

Bearing Witness

Janine di Giovanni

Introduction

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At the core of this book is the belief that first-person reporting is fundamental to international journalism.

The late David Halberstam, who established his journalistic reputation in Vietnam in the early 1960s with his tough-minded reporting for the *New York Times*, wrote in the Associated Press's tribute to its journalists, *Breaking News: How the Associated Press has Covered War, Peace, and Everything Else* (2007: 16):

[To me] that is what journalism is all about, sending good reporters to difficult and dangerous places that are about to become important but are not yet household words, covering stories when coverage means something, not, as all too often happens these days, too late in the story, when it doesn't really matter any more They [journalists] come to a story a little late and then leave a little too early.

We live in a global media world that can, when it chooses, have the capacity to link us all with dazzling technology – the Al Gore Live Earth global rock concert in July 2007 springs to mind – and has the capacity to influence us to care about developments anywhere on the planet.

Yet all that technology is seldom used to enlighten us about what is happening around the world, especially in Africa (Darfur is our most recent shameful example). The more than 100 networks that own and operate 24-hour news channels don't make international news a high priority with the exception of huge breaking news stories like 9/11, the London bombings, the death of Diana, the invasion of Iraq and the tsunami.

There are notable exceptions, and internationally minded networks such as BBC, CNN (I refer to the English-language channels that I can see and understand), Sky News and the new AlJazeera English-language channel do often commit huge resources to support dedicated news teams to take substantial risks to get to conflict zones and areas where natural disasters are occurring.

Yet few working in mainstream media today are proud of the international news output of their own newspapers or networks. It often falls to NGOs (the non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch, the International Crisis Group and the World Food Programme) to chronicle stories and issues that are not on the radar of the mainstream news media.

But no website, however worthy and informative, or no packaged report, slickly produced in London or New York, will ever be able to surpass the impact of original journalism, the discoveries of a single reporter or documentary maker or photojournalist on assignment somewhere in the world.

For those of us who have worked alongside brilliant correspondents and camera crews and witnessed for ourselves the reality of dramatic stories and major news events, there remains a reverence for those who take the risks to cover the world. Their contributions – their 'rough drafts of history' – are valued by leading historians, are digested by our most insightful policy makers, and do provide a reality check for politicians and office holders who understand that men and women with cameras and notebooks are an indispensable part of democratic societies; that what they write, record and broadcast cannot be ignored even when the reading and viewing is at odds with the official line.

Pontificating so-called experts on 24-hour news channels cannot ever replace or should never replace the reporting that is only possible if men and women continue to be assigned or, in the case of freelancers, independently pursue the stories that give us – in renowned

investigative reporter Bob Woodward's definition – 'the best obtainable version of the truth'.

There is a terrible price paid by those who are prepared to 'take the torch to the back of the cave and show what is there in the darkness' (that magnificent and moving phrase of American journalist and writer Pete Hamill from his wise little book *News is a Verb* (1998)).



Sunday Times correspondent Marie Colvin, blinded in one eye and badly wounded, reporting on the Sri Lankan civil war in April 2001

PHOTO COURTESY OF ASSOCIATED PRESS/PHOTOGRAPHER GEMUNU AMARASINGE

A thousand journalists lost their lives covering the news between 1996 and 2006 according to the International News Safety Institute's 2007 study *Killing the Messenger*. The overwhelming numbers of journalists who die are local journalists who are murdered for trying to pursue stories that governments and authorities do not want published or broadcast. The killers of journalists are seldom, almost never, arrested and prosecuted.

This book begins with one outstanding reporter's tale of her own life of reporting and 'bearing witness'. Before we consider the major trends and issues facing journalism and media today and tomorrow, we first want to examine the role and responsibility of the reporter herself.

Janine di Giovanni is an expatriate American correspondent who filed dispatches from the frontlines of wars and conflicts that took place after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. She and many other outstanding reporters of her generation chronicled the wars fought in the Balkans, first in Bosnia and then in Kosovo; the Intifada in Palestine; the Russian battle against the breakaway Chechens; and the civil wars in Africa. She also covered Afghanistan, East Timor and Iraq.

