

# Screaming Silence

## Fergal Keane reports on Rwanda's "season of blood"

*Rwanda is a country that was in pain but wasn't screaming. Silence. That's what I remember most- silence. Just an endless, screaming silence.*

(Fergal Keane, interview with PBS, 19 March 2004)

BBC correspondent Fergal Keane was in 1994 among the first Western journalists witnessing the immediate aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. In an attempt to cut down all the "tall trees", hundred days of unprecedented slaughter by Hutu extremists left over 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus dead in a country Keane knew nothing about because "all African correspondents were fixated by [...] Somalia and the US intervention there, and South Africa's transition to democracy."

Keane produced a series of articles, two BBC Panorama documentaries and a book on the Rwandan tragedy (*Season of Blood*) because, he feels, ignoring evil makes people "the authors of a guilty silence."

This analysis is based on three articles in a collection of his favourite pieces of work, the book *Letter to Daniel*, which give a personal account of what Keane has witnessed while reporting on the genocide.

Keane almost tangibly describes what happened at the Nyarubuye killing ground where several thousands of Tutsis, who sought protection in a Catholic church, were hacked to death with machetes, knives, clubs and stones by their Hutu neighbours.

Valentina Iribagiza, an at that time thirteen year old girl, is one of Nyarubuye's survivors and becomes Keane's personification of what genocide does to people. Valentina was severely injured by machete blows on the head and hands, and against all odds survived for over a month between decaying bodies at the churchyard. When Keane first met her in 1994 she was so much starved, in physical pain and traumatized that the only decent thing

to do was to leave and assumingly let her die. “You couldn’t have asked this child [what had happened]”, Keane stated. Three years later, in 1997, Keane returns to Rwanda and learns that Valentina is still alive. He meets her again, wins her confidence and records her moving testimony (*Valentina’s Nightmare*). To Keane the girl is an extraordinary example of strength, “people like her, they offer what hope if any there is for Rwanda”.

Even though Keane won several prestigious prizes for his work on Rwanda, he feels that the ordinary journalism of objectivity and rational comparison failed in Rwanda.

Journalism simply was an inadequate tool of expressing the looks in survivors’ eyes, the smell and horror of piles of decapitated bodies, and his own fear of the immorality he saw unfold. “This was not something I could convey with words or photographs or film”, Keane says.

Keane’s writing style in *Letter to Daniel* makes the accounts very powerful. He combines factual observations with the analysis of events and takes into account the systematic planning by powerful politicians and military leaders prior to the genocide.

Keane also reflects in detail on personal feelings, thoughts, questions and frustrations he struggled with during and after his work in Rwanda. His heavy reliance on individual life stories and testimonies breaks the conventional journalistic treatment of suffering in a superficial and objective manner. It makes the reader witness. However, the horrific descriptions of the killing scenes, which are by no means attempted to dramatise or sensationalise, might put some readers off.

They stand apart from ordinary news reporting on Rwanda and go beyond the “lazy” journalistic clichés of ethnic hatred which is, according to Keane, “an insult to the nearly one million dead”. The detailed nature of his writing makes it very accessible and appeals to readers to pay close attention.

According to Keane such personalisation of the genocide was necessary because it is impossible to explain brutalities in numbers or artificial terms like ‘massacre’ or ‘genocide’. “They [the audience] just don’t get it. It is too big”.

Keane's reports, understandably, exhale deep incomprehension and dismay. Even though he is an experienced war correspondent, Rwanda confronted him, for the first time, with a lingering feeling of guilt and a sense of human failure, as he explains in an interview with PBS: "You can't depend on the powerful and the rich to come to the aid of people like Valentina. Don't believe them, don't trust them, no matter how many times they say 'never again'."

When reading Keane's reports, you can almost feel and identify with his emotions and feelings. Because of the impact Rwanda had on his personal life and well-being, in his writings he continuously asks the question how people can do such thing. Keane himself rightly observes that "these are not questions that find their way into the average news report or documentary." Herewith his reports break the rules of objective journalism and one could wonder if Keane was perhaps too much emotionally attached and affected to write about Rwanda. But then again, who wouldn't... No human being could have remained untouched by the vast array of suffering and horror at display. As it did for Keane, Rwanda would have inflicted spiritual damage on any reporter. As he says: "Although I had covered acts of evil [before], I had managed to retain a belief in a world where the triumph of evil was prevented by an ultimate force for good. That belief has disappeared."

### **Main source of analysis:**

- Keane, Fergal (1996) *Letter to Daniel: Despatches from the heart*, London: Penguin Books, BBC Books.  
Season of Blood, pp.143-56  
Spiritual Damage, pp. 157-63  
A Letter from Africa, pp. 224-32

### **Supported by:**

- Keane, Fergal (1997) "Valentina's Nightmare", film broadcasted by BBC Panorama, February 10, 1997. Transcript of film to be found at PBS television series *Frontline*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/>.

- Keane, Fergal (1997) “The Rwandan girl who refused to die”, reprinted from Sunday Times,  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/reports/refuse.html>
- PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), Frontline (2004) Interview with Fergal Keane for “Ghosts of Rwanda”, March 19, 2004  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/interviews/keane.html>