



Radio Congo: Signals of Hope from Africa's Deadliest War

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While poring over dust-caked pamphlets in the library, Ben Rawlence stumbles upon the photo of a lost city of colonial Congo--a glistening, modern metropolis built by huge tin mines and European capitalists. Today, that city, Manono, sits beyond the infamous "Triangle of Death," in an area rarely reached by outsiders since war turned the country's rivers to blood.

In this compelling debut, Rawlence sets out to gather the news from this ghost town in one of the most dangerous places in the world. Ignoring the advice of locals, reporters, and mercenaries, he travels by foot, motorbike, and canoe, taking his time and meeting the people who are rebuilding their homes with hope, faith, and nervous instinct. We meet Benjamin, the kindly father of the most terrifying Mai Mai warlord; Leya, who happily gives up a good job in Zambia to return to her razed town; Colonel Ibrahim, a guerrilla turned army officer; the Lebanese cousins Mohammed and Mohammed, who oversee the remains of Manono's great mine; the priest Jean-Baptiste, who explains the conjoined prices of beer and normality; and the talk-show host Mama Christine, who dispenses counsel and courage in equal measure.

From the "blood cheese" of Goma to the decaying city of Manono, Rawlence shares the real story of Congo during and after the war, and finds not just a lost city but the seeds of a peaceful future.

Radio Congo: Signals of Hope from Africa's Deadliest War Details

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Pit says

Brilliant travel writing. Rawlence astutely dissects, mostly through chance encounters, the implications and "realities" of life in Eastern Congo. His erudite observations on the bleak ironies of the conflict are fuelled not by a sensationalist's hunger for gory spectacle but by an underlying, cheesy as it may sound, humanity. Radio Congo's chief achievement, in my opinion, is its ability to extrapolate from minute details (the wheelchair produce transporters spring to mind) the social and economic organization (and re-building) of a nation wrestling with its past. From the the psychological reverberations of colonization to Congo's thrilling landscapes, Radio Congo teems with well-informed and sharp observations. A read not to miss.

John Benson says

I decided to read this book after I had read Ben Rawlence's recent book, CITY OF THORNS about the Dadaab Refugee Camp in NE Kenya. This is his earlier book and there is very little in common between the books except that Rawlence's knowledge of Swahili helped him connect with people in a deep way in both places. I had also read Tim Butcher's BLOOD RIVER recently where he travels through some of the same areas as Rawlence did five years later in Eastern Congo (DRC). In fact, one of the key characters Tim Butcher met in Kalemie, Congo is a key person in this book. Reading the two books so close together gave me a sense of why Ben Rawlence could use the subtitle, "Signals of Hope". While his travels through eastern Congo are very rough, he traveled at a time when refugees were starting to be repatriated to the area again. When Tim Butcher traveled there, it seemed like there was no hope. Ben Rawlence captures well the various communities he visited along the shores of Lake Tanganyika and interior villages in eastern and southern Congo. The chapters are often quite short but bring out the struggles and humanity of the people who are living in this area. His book is not as strong on the history as Tim Butcher's or Adam Hochschild's earlier books on the Congo, but he captures the lives of these people at this particular moment in time quite well.

Steve says

Excellent written account of a journalist's journey through Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2007. He is intrepid and headstrong in his efforts to travel over ground and water to the city of Manono, deep in one of the most war-torn regions of the East. It is part travelogue and part reporting, with wonderful sketches of the characters and people he meets along the way. Rawlence shows a real gift for making friends with all kinds of people; shopkeepers, NGO workers, warlords, bureaucrats, etc. He continuously seeks and finds rides further and further south until he reaches his destination, all the while defying constant warnings from locals and expats that moving forward with his quest is dangerous and very well might kill him. After reading this brief synopsis, you might consider the author to be an adrenaline-seeking adventure junky; I can't tell you how far this is from the case. Rawlence becomes the consummate journalist, seeking the meat of the story and the details behind the main dish; he works his way through the country by being a fellow human to those he meets, and he is treated (relatively) well for his efforts.