Janine di Giovanni's many highly dangerous assignments – she was one of the few correspondents to watch the Russians pulverize Grozny, the capital of Chechnya – resulted in award-winning reports for the *Times* of London and *Vanity Fair Magazine*.

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Bearing witness: Janine di Giovanni with a KLA soldier, reporting during the Kosovo war in 1999

PHOTO COURTESY OF MAGNUM PHOTOS/PHOTOGRAPHER ALEX MAJOLI

On the morning of September 19, 2002, in a deserted cattle market in Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast, at a time I should have been drinking my first cup of tea, a government soldier stood a foot away from me with an automatic weapon pointed at my heart.

There had been a coup d'état but neither the soldier nor I knew that yet. All I knew was that I had gone to bed in a calm city – known as a beacon of stability in an otherwise violent West Africa – and woken up to gunfire; in other words, exactly what I had moved to Abidjan to escape: a war.

The confrontation in the cattle market was the aftermath of a short, sporadic battle between the government forces and some mysterious rebels no one had yet seen. Like me, the soldier was confused. He didn't know who was launching the coup, or why. He had probably been dragged out of bed at dawn by a superior. He was probably scared and a little drunk from drinking bad gin the night before. He stood, soaked in sweat, boots too tight, pointing an AK-47 at me and looking as if he had every intention of using it.

I wasn't alone. There was a man near my foot, groaning in pain. There were smears of blood on his clothes and the bullet wounds in his legs were small and neat. A moment before I'd squatted on the dirt and tried to drag him into my taxi. I wanted to get him to a hospital.

Hence, a government soldier threatening to shoot me.

'He's a rebel, he no good', he said in thick Ivorian French.

'He's hurt, I'm taking him to the hospital', I said.

He raised his gun, which had the safety catch off.

'Leave him', he said. 'He's ours.'

By the time this incident occurred, I had been reporting from war zones for nearly 15 years. I should have known that you don't argue with a man with a gun – particularly one who has just shot someone. The sensible thing would be to realize I had wandered into the wrong place at the wrong time – before an execution was about to take place – back up, apologize, and run. But the same 15 years had also given me the over-confidence of the survivor. I knew what would happen if I left. The injured man, who was grabbing my ankle, pleading, 'Sister, help me!', would be shot and tossed into a grave or left with the dead cows to rot, which in tropical Africa can happen quickly. I had never seen this man before, but I knew what his body would look like by lunchtime.

So I argued badly – telling this soldier, who probably could not read and write, about the Geneva Convention, the rights of man, and Christian

compassion. His impatience was turning to rage when another journalist pulled me back into our taxi and said: 'This is Africa, what the hell were you thinking?' Then we drove off. I don't know how long it was before they killed that man, but I do know it was my luck or what the Arabs call *Maktoub* – 'it is written' – that got me out of bed at 4 a.m. and to the cattle market. It was also luck that someone was there – someone who later became my husband, as it happens – to save me from my dangerous compassion. Bad luck followed by good luck. I was lucky not to be shot. Several colleagues and friends had been killed taking much lower risks.

Two years earlier, in another part of West Africa, I ate my last meal with one of them, Kurt Schork. We went to the best restaurant in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and had grilled prawns. Schork was a 52-year-old Reuters correspondent who had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford with Bill Clinton. He was legendary for his bravado and his scalding humour. During our Christmas season in Sarajevo, then besieged by the Serbs, we'd attended a midnight mass and then drunk a bottle of black-market champagne as we listened to mortars falling on the snowy city.

Now, drinking beer in the Freetown restaurant, I told him about a group of stoned teenage soldiers called the West Side Boys that I'd encountered earlier in the day. They'd surrounded my car, punched the hood, aimed their RPGs in my face, and demanded money, cigarettes, marijuana and sex. While my driver cried with fear, a colleague in the same car shouted at him to drive through the crowd. 'Just run them down!'

