



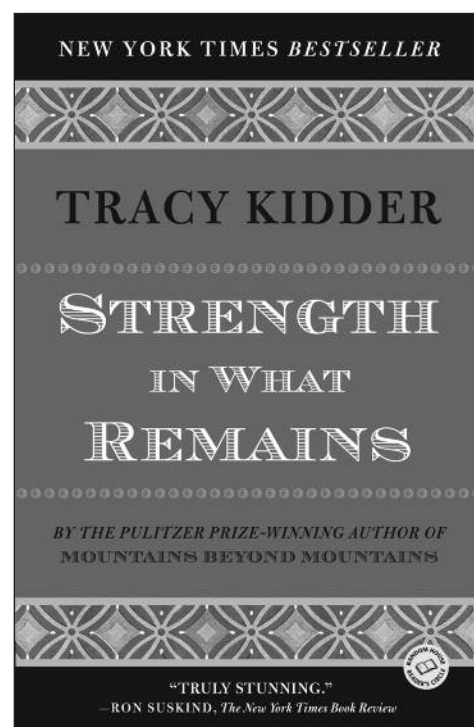
Strength in What Remains

Written by Tracy Kidder

Random House | TR | 978-0-8129-7761-5 | 304pp. | \$16.00/\$19.00 Can.

Reading Level: 8th Grade

Also Available in Unabridged Audio CD and eBook



“A tale of ethnocide, exile and healing by a master of narrative nonfiction. . . . Terrifying at turns, but tremendously inspiring. . . . a key document in the growing literature devoted to postgenocidal justice.”

—Kirkus Reviews

• note to teachers •

Strength in What Remains (hereinafter *Strength*), recounts the story of Deogratias (Deo) – his flight from civil war in Burundi, and Rwanda to homelessness in Central Park, New York City, to graduation from Columbia University, and to the fulfillment of the dream of his youth: to build a health care clinic in his homeland, free to those who can't pay. Deo grows up in Burundi, and eventually becomes a United States citizen.

In September, 1993, while Deo is in his third year of medical school, the president of Burundi is assassinated. Ethnic civil war ensues. Through the recounting of Deo's experiences of survival against all odds, Kidder provides us a window into the devolution of a country and a people. While it's difficult to read about such tragedies, Kidder compels the reader to be a witness to the inhuman conditions that afflict many of the impoverished regions of the world. Deo's experience is also one of redemption, of overcoming the morbid absurdities of human nature to become what he always has been – a healer.

Notably, Kidder, while astute and thorough in recounting and substantiating Deo's story, is not the detached observer of events for this book. Through writing about his own fear and reservations as Deo guides him on a tour of six months of terror, the reader is allowed to witness, to some extent, the horrors Deo also endured. By communicating to the reader his own attempts to conceal his reactions from Deo, and by acknowledging the intrusive nature of his own questioning, Kidder gives us the latitude to accept and work through our own emotions, misconceptions, and misunderstandings as we address some of the profound social, psychological, and political issues raised in *Strength*.

This guide is separated into three sections, Style and Structure, Comprehension and Discussion, and Personal Essays. The prompts in the first two sections are constructed for the purpose of fostering classroom and group discussion. The intent of the Personal Essay section is to cull in-depth reflective and/or investigative individual responses.

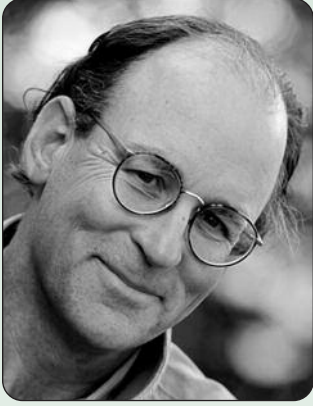
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• note to teachers (continued)

Finally, as you read this account of life over death, please take the time to visit Deo's Village Health Works clinic at <http://www.villagehealthworks.org/>. There, you will realize that Deo's youthful, "primal sympathy which having been must ever be" is an enduring strength.



