

NOTES FROM: *An Imperfect Offering*, by James Orbinski

SUMMARY: This is a memoir by a former president of Doctors Without Borders, and it's yet *another* book that changed me on a deep, almost *cellular* level when I first read it. Memories and ideas from the book just keep coming back to me again and again, and it *refuses* to leave me alone. I say this a lot (and I mean it!), but it is *life-changing*.

Doctors Without Borders (also referred to by its French initials, MSF) is an international humanitarian relief organization - an apolitical one - that goes deep into the worst, most dangerous, most *devastated* regions in the world and offers relief. They perform life-saving surgeries, they deliver food, they build shelters, and they provide clothing, comfort, support, and more to the afflicted. They've been doing this for *decades*, and for four of those decades, Dr. James Orbinski was on the front lines, doing what needed to be done.

Before accepting the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of Doctors Without Borders, Orbinski spent time in Rwanda, Somalia, Peru, Afghanistan - basically anywhere and everywhere people needed help that wasn't coming unless MSF provided it. He is, literally, indisputably, unequivocally - whatever - *a hero*, in *every* sense of that term, and *An Imperfect Offering* is just *spectacular*. It's *easily* one of my favorite books of all time, and again, it's just *life-changing*.

There's a similar book, *A Bed for the Night*, by David Rieff, that also deals with the politics of humanitarian aid (re: the corruption, both economic and moral), but there is *no* other book exactly like *An Imperfect Offering*. In a sense, there's also no one like Dr. James Orbinski, either, but that's not *completely* true.

In fact, there are *hundreds of millions* of people like him, and *none of us* will tolerate cruelty, inhumanity, or silence in the face of injustice. We're willing to give up at least *some* of our own material comfort and safety in order to help those less fortunate. There are hundreds of millions of us - perhaps *billions*- and we all *care*.

Albert Camus: "The only crime equaling inhumanity is the crime of indifference, silence, and forgetting."

"Pity or paternalism doesn't help anyone."

MK: In Somalia, his first "patient" was placed on top of a pile of bodies because he was going to die of starvation anyway and there wasn't enough time or people to tend to everyone.

"Speaking is the first political act."

"At its best, politics is an imperfect human project."

Rwanda: "The gutters alongside a hospital that we managed to keep open ran red with blood."

Girl Who Escaped the Killing Squads: "My mother hid me in the latrines. I saw through the hole. I watched them hit her with machetes. I watched my mother's arm fall into my father's blood on the floor, and I cried without noise in the toilet."

"We must confront injustice and hold our own governments accountable for what is done in our name."

"Only humans can choose to sacrifice life in the name of some political end, and only humans can call such sacrifices into question."

MK: About a week of feeding tube treatments would prepare children in Africa to have the strength to eat on their own.

"The term 'First World' implies that we have reached some sort of utopian ideal."

MK: The Red Cross was spending half its budget for the entire world in Somalia.

"If we get shot, then the NGOs leave, and there's no one left to pay protection money or salaries. They want us afraid and alive. They never fire at us."

Somalia: "Some crawled along the roadside, too weak to walk. Others had given up and simply lay still."

"We want them to care for each other, so we must care for them today."

MK: One MSF worker pushed a foreign photographer into a wall after the photographer stepped on a bedridden child's leg while trying to get a better photo of Sophia Loren holding a starving child in her arms.

"I could not live with who I would be if I did not go back."

MK: MSF in Somalia saved nearly 100,000 people.

"Cluster bombs buried in the sand look like butterflies, and so children pick them up."

"I still struggle now when I confront memories of that time, memories that are no longer unspeakable, but still unbearable."

"Genocide is a human choice."

Rwandan Teenager: "I used to feel ashamed, but shame is for those who have choices."

MK: People in Rwanda taken to mass graves would have their hands and feet cut off so they couldn't climb out of the graves. People would also pay to have their children shot instead.

MK: Bullets from sniper rifles would bounce off his armoured car when Dr. Orbinski was traveling between hospitals in Rwanda.

"How could anyone see an insect in the face of a child?"

"Animals can be brutal, but only humans can be rationally cruel."

"I wanted to kill the men who had done this to her. I wanted to pull the trigger again and again and again."

"Why would I want to see the world in any other way than the way it is?"

"We are not certain that speaking out saves people, but we are certain that silence kills."

MK: Dr. Orbinski's future mother-in-law called while he was meeting with the King of Norway, and the king said: "Oh God, I understand, I understand. Take the call, take the call."

MK: There are more Malawian doctors in Manchester, England, than there are in all of Malawi.

"I know why the struggle is right and good, and why we can always begin again."

"The most important thing any of us can do is to actively and pragmatically assume our responsibilities as citizens for the world we live in."

From the Acknowledgements: "The world is as it has always been. It is a terrible and beautiful place, and a place of possibility. And it is more beautiful for me that you are in it."