'Total amateurs', Schork said of the West Side Boys. 'They sound like a pick-up basketball team.'

The next morning, I sat eating breakfast with another journalist I'd known in Bosnia, Miguel Gil Moreno, by the slime-green pool of our decrepit hotel. It was the end of the rainy season in West Africa, and as we ate we could see dozens of frogs procreating by the edge of the water.

Like Schork, Miguel had a reputation. He was devoutly religious as well as courageous. In 1999, we had shared a frontline base camp with rebel Kosovar soldiers when it was being aurally bombarded and we hid in trenches for days. He was the first person I phoned for advice before I went to Chechnya. 'Remember to try to leave at least a week before the shelling drives you insane', he said.

Over breakfast, Miguel asked me about a homemade video I'd been given which showed men who might have been UN soldiers being tortured by rebels in Sierra Leone. It should have been a warning to both of us – look; this is the madness that happens here. But instead we said goodbye and Miguel followed Kurt and his crew up the road towards Rogbury Junction, to find out if the video was real. By lunchtime both men were dead, ambushed and killed by teenagers. War, as Thucydides remarked when reporting on the Peloponnesian wars in the fifth century BC, is a violent teacher. As a reporter covering wars, you can learn a few lessons in staying alive from the mistakes of others, but no amount of judgement and caution can save you from bad luck.

What does it do to you? I once, on a rainy London afternoon, sat on the couch of a well-known psychiatrist who was evaluating the impact on journalists of post-traumatic stress disorder. It was to be a three-year study, and I was one of his early subjects. He asked me about my sleep habits, whether I drank or took drugs, whether I was sexually promiscuous. Then he asked:

'How many dead bodies have you seen?'

I thought hard, trying to remember events and places; fields of bodies, mass graves, wells with blue corpses stuffed down them, the man in East Timor who washed up in the sewer, the slabs of dead flesh on my daily trips to the morgue in Sarajevo, the soldier in the snow in Chechnya, the miles and miles of dead Rwandans on a road near Goma.

'I don't know; hundreds?' I thought again. 'I have no idea.'

The psychiatrist was silent as he wrote in his notebook. After a while, he looked up.

'Don't you find that odd?' he said, not unkindly. 'Most people only see their grandparents, or their parents, at their funerals.'

Other than my grandmother's, my first dead body was in Bosnia. I arrived in the early autumn of 1992. It was still warm enough to get stung by a wasp, the last balmy days before a brutal winter. The war that would ruin the country was still young and enthusiastic, rather like me. I wasn't a complete ingénue about conflict – I'd been tear gassed in the crowd during Israeli–Palestinian clashes – but Bosnia was my first war zone.

Before that, I had been a rather haphazard academic trying to discover whether or not Katherine Mansfield had plagiarized Chekhov in her early short stories. But I grew claustrophobic in libraries, I was impatient with Mansfield's lukewarm feminism, and I did not have the real drive to see it

through. I threw away my PhD thesis in the late 1980s after I met an Israeli human rights lawyer who defended Palestinians. She led me throughout the West Bank and Gaza, introduced me to politicians and activists, and advised me to dedicate my life to writing about people who would otherwise be voiceless.

By then, I was working for the *Sunday Times*, and I fought to be sent to Bosnia – my editors kept trying to get me to write about style – but I eventually won the battle, and once in Bosnia, simply refused to leave. I stayed, on and off, for nearly three years.

That first trip, I travelled with a nervous Australian photographer and a young Croatian interpreter down small roads that had been commandeered by various rag-tag militias. Vesna, the interpreter, gave a potted history of the former Yugoslavia and smoked all my cigarettes. We passed empty villages with shuttered houses and fields of dead animals. There were no people on the road. Through the car window came the smell of distant explosives and petrol and fire. Near Vitez, we passed empty munitions factories which Vesna said had been part of a major industry during the Tito years.

