(Scheduled to appear in *Friends Journal*, November 2008)

1,900 words approx.

# The Translator

By Daoud Hari, Random House, 2008, 200 pages

The anguish surrounding Darfur has given rise to at least eight books, published since the present conflict began in 2003. The very fact that such a body of literature has had time to flourish even while the slaughter in western Sudan continues unchecked, literally speaks volumes to the failure of humankind to confront the ultimate crime of genocide.

If the 1994 Rwanda genocide happened so fast that the world could say afterwards "We didn't have time to act," and could declare "Never again," it is as if an ironical God sent us Darfur, so we would have all the time we needed. I am paraphrasing Darfur activist Eric Reeves, but I think all of us who have been touched deeply by Darfur have had the same thought.

Darfur challenges our beliefs, whatever they may be:

Those who advocate armed intervention have come up against the virtual impossibility of enforcing a peace that does not exist.

Those who once pinned their hopes on the United Nations must confront its failure to mediate a viable peace agreement for Darfur, let alone implement a single resolution on behalf of the victims.

Those who invoke the Quaker Peace Testimony to renounce any armed intervention must reckon the human cost of inaction in the service of nonviolence.

Darfur is a litmus test of our humanity and our beliefs.

As someone engaged in writing a book about Darfur, I have struggled to fathom its meaning. The books I describe here try in various ways to make sense of the conflict. I have chosen to focus on one, at the end of this review, not for its analytical power, but for the simplest of reasons: because in a very compelling way it makes the Darfuris come alive not simply as victims, but as people.

But first here is a brief listing -- by no means exhaustive – of recent books that may be helpful to Friends and others who wish to pursue Darfur from different perspectives.

Two new scholarly books treat genocide more generally, with references to Darfur. They join Samantha Power's seminal history of twentieth century genocides, *A Problem From Hell: American and the Age of Genocide* (Harper Collins, 2002, 620 pages), published just before the present Darfur conflict began. Power documents the U.S. government's history of inaction on genocides, from Armenia to Rwanda.

Power's book remains the most useful of the three for understanding our present inaction of Darfur. However, the two new volumes offer additional perspectives on genocide. *Blood and Soil*, by Ben Kiernan (Yale University Press, 2007, 724 pages) argues a more sweeping brief, that genocide began in ancient times with the advent of farming, and that it is enabled usually by some technological edge held by the genocidaires. Benjamin Lieberman's *Terrible Fate: ethnic cleansing in the making of modern Europe (Ivan R. Dee, 2008*, 395 pages) shows how the breakup of empires, chiefly Ottoman and Russian, created nation states in which ethnic minorities fell prey to persecution and genocide.

Among the books specific to Darfur, two somewhat earlier histories of the conflict remain relevant. They are *Darfur: a short history of a long war*, by Julie Flint and Alex de Waal (Zed Books, 2005, 152 pages), and Gerard Prunier's *Darfur: the ambiguous genocide* (Cornell University Press, 2005, 212 pages). Of the two, I think the shorter book by Flint and de Waal does a better job of placing the reader in Darfur, owing to the authors' experience traversing the physical landscape and cultural divides of the region.

*Darfur Diaries: stories of survival*, by Jen Marlowe, with Aisha Bain and Adam Shapiro (Nation Books, 2006, 259 pages) offers a print counterpart to their documentary film, *Darfur Diaries*, based on filmed interviews they conducted in Darfur in the fall of 2004, when the attacks by Janjaweed militias on black African villages were at their height. Both the book and film offer a glimpse into the lives of the survivors they encountered, with special emphasis on the courage and resilience of children. Marlowe is now in the final stages of editing a documentary film about South Sudan, based on our travels there in 2007 with three Lost Boys.

Two books are so different that I can't resist pairing them. *Genocide in Darfur: investigating the atrocities in the Sudan*, edited by Samuel Totten and Eric Markusen (Routledge. 2006, 284 pages) is a collection of academic articles, clustered around the U.S. government-sponsored Darfur Atrocities Documentation Project (ADT). Data compiled by the ADT was instrumental in prompting the Bush administration to issue its "genocide" declaration in September of 2005. Like that surreal declaration – which said in effect that we recognize this is a genocide but will take no action -- *Genocide in Darfur* is carefully hedged, forensic in tone, and enough of it is given over to methodology to create an air of detachment from the suffering it purports to examine. It will be of interest mainly to professionals.

Eric Reeve's *A Long Day's Dying: critical moments in the Darfur Genocide* (The Key Publishing House, 2007, 360 pages) is written in a far more combative spirit. Reeves, a Smith College professor of English, is a passionate and prolific writer who minces no words in attacking the failures of the U.S. government, the UN, and the African Union.