My favorite segment is his journey south over Lake Tanganyika as he bounces from one seaside village to

the next, by day and night. At one point he is ferried along by a group of teenage boys, and it is during this interesting leg of the trip that his humanity is exceptionally apparent, just in how he relates to the boys and chats in the darkness.

Rawlence is a fantastic writer and he certainly, for better or worse, paints with an optimistic brush. Congo is a tough place to be optimistic, and indeed I found an article online while I was reading *Radio Congo* where Rawlence writes, post-publishing of the book, that his optimistic vision didn't exactly work out. But no matter how the oscillation of this turbulent place revolved after he put paper to pen on his journey, this book is a marvelous record of what one man can accomplish in one of the world's most dangerous places, when he arms himself with simply guile, humanity and the journalist's commitment to curiosity. If perhaps his vision of a peaceful, prosperous Congo on the horizon remains days farther away than he first expected, Rawlence succeeds in showing us, and very much reminding us, that the best of humanity still mixes side-by-side with the worst, wherever that may be, and that we are all better off for noticing.

Lukas Dufka says

Ben Rawlence displays two rare virtues throughout the whole book - courage and curiosity. The combination results in an important account of how life, its human shape, that is, goes on in a country that has seen only war, exploitation and mismanagement for centuries. Having finished the book, I would argue that the optimistic conclusion of the book wasn't just a requisite happy ending to increase the sales, but objective conclusion based on a big deal of pragmatism and acceptance of hard facts. At the very least, if all seems to have gone terribly wrong and it looks just about incorrigible, losing hope is the last thing to be lost before utter defeat, while preserving hope is always the first step to trying again to shape your circumstances into something better. What Rawlence has seen on his journey is, in spite of all the misery suffered, that hope has survived. And if the people of Congo who bore the endless atrocities of the war can go on and remain hopeful of their future, then nobody else in the world should feel like giving up on them either.

Juliette says

"Human beings are capable of war and sadness and all sorts of terrible stuff, but also cupcakes." (Kid President)

A few weeks ago, the Brooklyn Academy of Music plastered Ben Rawlence's headshot all over my Facebook feed. Don't get me wrong, it's a nice — albeit inexplicably green — headshot, but after about the fifth day of seeing the advertisement for the third time that day, I was sick of seeing it. It's like he was staring into my soul and judging all my posts. *Who are you, green man? Why are you judging my love for Peyton Manning? Explain yourself.* So I clicked on it.

Rawlence will be "in conversation with K'naan" at BAM on February 12 about Rawlence's new book, *City of Thorns*. (Seriously, BAM, it's okay to just say "talk" or "discuss.") The synopsis sounded interesting, so I started Googling reviews of *City of Thorns*. It has excellent reviews from all the places you'd expect to give it excellent reviews: fancy, smart, intimidating places like NPR and *The New York Times*.

Still, I wasn't sold on this event so I bought *Radio Congo* to get a feel for his writing.

"Can you believe," he says furiously, "there are still humans who consider other humans not humans?" (*Radio Congo*, 157)

Going in, I knew that Congo is the definition of war-torn. I knew that, after the genocide in 1994 (the big one), Hutu *genocidaires* fled to Zaire, and Rwandan soldiers pursued them. Rawlence expands on that. I learned about the different factions and ethnic groups. I won't even pretend that I now have a grasp of the politics, but I think I understand more than the average person.

Rawlence and I didn't get off to a good start. When "planning" his trip, Rawlence decided "to leap and hope, trust the people who live there to feed me, give me shelter[,] and help me along to the next place." (15) Now, Rawlence clearly is not a small, brown woman with trust issues. Even so, I marvel at his — oh, what's the P-word I'm looking for? Let's go with *presumption*. I marvel at his presumption.

What's more, I marvel that his lack of planning works. People help him! Without qualms! He just finds these people! And they say, "Sure, stranger, let's get some beers (you're paying). And then you can hop on my motorbike! And I'll take you where you need to go!" That was the most amazing part of the entire book, and, to his credit, Rawlence knows it: "The grace and kindness with which I am received continues to astonish." (208)

I won't recount the stories of what these people endured. If this had been a work of fiction, a product of Rawlence's imagination, I would have put it down in disgust at the gratuitousness and sadism. Indeed, the stories of these survivors are worse than what most fiction writers can put into words. They are every horrific, intimate nightmare of war that you can imagine; they are worse than you can imagine.

