

**Review of *Extraordinary Evil: A Brief History of Genocide... And Why It Matters*  
by Barbara Coloroso. Toronto: Viking Canada (Penguin), 2007**

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Barbara Coloroso is best known for her work on effective parenting, school discipline and bullying. In this book, she turns to an infinitely more terrifying, yet (she argues compellingly) related, subject. I postponed reading *Extraordinary Evil: A Brief History of Genocide* for a long time because of its sombre and disturbing topic, but in fact it is in some ways a strangely optimistic book. In proposing the use of her model of bullying as a way of working towards preventing genocide, Coloroso makes this seem like an attainable goal. This is both a strength and a weakness of the book: a strength in that it offers a practical and hopeful approach, rooted in educational practice; a weakness in that she lays herself open to charges of oversimplification, and lack of political analysis and historical training. Indeed, the latter critique sent *Extraordinary Evil* to join *The Grapes of Wrath*, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, the Harry Potter series and *The Canterbury Tales* on the long list of books that have been banned from classrooms. Following complaints from members of the Turkish community, the Toronto Board of Education dropped the book from the reading list for a Grade 11 course on genocide and crimes against humanity<sup>1</sup>, apparently on the grounds that Coloroso was not a historian (Desjardin, 2008; Hammer, 2008). However, she states herself that she writes not as a historian but as "an educator, a parent, and a former nun" (Coloroso, 2007, xxiv) and bases her arguments on insights from her knowledge of bullying and her experiences working with genocide survivors in Rwanda through the Tumerere Foundation<sup>2</sup>.

As to the charge of oversimplification, early in the book Coloroso quotes Sebastian Haffner, author of *Defying Hitler: A Memoir*, who writes:

Real ideas must as a rule be simplified to the level of a child's understanding if they are to arouse the masses to historic actions. A childish illusion, fixed in the minds of all children born in a certain decade and hammered home for four years, can easily reappear as a deadly serious political ideology twenty years later (Haffner, cited in Coloroso, 2007, xxvii).

The book should be read in this light. Its historical, cultural and political analysis of the three genocides it uses as examples (the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire; the Jews, Roma, and Sinti in Europe; and the Tutsi in Rwanda) could clearly be more nuanced and more extensive. How could this not be the case? By now there are vast archives and bodies of scholarly work on all of these examples and Coloroso does refer the reader to many key texts. Her own approach is indeed, in some respects, simplified. Yet the book has much to say to parents and teachers who wish to create caring communities and to raise children who have the courage to do good in the face of evil.

Claude Lanzmann, who made the film *Shoah*, posited the "obscenity of the very project of understanding [genocide]". Yet Coloroso, while agreeing with him, argues, "[t]hat should not prevent us from studying it. Genocide is not outside the realm of ordinary human behaviour... " (p. xxi). Calling genocide "the most extreme form of bullying", she

describes the latter as "a far too common system of behaviors that is learned in childhood and rooted in contempt for another human being who has been deemed by the bully and his or her accomplices to be worthless, inferior, and undeserving of respect" (Coloroso, undated). She applies her model of the "bully circle" to the three cases the book draws on. According to the model, bullying involves a cast of characters surrounding the bullied person or group. These characters include: A. the bully/bullies (planners, instigators, and perpetrators); B. henchmen (who take an active part but do not instigate); C. active supporters (cheer the bully on and reap benefits from the bullying); D. passive supporters (get pleasure from the pain inflicted); E. disengaged onlookers (turn a blind eye or do not take a stand); and F. potential witnesses (know they ought to help but do not act) (pp. 82-3). Genocide involves this same cast of characters and similar scripts.

Coloroso argues convincingly that in cases of genocide, as with bullying, conflict resolution will not work. She uses the events in Rwanda to illustrate this, showing how the United Nations failed to act, at least in part, because the genocide was scripted and understood internationally as "ancient tribal animosities" or as a civil war. Because of this, the role of the UN was understood as being to oversee a ceasefire. Instead, the genocide should have been recognized for what it was (and Coloroso believes that, again as with bullying, there are clear indicators common to any genocide) and stopped forcefully, the perpetrators brought to justice and reparations made so that the community could find ways to heal, or at least to coexist.

Based on her deconstruction of the causes and consequences of genocide, both to the victims and to the world, Coloroso proposes conditions through which she believes the "empty slogan of Never Again" can become real (Coloroso, undated). The book considers the problem as an educational one and draws on the southern African concept of *ubuntu*, the idea that each of us depends on the well-being of the community and, if anything harms that community, each one of us is diminished. If the potential for bullying and genocide can be nurtured from a young age, as Coloroso argues, so can the capacity to do good. "[R]epeated acts of courage and bravery strengthen and perpetuate... acts of kindness and daring" (pp. 124-5). The book tells the stories not only of the unimaginable horrors of genocide but also of acts of extraordinary bravery and compassion.

As I read the book I was thinking of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's belief that the mind of a child has "two vents; destructiveness and creativeness [and that] to the extent that we widen the creative channel, we atrophy the destructive one" (p. 33). This idea seems to have some connection to Coloroso's insight that "[t]he more one does good, the easier it becomes to do more good [and] the more one acts cruelly, the easier it is to be cruel again" (p.141), that if evil is banal, as Hannah Arendt argued, so is good. For many teachers, perhaps especially those interested in Arts based education, Ashton-Warner's idea seems intuitively right, but it is difficult to reconcile with the knowledge that cultured and creative people have been responsible for the most brutal war crimes and for genocide. Indicted war criminal and *génocidaire*, Radovan Karadzic, is a prize-winning poet and Adolf Hitler was a painter. The issue is not one of degree of talent, but that the development of creativity alone is clearly not enough. Perhaps Coloroso has it right and the antidote to destructiveness is not being creative but simply doing good. She asks us to consider what we can learn from people who were resisters, defenders, and witnesses in each of these genocides. "Can they give us a clue as to how we can raise

a generation of children who care deeply, share generously, and help willingly? Can they show us the antidotes for the most virulent agents ripping apart the fabric of our humanity -- hating, hoarding, and purposely harming one another?" (Coloroso, undated). For educators and parents, it is a place to start.

## References

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Hammer, Kate (June 13, 2008). High School Course on Genocide Draws Protest. *The Globe and Mail*, A12.

## ENDNOTES

1. The book appears to have been reinstated later.
2. The Tumerere Foundation is run by survivors of the genocide, with little funding and few resources, to create a refuge and provide educational possibilities for orphans of the genocide. The foundation can be contacted at [tumerere@inbox.rwanda](mailto:tumerere@inbox.rwanda).