



# A Thousand Hills to Heaven: Love, Hope, and a Restaurant in Rwanda

*Josh Ruxin*

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**A Thousand Hills to Heaven: Love, Hope, and a Restaurant in Rwanda** Josh Ruxin

**One couple's inspiring memoir of healing a Rwandan village, raising a family near the old killing fields, and building a restaurant named Heaven.**

Newlyweds Josh and Alissa were at a party and received a challenge that shook them to the core: do you think you can *really* make a difference? Especially in a place like Rwanda, where the scars of genocide linger and poverty is rampant?

While Josh worked hard bringing food and health care to the country's rural villages, Alissa was determined to put their foodie expertise to work. The couple opened Heaven, a gourmet restaurant overlooking Kigali, which became an instant success. Remarkably, they found that between helping youth marry their own local ingredients with gourmet recipes (and mix up "the best guacamole in Africa") and teaching them how to help themselves, they created much-needed jobs while showing that genocide's survivors really could work together.

While first a memoir of love, adventure, and family, A THOUSAND HILLS TO HEAVEN also provides a remarkable view of how, through health, jobs, and economic growth, our foreign aid programs can be quickly remodeled and work to end poverty worldwide.

## A Thousand Hills to Heaven: Love, Hope, and a Restaurant in Rwanda Details

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Author : Josh Ruxin

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## From Reader Review A Thousand Hills to Heaven: Love, Hope, and a Restaurant in Rwanda for online ebook

### Jamie says

I hardly ever venture into the realm of non-fiction because I love stories, and find most non-fiction to be so bogged down with statistics that it reads more like a timeline than a story. Ruxin is a beautiful story teller, and I absolutely loved this book.

Ruxin tells the story of his family's building of a life in Rawanda, and their journey to bring a better life to those already living there. His personal account of the aftermath (even years later) of the Rawandan genocide and the lives it left behind are both haunting and hopeful. For those pondering the question, "What positive difference can I make in the world?" this is a great read, and I thank Goodreads for my advance copy so I could read it and tell everyone else that it is completely worth your time to read it too!

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### Nickie says

This is a wonderful book, I cannot recommend it enough!

This should be required reading for anyone involved with an NGO or other aid project. Josh & Alissa Ruxin are an amazing couple. This story is about so much more than just the restaurant - although that is a large part of it. Actually, the plans to build Heaven don't come forth in the story until almost halfway through the book. Between the work with the health clinics, farming, Alissa's work with children - this couple tirelessly devotes themselves to hands-on personal assistance to the people of Rwanda. They truly foster hope within a country struggling to recover from atrocities that are beyond our comprehension in this country.

This is a love story between Josh & Alissa, a story for the love they have for the Rwandan people, and a story of a strong resilient people on their way to recovery, reconciliation & self-sufficiency.

The world needs more people like Josh & Alissa! READ this book - if it doesn't touch your heart, you're a corpse! This is one that I will be re-reading many times in the future!

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### Jz says

Josh Ruxin tells the story of rousing himself from a comfortable life as a successful Manhattan-based development consultant, to the front lines of poverty in equatorial Africa as Rwanda has grappled with the legacy of genocide. He shares both the conflicts and triumphs he encounters with others and himself as he seeks to make a difference in the lives of individuals in the most direct way possible -- but also in a way that could be applied more broadly.

Josh is both a dreamer and a realist, capable of intense devotion and unvarnished critique. The book unfolds as an intimate conversation between author and reader -- one can imagine having it at Heaven, the coffee shop-turned bar-turned restaurant-turned hotel (and is there a bowling alley too?! ) that Josh and his wife Alissa open in the midst of working to permanently improve the fortunes of Mayange, a rural district that has seen the worst that war, drought, and pestilence can offer. We experience Josh's doubts and fears, his hopes,

and the lessons he learns and imparts as he works with Rwandans to effect lasting change in country and city. Again and again Josh leaps into deeply worthy ventures with unknown outcomes, gently but insistently asking us through example what our own priorities are -- and how we might better align them.

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### **Melanie says**

This is a gem of a book that I never would have come across had I not heard about it on the What Should I Read Next podcast. This is the story of a family who moves to Rwanda to do international development work and eventually establishes a restaurant. The author is a seasoned international development professional and gives some great insights on what types of aid actually works and what ends up hurting more than it helps. We also get glimpses into what happened during the Rwandan genocide as the author tells the back story of some of the people he works with. The author communicates an obvious admiration for the ways in which the Rwandan government is trying to rebuild the country and for the people who want to put the genocide behind them and build a strong country and communities. This book is part memoir, part history, and part international development philosophy, and it was a treat to read.