And yet these people are kind to this stranger.

He travels to the most dangerous part of Congo, and the people whom he meets do not treat him with fear, distrust, or caution. They take him under their wings. They feed him. They take him out for drinks. They introduce him to the right people and the wrong people. They help him find his way.

It's beautiful.

If Rawlence scoffs at anybody, he scoffs at the NGO workers who are oblivious, at best, and condescending, at worst, to the people they are supposedly there to help. They are in Congo to do their assignments and nothing more, it seems:

When the crew buy fish from a passing canoe, Yvette stands over Bwalile telling him how to grill it, then offers the finished product to me before flaking a little on a plate for the crew and promptly finishing off the rest herself. (123)

That evening two UN workers invite me to dinner in their compound. Without a nod to Uvira's hungry inhabitants, we feast on Italian food, French wine, Canadian whisky and cigars, but still no fish. (76)

(Honesty begs me to note Rawlence's benefit of the disconnection.)

You have to wonder about an organization that literally lives separately from the people they claim to want to aid.

Finally, I need to stress that Rawlence is a talented writer. Maybe it's not enough to go on the "How to Write Well" shelf with Heaney and Tolstoy, but I will reconsider my judgement after *City of Thorns*. The descriptions of the stars made me think, *This guy gets me*.

Yes, I love the stars. I'm biased. Rawlence's green-man headshot on my newsfeed was framed by updates from the Cassini Mission, EarthSky, and Rosetta, so I'm an easy audience. His descriptions of the sky were pleasant surprises.

The stars come out; the sky is taut and clear, the skin of a drum. (147)

...under stars so vivid they form a mist across the night.... (163)

[T]he stars glint sharply — a fistful of diamonds scattered on velvet. (249)

The ground is muddy underfoot and although I must watch my steps, I look up. The rain has drained from the sky and stars shimmer across the black vastness of the night. (286)

That green man understands me. If he wrote a book about going camping under the stars, and it was just his descriptions of the sky, I'd snatch that up. I'd preorder the hardcover.

Here, Rawlence's meditations on the stars made me think of that Wilde quote from Lady Windermere's Fan.

I'm still undecided about attending the BAM event. (What follows has absolutely nothing to do with this book, City of Thorns, or Ben Rawlence.) (view spoiler)

But if City of Thorns is as good as they say it is, I might have to go, but I probably won't wear a dress.

Susan Hester says

Having lived in the Cpngo many years ago, I believe the author did a superior job of relating his Congolese journey. I loved the humanity, hospitality and humor in which the people were depicted, as well as the monumental problems which they have and continue to face.

Liralen says

Although Rawlence set out in search of a particular Congolese town -- Manono, once a luxurious colonial outpost, now an impossibly remote ghost town -- this is not a book about that town. Rawlence gets there, eventually, but first he walks and boats and is chauffeured on motorbikes most of the way across the fractured country.

He notes, as he goes, how isolated these towns and villages are; the inhabitants are wary after years of war, and often their only external news comes by radio. Outgoing radio reports, meanwhile, often have short reaches. News from Manono, then, is hard to come by.

I'm not actually convinced that Rawlence met his objective. He made it to Manono, yes; he witnessed the changes since its colonial heyday. But it sounds like Manono's news, at least when he was there, might best have been encapsulated in the stories of individual lives there -- small news; daily-life news. There are some of those stories from Manono, but there are far more from elsewhere across Congo. This is not a criticism; those little moments add up to a lot of interesting, localised images. He conveys a lot about the way the country is put together and the way things work on the ground level. But I bet it also would have been interesting if he'd spent (as I originally expected) far more time in Manono, getting to know people there.

Max says

My 2nd "guy going to Africa" book in the past month. This was the better of the two (or perhaps just the

more relevant and contemporary).

