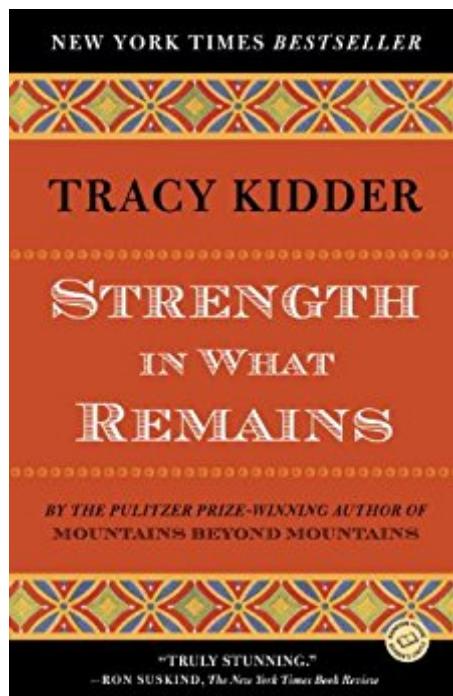


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# Strength In What Remains



## **Synopsis**

BONUS: This edition contains a Strength in What Remains discussion guide. In *Strength in What Remains*, Tracy Kidder gives us the story of one man's inspiring American journey and of the ordinary people who helped him, providing brilliant testament to the power of second chances. Deo arrives in the United States from Burundi in search of a new life. Having survived a civil war and genocide, 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 and shows us what it means to be fully human.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

It is sobering to those of us in "the West" when we realize how little we actually know of the suffering so many thousands/millions are enduring in places of civil unrest all over the world. This book is told by another about Deo, a third year medical student who was of the Tutsi tribe in Burundi who managed to escape a massacre. The tale of his wandering 6 month journey through the forest

hiding from everyone, not knowing who is friend or foe, eating roots and drinking unsafe water, then languishing in a refugee camp is riveting. He landed in NYC, and was helped by other African immigrants to get an under the table cash only subsistence job delivering groceries, to live as a squatter with them because it was "free" lodging. This brilliant man learned what American racial prejudice felt like, choosing to live in Central Park for 6 months until he was ultimately helped by a former nun who found him a family who invested in his education and helped him to ultimately thrive in the US, finishing medical school at Columbia University and Harvard then returning to Burundi to help his people recover and build themselves and their communities back up. I think of him as the Mandela of Burundi. I highly recommend this book in both the audible and kindle formats. It is one that makes you think and tell other people about it.

Burundi is one of the poorest countries in the world, but the misery suffered by its population goes well beyond profound poverty. As is well known, both Burundi and the neighboring country of Rwanda had gruesome civil wars in the late 1990s. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed in fighting between the two main ethnic groups in these countries, the Hutu and the Tutsi. "Strength in What Remains" is the story of Deogratias--or "Deo"--a young Burundi medical student and a Tutsi. When the Burundi war breaks out in 1994, Deo escapes to New York with \$200 in his pocket and finds work as a grocery store delivery clerk. Living on the street, he almost gives up in despair, but he befriends a politically active nun who finds him a home in Lower Manhattan with an older, childless couple, who later pay his way through Columbia. Deo subsequently finds work with the global health organization founded by Paul Farmer, the subject of one of Kidder's earlier books, "Mountains Beyond Mountains." With the experience he gains at PIH, Deo eventually returns to Burundi to build a health clinic there. Tracy Kidder's true story of Deo's life has two parts. The first part tells Deo's story from the time he is a small child to the time he graduates from Columbia and starts to work at PIH. It's powerful, indeed frequently overwhelming. But the second half of the problem is problematic. Here Kidder describes the trip he took with Deo back to Burundi, to retrace the path Deo's took while escaping the violence and to make plans for the health clinic. Reading this section recalls watching a Michael Moore movie: you just wish that Moore would get back behind the camera and make his movie, without inserting himself into it, and the same seems true of Kidder. His reactions to the killing fields of Burundi aren't what should matter, and yet there he is telling you about his inability to feel the appropriate feelings. There's also another problem with the second half of the book: sometimes it seems that Kidder has forgotten what he already wrote. For example, one of the most memorable moments in Deo's experience occurs when he's been on the

run for weeks, and, exhausted, is about to give up just short of the Rwandan border. A Hutu woman sees him, coaxes to keep moving, and lies the border police saying that he is her son, in order to save him. Kidder tells this story in detail, in the first half of the book, writing: "'I'm too tired,' [Deo] told the woman. 'I'm just going to stay here.' 'No, no,' she said. 'The border, it's nearby.'". In the second half, when they revisit the scene, Kidder describes a conversation he has with Deo: "'What was it you told her?' I asked over the noise of the plane. Gazing out, Deo replied 'I'm too tired. I'm just going to stay here.' And she said 'No, no. It's not too far to the border.'" I happened to read this book shortly after reading Chimamanda Ngozi's "Half the Yellow Sun," a fictional account of a different African civil war: the Nigerian war that predated Burundi's by about 30 years. Both books pack an emotional wallop, but somehow Ngozi's fiction had an immediacy for me that Kidder was approaching in the first part of his book, but upset in the second.

A book like "Strength in What Remains" forces you to question your faith in the human race and helps restore it at the same time. Tracy Kidder brings us the indelible Deo, a Burundian medical student who survives the Burundian genocide in the mid-90s. He "escapes" to New York City with virtually no money and no friends or family to turn to for help and support and eventually returns to Burundi to set up a medical clinic for the poor. His survival and success causes anyone who anyone reading this book to ask themselves whether they could have not only survived such circumstances, but prospered after what he had been through. We view Deo with a sense of awe and respect for what he went through, how he overcame those nearly insurmountable obstacles and where he is now. If this book can't lift your spirits, you may not have a heart that is beating. A few things make this book stand out above others of this genre. First, Kidder's use of flashback to alternate between the "present" and Deo's life in Burundi, escape to NY and eventual return to Burundi is far more effective and engaging than a linear approach to storytelling. The second thing Kidder does well is bring us closer to secondary characters that intersect and are instrumental in Deo's resurrection -- from the ex-nun who first befriends Deo in NY, to the Wolf's, the couple that take Deo in to live with them, to Dr. Paul Farmer. In other books, these secondary characters often remain nameless and faceless with little credit or importance placed on their role in helping the main protagonist overcome their obstacles. Kidder brings us close to these characters and reinforces their contributions in helping Deo overcome his past and becoming his new, extended family in his adopted homeland of America. "Strength in What Remains" has a palpable undercurrent of "fear" throughout the book. This tone is set early with the stark horror as Deo hides from the ethnic killers and narrowly avoids the same fate. However, this fear remains with us through Deo's journey --- from the degrading and

denigrating employer/boss Deo has at the grocery store to his first visit to Burundi during the reconciliation where tension and fear still lurks underneath the surface. This is a book not to be missed. This is a book about survival and redemption that will leave a lasting imprint on anyone fortunate to get to know Deo's story.

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