiation, favor, flattery and deception, Rusesabagina managed to keep his "guests" alive another day despite the homicidal gangs just beyond the fence and the world's failure to act. Narrator Hoffman delivers those words in a stirring audio performance. With a crisp African accent,

Hoffman renders each sentence with heartfelt conviction and flat-out becomes Rusesabagina. The humble hotel manager not only illuminates the machinery behind the genocide but delves into Rwanda's complex and colorful cultural history as well as his own childhood, the son of a Hutu father and Tutsi mother. Hoffman successfully draws out the understated elegance of Rusesabagina's simple and straightforward prose, lending the story added vividness. This tale of good, evil and moral responsibility winds down with Rusesabagina visiting a church outside Kigali where thousands were massacred and where a multilingual sign-cloth now pledges, "Never Again." He once more stops to consider words, the ones he worries lack true conviction—like those at the church—as well as the ones with the power to heal. For the listener, the words of Paul Rusesabagina won't soon be forgotten. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Rusesabagina . . . weaves his country's history with his personal history into a rich narrative that attempts to explain the unexplainable. . . . The book's emotional power comes from his understatement and humility. (The Boston Globe) An extraordinary cautionary tale. (The Atlanta Journal-Constitution) Rusesabagina's story of survival amid manic slaughter is as awful as it is gripping. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch) Read this book. It will humble and inspire you. (Sunday Telegraph, London) Extraordinary; horrific and tragic, but also inspiring, because Rusesabagina refuses to give up his belief in the basic decency of humanity. (The Times, London)

“Ordinary” he can call himself, if he likes; but what Paul Rusesabagina did between April and June of 1994 was truly extraordinary. His job as manager of a luxury hotel in the Rwandan capital at Kigali may seem ordinary enough, to be sure. But when the Rwandan genocide began in April 1994, Rusesabagina responded by sheltering hundreds of refugees in the Hotel Mille Collines, one of the most exclusive hotels in Kigali. And while 800,000 people were murdered all over Rwanda during the genocide, all of the 1,268 refugees to whom Rusesabagina opened his doors survived. “Ordinary,” my foot. “An Ordinary Man,” Rusesabagina's autobiography, sets forth the author's sense of how he went from a rural village upbringing to city life in Kigali, a hotel-management career, and ultimately the heroic role that he played in saving hundreds of lives during the genocide. Rusesabagina dismisses any attempt to depict what he did as heroic. “I never saw it that way, and I still don't. I was

providing shelter. I was a hotel manager doing his job (p. 190) but the importance and significance of what he did comes through nonetheless. Many are somewhat familiar with Rusesabagina's story because of the Terry George film "Hotel Rwanda" (2004), with Don Cheadle as Rusesabagina; but the real story of Rusesabagina and the Mille Collines during the genocide is even more fascinating than George's compelling film. Because the details behind the Rwandan genocide are intricate, and involve historical and cultural issues that might not be familiar to many readers outside Rwanda, Rusesabagina takes some pains to make clear how divisions between Tutsi and Hutu, created and exploited during colonial times by the Belgians who then ruled Rwanda, remained and festered long after Rwanda gained its independence. A hard-line Hutu government's fears of losing power to exiled Tutsi rebels helped lead to "the quickest [genocide] in recorded history, in which eight hundred thousand people were killed in one hundred days with a calculated efficiency that would have impressed the most rigorous accountant" (p. 53). As Rusesabagina tells it, his experience as a hotel manager, his years of using interpersonal communication skills to placate unhappy guests, prepared him for the delicate maneuvering that he would have to do in order to prevent hundreds of refugees from being murdered in the genocide. Rusesabagina thus describes what he learned regarding the art of negotiation: "Someone who *deals* can never be an absolute hard-liner. The very act of negotiation makes it difficult, if not impossible, to dehumanize the person across the table from you. You are forced to make a compromise, and by doing this you are forced to understand, and even sympathize with, the other person's position. And if cups of good African coffee, some wine, a cognac, or all of the above could help lubricate this understanding, it was all to the good" (p. 49). Using the contacts that he had established over the years, their phone numbers set down in a black leather binder that he describes as "my personal directory of numbers for the elite circles of government and commerce in Rwanda" (p. 99), Rusesabagina called in favors on a regular basis, as when he successfully had an Interahamwe militia roadblock removed from in front of the Mille Collines, thus improving the chances that other refugees could get into the hotel, and lessening the likelihood of the militia storming the hotel. I am aware that there are those who claim that Rusesabagina's actions were not so heroic as is generally believed to be the case. There are books out there claiming that Rusesabagina charged people for the privilege of staying in the Mille Collines during the genocide or even that he threatened to eject some refugees out into the streets, where they would inevitably have perished at the hands of