I've never been to sub-Saharan Africa before, and I have no real idea of what to expect, which is what makes these books interesting at the moment. This was well-written and engaging. It did a good job of giving color to daily life in the Congo. The characters (both African and European) were all a bit hollow still, but they had some level of complexity and I enjoyed his ability to write about individuals as individuals rather than archetypes. I didn't find his observations to be super insightful, but the writing was lively, and I enjoyed traveling along on his adventure.

Betsy Hover says

I was delighted to receive this book from Goodreads Giveaway!

This author, Ben Rawlence, has written a book that takes the reader on his journey thru the Katanga province - a place where rarely foreigners enter. The author shows the human conditions and what of these Congolese people have lived thru, the good, bad and ugly! However, he also depicts the resilience of the people and how they survive despite these setbacks of tragedy and warfare.

I would highly recommend this book as a MUST read!!

Art says

Writing from a region that's faced a century of ruin, exploitation and pain it's pretty clear from the start this was not going to be a happy tale. Interesting view of life in the Congo.

Doris says

Interesting story and beautifully written--the author travels into remote areas of the Congo (DRC) to see how the ongoing wars, warlords, corruption, etc has left the population and answer the question "is there hope?" He finds there is hope; I finished the book feeling more skeptical. I learned a lot about the history of the conflicts and ongoing strife. The wealth of the Congo, its mineral resources, have been the cause of much of the problem as the colonial powers, citizens of Rwanda, warlords, entrepreneurs all struggle for its wealth leaving little except misery for the ordinary citizen.

Christine says

I received this book as part of a Goodreads giveaway.

Radio Congo was a fascinating read of the author's journey through areas in Africa, and the people,

landscape, buildings and weather encountered. Hospitality and kindness from the very, very poor, hopeless people shines through, and it amazed me at the overall positive demeanour and generosity shown towards the 'white man' who was travelling through to hear various stories from different peoples.

I liked the social awareness nature of the book, and the frankness in which it was written. Made me think about how charities work, and where money donated to Africa really goes.

Matt says

This was one of the best written books I've read about the Congo in a long while. Heartbreaking, as the author makes his way through villages ravaged by war, and shares the stories of refugees and the displaced, who survive despite untold suffering and few prospects. It is a hopeful tale nonetheless, and the author relates many signs of innovation to demonstrate that the indomitable entrepreneurial spirit of the Congolese people is indeed alive and well.

David Smith says

Radio Congo – Ben Rawlence

“Before this trip I knew more about how people in Congo were dying than how they were living.” Author Ben Rawlence.

I had to read this book because of its title – radio would have been enough on its own, so would Congo – put them together and the temptation is too great. My expectations however were low – I had not heard of Ben Rawlence nor did I know anything about his work until stumbling across a review of the book on the African Arguments website. I like to fool myself into believing that if there is something happening in the radio world in the Congo I'll know about it.

What I did not know, until reading Radio Congo, is that Ben Rawlence is an enormous talent in the travel-writing genre. He cleverly uses visits to isolated community radio stations scattered across the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to tie together a collection of adventures that ultimately lead him to Manono, an old tin-mining town off the beaten track in Katanga province.

Ben enters the DRC from Rwanda, crossing into North Kivu where he befriends the owner of a radio station in Rutshuru – Jean-Baptiste, who tells him that “Radio is the spider’s web that is holding this country together.” Ben’s route to Manono, made possible by the kindness of strangers, a recurring theme throughout the book, features radio stations as that act as the post office, community centre, health service, early warning system and friend in places which rarely and sometimes never see a car or a newspaper. They help to hold together a country and a population that, contrary to outside observations, is not trying to balkanize itself into several smaller states but is simply, in the absence of an effective central government, making a plan to survive on a daily basis.

This is a book about real people – the same kind of people most South Africans bump into on an almost daily basis often without realising it – everyday run-of-the-mill Congolese. Chances are, if you’ve been guided into a parking spot at the local shopping mall, from Cape Town to Polokwane, the man in the shiny yellow

vest is from Lubumbashi, Kinshasa, Goma or one of the villages along the shores of Lake Tanganyika in which Rawlence spent time in while trying to figure out how next to continue his journey.

