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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Strength in What Remains by Tracy Kidder

Summary

In this new book, Kidder gives us the superb story of a hero for our time. *Strength in What Remains* is a wonderfully written, inspiring account of one man's remarkable American journey and of the ordinary people who helped him—a brilliant testament to the power of will and of second chances.

Deo arrives in America from Burundi in search of a new life. Having survived a civil war and genocide, plagued by horrific dreams, he lands at JFK airport with two hundred dollars, no English, and no contacts. He ekes out a precarious existence delivering groceries, living in Central Park, and learning English by reading dictionaries in bookstores. Then Deo begins to meet the strangers who will change his life, pointing him eventually in the direction of Columbia University, medical school, and a life devoted to healing. Kidder breaks new ground in telling this unforgettable story as he travels with Deo back over a turbulent life in search of meaning and forgiveness.

Discussion Questions

1. The first section of the book entitled "Flights" describes two kinds of flights: those in Africa, which are obvious flights for physical survival; and those in New York City. What kind of "flights" does the New York part of the book refer to?
2. How does Deo derive his name? What is the irony in his name...or is there irony? What are the meanings of some of the other names of those he meets along his journey?
3. How does Deo think about his experiences in New York City as compared to his growing-up years in Burundi? Does he change his views over time?
4. The manager of the food store where Deo works humiliates him. Why does this treatment sting more than the other humiliations he has received before?
5. What does Deo feel about Sharon McKenna and her personal quest for his redemption? How do you feel about her McKenna's? Why is McKenna so insistent?
6. Talk about the meaning of this observation from Chapter 7 regarding history: "...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."



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7. Also consider this passage in Chapter 8 from the W.E.B. Dubois poem, "The Souls of Black Folk": "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 reflect Deo's life in New York?
8. Kidder conducts numerous interviews about Deo— Drs. Joia Mukherjee and Paul Farmer, Sharon McKenna, Charlie and Nancy Wolff. What are their various interpretations of Deo? Do you agree or not with any (or all?) of their assessments?
9. How does Deo's involvement in Partners in Health open up a new world for him?
10. What is Deo's reason for refusing psychiatric treatment? Do you agree with his decision and reasoning? Could he benefit from therapy?
11. Upon hearing Deo's account of his life, Kidder admits that he himself would not have survived. What qualities does Deo possess that enabled his survival? How do you think you might have fared under the same circumstances?
12. How and why does Kidder's relationship with Deo change during his trip with Deo to Burundi?
13. Describe Deo's reaction upon visiting the Muhato hospital. What is the significance of the left open door? How does the hospital visit compare to Deo's visit to the Murambi memorial?
14. Talk about Deo's belief that the primary cause of genocide is misery. Do you agree with his observation?
15. Deo laughs while recounting the suicide of a Belgian colonial. He also laughed earlier, in Chapter 9, while hiding among the corpses. Talk about this strange reaction and what it suggests about Deo's state of mind, personality or the culture in which he grew up.
16. In the epilogue, Deo talks about the Burundian volunteers who are building a road to his clinic. Talk about why they are so committed to bringing Deo's dream to fruition.
16. In what way, if at all, has this book changed your understanding of genocide? What other books or films have you seen that have focused on this problem, not just in Africa but in other parts of the world? Do you see genocide as a localized problem or a global issue?

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