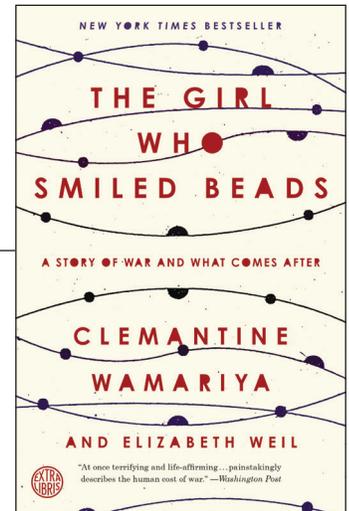


# The Girl Who Smiled Beads

A Story of War and What Comes After

by Clemantine Wamariya and Elizabeth Weil



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Also available in e-book format and as an audio download

Reading Level: 10

“Wamariya and the journalist Elizabeth Weil set out to sabotage facile uplift. . . . The fractured form of her own narrative—deftly toggling between her African and American odysseys—gives troubled memory its dark due.” —Ann Hulbert, *The Atlantic*

“Wamariya tells her own story with feeling, in vivid prose. She has remade herself, as she explains was necessary to do, on her own terms.” —Alexis Okeowo, *The New York Times Book Review*

## about the book

Clemantine Wamariya was six years old when her mother and father began to speak in whispers, when neighbors began to disappear, and when she heard the loud, ugly sounds her brother said were thunder. In 1994, she and her fifteen-year-old sister, Claire, fled the Rwandan massacre and spent the next six years migrating through seven African countries, searching for safety—perpetually hungry, imprisoned and abused, enduring and escaping refugee camps, finding unexpected kindness, witnessing inhuman cruelty. They did not know whether their parents were dead or alive.

When Clemantine was twelve, she and her sister were granted refugee status in the United States; there, in Chicago, their lives diverged. Though their bond remained unbreakable, Claire, who had for so long protected and provided for Clemantine, was a single mother struggling to make ends meet, while Clemantine was taken in by a family who raised her as their own. She seemed to live the American dream: attending private school, taking up cheerleading, and, ultimately, graduating from Yale. Yet the years of being treated as less than human, of going hungry and seeing death, could not be erased. She felt at the same time six years old and one hundred years old.

In *The Girl Who Smiled Beads*, Clemantine provokes us to look beyond the label of “victim” and recognize the power of the imagination to transcend even the most profound injuries and aftershocks. Devastating yet beautiful, and bracingly original, it is a powerful testament to her commitment to constructing a life on her own terms.

## • about the authors

Clemantine Wamariya is a storyteller and human rights advocate. Born in Kigali, Rwanda, displaced by conflict, Clemantine migrated throughout seven African countries as a child. At age twelve, she was granted refugee status in the United States and went on to receive a BA in Comparative Literature from Yale University. She lives in San Francisco.

Elizabeth Weil is a writer-at-large for *The New York Times Magazine*, a contributing editor to *Outside* magazine, and writes frequently for *Vogue* and other publications. She is the recipient of a New York Press Club Award for her feature reporting, a Lowell Thomas Award for her travel writing, and a GLAAD Award for her coverage of LGBT issues. In addition, her work has been a finalist for a National Magazine Award, a James Beard Award, and a Dart Award for coverage of trauma. She lives in San Francisco with her husband and two daughters.

## • note to the teacher

Clemantine Wamariya invites the reader on her six-year journey from war-torn Rwanda through refugee camps in seven African countries to the United States, describing her struggle to survive and make sense of her own story as well as the lingering impacts of her experiences. In doing so, she encourages the reader to look beyond easy, inexact labels such as “refugee” and instead attempt to understand the complicated narratives that together shape a person. Further, she prompts the reader to consider the broader themes of hate, forgiveness, and the incumbent responsibility of the rest of the world when human rights are being violated.

Supporting the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Reading Informational Texts for high school curricula, *The Girl Who Smiled Beads: A Story of War and What Comes After* is an appropriate selection for grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 in Language Arts and World History classes. At the college level, the book is ideal for first-year and common reading programs.

In the following “Examining Content Using Common Core State Standards” section of this guide, prompts provide for a critical analysis of *The Girl Who Smiled Beads* using the CCSS and are organized according to the standards they primarily support. In addition, at the end of each standard and the corresponding prompts, a classroom activity is provided that will further enhance analysis of the text.