A ghostly bus full of young soldiers, faces pressed against the windows, drove past with a sign hung on the side: VOLUNTEERS FOR JAJCE. Jajce, the ancient Bosnian capital, was now the scene of a bloody battle raging in the north that would soon be lost by Bosnian forces with many casualties. Vesna waved to one soldier; he waved back. She said: ‘He will never come back from Jajce.’

There was another photographer in the car behind us. He was French and silent. Sometimes, I drove with him. He was known to be fearless and somewhat strange, almost mystical. Once, on a particularly spooky road, we came to a Bosnian checkpoint and I lowered my window to hand the soldier our passports. The soldier reached out, but instead of taking the passports, he stared hard at the photographer’s pale face.

‘What strange eyes you have, my friend’, he said flatly.

The photographer frowned. ‘Strange?’ he asked. ‘What do you mean, strange?’

The soldier laughed, enjoying his discomfort. ‘You have death in your eyes’, he said matter-of-factly. He handed back our passports, lit a cigarette and lifted the frayed rope that was the checkpoint. He motioned us through, not talking, not smiling, not waving.

The photographer was silent for the rest of the trip until we reached the car wreck. Then we saw the real dead, two of them, a couple who had

been trying to flee something – fighting, a village being burnt, none of us would know. Vesna had studied some medicine and she said they could only have been dead a few hours. Long enough, I remember thinking, for their souls to fly away.

They had driven into a tree at what must have been full speed, and they had flown through the windscreen so that their bodies lay half in, half out of the car. Their necks were broken and hung down like chicken gizzards. Their eyes were still open. Their bodies fascinated me. I walked closer and stared, trying to memorize their surprised expression, caught in the exact moment of death.

Why and to what private or public benefit? I don't know, but in more than 10 years – and the 1990s was a decade of wars – I followed armed conflicts like a homing pigeon: the former Yugoslavia, then Chechnya, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Algeria, Palestine, East Timor, Kosovo, Ivory Coast, and later Iraq and Afghanistan. I got good at reporting a war the way that you get a good serve at tennis if you practise long and hard enough. When I would watch television and see a conflict gathering in some remote part of the world, I found it impossible to stay still, not to pick up the phone and ask to be sent there, and as a result, I honed great skills: intuition, bravery, I guess, or perhaps it was foolhardiness, the ability to talk or push my way into any situation, but more importantly, to deal with tremendous pressure without cracking.

Then there are the stories. It is always a cliché to write about women and children during war time, but the fact is that those are the images that stick with you, and I felt in some way that when I wrote them these people would not suffer in vain. Perhaps that is very grandiose. And it was often painful. The first time I saw the agony of a child writhing on a dirty cot in a field hospital with his guts ripped open and no painkillers, I went outside, leaned against a wall and cried and vomited. But I did that only once. The rest of the time, I observed and wrote, and then got back into my car and left.

I tried to behave safely, but the thing is, you never think about your mortality when you are actually so close to it being cut short. A famous war photographer, a woman who had hidden behind a bush in Africa to photograph an execution, once said to me, 'I never thought I would get killed because my mother loved me too much.' My equally irrational assumption was that, as a woman in her very early thirties, I wouldn't die because I hadn't really lived enough yet. All the statistics made no impression on me.

Out of the most shocking recent figures on Iraq¹ comes the theory that journalists are targeted, and by both sides in the conflict. In 2004, Eason Jordan, the former chief news executive of CNN, resigned from his job after insinuating that journalists were being targeted by the American military (Kurtz 2005). But if journalists are being specially selected for expunction in Iraq, this is nothing new. No British journalists died in the Falklands War of 1982, but a popular story returned from the fleet carrying British forces to the South Atlantic. A marine officer is instructing his marines. Question: 'What do we do if we capture some Argentinian troops?' Answer: 'Shoot them.' Question: 'What do we do if we capture some Argentinian troops and we're with a television crew?' Answer: 'Shoot the television crew.' During the battle of Mostar in the spring of 1993, it was rumoured the Bosnian Croat militias put a price tag of 50 Deutschmarks on the head of every journalist. Fifty DM, even then, couldn't buy a good lobster dinner with wine in Split. If nothing else, the price proved that William Howard Russell, who reported the Crimean war for *The Times*, was right when he described his fellow members of this new profession, war reporting, as a 'luckless tribe'.