As is the case with the parking guards, everybody has a story – and the story often involves murder and rape which are so widespread that virtually no one is unaffected thus condemning these horrific tales to the category of “unremarkable;” this is why we rarely hear about them.

The author’s day job is at Human Rights Watch, and it’s obvious this other aspect of his life has honed his ability to see more than just the trees in the forest – while not a political book, Radio Congo offers sharp insight into the origin of some of the DRC’s gravest problems, including the ongoing support of rebel groups by neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda as well as an understanding of generally misunderstood trials and tribulations of the Banyamulenge – DRC Tutsi originally of Rwandan origin who live in Eastern parts of the country.

Apart from almost making the reader able to feel the mud splatter up from the back tyre of the motorbike on which he hitches a ride, Ben provides the reader with some hard truths about expat views and contributions to societies in turmoil – a South African businessman operating in Goma cuts to the chase with “the real problem is that war is good for business.” The tough reality is that it is not only blood diamonds that fuel conflict in this part of the world – virtually everything does, from charcoal to cheese. Even the United Nations mega peacekeeping mission and the non-governmental organisations that operate in its orbit tend to be big contributors to the problem simply by injecting vast sums of money for accommodation, food and fuel into economies dominated by warlords – Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo has much more to say on this topic in Dead Aid.

Getting to Manono is not easy, but it is the journey that is the story – the route Ben Rawlence takes is difficult, and not without its unsavoury characters, however, I am pleased to note that he emphasises – “...as ever, Congo is more hospitable than hostile.”

When he eventually does reach Manono, a model Belgian mining town in the 1950s, he encounters children in rags, in the mud, extracting tin by hand before it is collected by Lebanese merchants who find ways to smuggle it out of the country on dodgy Russian aircraft; the locals have front-row seats watching their wealth disappear into the sky and, without witnesses, there’s virtually nobody to fight their corner.

If, unlike me, Radio Congo doesn’t excite you as a title, but you do like the travel writing of the Eric Newbys and William Dalrymples of the world, then chances are you will enjoy the words of Ben Rawlence.

Radio Congo is published by OneWorld.

David L. Smith is a Johannesburg-based media specialist who was attracted to the title of this book because he set up Radio Okapi – a national radio service in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Mikey B. says

This is a compelling journey in the Eastern Congo in towns near or by Lake Kivu and Lake Tanganyika. We experience, through the author, this war-torn country which has been invaded and devastated by its neighbors Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda and is now fractured by several regional warlords (such as the Mai-Mai).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has gone backwards in time since the advent of Mobutu's dictatorship in the 1960's. The tin and coltan mines that the author visits are being mined by hundreds of individual entrepreneurs, who carry the tin or coltan on their backs for miles to be put onto old airplanes and shipped off to Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and from there sold to First World countries and China to be used and assembled for our multitude of electronic products. The people of the Congo who painstakingly extract these products with their bare hands get only a fraction of the world price. In one case the author was prevented by military warlords from visiting one of the mines.

The author gives vivid descriptions of life, without drawing undue attention to himself. Often people in the Congo know more what is going in London or Iraq than within their own country. Radio is the chief source of news and information - each town has its own transmitter which is only good for about fifty miles. So communication between towns within the country is almost non-existent. Bicycling and mopeds/motorcycles are the main ways of transport - there are very few cars and the roads have degenerated to the point of being trails. The towns are being re-populated by returning refugees - some have been gone for over ten years. There are roadblocks everywhere - soldiers and local militia collect a tithe for the privilege of passing through. This is particularly horrendous for those who work the mines as this just extracts money from their hard work. Children and families have experienced and may have done unspeakable crimes of which we get glimpses of in this book. Because the war lasted so long victims sometimes become perpetrators.

It is amazing that despite all this that the author, for the most part, experiences only hospitality and kindness. People with so little and who have suffered so much welcome this foreigner into their country.

Page 56-57 (my book)

"I am not into politics", says Eugene. "I am just a businessman. You cannot make or trade anything in Congo that does not somehow put money into the wrong hands." Eugene is right. Every movement in the militarized economy of North Kivu greases the wheels of conflict.