## • pre-reading activities

Providing students with preliminary background knowledge regarding the Rwandan genocide will encourage a more nuanced reading of *The Girl Who Smiled Beads* (information on the conflict can be found here: [tiny.cc/Rwandanhistory](http://tiny.cc/Rwandanhistory)). As with many narratives that deal with war as well as its implications and aftermath, this story touches on violence and situations that must be approached with care in a classroom environment. By encouraging students to be open and honest, and constructing an environment in which it is safe to share their reactions, students will feel more comfortable engaging in discussions regarding sensitive topics.

As a result of our ever-evolving news cycle and the changing status of world political affairs, the dialogue surrounding refugees in America is constantly in a state of flux, but examining some key facts on refugees in the United States will help students to understand the scope of the issue. The Pew Research Center has compiled American refugee data here: [tiny.cc/refugeesintheUS](http://tiny.cc/refugeesintheUS). Discussing the role of the United States in both aiding and accepting refugees can be politically charged. It is important to establish ground rules regarding these discussions. Additionally, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has curated resources for teaching about refugees that can be found here: [tiny.cc/UNHCR](http://tiny.cc/UNHCR).

Furthermore, you can listen to Clemantine describe in her own words what the book means to her and her reasons for writing it here: [tiny.cc/Clemantine](http://tiny.cc/Clemantine).

- examining content using common core state standards
- ELA standards: reading informational text: grades 10, 11 & 12
- key ideas and details

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1**

**Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.**

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1**

**Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.**

Clemantine often contrasts her experiences and reactions with those of her older sister Claire: “I have never been Claire. I have never been inviolable” (5). Near the end of the text, as Clemantine is attempting to explain to Claire why she feels disregarded, she observes that Claire never uses “we” when she tells their story. Claire responds, “But you know . . . when I remember our experiences, I’m alone” (261). How do the outlook and experiences of Claire differ from those of Clemantine both throughout their journey as refugees and after they settle in America? What influences contribute to their differing experiences, and how do they impact how they reflect on and remember their plight?

As Clemantine describes her first night in the pastor’s house in Chicago, she describes viewing the refrigerator: “I was amazed and impressed, and I could not stop thinking that if our neighbors in the slum in Zambia could see this, they’d be so appalled. How could one place have such excess while in another, just a plane ride away, people starved?” (38). How does Clemantine react to her new surroundings and life in America? In what ways does Clemantine react differently to people’s kindness in America than in Zaire and South Africa? What changes does she make as she adjusts to her American life, and how does she feel about those changes? How could those who wish to help refugees better aid in these transitions?

Clemantine is drawn to a number of authors and stories. The discovery of the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel enraptures her: “I could not absorb the book and I could not put it down” (100). From Toni Morrison to Maya Angelou, Sebald to Malcolm X, Clemantine lists a great number of storytellers who impacted her. How do the readings of the various texts help her define her own experiences? How do authors like Sebald help Clemantine to find her truth? In what ways does Clemantine’s passion for the writings of these authors naturally extend from her love of the oral folktales Mukamana told her as a child, and in what ways does it diverge?

Near the end of the memoir, as Clemantine realizes that her mother has a narrative that can be used to describe her experiences and she does not, she explains, “I only had a character, a rubric. The girl who smiled beads gave me a way to go through the world, to believe in my own agency and my right to make decisions for myself, but I was still looking for a narrative that felt coherent and complete” (263). Why is Clemantine particularly drawn to that particular story from her childhood? What are the similarities and differences between her story and that of the girl who smiled beads?

- **classroom activity**

Through much of the memoir, Clemantine describes her struggle to reconcile the person she feels she is with the person others perceive: “Often I find myself trying to bridge the two worlds, to show people with so little, that everything is yours and everything is not yours. I want to make people understand that boxing ourselves into tiny cubbies based on class, race, ethnicity, religion—anything, really—comes from a poverty of mind, a poverty of intelligence” (179).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie expresses related ideas in her TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story.” Watch the talk at [tiny.cc/dangersinglestory](http://tiny.cc/dangersinglestory) and consider the following questions. What ideas or themes discussed by Chimamanda are similar to those of Clemantine’s story? How are they different? How do the examples and situations in the talk influence your understanding of Clemantine’s story? How does the danger of a single story that Chimamanda references relate to Clemantine’s search for a narrative?

## key ideas and details

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2

**Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.**

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2

**Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.**

*Vulnerability:* Before Clemantine and Claire flee to their grandmother’s home, Clemantine describes herself as a curious child: “My mother would try to discourage my curiosity, reproaching me with the words *ushira isoni*—you are not shy” (12). She is constantly attempting to learn about and understand the world around her, and desperately wants to know from what her family is shielding her. Yet later, when at the Ngozi refugee camp in Burundi, she writes, “I yearned to be protected, and I was not protected” (68). What prompts this change in Clemantine’s understanding of her own vulnerability? How do her experiences influence how she views the other children in the camp that she attempts to care for? How do they shape her later relationship with her niece, Mariette? Why does she feel such a strong need to care for and protect her?