• about the author

TRACY KIDDER was born on November 12, 1945, in New York City. He graduated from Harvard and served as a lieutenant in Vietnam. After returning from the war, he enrolled in a masters of fine arts program at the University of Iowa, at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. There, Kidder met a contributing editor to the *Atlantic Monthly*. The editor helped him get his first assignment with the magazine in 1973. Kidder is now a contributing editor to that magazine and continues to publish articles in other magazines, such as the *New Yorker*. He has also published a Pulitzer Prize-winning non-fiction work, *The Soul of a New Machine* (1981). His other works include *House* (1985), *Among Schoolchildren* (1989), *Old Friends* (1993), *Home Town* (1999), *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003), and *My Detachment, A Memoir* (2005).

• style and structure

1. *Strength* is composed of a short prologue and two sections: 1) Flights and 2) *Gusimbura*. In the Flights section, Kidder writes in the restricted third person. The reader understands the 1990s upheaval in the African countries of Burundi and Rwanda through Deo's experiences. Deo also describes surviving the immigrant experience in New York City. In general, his African flights recount how he physically survived; in New York, his flights of survival are mostly psychological. The second section of the book, *Gusimbura*, is written in the first person – giving a voice not just to Deo, but also to the author, and to individuals integral to the redemption of Deo, his intellectual fortitude, and his childhood aspirations. Discuss the structure of the book. What kind of effect does it have on the reading experience?
2. *Strength* opens with a post-genocide account of Deo returning to his family's former home in Butanza, Burundi. The author accompanies Deo on this trip. Deo warns Kidder not to mention Deo's friend, Clovis, by name when they arrive in Butanza. To do so would *gusimbura* (a Kirundian term) all those who knew Clovis. To *gusimbura* someone, means that an individual, upon hearing the name of a dead loved one, is forced to relive the suffering and sorrow of that loved one's death. Why do you think Kidder opens the book with this incident?
3. The title of this nonfiction work is derived from a William Wordsworth poem, "Ode 536: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." An excerpt of the poem is reprinted in the front of *Strength*. Read the full-length poem and draw thematic comparisons between it and *Strength*, specifically as it relates to the following quote from Chapter 5:

"In her company . . . he could talk as if he still imagined himself becoming a doctor, even though, as it had been from the start, this was usually just a way of telling her who he used to be."

Wordsworth's poem can be found online at: <http://www.bartleby.com/101/536.html>

• comprehension and discussion

FLIGHTS

1. Birth names are contextual in Deo's Burundian culture. For instance, his mother named him "Deogratias" (meaning, "thanks to god"), because she nearly died in childbirth. As you read about Deo's journey, consider and discuss the meanings of the names of people whom he meets. Research your own name's origin and meaning. What do you think about the significance of names? Do they reveal anything about the person? Does your name reveal anything about you?
2. In the first few chapters, Deo compares his first experiences in New York City with his experiences growing up in Burundi. What does he conclude? Do these conclusions change over time? Explain.
3. Deo is hired as a deliveryman by a food store chain and is unfortunately mistreated by Goss, the manager of the store. Although Deo has been humiliated many times before in his life, especially by his teachers, he considers his mistreatment by Goss and the building superintendants unbearable (Chapter 5). Why does Deo feel this way? Do you think he is justified? Explain.
4. In Chapter 4, Deo is befriended by Sharon McKenna, who makes Deo's redemption her personal quest. How does Deo feel about her interventions? Why do you think she is so insistent?
5. In Chapter 6, there is a verbal exchange between Deo and a fellow African American health care worker at Fair Oaks Nursing Home. Why is Deo confused by this exchange?
6. In Chapter 7, Deo's grandmother blames a neighboring family for Deo's bout with malaria. Is there merit to her accusation? What does it say about traditional beliefs and cultural values?
7. Analyze this statement from Chapter 7:
"He would come to feel that history, even more than memory, distorts the present of the past by focusing on big events and making one forget that most people living in the present are otherwise preoccupied, that for them omens often don't exist."
8. In Chapter 8, Deo recites a W.E.B. Dubois poem *The Souls of Black Folk* on the subway:
"He felt the weight of his ignorance, not simply of letters, but of life, of business, of the humanities; the accumulated sloth and shirking and awkwardness of decades and centuries shackled his hands and feet."
How might this statement sum up the plight of Burundi?
9. This same Dubois poem also includes the following lines: "To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships." How does this statement sum up Deo's life in New York City?
10. In Chapter 8, Deo's tears are replaced by laughter. Why?