The practice of war reporting has changed a lot since the 1990s, when it could still be conducted alone or among groups of like-minded journalists, travelling together for company, cheapness (three to a hire car, two to a hotel room), and at least the notion of greater safety. Now reporters go to war with their own militias. There are always exceptions, but most reporters covering Iraq and Afghanistan – particularly the television networks – employ small armies of security guards, with high-tech tracking equipment, weaponry, and chase cars in the event the journalists are kidnapped.

The guards are usually former Special Forces soldiers who are employed by private British or American companies which promise 'physical security and protection'. In January 2003, I went to one of these companies, Centurion, based near the Special Air Services (SAS) headquarters in Hereford, to learn some 'hostile environment' training. According to the Centurion website, 'Knowledge dispels fear. In an ever more volatile and hazardous world, the reward of accurately assessing risk is the confidence of being alert to potential danger and knowing instinctively how to deal with it. This is the difference between managing threats to safety and security and merely surviving them' (Centurion 2007).

It is true one feels safer in their company. In December 2001, during a bombing in Tora Bora, Afghanistan, I cowered on a ridge while a security guard working for CNN shouted instructions – which way the rocket was coming in and where I should throw myself on the ground. I found his authority comforting, but I also wondered if it didn't dull my own instincts for danger, and if the habit of travelling with armed men merely attracted the trouble the armed men were meant to repel. At the start of the Iraq War, the militia accompanying an American TV crew to Tikrit opened up on a group of insurgents and were soon involved in a gun battle.

The course I took in Hereford taught me how to treat a bullet wound and which way to run during a firefight. I learned how to be a good hostage when my tutors tied a hood over my head, kicked me in the ribs, and made me lie on frozen earth for 45 minutes with my hands and legs spread wide while the sound of shots came from some nearby woods. Other advice, such as how to get out of a minefield using a long steel instrument (would that be in my luggage?), was not so useful.

'What do you do when you approach a checkpoint?' asked our instructor, choosing a rather humourless American reporter for the answer.

'Look into their eyes', she answered in a monotone drawl. 'Always make eye contact.' I said nothing, but I knew this was dumb advice. Had I made eye contact when I was briefly taken captive by a band of Serb paramilitaries in a remote mountainous region on the Kosovo–Montenegro border in 1999, I would probably be either dead or gang raped. I was with two French journalists and we had been on a mountain ridge interviewing the refugees who were fleeing the fighting. It was bad luck I was caught and bad luck I was with Frenchmen. French Mirage planes had just bombed Belgrade, injuring relatives and friends of the soldiers who were holding us captive.

My captors were drunk and maddened with violence. Looking them in the eye, it seemed to me, would have been mistaken for insolence – an insolent foreign woman among strong, drunk men. My eyes never left the ground and I spoke the Hail Mary again and again as they fired over our heads and marched us through the woods, beating my companions with rifle butts. They joked about how and where they would kill us, who would go first.

What saved us in the end was luck. The soldiers had a call on their radio. Their commander had captured a far bigger prize than us – an American airman. Their interest in us suddenly vanished and we were

abandoned at the side of a snow-covered logging road. As we limped down the mountain to the nearest town, one of the Frenchmen broke our silence to say, 'I was sure they were going to rape you.' He paused for a few moments and then added, 'And I am not sure we could have stopped it.'

The truth is that for many years I did not have a real life. I felt I lived in a parallel universe filled almost exclusively with violent conflict. Of course, people wondered why I did it. When my father was dying of cancer, I sat by his bed and we talked about many things, including faith, death and war. My father came to the USA from Naples. As a college student at the time of Pearl Harbor he enlisted in the US Air Force. 'It was the right thing to do', he said, 'but I was afraid. I was chicken. I didn't like war. I didn't like being away from my family.' All that was normal, he said. 'But what you do, that's not normal, it really isn't.'

