



# *The Girl Who Smiled Beads: A Story of War and What Comes After* by Clemantine Wamariya and Elizabeth Weil

## About the Book

“The plot provided by the universe was filled with starvation, war and rape. I would not—could not—live in that tale.” Clemantine Wamariya was six years old when her mother and father began to speak in whispers, when neighbors began to disappear, and when she heard the loud, ugly sounds her brother said were thunder. In 1994, she and her fifteen-year-old sister, Claire, fled the Rwandan massacre and spent the next six years migrating through seven African countries, searching for safety—perpetually hungry, imprisoned and abused, enduring and escaping refugee camps, finding unexpected kindness, witnessing inhuman cruelty. They did not know whether their parents were dead or alive. When Clemantine was twelve, she and her sister were granted refugee status in the United States; there, in Chicago, their lives diverged. Though their bond remained unbreakable, Claire, who had for so long protected and provided for Clemantine, was a single mother struggling to make ends meet, while Clemantine was taken in by a family who raised her as their own. She seemed to live the American dream: attending private school, taking up cheer-leading, and, ultimately, graduating from Yale. Yet the years of being treated as less than human, of going hungry and seeing death, could not be erased. She felt at the same time six years old and one hundred years old. In *The Girl Who Smiled Beads*, Clemantine provokes us to look beyond the label of “victim” and recognize the power of the imagination to transcend even the most profound injuries and aftershocks. Devastating yet beautiful, and bracingly original, it is a powerful testament to her commitment to constructing a life on her own terms.

## Suggested Opening Prayer

O God:

You bring hope out of emptiness, energy out of fear, new life out of grief and loss.

As Mary returned to mourn yet found unspeakable joy, so comfort all who have lost their homes through persecution, war, exile, or deliberate destruction.

Give them security, a place to live, and neighbors they trust to be, with them,  
a new sign of peace to the world. Amen. Source: The Sabeel Center, Jerusalem

## Discussion Questions

These are some suggested questions to get your discussion started. Some questions are from the publisher's teaching guide.

- In the first chapter of the book, Clemantine tells us: "I have never been Claire. I have never been inviolable." As the story unfolds, she and her sister react to trauma in very different ways, and rely on different survival strategies. How would you characterize their differences? Which events best illustrate those differences?
- Clemantine's experience as a "stateless" person is harrowing, yet there are times when she and her sister experience great kindness and generosity. Describe some of the kindnesses that stood out to you.
- Why do Clemantine's sister and mother instruct her not to accept gifts? And why does Clemantine come to see acts of charity as a negative thing? Do you agree with her view of charity?
- Clemantine sets forth an alternative to charity, an ethic of sharing. What are the origins of this practice in her life? After she arrives in the United States, there are times when Clemantine feels alienated by American culture. What is most surprising to her about American culture? What are some of the things that make her uncomfortable or anger her?
- Clemantine takes issue with the word genocide, which she describes as "clinical, overly general, bloodless, and dehumanizing." In her view, that one word cannot adequately capture the atrocities of racialization and war in Rwanda. Do you agree that words and abstract concepts can distort or overwrite people's experience? Are there words about which you feel similarly?
- Clemantine sometimes speaks at events about being a survivor of genocide. In some ways she finds it rewarding but more often she finds it unsatisfying. What is it that she finds objectionable and why?
- Why do you think the authors chose to structure the book so that it oscillates between Clemantine's time in Africa and her life after emigrating to the United States, rather than as a linear story?
- What insights does Wamariya offer in her memoir on the topic of forgiveness? Why does she argue with her sister Claire about this subject? Whose opinion do you agree with more?
- What kinds of questions are commonly asked of Wamariya and what does she believe that this often exposes about those asking the questions and the way that many people commonly think of refugees? Why does the transaction of telling her story often bother her?

## About the Author

Clemantine Wamariya is a storyteller and human rights advocate. Born in Kigali, Rwanda, displaced by conflict, Clemantine migrated throughout seven African countries as a child. At age twelve, she was granted refugee status in the United States and went on to receive a BA in Comparative Literature from Yale University. She lives in San Francisco.

Elizabeth Weil is a writer-at-large for The New York Times Magazine, a contributing editor to Outside magazine, and writes frequently for Vogue and other publications. She is the recipient of a New York Press Club Award for her feature reporting, a Lowell Thomas Award for her travel writing, and a GLAAD Award for her coverage of LGBT issues. In addition, her work has been a finalist for a National Magazine Award, a James Beard Award, and a Dart Award for coverage of trauma. She lives in San Francisco with her husband and two daughters.

[War and what comes after | Clemantine Wamariya TED Women](#)

[She Fled Rwanda To Survive — But Does Not Like The Words 'Refugee' Or 'Genocide' NPR](#)

[Clemantine Wamariya, Who Survived Genocide in Rwanda, on Her New Memoir, The Girl Who Smiled Beads—and Living for Black Joy Vogue](#)

## Further Reading and Watching

Websites:

- [Genocide Prevention, US Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)
- [Rwanda genocide: 100 days of slaughter, BBC](#)
- [Rwanda: Justice After Genocide—20 Years On, Human Rights Watch](#)

Books:

- [They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky, Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, and Benjamin Ajak](#)
- [A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea, Melissa Fleming](#)
- [We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families, Philip Gourevitch](#)
- [Sister Outsider, Audre Lorde](#)
- [The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison](#)
- [A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide, Samantha Power](#)
- [Between Two Worlds, Zainab Salbi](#)
- [On the Natural History of Destruction, W. G. Sebald](#)
- [Night, Elie Wiesel](#)

## Further Reading and Watching

### Film:

- [Ghosts of Rwanda, Frontline](#)
- [4.1 Miles, POV](#)

### Hometown Podcast Episodes:

- [Rwanda: Land of a Thousand Hills](#)
- [Part two – Rwanda: Land of a Thousand Hills](#)
- [Living the Faith: An Interview with Drocella Mugorewera](#)