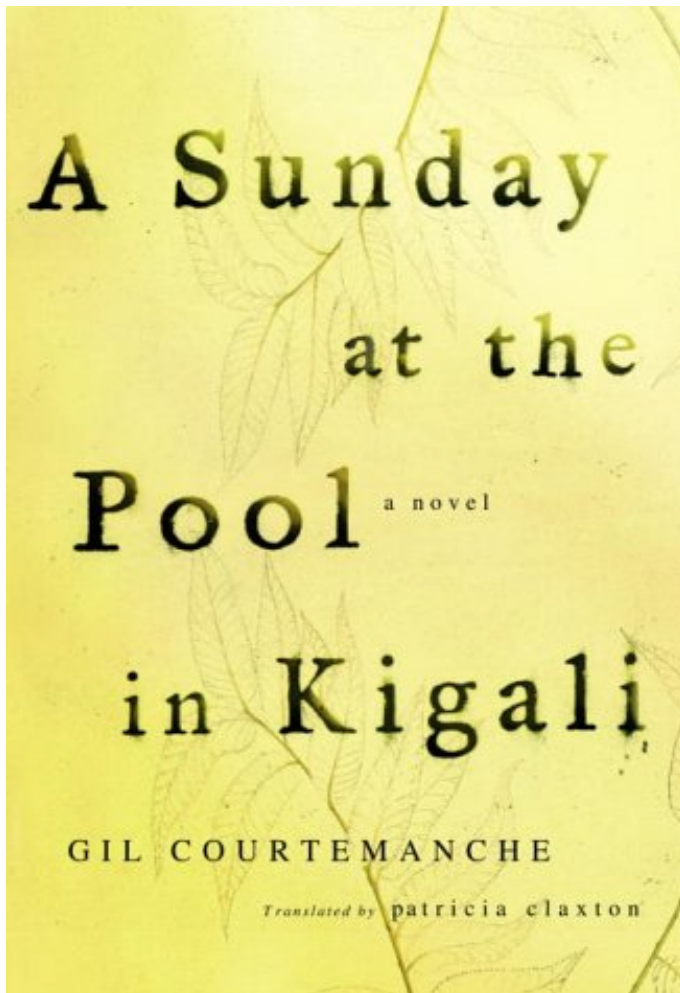


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**Gil Courtemanche**

**A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali**



Title: A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali

Author: Gil Courtemanche

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## Description

*“Look, for people who’re going to be dead soon, we’re not doing too badly.”*

“The novel of the year” is what *La Presse* called this extraordinary book, a love story that takes place in the days leading up to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. A first work of fiction by one of French Canada’s most admired journalists, Gil Courtemanche, it was first published in Quebec in 2000, spent more than a year on bestseller lists and won the Prix des Libraires, the booksellers’ award for outstanding book of the year. Rights were sold to publishers in over twenty countries in Europe and around the world. This humanist story of an unlikely love affair set against a holocaust has become an internationally acclaimed phenomenon, worthy of comparison with the work of Graham Greene and Albert Camus.

The swimming pool of the Mille-Collines hotel, Kigali, in the early 1990s, draws a regular crowd of assorted aid workers, strutting Rwandan officials, Belgian businessmen, French paratroops and Canadian expats. Among them is Bernard Valcourt, a documentary filmmaker from Quebec, on a mission to set up a television station in the capital. Valcourt, who for two decades has earned his living from wars and famines, lingers around the pool drinking warm beer and watching football; but most of all, watching Gentille, a beautiful young waitress, who is a Hutu but often mistaken for a Tutsi because of her family’s strange history.

The trouble coming stems from a long conflict, instigated in colonial times by Whites who treated Tutsis as superior to Hutus. The Hutu government is now openly encouraging violence against Tutsis. The physical traits of the Tutsis make them easy prey, but they are not the only ones in danger. Too many people are already dying in Rwanda daily: of AIDS, of malaria, and increasingly at roadblocks at the hands of drunken militia, or pulled from their homes. The hotel staff and prostitutes sense trouble and death drawing closer as they continue providing drinks and meals and sex.

The story of this developing catastrophe is revealed through the lives of a handful of Rwandans who befriend Valcourt. They confide in him because he listens, and because his interviews offer them a chance to try to change the way things are by telling the world. Their candour and warmth begin to make his heart glow. He meets people like Méthode, who knows a bloodbath is brewing and would rather die of AIDS in the comfort of a hotel room than by a machete. Threatened, frightened, sick, they don’t want to talk and act like they’re dying. Poor as they are, they want to have some moments of pleasure and celebrate life.

As Kigali life continues in its resourcefulness and persistence, Valcourt is falling in love with Rwanda, and with Gentille, who loves him because he sees her as no-one has seen her before. Even as the worst horrors begin, as friends are raped and murdered, he starts to feel a strange peace in this land of a thousand hills, though he repudiates the outside world for its failure to intervene. Because Gentille is thought to be Tutsi, her life is in danger. Still, no-one can believe that the extremists will go too far, that brothers and sisters will kill brothers and sisters, and that 800,000 civilians will be massacred.