GUSIMBURA

1. Why is Deo's account of his interaction with the Russian journalist on the flight to New York City so crushing to him after all he had been through in Burundi?
2. What does Deo's vivid memory of the baby at its dead mother's breast represent to him?
3. Kidder interviews Dr. Joia Mukherjee. Describe her interpretation of Deo.
4. Kidder interviews Dr. Paul Farmer. Describe his interpretation of Deo.

• comprehension and discussion (continued)

5. According to Deo, becoming a member of Partners in Health was like a whole world opening for him. Why?
6. In Chapter 10, Deo provides his reasoning for refusing psychiatric care: “It’s true that I really had, I still do have all these problems. There’s no way that they will go away from me. But I deal with them the way I can.” What do you think about Deo’s philosophy and his decision to forego treatment?
7. As Deo recounts his life to Kidder, Kidder concludes, “I would not have survived.” Discuss some of Deo’s qualities that enabled his survival. Do you think you would have survived under similar circumstances? Explain.
8. What does Deo realize about the demographics of New York City while spending the day lost in the subway system? What are the connections, if any, between the demographics of NYC and his Burundian homeland?
9. Kidder interviews Charlie and Nancy Wolff. Describe their interpretations of Deo.
10. Kidder interviews Sharon McKenna. Describe her interpretations of Deo.
11. Magenta is a purplish red color. Why do you suppose Sharon sees Deo’s color as magenta?
12. During a telephone conversation with Charlie Wolf, Sharon tells Charlie that Deo needs a family. Use the interactions between Sharon and Deo leading up to that first dinner with the Wolf’s to explain why Sharon has come to this conclusion.
13. Describe the significance of the door left open in the Mutaho hospital.
14. Deo says that misery is the primary cause of genocide. Do you agree? Explain.
15. In Chapter 13, Kidder accompanies Deo on a return visit to Burundi. On this trip, Kidder’s relationship with Deo changes. How and why does it change?
16. Deo has used the term “like” on a number of occasions throughout *Strength* when he describes various situations that have occurred in his life. In Chapter 17, the term is prominent in his discourse as he shows Kidder the memorial at Murambi. What is the significance of Deo’s choice and use of this word while describing the memorial?
17. In Chapter 17, compare Kidder’s reaction to visiting the memorial in Murambi to his reaction to visiting the hospital in Mutaho.
18. In the final pages of Chapter 18, while recounting the suicide of a Belgian colonial after the Belgians left Burundi, Deo laughs. We also know that Deo suppressed laughter while hiding among corpses (Chapter 9). These reactions appear to be inconsistent with the Deo, who, as a child, couldn’t bear the slaughter of a family cow (Chapter 3). Discuss these inappropriate reactions. What do they indicate about Deo’s personality? What do they say about the culture in which he grew up?
19. In the epilogue, Deo recounts the story of a mother who is among a group of Burundian volunteers who help him build a road to his clinic. Three of her children have already died and she carries another sick child of hers as she works. She explains that she’d rather build a road to a health clinic that will help other children than stay at home to watch her child’s inevitable death [The mother’s picture is number 19 on the gallery page of the Village Health Works website: <http://www.villagehealthworks.org/Work/Gallery.html>.] Another Burundian woman says, “You will not pay a penny for this road. We become so much sick because we are poor, but we are not poor because we are lazy.” Discuss the resolve of the Burundian people. Why do you think, that even at all costs, they are so committed to seeing Deo’s dream become a reality?

