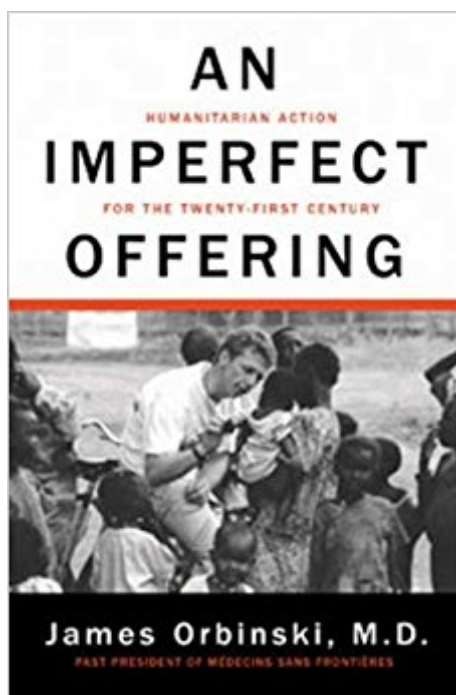


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# An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action For The Twenty-First Century



## Synopsis

From one of the world's greatest humanitarian activists comes a searing personal memoir that is also an urgent call to confront suffering in all its many forms. Having seen things we hope never to see, confronted suffering and dispassion and evil we hope never to encounter, and faced deep personal torment, James Orbinski still believes in "the good we can be if we so choose." His chosen medium for revealing this is stories from his own experience—a doctor's indelible testimony from the front lines in Peru, Somalia, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Zaire—embodied in which are warnings, hope, and lessons in how we can inject humanitarian activity into our lives. Being political, he has discovered, is not only reserved for politicians; admitting imperfection is essential to compassion. With an eye for detail like that of the finest journalist and the empathy of the most committed doctor, Orbinski's powerful voice is matched by the urgency of his message. At a time of great political and moral uncertainty, *An Imperfect Offering* is invaluable reading for anyone who wants to make a difference. Excerpt: "This book is a series of stories in which I ask, again and again, 'how to be in relation to the suffering of others.' It is a personal narrative about the political journey I have taken over the last twenty years as a humanitarian doctor, as a citizen, and as a man. It is about the mutuality that can exist between us, if we so choose. I have come to see humanitarianism not as separate from politics, but in relation to it, and as a challenge to political choices that too often kill or allow others to be killed. At its best, politics is an imperfect human project. It is at its worst when we delude ourselves into thinking it can be perfect. Speaking is the first political act. It is the first act of liberty, and it always implicitly involves another. In speaking, one inherently recognizes that "I am and I am not alone." In this space lies our humanity." (a composite from chapter 1)

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Best of the Month, October 2008: Judging by his biography, James Orbinski is superhuman. As a med student in the late '80s, he spent a year researching pediatric AIDS in Rwanda, which opened his eyes to the human consequences of political failure. After cofounding the Canadian chapter of Doctors Without Borders, Orbinski embarked on relief missions to the world's most chaotic pockets, including war-torn Somalia and the refugee camps of Afghanistan. When reports of genocide filtered out of Rwanda, Orbinski led a small team that--with scant supplies--tended to the sick and wounded in Kigali. Within 14 weeks, 800,000 people were killed as the international community sat idly by, and Orbinski experienced a profound personal crisis. He emerged with a renewed commitment to his role as doctor, not only as a healer but as a voice for those who have been disastrously failed by governments. In *An Imperfect Offering*, he bears witness to surreal levels of suffering, and his actions seem impossibly heroic. But descriptions of his patients' courage and his own moral challenges make this story an exploration of what it means to be human, and what our responsibilities are to each other. Through his story, the suffering of millions is no longer unimaginable, and indifference is not an option. --Mari Malcolm

In this captivating look at humanitarian intervention in the 20th century, Orbinski, former head of the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), uses stories from his decades of service with the group to examine how to be in relation with the suffering of others. The author describes his time on the front lines of suffering in Russia, Somalia and Afghanistan. When Orbinski recounts his second term in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, the book reaches an emotional peak: it was his undoing, and struggling with the horror he has seen, he drifts into a netherworld of confusion, fighting to regain his footing as a man, as a doctor and as a putative humanitarian. His ensuing reflections on humanitarianism are as riveting as his personal thoughts, which include diary entries, recollections and correspondence with friends in the humanitarian and diplomatic corps. The book manages to be both personal enough to construe the human toll of political and social disasters without falling into the trap of maudlin, patronizing depictions of human suffering. Orbinski, who accepted the Nobel Peace Prize for Médecins Sans Frontières in 1999 does credit to his organization and his humanitarian credo. (Oct.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a

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Orbinski's stories about his career with Doctors Without Borders (aka Medecins Sans Frontieres) takes us to various trouble spots ranging from South America to Afghanistan and Ethiopia and he makes a courageous effort to help those affected by war and famine. Much of the book deals with the African nation of Rwanda, during the genocide of 1994 in which he witnessed unbelievable atrocities as a million people were slaughtered in a 100 days while the world basically did little more than look on. The United Nations actually reduced its commitment during the worst of the killings and managed to save only a handful of lives. The book does not flinch from describing terrible and unbelievably cruel acts but it is an important book to read - after all the atrocities in Rwanda could be repeated again in a continent noted for less than competent governments, poor economic management and terrible acts of violence.

James Orbinski addresses the complex problem of suffering and why it occurs while struggling with his direct role in minimizing human suffering while working with MSF. His humility and elegance along with brutal honesty and raw emotion were gripping and empowering. After reading, some of my questions regarding NGOs roles and the nature of suffering were answered, but these were replaced with perhaps more questions about the amazing human nature and my role in contributing to and helping to diminish human suffering. Read this if you want to be left pondering for a long while.

I've been a contributor to Doctors Without Borders for several years. I've found they are already in place--or close by--when a disaster strikes and are in action immediately. This is written by a doctor who tells what life is like to be in these situations. It can be moving or frustrating, depending on where he is at any given time. I am in awe of those who would and do work in this organization.

An amazing, horrifying, beautiful, and inspiring read. For those of us who want to truly throw their lives into humanitarian work, this is a must read. If you still want to work for MSF after reading this, then hopefully I'll see you over there. Many of us are taught about international conflicts through our schools, parents, and/or media. This is from someone who was on the ground. Disclaimer: You may want to skip over the Rwanda Genocide Chapter if you can't handle truly graphic information.

It's hard to put down this book, as it describes some of the most desperate humanitarian crises in

recent history. Orbinsky tells how he was able to make a difference with his work. Please read this book and donate to Doctors Without Borders, Partners in Health, Oxfam and other humanitarian groups. This book will help you see how much you want to help others.

This book is an excellent account of cynical machination of the US and the European Union in the African continent. Orbinski reminds us that Western countries' horror of Germany's atrocities against Jews during world war II is only empty rhetoric, that in the face of genocide, what determines policies is not mercy or ending of suffering of innocent men, women, and children, but selfish national interest and political expediency.

I am a pre-medicine student looking to practice medicine internationally, such as Dr. Orbinski, and this book has completely rocked my world. I have had to set it down a few times just because it is so overwhelming, but I feel that it is an excellent insight to the world of humanitarianism. If you have any interest in humanitarianism (medicinal or not), I highly recommend this. It is quite an eye-opener.

Very poignant and moving - could not put it down and shared it with many interested in global nursing

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