the militias. And I have seen some people's claims -- on the basis of "insider knowledge" of one sort or another, often relayed by someone in or from Rwanda -- that Rusesabagina is not at all the nice and good person that one gets a sense of from reading "An Ordinary Man" or watching "Hotel Rwanda." To these readers, I would respectfully point out that Rusesabagina has served as a whistleblower, revealing from an insider's perspective the more difficult aspects of his society. Whistleblowers provide valuable information that the larger world needs to know, but rarely make themselves popular within their own group in the process. Additionally, Rusesabagina has criticized, in this book and elsewhere, the current Rwandan government of Paul Kagame, the onetime R.P.F. (Rwandan Patriotic Front) rebel leader whose forces prevailed in the civil war, and who has served as president of Rwanda since 2000. To be involved in politics, at any level, is to take on enemies and invite criticism. Ask yourself whether some of the criticism levied against Rusesabagina may constitute a form of special pleading, set forth by people with a vested interest in putting forth their own version of the events that Rusesabagina describes in his book. And while you're at it, please consider a couple of simple facts: Fact 1: Outside the walls of the Hotel Mille Collines, all over the nation of Rwanda, eight hundred thousand people were murdered, in one of the worst acts of genocide since the Second World War. Fact 2: Inside the walls of the Hotel Mille Collines, Paul Rusesabagina gave shelter to 1,268 people. Every single one of them survived the Rwandan genocide. As Rusesabagina himself accurately points out, "Nobody was killed. Nobody was wounded or beaten in the Mille Collines" (p. 131). I read "An Ordinary Man" while my wife and I were in Rwanda. We visited the Kigali Genocide Museum, and the Nyamata Genocide Memorial where over 10,000 people sought refuge inside a Catholic church but were murdered. We even dined at the Panorama restaurant atop the Mille Collines hotel that Rusesabagina once managed. It was truly a strange experience to be enjoying fine food and excellent wine in an elegant atmosphere, looking out upon the bright lights of Kigali, while knowing that 22 years before, the building we were visiting had been a de facto refugee camp for people seeking to escape the genocide. Truly, there is nothing ordinary about a visit to Rwanda. And there is nothing ordinary about what Paul Rusesabagina did, or about the way he describes it in "An Ordinary Man."

Paul Rusesabagina just wanted to be a good hotel manager. In the insane days of 1994, when 800,000 Rwandans were massacred by their neighbors and countrymen over the course of three months, being a good hotel manager meant finding a way to accommodate more than 1200 people -- most of them Tutsis who were targets simply because of their tribal identity

and a toxic history in a 112-room hotel. But this hotel, the Belgian-owned Milles Collines, may have been the only safe place in Rwanda for those who were fortunate enough to find refuge inside its walls, while outside the world exploded in an insane paroxysm of rage, revenge, and bloodlust. No one was on vacation in this luxury hotel during that late spring and early summer. Everyone in the Milles Collines was lucky to be alive, and was hoping to stay that way. That they did is due in no small measure to the resourcefulness, the pluck, the diplomatic skill, and the utter determination of the hotel's manager, Paul Rusesabagina. If you have seen the 2004 film "Hotel Rwanda," you know the basic outlines of the story. After the airplane carrying the presidents of Rwanda and neighboring Burundi was shot down on its approach to Kigali, the country erupted in violence, primarily directed against ethnic Tutsis and sympathetic Hutus. The killing lasted from early April to early July and left the country in shock. Other countries (one hesitates to use the term "international community" since this and many other events before and since call into question whether such a thing exists) did little to address the crisis, and the UN proved completely ineffectual. The sheer scale of the killing is mind-numbing. (Though he doesn't spend much time discussing the movie, Rusesabagina vouches for the overall accuracy of "Hotel Rwanda." He was interviewed by screenwriter Keir Pearson, who received an Academy Award nomination.) This is an autobiography, so the subject is Rusesabagina, not Rwanda. But the histories of man and country are hard to separate from one another. The author provides a brief Rwandan history lesson in order to provide context for the events that form the core of the book, and also outlines his early years and the choices and opportunities that ultimately led to his job as the manager of a luxury hotel in the capital city. The core of the book, though, concerns the events of 1994 and Rusesabagina's role in saving hundreds of lives. A lot can be blamed on colonial powers that accentuated racial distinctions for purposes of facilitating rule, but even without such a history it often doesn't take much of a spark for a difference that may not mean much at other times to suddenly mean very much indeed. Rusesabagina, however, is not inclined, as many others have been, to blame the genocide on Rwanda's colonial history. For him, the root explanation was much simpler: People in power wanted to stay in power, people out of power wanted to seize power, and both sides would spread rumors, stir up hatred, and do whatever else was necessary in their pursuit of power. An ethnic Hutu himself, he maintains that "the Hutu government wanted all the anger in Rwanda pointed toward any target but itself." When the killing started, Rusesabagina sheltered Tutsis from the beginning, including in his own home before