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### **Ivan says**

FIRST LINE REVIEW: "Our plane drifts up over the Atlantic at dusk." I have read at least 10 books about Rwanda and its recent history. This one was, by far, my favorite! Maybe that's because I'll also be drifting "over the Atlantic" in a few weeks to land in Rwanda, but it's also because I found Josh and Alissa's story so beautifully inspiring and well-told. The huge beam of hope that now shines on Rwanda is wonderful and this tale of two Americans committing their lives to making a difference there is beyond inspiring. I'll be staying just down the street from their Heaven Restaurant and am looking forward to meeting them there!

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### **Amy says**

A 3-star book with 5-star moments. The author makes Rwanda sound like a beautiful place. This book appealed to my need for armchair travel (I love the author's description of what it's like to wake up in his house in Kigali, but I'll probably never go there). Along the way, I was impressed with this family's commitment to doing good.

Lots of explanations of the best ways to go about development work; a bit less about food and setting up the restaurant. Although the book is not about the genocide, it includes some of the horrific stories. But overall the author seems so optimistic, so eager to show how special Rwanda is, that the book reads almost like a pitch for a development project.

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### **Nic Ayson says**

I found I struggled to get really into this book as I really didn't enjoy the authors style. Not a lot of humility felt from this guy. Although I'm quite sure he and his wife achieved wondrous things during their time in Rwanda, I didn't really care to follow his take on their successes. Too much skite..for me.

## Diane S ? says

The first thing I noted when I started reading this book was the author's enthusiasm and love for his various endeavors. Rwanda has suffered a horrific past, but is now on the road to recovery, and the people look toward the future with hope.

Josh, first got into this type of work on almost a fluke, but his enthusiasm for this type of project has guided his life, with a few detours and when he met his wife, Alissa, they both decided to make Rwanda their home. It is through their story that the reader learns much of the history of Rwanda, the genocide that tore their country and its people apart.

The story flows very well, so easy to read and their lives are so interesting. The country, the people, the family they are now raising and the opening of their restaurant called "Heaven". Told with hope and humor, everything was not easy so yes, also their hardships and their viewpoints on the things they encounter in their challenging lives. I enjoyed this book and surely the world can never have enough of people who are trying to make a difference, wherever they choose.

ARC from NetGalley.

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## Ra says

I really wanted to like this book. It was recommended by one of my favourite book blogs and I love Africa and people who do good there.

The author makes some good points about how to do development in Africa without creating dependence. His style, however, irritated me somewhat. I perceived him as an American do-gooder, with a sense of superiority that is respectful to Africa on the surface only. I did not even find the way he described his wife or his children particularly endearing, they came across as trophies to his expat life. There is endless name-dropping, and great detail about setting up the restaurant called Heaven (hence the title). I also found the jumping around between stories and characters confusing (especially in the audio version where you really cannot cross-check or move back and forth quickly between chapters).

This tries to sound as the story of a couple who makes it in a strange land. However, it is hard to overlook the fact of their born privilege. They made it because they come from money and power. They used the trophies of their privilege to make it in Africa. So this is not the story of struggle or suffering or sacrifice that they want us to believe.

The book is saved by the personal stories of those who really suffered, and made it, in Rwanda. Some horrific details of the genocide left me in tears, and I admire the spirit of Rwandans who made it through this darkness. I loved the descriptions of Africa and the resilience and wisdom of its people, the driver he calls Op-Ed for example.

I only listened absently to recipes and the way to run a restaurant, and the underlying self-congratulatory tone of how privileged few can make it in the heart of darkness.

I cannot deny the author's achievement and how much good he and his family did in Rwanda. In the end he used his privileged upbringing and wealth to help the people in many ways. He worked towards empowering

them. But he also got plenty in return. I did not sense any personal sacrifice from his part. The wife Alissa seemed to be the one carrying that burden.

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## Carol says

A beautiful book about humanitarian aid, life, and hope in the hilly country of Rwanda. Josh Ruxin has an impeccable resume of contacts, networks, and experience in the NGO / humanitarian world. And a wife that he cherishes and who is his partner throughout the struggles they face. Ruxin has a desire to eradicate poverty in Rwanda, a country shredded by the 1994 genocide. He comes to establish health care and farming. His approach is different - and admirable - from the traditional NGO, western-based approach. Rather than creating a dependence on handouts and the western world's finances, Ruxin teaches the Rwandans how to create, establish and maintain their own businesses - and then plans his exit strategy, leaving the Rwandans self-sufficient. His wife, Alissa, builds a restaurant, now world-class (!), in the capital of Kigali, on a street called Heaven. Ruxin lovingly describes his Rwandan co-workers and the harshness of the poverty they face in a manner that shows his love and concern for these people. If I could go to Rwanda, I'd want to meet the Ruxin family, dine at Heaven, and see the country he loves.

