

Exploring History

Talking with Hanna Jansen

by Hazel Rochman

At the age of 8, Jeanne was the only one of her family to survive the Rwanda genocide in 1994. Then a German family adopted her, and her adoptive mother, author Hanna Jansen, tells Jeanne's story in *Over a Thousand Hills I Walk with You*, a compelling, barely fictionalized biography that stays true to the traumatized child's bewildered viewpoint.

Jeanne is witness to unspeakable horror, but there is no exploitation of the massacre, only the facts of what happened to those close to her. Nor is there sentimentality about the world she loses: she feels jealous of her sister, distant from her teacher dad, loves her older brother, takes for granted her comfortable Tutsi Catholic home in the town of Kibungo. Elizabeth D. Crawford's translation from the German is clear and eloquent.

Born just after World War II, Jansen grew up in Osnabrück, Germany. After graduating from university, she spent many years working as a teacher and writing textbooks. Jansen has also published four other children's books, which along with *Over a Thousand Hills I Walk with You* have been translated into several languages. Hanna and Jeanne live in Siegburg, Germany, with Hanna's husband and the Jansen's 12 other children, most of them war orphans. I spoke with Jansen by e-mail about *Over a Thousand Hills I Walk with You*, which received a starred review in *Booklist*. She sees it as "a book against indifference and forgetting," and hopes it will help "diminish prejudice, racism, and exclusion of any kind and thus open people's eyes to what basically unites them, as different as they may be."

HR: What made you adopt Jeanne?

JANSEN: Jeanne was the fourth child we adopted. First we adopted Fatia, who came at the age of thirteen into our family. She was a refugee from the civil war in Somalia. After her we adopted twins from Rwanda who were twelve years old when they became part of our family in 1995. Jeanne arrived in 1996 at the age of 10. All the children—including

those who came from Africa later—lost their families and needed a new home. The reason to adopt them was love. But we waited until they were sure that they belonged to us and wanted to stay in Germany. They all decided it themselves. The adoption gave them all rights to become accepted members of society.

HR: How do you stay true to the child's point of view in your book?

JANSEN: From the very beginning I had a deep connection with Jeanne. She started to tell me about her horrifying experiences from the time she learned her first German words. So we had been speaking together for about four years before I started to write the novel. I think that I have always had the gift to empathize with children. Maybe it's because I'm still close to the child in me and to its bewildered viewpoint. I began to "work" with children when I was a teenager. Children have always meant a lot to me. I love them. With Jeanne I felt a special connection, like a relationship of souls, though we have very different characters. It was what you could call love and trust on our first meeting. So my intuitions have always been very close to her experiences.

HR: Does talking about what happened help her?

JANSEN: Yes, I think it has. Our very detailed conversation was a work of memory and grief. She felt an urgent need to tell about her witnessing the murder of her mother and her brother, so she spoke about it again and again. It seemed to me as if she wanted to free herself from the terrible nightmares that drove her out of bed at night. But it was hardest for her to return to the good memories, to her life before the genocide, happy memories that until then she had split off from herself. To feel what she had lost called up enormous grief in her, which I had to cushion. Nevertheless, it was this part of our work together that was most important. Once she told me that after sharing it with me this way, she could feel like a complete person again.

HR: Has she had any contact with Rwanda directly or indirectly since she left? In retrospect why does she think the Hutus were angry with the Tutsis?

JANSEN: She has had no direct contact with Rwanda up to now, because she decided to finish school before going back for a visit. But we always stayed informed about the political developments in Rwanda. The older Jeanne became, the more we tried to see her memories in the context of Rwandan politics, in order to “understand” the connections better. So her view of the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis, and what had been going wrong on both sides during different periods of Rwandan history, has become more objective over time. Now she can see that the Hutus were oppressed by the Tutsi dynasty for a long time, and that the growth of mutual mistrust has its roots in propoganda and struggles for power, and responsibility lies with the political leaders. That helps her too, though of course it doesn’t take suffering from her.

Indirectly she has a lot of contact with Rwanda. She has five Rwandan siblings in our family (siblings by adoption), two aunts who live in Germany, and some Rwandan friends.