War attracts certain types. There are those who want to witness, describe and communicate the important and often tragic facts: a noble motive, because the world should know these things, and among most of us a noble posture (we are 'bearing witness'). There are also those who just love it, who have a perverse attraction to suffering and danger and the euphoria that follows exposure to them: war as a higher form of bungee-jumping. I'd like to think that most of me belongs to the first camp, but I know some of me must belong to the second. Why else would I have stared into the faces of the dead couple in their crashed car in Bosnia all those years ago? Or, in Kosovo, felt the thrill, hand shaking round a cigarette, of crawling undamaged from a field where a sniper had fired at me again and again?

I went to Iraq during the invasion in 2003 for nearly five months, but even as I was packing my bag to go, I thought it would be one of my last wars. I was getting married, and I wanted a child. I knew I couldn't sustain the pace or the loneliness. My son was born nine months after I came home from Iraq. When I first saw him, seven weeks premature and vulnerable, it seemed impossible that I'd ever want to report a war again. And yet when he was six months old I was back in Baghdad, leaving him with his father in Paris. My motive was partly curiosity – would I be a different being now that I had given birth? – and partly the fear that if I did not go back to war, I would lose my standing, my reputation and, most importantly, my nerve. In a sense, it was also a test. Would I be able to continue the life I lived before now that I was a mother? While I was pregnant,

I lived in a state of denial, even going to Gaza eight weeks before my son was born. But now that he was here, I was not sure I could stomach being separated from him.

One afternoon, I got stuck in an elevator at the Al Hamra Hotel with a new crowd of young reporters I'd never seen before. They were male, this was their first conflict, and they were acting like macho asses. Some had shaved their heads to look like Bruce Willis. For years I'd insisted that war reporting was an asexual activity, that there was no difference of perception between male and female war correspondents, or at least none caused by their gender. In the lift, this seemed wrong. I had a baby. Giving birth to him had opened receptacles of fear that had been clamped shut years ago, perhaps on that first trip to Bosnia.

I would be lying if I said I did not miss the excitement of reporting a war. When the conflict in Lebanon began, I was in America teaching my son to swim. Which was more important? Logically, I knew the answer, but yearning is not logical. Reporting war had been most of my life for many years and suddenly to be pulled from it was like a junkie having their stash of drugs stolen.

The reporting I have done since Luca arrived is more tame. The responsibility I feel for his life, for keeping his mother alive long enough to see him grow up, is vast. I go to Gaza, I go to Africa, I will soon go to Afghanistan. But when I now hear gunfire, I run away and cower in a building like a normal human being. I am not sure I would drive up the nasty road to Rogbury Junction where my friends were murdered. If I found myself in a Grozny suburb while the city was falling, as I did in February 2000, I would get out as quickly as possible. And as painful as it is to admit to myself, if I found myself back in that cattle market in Abidjan with a bleeding man clinging to my leg begging me to save him, and an armed man about to kill me for my misplaced compassion – I would disentangle myself and quietly walk away.

Note

- 1 Editor's note: 235 journalists and media workers were killed in Iraq between the beginning of the conflict in 2003 and November 2007. Figures from the International News Safety Institute (INSI), 28 November 2007, <http://www.newssafety.com/stories/insi/insideaths281107.htm>.

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Questions for students

- 1 Journalists can pay a heavy personal and psychological price for 'bearing witness' to conflicts and human suffering around the globe. What are the arguments for and against such sacrifices?
- 2 Janine di Giovanni notes that war reporting has changed dramatically since she started doing it in the early 1990s. What are those changes and how do they affect the quality of newsgathering?
- 3 Is the world now too unsafe to send 'Western' correspondents to cover conflicts such as Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan? What are the arguments for and against using foreign reporters as opposed to local reporters?