In reading a book like Jean Hatzfeld’s *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak*, it is difficult to avoid the feeling of voyeurism. The question of who Mr. Hatzfeld’s audience is is a curious one: what sort of people want to read interviews with men who slaughtered their neighbors? And why? Some, presumably, who for one reason or another are interested in the history of genocide; people with a particular interest in Rwanda; and those with an interest in the psychology of violence on a grand scale.

Many books in the decade since the horror of the Rwanda genocide have examined one aspect or another of it: from Philip Gourevitch’s journalistic effort to understand the magnitude of the tragedy to Linda Melvern’s detailed—even clinical—analysis of those several months in 1994; Elizabeth Neuffer examines attempts towards justice, contrasting Rwanda with Bosnia; Colin Tatz attempts to compare and contrast various genocides in search of some kind of understanding. The common theme throughout these works is the incomprehensibility of genocide: they all begin (and ultimately end) with a *why did they?* and a *how could they?*

Given this apparent desperation to understand, it seems odd that none before (to my knowledge) have taken Mr. Hatzfeld’s approach, asking those responsible to explain it to us. The structure of the book answers our hope that these men, who swung machetes day after day against those with whom they had formerly lived peaceful (if uneasy) lives, will explain it to us. In each chapter, Mr. Hatzfeld first explores a particular question that arises in the face of an event such as this one and then provides the responses from his interviewees. The feeling is one of snapshots on a particular theme: “The First Time” “Group Spirit” “And God in all This?” and so on. In this way he conveys the feeling of a group conversation, though in some cases the interviews were carried out one on one.

The question, of course, is: Did it work? Does hearing the thoughts of these men after their crimes, sitting in jail, explain to us what they did?

Ultimately this isn’t really a fair expectation; the oft-repeated claim that such crimes *defy comprehension* is not an idle one. Hearing a man’s honest description of what it’s like to kill an acquaintance with a machete doesn’t get us any closer to understanding why he did it. If the book leaves us feeling no closer to understanding the event, the reason lies in the incomprehensibility of the event itself, rather than with Mr. Hatzfeld. More than answering questions, the book raises them, and interesting ones.

In some cases, it nearly appears that the men are incapable of understanding the question in the terms in which we would like to have it answered. In response to *why*, they make statements like this one: “…the judge announced that the reason for the meeting was the
killing of every Tutsi without exception. It was simply said, and it was simple to understand…so the only questions were about the details of the operation.”

This quote comes from the beginning of the book, and fairly makes one want to scream: no, the details of the operation are not the only questions—what about the question of whether or not one ought to follow such orders? About where the orders were coming from? About what such a course of action would accomplish? There are myriad questions: and yet the men responsible—the ten interviewed here at least, and likely many others—fail to ask any which don’t relate directly to the “details of the operation”.

Mr. Hatzfeld notes that when he asks the prisoners he interviews (most of whom have fake names) questions about their activities using the singular you (interviews were conducted in French), he gets nothing: I always worked in the fields, I didn’t see anything at all. When he switches to the plural you, however, things change significantly: “We went up to the soccer field at around nine or ten o’clock...and we would go off on the attack. Rule number one was to kill. There was no rule number two.”

This dissociation and apparent failure to take, or even comprehend, personal responsibility is a common and recurring theme throughout the book. The men so often repeat the claim that the genocide was something that simply happened, rather than something that was done, that it appears universal among them. Religion plays into this somewhat: one man notes that “…I did not choose this, it was God. I massacred some Tutsis, and then the Tutsis killed some Hutus.”

Though there is some understanding that this event was different, there is frequent reference to the fact that ethnic massacres were not unknown in Rwanda prior to 1994. The sense we are left with is of a quiet insistence that it was the scope, and not the nature, of the 1994 events that were extraordinary. Given that the men interviewed come from a region in which 50,000 out of a population of 59,000 Tutsis were killed, it is not only difficult to countenance this claim but nearly nauseating. The quote above implies that it’s just a simple back and forth: “I massacred some Tutsis, and then the Tutsis killed some Hutus.” This kind of simplistic and ultimately misleading description of the genocide comes only from the killers; by playing down the exceptional nature of their own actions, there seems to be a hope that it will be perceived that they were only playing a role that from time to time one group or the other must play. One killer even says, “Each morning there were those who had to die and those who had to kill.”

It is perhaps not surprising that those who committed these atrocities tend to view it as something they simply got caught up in, rather than something that they were personally responsible for: untangling the combination of subconscious self-preservation and calculated denial would likely be impossible. Some are aware of the need to avoid awareness of what they did: “Even in your heart of hearts, it’s riskier to remember than to forget.” The solution appears to be to insist that the genocide was unstoppable, a force of nature rather than a piece of history.

1 My emphasis.
Is it true? Is it possible that those thousands who killed really had no other choice, that anyone in the same situation would have acted essentially the same, and carried a machete day after day against neighbors, acquaintances, sometimes even friends?

Whether it’s human nature or simply my own, I feel drawn to believe that if only people had made conscious choices not to be involved, if only they had refused to go along with the crowd, then perhaps the tragedy could have been averted. But Hatzfeld’s book leaves this hope in question: the killers’ constant repetition that it was God who made this genocide, and that there was nothing they could have done to avert it, ultimately becomes convincing. Those who refused to participate were killed; from our moral perspective, perhaps a better choice than to take part in the killings themselves. But how can we judge such a situation, not having been in it? Many of the killers make the same point: insisting that those who were there simply cannot understand and have no right to judge them. Many claim that they will be judged by God, and by no other; that we who were not there cannot understand or pass judgment upon those who were.

One of the most disturbing aspects of many of the killers’ attitudes is their near-disregard for the importance of reconciliation with the survivors. Many of them indicate that they know they have to apologize; but feel that after that, their duty is done: one man says “I wrote short notes of apology to some families of victims I knew and had them delivered by visitors.” This is perceived as enough; he knows that it may be difficult for the survivors to accept his apology, but doesn’t see what else he can do.

As readers, the book leaves us feeling sort of unsettled: partly, of course, because of the nature of the material and the simple impossibility of really understanding what seems so alien to us. But the worst of it is the feeling towards the killers, the men interviewed who we feel we’ve just spent a couple of hours talking to. We expect to feel repugnance, disgust, distaste—and these emotions are all there. But not to the extent that we expect; as Mr. Hatzfeld says, “This is awkward to admit, but curiosity wins out over hostility.” And this is true: it is in many cases difficult to dislike these men, even if we find their actions and their descriptions of them horrifying and incomprehensible. It takes a conscious effort to remain horrified: it’s easy to slip into viewing these men as they view themselves, as essentially good people who got caught up in something bad, and were helpless to resist.