moving them to the hotel, having seen his father do the same thing during earlier troubles. Convinced that words can be used as effectively as weapons if handled skillfully, Rusesabagina did not hesitate to use the phone, talk to acquaintances (including those who had killed or looked the other way), beg, cajole, plead, threaten, exaggerate, whatever it took. He called in favors. He tried to prick the conscience of people outside Rwanda who might be moved to act. He called upon the power of language to counter the power of machetes, the primary weapon of the marauding killers. To those who would criticize him for dealing with murderous militia leaders, Rusesabagina responds that “in order to fight evil you sometimes have to keep evil people in your orbit.” The practical mindset that contributed to his success as a manager tells him that “even the worst among them have their soft side, and if you can find and play with that part of them, you can accomplish a great deal of good.” Given the number of times that the welfare of the people in the hotel depended on his ability to call on a favor from a general or other well-placed but culpable person, it’s hard to argue with his point. Would it have been better to remain “pure” if it meant risking the lives of hundreds of people? There are many sub-stories contained within the broad story of the oasis of tenuous safety that the Milles Collines became. One of those that I found interesting was how quickly the sheltered group established a form of self-government. This must be a natural social instinct. Years ago I read Langdon Gilkey’s *Shantung Compound*, about foreigners in China who were rounded up and placed in a Japanese internment camp during World War II. I was struck by the same thing, the innate need to maintain routines and to create rudimentary institutions of government. (Of course, there is always *Lord of the Flies* as the chilling other side of this coin.) Rusesabagina is quite critical of what he sees as the complete ineffectiveness of the United Nations “peacekeepers” and indeed of the UN as an organization. Individuals within it could, and did, perform acts of bravery and humanity, but taken as a whole he finds UN involvement in Rwanda to be no more than a “farce.” For us as observers, of course, hindsight judgments are easy, but Rusesabagina was there, on the ground, as events were unfolding, and he made numerous appeals to those who might have made a difference. There is little indication that the UN, or anyone else outside Rwanda, did much to address the hundred-day horror until after the dust had settled and did little enough even then. Entire books have been written about genocide and how it happens. While Rusesabagina’s intention in this book is to give an account of his life and his involvement in one specific event, toward the end he offers brief observations about the larger problem. Noting the occurrence of war as a typical enabler in cases of

genocide wherever it happens, he argues that genocides “are the brainchildren of insecure leaders eager for more power. Governments ease their people into them gradually. Other nations must be persuaded to look away. And all genocides rely heavily on the power of group thinking to embolden the everyday killers.” I am not an expert on this, so I can’t say whether or not this really does capture it, but the description is broad enough that it probably does, and it certainly seems to ring true in modern cases. Certainly in the case of Rwanda in 1994, all the elements were present: power-hungry leaders, step-by-step escalation (starting with inflammatory radio broadcasts that were at least tolerated, and were perhaps actively encouraged, by government and military officials), inaction by other countries, and a strong mob mentality. Rusesabagina ends his book on a positive note, though, with optimistic comments about decency and sanity as the natural and normal condition of the human race and human societies. While modern history gives us plenty of reason to share his optimism when it comes to individuals and their choices, sadly it is harder to be optimistic about group behavior, or about the susceptibility of people to demagogues who appeal to base instincts, including fear, suspicion, selfishness, and hatred. This has proven to be an extraordinarily difficult nut to crack, whether by governments, religions, or moral philosophies. Simply put, as a species we have so far been incapable of inoculating ourselves against the pathologies that seem to be latent in the human condition. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why actions like those of Paul Rusesabagina inspire us. He may have been an “ordinary man” but plenty of other ordinary men were out killing their neighbors when he made a different choice.

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