

Extract from *A Hundred and One Days* by Åsne Seierstad

Foreword

This book is about a journey, a war and some of the people caught up in the war. For a hundred and one days, from January to April 2003, I tried to record what I experienced in Baghdad.

During such a journey the reporter is on duty at all times. Things can happen at any moment. Information is suddenly received or the idea for a new story comes to mind. The reader sees only the outcome; the articles say little of how they were first conceived or what has been left out.

In my ten years as a journalist reporting from war and conflict zones, I have never worked under more difficult conditions than I did in Iraq. Before the war the problem was elementary: no one said anything. Iraqis used empty phrases and banalities for fear of saying anything wrong or betraying their own thoughts.

What to do as a journalist when everyone says the same? Do they all mean it? Do none of them mean it?

I tried to move around in the landscape between deafening lies and virtually silent gasps of truth. The sophisticated apparatus of oppression affected journalists too; sometimes it had a direct bearing on what we wrote. In time new challenges arrived – descending from the sky, rushing through the air, crashing around our ears. There was no power, no water, no security. All the same, every day we had to file our reports, watched over by our minders.

One day the minders were gone. Then I tried to discover what happens to people when the dam bursts. What do they choose to say when they can suddenly say what they want?

My reports from Baghdad are my reports. They come directly from my own – not always adequate – experiences. The events might have been interpreted differently by other correspondents. An Egyptian journalist probably saw the war in Iraq from another angle; an American might have assessed the situation in a different way again; maybe an intellectual from *Le Monde* had his own emphasis.

The truth about the war in Iraq does not exist. Or rather, there are millions of true accounts and maybe just as many lies. My remit as a journalist in the chaos of war was not to judge, predict or analyse. It was to look, ask and report.

My greatest advantage was that I was there. My eyes were there, my ears were there.

When I left for Iraq I had an agreement with three newspapers. *Aftenposten* in Norway, *Dagens Nyheter* in Sweden, and *Politiken* in Denmark. In time my articles were also published by *Ilta-Sanomat* in Finland, *Der Tagesspiegel* in Germany, *Trouw* in the Netherlands, *Der Standard* in Austria, and *Tages Anzeiger* in Switzerland. In addition I was employed by several radio and TV channels.

The articles I sent home were snapshots, glimpses from the war. They belong to certain days and incidents. Some have been reproduced in their entirety, others have been integrated within a larger context. The war can never be entirely grasped or understood through instant reporting. Nor can political analysis impart the tragedy of seeing one's own child killed by a missile.

No story contains the whole story. This is just one of many and it gives a fragment of the whole, not more. Read the reports of the Egyptian, the American, or the Frenchman. But above all, try to find the Iraqi version of the war, and the time before and after the war. Together they will give us a basis for understanding what is happening, now that the acts of war are over, but before peace has arrived.

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