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A hard-hitting chronicle of an overlooked chapter of recent history, told with skill and compassion, **A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali** also a celebration of living in the moment, of the integrity of friendship and the courage of everyday heroes. Harrowing, unsettling, challenging, but beautiful and moving, it is a book that cannot leave the reader untouched; as a *Quill & Quire* reviewer said, it is “full of real people that demand to be remembered.”

## Insightful reviews

Emy: The problem with this book is that it presents both very good elements and very bad elements. So I can't say that I loved it for its informative and moving depictions of Rwanda in the lead up to the genocide of 1994, because there are aspects of this book that I just hated.

First of all, Gentille and Valcourt are supposed to be in love but it is really not shown, only said. And there is something about they came together and how their story is described that just felt very uncomfortable. Added to some other details throughout the book, I can't help but feel that this was written by someone perverted.

I am obviously not talking about the ever-present rapes and brutalities. These are an important part of illustrating the Rwandan society of the time, which is the real strength of the book. You really feel like you are getting a good insight into the reality of what happened in the lead up to the genocide.

So it seems to me that what really works here are the facts on which the story is weaved, in opposition to what has been invented and embellished, which really doesn't work at all.

Anne: Very raw, very explicit. Not only covers the build-up to the Rwandan genocide, but also the AIDS-epidemic. Even though they are two totally different books, there are some very clear similarities I noticed after reading [Baking Cakes in Kigali](#) prior to this one: The Rwandan men are depicted as sex driven beasts; it seems that's all they can think about and they don't give two shits if they happen to infect women with AIDS. Some of them do it deliberately, because "everyone is going to die anyways", either from a machete, malaria or AIDS. I refuse to believe that the first part of this depiction applies to the majority of Rwandan men. Practically all Western men I've met are sex driven, but to this Rwandan extent, making it seem as if this and only this contains their entire personality seems a bit harsh and unrealistic. The lack of caring about dying of AIDS however, I can totally understand in a country where not many people make it over fifty anyways. The brainwashed induced violence, I can understand as well; it's not like that kind of stuff only happens in Africa.

As for the story itself, I first thought it was mainly autobiographical, but then after finishing it, found out that Gil Courtemanche was in Paris during the time of the genocide in 1994. He *did* meet Gentille, but there was never a love story there. After discovering this, I only got more frustrated about Valcourt refusing to leave Rwanda when shit was already hitting the fan. I believe this was written so to depict the love for Rwanda as a country. Also, if Valcourt had left, we wouldn't have been able to 'see' the genocide from up close. Still, frustrating!

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I gave this one 4 stars, because it was so intense and shocked me to the core. The numerous sexual explicitities didn't have to be so, well, numerous for me, but I guess when you're going for raw storytelling as an author, you'll get the most of out it when you can.

Highly recommended to people who heard about the Hutus and the Tutsis, but don't really know what was truly going on. Not so recommended to people who don't like/want to read about women getting raped in the most brutal ways. Neither do I, by the way, but if you truly want to know about the horrors that happened, you can't just read about the landscape for 300 pages.

Sebastien Castell: This is a difficult book to review. It's well-written, original, and gives the reader insight into not only a terrible chapter in recent history but into the wider pattern of insensitivity that led to the Rwandan massacre. But none of that means you'll enjoy reading the book. The main characters are kept at a distance from the reader - their thoughts and emotions explained by the author rather than shared. The callous brutality of the villains in the book is muted by the way they're all lumped into broad categories. Most of all, the almost ceaseless descriptions of cruelty would, if this were not based on real events, make the book seem as if it were simply trading on lurid violence rather than genuine storytelling. But of course the story is based on real events and therefore we have no choice but to react to the story in context of our shared history. That's why I rated the book four stars despite not enjoying it. Sometimes a book should be read because it's important regardless of whether it's enjoyable.

Maxime Ouellet-payeur: De votre vie de lecteur, c'est un des livres qui vous touchera le plus. Cynique, mais triste et ondulant dans un monde entre l. a. fiction et los angeles biographie. Déconseillé aux coeurs sensibles et à ceux qui vivent dans un monde facile. Ce livre ne l'est pas.

Philip: this can be terrible and extremely honest. one other needs to for anyone who desires to spend time within the quarter and needs to appreciate the way it can all get it wrong very quickly. It's terrific how humans nonetheless are inclined to blame the colonial previous for today's problems. It's time that we began to take accountability for our personal activities now.

Dana: Valcourt is a Quebecois dwelling in Rwanda. He really loves the land and has stumbled on his position in life. Staying on the Mille Collines, he meets and falls in love with Gentille. Gentille is a Hutu who feels like a Tutsis. She is in grave hazard throughout the genocide. Valcourt desires to marry her yet sees no cause to depart the country. regardless of seeing the our bodies of his associates who've been murdered, he keeps to stay. The reader is admittedly stretched in knowing why a person might placed an individual he's in love with in such danger. i discovered the various philosophizing rather well done. At one element Valcourt states that every nation has a sickness. The illness attributed to Canada was once complacency. this can be so true. additionally fascinating used to be the truth that the UN did not anything although a few of their body of workers used to be murdered. This is a wonderful tale yet no longer for somebody with a vulnerable stomach.

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