Reeves favors robust intervention by a multinational armed force. He led the charge to hold China's feet to the fire for supporting the genocide with its oil purchases and weapons sales. Many of these essays have appeared on-line, some within a few hours of the unfolding of events, always girded with an impressive array of logic and facts. Reeves is to the Darfur conflict what Noam Chomsky was to the Vietnam. Given the ephemeral nature of Internet postings and the tiny type-size that Reeves uses on his own web-site (www.sudanreeves.org), it is about time they were collected in a book.

I have mostly scanned, not fully read, enough of *Darfur's Sorrow: a history of destruction and genocide*, by M.W. Daly (Cambridge University Press, 2007, 368 pages) to think it promising. Arranged chronologically, it includes discussion of the May 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement (which Daly treated with the skepticism it deserved), so it covers more recent developments than either of the aforementioned histories.

All the books described so far were written by American and British academics and journalists. Whatever their strengths, they remain the work of outsiders. Fortunately, two books have appeared in the past six months written by Dafuris -- members of the Zaghawa tribe, one of the three main tribes, along with the Fur and the Masalit – that are suffering under the genocidal predations of the National Islamic Front government in Khartoum and its shock troops, the Janjaweed militias.

Halima Bashir's *Tears of the Desert: a memoir of survival in Darfur* (Balantine Books, 2008, 305 pages) tells of the author's girlhood in Darfur, the attack on her village, the story of rape and struggle for survival. Written with assistance from one Damien Lewis, the book is well worth reading.

The other book, which I have saved for last on my list, is Daoud Hari's *The Translator* (Random House, 2008, 178 pages). This is my pick out of all these works, if I were to recommend a single book for bringing Darfur culture and its desert terrain poignantly alive. However terrible the events, Hari's stories are told with humanity, beauty and humor.

*The Translator* is one of the most compelling books I have ever read, period. Daoud Hari returned to his village in Darfur in 2003 just as it was being attacked by the Janjaweed. His first-hand account holds the reader in its grip from the first page to the last. This is a thriller, a tale of life and death steeped in traditional wisdom and honed with the precision of poetry, by turns wry and exuberant, shocked and enduring. Best of all, this deceptively small book is suitable for readers of all ages.

As a high school student, Daoud Hari ('Daoud' is a variant of the Biblical 'David') fell in love with English literature: Shakespeare, Dickens, George Orwell, and the rest, with an overlay of Clint Eastwood films that played in a dusty cinema in El Fashir, North Darfur, where Daoud spent some of the coins he earned working part-time in a restaurant. When he dropped out of school to join the rebel resistance against the Sudan central government, his older brother Ahmed searched him out. "He sat me down under a tree and told me that I should use my brain, not a gun, to make life better."

"Shooting people doesn't make you a man, Daoud," Ahmed tells him. "Doing the right thing for who you are makes you a man."

Ahmed, a tribal elder by the time Daoud returns to Darfur, is killed in the fighting that Daoud witnesses, but he remains a guiding spirit as Daoud turns his own language skills to the task of helping American and European journalists bear witness to the horrors that are unfolding in his native land. This becomes his mission.

Daoud Hari's memoir is "as told to Dennis Burke and Megan M. McKenna." Whatever shaping effect these writers had, it appears they have done their job well. Hari's own uniquely lyrical voice is a gift to any of us who hunger to be touched by something beyond the tragedy: the soul of Darfur. *The Translator* offers telling flashes of history and glimpses of the larger geopolitical picture even as it unfolds its human story and its closely observed details of traditional life in the desert – from the negotiations surrounding an arranged marriage to the loyalty of camels, observations that could come only from within the nuanced tapestry of Darfur culture.

Small gems appear on nearly every page: descriptions of how small birds take refuge before the bombing attacks, even flying up Dauod's sleeves; the miracle of a forgotten banknote that gets him out of an Egyptian prison; his sadness upon returning to his village and seeing that his mother has exchanged her colorful garb for drab to avoid being seen from the cockpits of Antonov bombers.

Among the gems are Dauod's philosophical observations. "The proof of a democracy is surely whether or not a government represents the heart of its people."

Caught in a tight spot where he must explain his dual identity, he says "Everything is complicated like that in Africa. Nothing is simple. No one is simple. Poverty generously provides every man a colorful past."

So it is with considerable pleasure and also urgency that I recommend *The Translator* not only to individuals, but to book discussion groups and to educators looking for a book that a whole school might read as a common touchstone.

Can books stop a genocide?

I've come to view the so-called "international community" as a fiction, and to doubt my own ability – the ability of any of us – to stop this particular genocide, that has claimed so many lives already, and which continues to imperil the 2.2 million displaced Darfuris who depend on a precarious supply-line of international aid.

But any antidote to the numbing dehumanization that blankets a genocide is surely a step in the right direction.

By David Morse

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