

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Denise Leith, *What Remains* (Allen & Unwin, 2012)

When Anna Funder published the novel *All That I Am* in 2011 questions were asked as to why, after the success of *Stasiland* (2003), she had chosen to write her second book as fiction, based as it was on real people living through a specific historical event. She claimed that she was being true to history but that she had ‘massaged the political and emotional web between people’ which is not possible in non-fiction.¹ Once again we may ask the question as to whether it is more effective to set historical events in a fictional context, with the freedom that gives an author, or whether the unemotionally presented facts, as set out in non-fiction, give an accurate, and thus more effective account of real events. Denise Leith, in *What Remains*, gives a fictional account of the experiences of one war correspondent after having earlier publishing *Bearing Witness: The Lives of War Correspondents and Photojournalists*, based on her interviews with people who had worked in war zones.

In the introduction to *Bearing Witness* Leith writes: ‘While journalists live with the horrors they witness and a commonly expressed sense of impotence, they all claim that their job is a privilege and their work has given their life meaning.’² Leith sympathises with their desire to make a difference, while admitting that in her work as a writer and a lecturer in international relations she felt powerless to change the world. In an interview with Caroline Baum she says that she found she could do it much better in fiction than non-fiction. Writing fiction was more satisfying, complete and whole. In taking the readers to the heart and emotions of someone she could reveal the truth of what happens.³

Before I began reading the book the blurb on the back cover of *What Remains* worried me. There were too many adjectives: arresting and powerful, tumultuous, naïve and idealistic and harrowing. One should not, however, judge a book by its cover. The events are dramatic and the reaction of the protagonist to atrocity, danger, suffering and death is described movingly but not sensationalised. It was not the ‘Bridget Jones meets Indiana Jones’ that I feared.

What Remains is written from the point of view of Kate Price, a relatively young and inexperienced journalist. Her experiences in a number of war zones disturb and shock her until the situation she faces in Rwanda becomes a turning point, and she is no longer able to feel any emotion.

At first I couldn’t see anything and I stumbled, nearly falling on the bodies at my feet, so I stood still, as my eyes adjusted to the gloom. I could hear a dull background hum, not sure what it was until I realized that it was the sound of the flies: big black and green blowflies. Thousands of them. Everywhere. The floor, the pews and the dais were covered in bodies. ... At my feet was a little girl; her legs were torn wide and the flies were feasting. When I leaned down to close her legs the flies rose up and one got caught under my scarf. Frantically I pulled at the material to let it out, but it seemed to be stuck, buzzing and crawling around my cheek. Unable to breathe I clawed at the scarf with both hands to get it off my face and screamed. (120)

¹ Catherine Kennan, *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 September 2011

² Denise Leith, *Bearing Witness* (Sydney: Random House, 2004) xxi.

³ Bookshots.net/2012/02denise-leith-what-remains accessed 4 April 2012

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It is interesting to compare this account of the atrocities in Rwanda as experienced by the fictional Kate with that of the journalist Donatella Lorch, as reported by Leith in *Bearing Witness*.

What amazes and perplexes me and keeps drawing me back is trying to figure out what makes people tick. ... For example, in the case of post-genocide Rwanda, after you did all the traditional, standard, post-genocide stories of the fighting, the mass graves and the retaliatory killings and revenge, you then had to start figuring out where the story was.⁴

It is clear that *Bearing Witness* provided the research for *What Remains*. Is fiction more satisfactory than nonfiction? I found the fictional account of the various war zones more compelling and touching. What makes the difference is that while the firsthand accounts by journalists reflect what they saw, their reporting is constrained by their inhibitions and the limits they place on themselves. In addition they need to remain detached from the sights and suffering they are witnessing in order to maintain their sanity and professional judgment. In *What Remains* the events of Kosovo, Rwanda, Palestine Chechnya and Iraq are revealed in an outline of the causes of the conflict, the effect on the physical and social environment and the upheaval caused by all of these. Kate tells her story. In doing this she embodies the attitudes, frustrations and fears of journalists, at the same time writing frankly about her own emotional responses. Then there are people with whom she interacts. In Sarajevo there is the not entirely convincing story of the rescue of an old lady, put on a plane for England. There are the children she and Pete rescue from a bombed out cellar, the driver in Iraq who becomes a friend. More often, however, Kate, in registering the chaos and violence around her, acknowledges that she can do nothing to change the world. Even the reports she sends back to London are subject to editorial control.

Had the story been simply a roll call of war zones and adventures it would have had limited appeal. The love story between the photographer Pete McDermott and Kate, fraught as it is with misunderstanding, missed chances and their mutual reluctance to become involved in a difficult relationship, is threaded strategically throughout the narrative, developing the characters and engaging the reader. There is a refreshing lack of sentimentality in their dialogue:

‘What would you pay for me, my hero? What do you judge my worth to be?’
‘About a thousand pounds would do it, give or take a couple of quid. I don’t know’ he said turning around to look me up and down. ‘Maybe thirteen hundred, tops. You’re a bit skinny for the likes of the punters around here.’ (197)

Other characters are important – Peter’s friend John, who chooses to return home and save his marriage, while still torn by a desire to be in the thick of the action, Bella with her chaotic love life and Larry, the editor who recognizes that Kate is suffering from post traumatic stress long before she is ready to acknowledge that she needs a break. The problem is that the war zone becomes the reality and the idea of returning home to host dinner parties and talk trivia becomes abhorrent.

⁴ Leith, *Bearing Witness* 217.

The book draws you in, in a very satisfying way, never succumbing to treacly sentiment or sensationalism. The story is of a young woman who transforms from an ambitious war journalist to a woman who has seen more than most of the world's suffering, has experienced her own triumphs and loss yet who emerges at the end with hope, concluding that 'life is good, the sun is shining and I'm not sure we should ever ask for more than that' (375). The title, *What Remains*, refers to Pandora's box. After she had opened the box and allowed so much trouble to escape she slammed the lid down. All that remained was hope. I was left with some hope as well and a sense of having been there. I cried at the end of the novel, and would recommend other readers to have their box of tissues at the ready.

Emily Sutherland