*Home:* As Clemantine journeys with Rob to Zaire, she wakes in a panic: “I didn’t know where I was. I could not find my way back to camp” (75). After she arrives at Rob’s family home, she runs to the couch and cries; she writes, “I wanted to go back, but I did not know where. Nobody talked about home” (78). Clemantine longs to return home, but what does “home” mean to her? Why was she so panicked about not being able to find her way back to the camp? As she travels, she carries a Mickey Mouse backpack with her that contains items picked up over the course of her travels. What does that backpack symbolize and why is she so devastated when she loses it? How does her hope of returning to her previous life impact her outlook as she travels? Finally, after being reunited with her mother, she writes, “For years I’d told myself that I would remember all the places I’d been and all the things I’d seen . . . I’d share everything about my life. Now I decided not to tell her anything at all” (129). How has life changed Clemantine, and in turn how does it shape her relationships? At what point in the story does Clemantine realize that there is no going back to her previous life?

*Cruelty:* Clemantine seems to struggle with how to feel about those who cause harm: are they truly bad or evil, or can their actions be attributed to the circumstances of their surroundings? As she explains how her experiences change her, she writes, “That was . . . the first rupture when I was old enough to understand just how cruel and terrible people can be without even knowing they are so cruel” (174). And later: “Who was evil? The children who were hungry and scared? The men with guns offering them comfort and the means to feel purposeful and empowered?” (173). Where does Clemantine place the blame for the atrocities that happened in her home country? How does her interpretation contribute to the related notion that people are more than just fragments of their story? What does this demonstrate about really knowing and understanding people and their actions?

*Faith:* Themes of religion and faith are woven throughout the story in the actions and beliefs of different characters: Mama Dina’s daily prayers as well as the steadfast beliefs of Claire and their mother. Clemantine writes of her exposure to Elie Wiesel’s *Night*: “I was fascinated, perhaps most of all, by his willingness to question the existence of God. No one in my life had done that” (100). What is Clemantine’s reaction to those who turn to faith in response to what they’ve experienced? How do the beliefs of Claire and their mother differ from those of Clemantine, and in turn how do those beliefs shape their reactions to and discussions of the past?

*Sense of self:* As Clemantine describes herself in the first refugee camp, she writes, “I lost track of who I was” (42). Later, as she reflects on the making of bracelets, she writes, “I was trying to braid my story together, keep all my various lives connected” (186). Finally, in explaining the effects of trauma, she writes, “Those essential pieces of yourself are stolen. You, as a person, are emptied and flattened, and that violence, that theft, keeps you from embodying a life that feels like your own. To continue to exist, as a whole person . . . you need to remake yourself on your own terms” (220). How do Clemantine’s experiences shape how she sees herself? How does she attempt to maintain her sense of identity throughout the varying circumstances of her life? Does she eventually coalesce the different pieces of her story into a narrative through which she can understand herself and her experiences? What does this say about the importance of belonging and working through trauma? How does her story, in the last chapter of the memoir, compare and contrast with the story Clemantine tells in the preceding chapters?

### classroom activity

Clemantine, in her own words, explains: “I was constantly yearning for mothers, cultivating backup and replacement mothers” (253), and, while she is particularly drawn to Mama Nepele and Linda, she never stops missing Mukamana: “I still, *still*, after everything . . . longed for Mukamana. I wanted her to sit on the side of my bed, talk to me, and make my world feel not just magnificent but logical and whole” (263). However, she never feels as connected to the women in her own family in the same way: “I was on one side of a giant chasm and my mother was on the other. . . . It was like that with Claire too” (260). Create a visual that depicts Clemantine’s relationships with the meaningful women in her life—include with your depiction a written explanation of the similarities and differences in these relationships and what Clemantine is searching for in a mother figure.

### key ideas and details

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI9-10.3

Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI11-12.3

Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

Rob is introduced in the first sentence of the memoir: “. . . I met my sister Claire at her apartment in a public housing unit in Edgewater, where she lived with the three kids she’d had before age twenty-two, thanks to her ex-husband, an aid worker who’d pursued her at a refugee camp” (1). How does this introduction influence the reader’s perception of Rob? How does Rob change as events transpire and what prompts those changes? Does Clemantine ever feel that Rob deserves Claire?