HR: How do you tell her family story without being sentimental about the world she has lost?

JANSEN: Being truthful is a challenge when you try to tell about such dreadful experiences. I had painful feelings when I wrote the story, and I suffered while imagining what had happened to those people whom I came to know so very well through Jeanne’s detailed descriptions. When we remembered her African family we wanted to “meet” her parents and siblings as the personalities they really had been, to see them in their greatness and in their little mistakes as well. They were not heroes, just members of a family not so different from ours: spending a quite normal life together with little fights, jealousy, misunderstandings, fears—and love. When we talked about them, there were moments in which Jeanne became angry and allowed herself to criticize her parents. She sometimes felt discriminated against because she thought her brother and sister were favored. And she reproached her parents for not having explained to the children what was happening when the massacre started. Not being sentimental, just telling truthfully

about her family members, brought me very close to them—and I hope readers will feel it in the same way.

HR: What is the role of the short chapters with your own commentaries that appear throughout the book?

JANSEN: I felt that I couldn't tell the story without facing my own feelings. It took Jeanne a lot of courage to publish her personal story, so I wanted to be on her side. The commentaries allowed readers to go out of that hurting story, just to get a breath. They helped readers to take a step back and then go forward again. I composed the texts like counterpoints. At the beginning, when I told about Jeanne's peaceful family life, in my commentaries I already anticipated the horror, and later when I told about the horror, I went forward to Jeanne's life in Germany that showed a hopeful beginning. When you read it carefully, you'll find many special links that connect moments in the commentaries with moments of the Rwandan story. I wanted to make clear that the African and German parts of Jeanne's life story are like two sides of the same coin and everything can work together. I really do believe that in each moment of human and personal life everything is present at the same time: living and dying, guilt and healing. The commentaries tell about Jeanne's integration into our family, so they can be the bridge that leads directly to Africa. As a result I hope readers will feel that the continent is not as far away as we often think it is.

HR: Why does Jeanne think she survived?

JANSEN: She was used to fighting for herself since her early childhood. She told me that she didn't have any thoughts when it was happening, that she just let herself be led by her instincts. She fought without knowing why. But once she told me that she doesn't understand why she was the only one of her family to survive, that she felt guilty about it. I think she has enormous power, a great force of will, and I know very well that she is able to confront people with it. There were some very dangerous moments when people wanted to kill her too, but her strong rage made them retreat. She told me that her brother

had been already dead before he died, because he had given up. I'm sure that she never gave up, not for a single moment. Even when she was very weakened by illness, she decided to live.

HR: In my Booklist review I said that Over a Thousand Hills I Walk with You is an important addition to the Holocaust curriculum. Is there a connection between what happened in Rwanda and genocides under the Nazis, in Bosnia, and across the world? Why did it happen again? I'm haunted by your comment in the book: "And the world looked on. Or looked away."

JANSEN: I think you have to be careful comparing those inconceivable events that happened in different countries. It's important to look thoughtfully at the special national conditions and contexts. Maybe then you'll discover aspects of elemental human conflicts and behavior that are comparable. Indeed, the possible comparison with German history was always present in me during the writing process. And I still see it. In both countries there was that sort of racism of "allowing" people to treat other people as "pests" and therefore to exterminate them; there was that deep feeling of envy caused by very bad living conditions; there were the masses that could be easily influenced because they were uneducated. But in the end I must say the fact that "normal" people change into beasts from one moment to another and become able to murder even children without having any feelings of guilt is beyond all that I can understand or explain.

What's more, there is one question that has occupied me since my visit to the U.S. earlier this year when I was on a panel with the author Tonya Bolden as part of the PEN World Voices Festival. Did people in America ever define the history of slavery as an African holocaust that happened over several centuries? This tragedy took the lives of 10, 20, maybe 60 million men, women, and children who were not treated as human beings with dignity.

Sampling Jansen

Over a Thousand Hills I Walk with You. 2006. 344p. Carolrhoda, \$16.95 (1-57505-927-4). Gr. 7–10.

Hazel Rochman is a contributing editor for the Books for Youth section of *Booklist*.