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## Jill says

As indicated in the Preface, this is not a book about the Rwandan genocide, nor about politics or the local economy. It's about the life that a young couple is building in Rwanda, and their contribution to the end of poverty there. Josh Ruxin, highly educated at Ivy League schools and a self-described "development nerd", decided to phase out his consulting career and start Health Builders, a program to help countries create business plans for public health investments through the Global Fund. Josh's wife Alissa had earned a public health master's degree and had visited Tanzania for an internship. They decided to start their family and build a life together in Rwanda. Upon arrival in Rwanda, Josh's role with Health Builders was well defined, but Alissa was casting about for projects that would allow her to make a difference.

Though the book is not about the genocide, that horrific period in history is just 19 years in the past and Rwanda is still healing from that senseless slaughter, so it is mentioned frequently in the text. Ruxin mentions the role of many of their Rwandan friends and associates in the genocide, whether they were participants or survivors. Ruxin also writes extensively about how to offer support and aid that has a lasting value in developing countries, not just flying in food donations that feed the starving, but lessons in sustainable farming practices that are left behind when the aid organizations move on. He's also a strong proponent in putting in management and organizational systems that bring western business disciplines. He mentioned QuickBooks many times. In the health clinic, the team started tracking the invisible parts of public health: Finance, HR, planning, pharmaceutical stocking, and procurement. These pragmatic details are interwoven with interesting stories of the Rwandan people and cultural idiosyncrasies that were sometimes amusing and other times frustrating.

After some time in Rwanda, the couple decided to open a restaurant, since they both had a love of good food, there were few good restaurants in Kigali, and it would allow them to train and employ many of the locals. The adventure of locating the right property, remodeling and staffing it provide many insights into the challenges of living in such a foreign place. It's a labor of love, both exhausting and exhilarating. They probably aren't making much money in the restaurant (named Heaven), but it is definitely meeting an important need in Kigali. At the end of the book, a few recipes for favorite dishes at the restaurant are included as well as photographs of the restaurant and the Ruxin family.

This memoir is a delightful blend of local culture, do-gooder optimism, lectures about what does and does not work in international aid, and an inspiring tale of how much difference one committed young couple can make in the rebuilding of an impoverished nation. Rwanda has made astonishing advancements in a short period of time, and the Ruxin family, which by now includes 3 children conceived during their time in Rwanda, will always be able to look back with pride at their time in this beautiful hilly country.(less)

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### **Tom Steiner says**

A love story and adventure of two people written in such a way that I could not stop reading. It was amazing that Josh Ruxin decided to move lock stock and barrel to Rwanda to help a society in transition after the horrible genocide which took place in the early 90's. He explains how he changed the way the Rwandans went from almost no health facilities to creating over 60 clinics as well as teaching the natives how to farm on land that had never been farmable. On his journey he meets the love of his life. Together they decide to marry, move to Rwanda, start a family and open a Restaurant which has become the finest in Kigali. Not only for its cuisine but his wife, Alissa , who had no prior Restaurant experience, helps to train and employ Rwandans giving them a renewed purpose in life. Josh also writes about the ups and downs of living, working and raising a family in a third world country. If your interested in understanding how 2 people can make a difference this a must read.

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### **David Zapol says**

This book is a page-turner. I literally could not put it down, ignoring all responsibility while I devoured chapter after scintillating chapter. Ruxin's memoir is a personal account of an extraordinary adventure to set up a life and save lives in Rwanda. It is a celebration and discovery of the important things in life, balanced with the levity of talking about food. A must- read for anyone who has both a heart and a mind.

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### **Patricia Burgess says**

Josh and Alissa Ruxin seize/create an opportunity to move to Rwanda in the early 2000s to work on Millenium Village. Mayange is wrought with years of drought, extreme poverty, extreme malnutrition and neighbors still in grief from the horrors of the 1994 genocide. This memoir is moving and informative, how a country pulls itself out of its past and makes elimination of poverty its primary priority. The Ruxins are "on the ground," working with both aid and government organizations but more importantly, Rwandas, to achieve success through health organizations and creating a restaurant as a social enterprise to teach Rwandas skills, to provide employment and funds for education. They are very brave, practical, incredible bright, hard-working. A blueprint for success in Africa and other nations.

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### **Barb says**

Having read many books about Rwanda and the horrific genocide that took place in 1994, this memoir was an amazing read about how much progress has been made in the last 20 years. I loved this book for so many reasons - the wonderful writing and storytelling that was hard to put down, Josh's beautifully expressed love for his wife and family, an incredible group of Rwandian friends and coworkers with so many heartbreaking

stories but a remarkable ability to forgive and love that is just inspirational. If that isn't enough, I was consistently impressed with Josh's 5 rules for successful government and NGO aid to third world countries. They proved it worked in Rwanda....perhaps we need to apply these rules to all charitable aid organizations. I know it has changed where my charitable aid dollars go. Oh, and finally....it's a story of starting a restaurant with accompanying recipes. Just a GREAT book! Loved it!

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