Near the beginning of the book, Clemantine references the story her beloved Mukamana told her about “a beautiful, magical girl who roamed the earth, smiling beads” (15). Yet the entire story isn’t told until much later (208). Why is the story not shared in full at the beginning of the book when Clemantine introduces it? What does the story’s placement in the memoir say about Clemantine’s relationship to it, and what impact does it have on the reader’s understanding of Clemantine?

## classroom activity

Use the map included at the beginning of the text to create a timeline outlining Clemantine and Claire’s journey as well as significant events and experiences along their way. Write an explanation that describes how different places and situations change Claire and Clemantine; refer to the chapters both before and after each section as you interpret the long-lasting impacts of their journey.

## craft and structure

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4**

**Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).**

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4**

**Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in Federalist No. 10).**

Clemantine describes the futility of summing up her experiences with the word *genocide*: “You cannot bear witness with a single word” (95). Why is this particular word so frustrating to her? How does this word and people’s understanding of it relate to her sharing her specific story?

In describing the word *refugee* Clemantine writes, “It’s strange how you go from being a person who is away from home to a person with no home at all. The place that is supposed to want you has pushed you out. No other place takes you in. You are unwanted, by everyone. You are a refugee” (29). The dictionary defines a refugee as “a person who is forced to leave their country in order to escape a war, persecution, or natural disaster.” In what ways does her own description of a refugee differ from that of the dictionary? How does Clemantine’s story impact or alter the reader’s understanding of the word *refugee*? Is it possible for one word to encapsulate the meaning of the term?

## classroom activity

While words like *genocide* do not completely encapsulate the experience they describe, there is usefulness in having a consistent vocabulary. Read about the development of the word at [tiny.cc/crimewithoutaname](http://tiny.cc/crimewithoutaname) and about Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term, here: [tiny.cc/genocide](http://tiny.cc/genocide). In writing, explain both the benefits and limitations of defining a word. How does that explanation apply or not apply in regard to the word *genocide*?

Several points in the text provide meaningful opportunities to consider how differently people react (or, choose to react) to life-changing events. How does Clemantine’s imagination shape her experiences and outlook? What role can the imagination play in helping to cope in difficult situations?

## craft and structure

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6**

**Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.**

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6**

**Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.**

Clemantine has a personal reason for working through and sharing her story, but, beyond that, why does she feel it is important to share her story with the world? In what ways might exposure to her story change or influence the people who read it?

The memoir opens in 2006, as Clemantine and Claire appear on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and then alternates chapter by chapter between descriptions of their lives in Africa and in America. What impact does this back-and-forth structure have on the reader's understanding of the text, and what role does it play in Clemantine's retelling of her experiences? Why did Clemantine choose to open the text with the events the day of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*?

## research to build and present knowledge

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.8

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.8

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

Research the international community's response to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda as well as its response to other examples of genocide throughout history. Finally, write an analysis paper that summarizes your research and makes clear the expected role of the international community when human rights are being violated, the mistakes the international community has made in their response to these situations in the past, and how its involvement should look moving forward.

## resources

*Frontline: Ghosts of Rwanda* ([tiny.cc/ghostsofrwanda](http://tiny.cc/ghostsofrwanda)): The companion website to the *Frontline* episode dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide includes a variety of resources including interviews, timelines, and information about the world's lack of response.

"The Global Refugee Crisis: A Community Responds" ([tiny.cc/globalrefugeecrisis](http://tiny.cc/globalrefugeecrisis)): A PBS lesson plan exploring the global refugee crisis. The plan accompanies an Academy Award-nominated short film, *4.1 Miles* ([tiny.cc/fourpointone](http://tiny.cc/fourpointone)), that follows Coast Guard officers as they struggle to save those who are fleeing their countries by sea.

"Confront Genocide" ([tiny.cc/confrontgenocide](http://tiny.cc/confrontgenocide)): A United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website dedicated to providing resources about instances of genocide around the world. Information about defining, predicting, and preventing genocide along with detailed information regarding cases of genocide in human history.

## other works of interest

*Anthills of the Savannah*, Chinua Achebe

*The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho

*They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*, Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, and Benjamin Ajak

*A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea*, Melissa Fleming

*We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, Philip Gourevitch

*Exit West*, Moshin Hamid

*Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde

*The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison

*A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, Samantha Power

*Between Two Worlds*, Zainab Salbi

*On the Natural History of Destruction*, W. G. Sebald

*Night*, Elie Wiesel

## about this guide's writer

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