• personal essay

1. In Chapter 13, Kidder provides a synopsis of historical events leading up to the disintegration of order and the rise of chaos in Burundi and Rwanda. He quotes Peter Uvin, “social exclusion and the ethnicization of politics . . . are the two central elements to violent conflict in Burundi and Rwanda that, like electrons, spin around a core of massive poverty and institutional weakness.” Support or refute this conclusion by using examples from *Strength*. (Works of Peter Uvin are noted in the sources section of *Strength*. One excellent, ready-reference, “Structural Causes, Development Cooperation and Conflict Prevention in Burundi and Rwanda,” is available online.)
2. In response to Kidder’s question about studying philosophy, Deo says, “I wanted to understand what had happened to me.” In Chapter 11, Kidder begins to consider the role of providence in Deo’s survival. Deo, in fact, was physically (he made weekly fourteen hour treks to the family’s vegetable fields) and intellectually (he knew his plants and could diagnose the condition of his own body) fit to withstand the terror he endured. Analyze the roles that philosophy, providence, and evolution play in Deo’s life. Of the three, choose which role you think is most pertinent to Deo’s survival.
3. In Chapter 16, Deo compares his land to the setting of Joseph Conrad’s novella, *Heart of Darkness*. Compare and contrast Conrad’s work with what you have learned about the Burundian civil war and Rwandan genocide.
4. In the epilogue of *Strength*, Kidder suggests the role international organizations and international aid played in the terror perpetrated in Burundi and Rwanda (the poorest of countries). Support or refute his description by citing reliable sources.
5. In second grade, Deo read a book of fables. One fable, “What Killed You, Head,” deeply affected him (Chapter 3). The moral of the story is that a fool is one who talks too much. In another instance, a rebellious medical student compares Deo to a beheaded snake (Chapter 7). As Deo recounts his life in flight, he alludes to gruesome scenes involving severed heads. Analyze these and other references of detachment in *Strength*. What message (or messages) do they deliver about evolving or devolving societies?
6. The Kirundi term *gusimbura* recurs throughout this book. Analyze its meaning. Is its meaning more akin to being silent, forgetting, or forgiving? Explain.
7. A survival theme in *Strength* centers on education. Deo’s father convinces Grandfather Lonjino to continue the education of Deo’s uncle. Deo’s father and mother, convinced that education is the way of advancement for their children, ensure that their children attend school. Though Deo’s education is interrupted by civil war and genocide, he eventually achieves an advanced education. Examine the qualities of Deo’s character which you think compelled him to persevere.
8. Family bonds are strong in Burundian culture. Because of the amount of time Deo spends being cared for by his grandfather, Lonjino, they developed an extremely close bond. What qualities remain with Deo as a result of this bond?
9. Deo meets Dr. Paul Farmer in Boston. Farmer becomes his professional mentor and a dear friend. Farmer is also instrumental in helping Deo realize his dream of building a free health clinic in Kigutu, Burundi. These men and their experiences are similar in many ways but are also in many ways vastly different. For instance, in *Strength*, Deo observes that Farmer “didn’t sleep much either.” However Deo surmises that Farmer’s “sleeplessness, unlike his own, was self-imposed and purposeful, and therefore admirable.” (Chapter 10). After reading *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Tracy Kidder’s 2003 account of Dr. Paul Farmer’s life and work as co-founder of Partners in Health, compare and contrast the characteristics and experiences of the two men.

• other works of interest

God Grew Tired of Us: A Memoir
by John Bul Dau

Heart of Darkness
by Joseph Conrad

Infidel
by Ayaan Hirsi Ali

*Life Laid Bare: The Survivors
in Rwanda Speak*
by Jean Hatzfeld;
Translated by Linda Coverdale

*A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of
a Boy Soldier*
by Ishmael Beah

*Outcasts United: An American Town,
A Refugee Team, and One Woman's
Quest to Make a Difference*
by Warren St. John

*Six Months in Sudan: A Young
Doctor in a War-Torn Village*
by Dr. James Maskalyk

*Tears of the Desert: A Memoir
of Survival in Darfur*
by Halima Bashir with Damien Lewis

The Translator: A Memoir
by Daoud Hari

*We Wish to Inform You That
Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with
Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*
by Philip Gourevitch

For other books, consult the bibliography of *Strength in What Remains*.

• other titles by tracy kiddler

Mountains Beyond Mountains
The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World
Random House | TR | 978-0-8129-7301-3 | 352pp. | \$15.95

My Detachment
A Memoir
Random House | TR | 978-0-8129-7616-8 | 208pp. | \$13.95

The Soul of a New Machine
Modern Library | HC | 978-0-679-60261-3 | 416pp. | \$21.95

• about this guide's writer

JUDITH TURNER is an Assistant Principal at Terrace Community Middle School, in Thonotosassa, Florida. She has held Subject Area Leader positions in Language Arts and Social Studies. Ms. Turner received her B.A. in English from the University of Wisconsin – Green Bay, and her Masters in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of South Florida, Tampa.

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