



All's bare in love and war

A deeply personal story about the lives of journalists on the frontline.

Review by Claire Seobie

What *Remains* is the story of Kate Price, a journalist who starts her career in Riyadh in 1991 as the world press gather for Operation Desert Storm. While her British foreign editor Larry does not have high expectations of this “green-arsed kid”, she is determined to become “the best reporter in the business”.

Price persuades two veteran photographers – Pete McDermott and John Rubin – to let her join them on a trip towards Kuwait. Her first brutal encounter with war is on the “Highway of Death”, the road from Basra bombed with napalm by the Americans, leaving hundreds of Iraqi troops dead, their blackened military vehicles scattered across the desert. “Eerily, their radios were still playing.”

During the next 14 years, Price covers Rwanda, Chechnya, Palestine, the Bosnian massacre in Srebrenica and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, sometimes alone, often with McDermott.

Written from the first-person point of view, Price has gumption and ambition and believes her words can make a difference. Raised in Australia until she was 15, when her parents returned to England, she always wanted to cover war.

McDermott has a reputation as a “scratchy character” who is defined by the lives of strangers he has photographed.

Their complex, torturous and deeply tender relationship is the thread that pulls you through Leith's fierce, compelling and pacy novel. It's what drives Price to return to Sniper Alley in Sarajevo and the

Palestine Hotel in Baghdad. It also gives rise to some of Leith's most searching prose. “‘Which one of us loved more,’ wonders Kate. ‘There is always the lover and the beloved; the object and the subject. There is always the one who loves more.’”

For journalists, Price says, “each war has its own character”. If the Balkans was her war, Rwanda was her undoing. It's here that Kate lets her guard down – literally with Pete – and where the nightmares begin that never leave her. “Rwanda was too much for the mind to take in. Something in her was dying ... her hope.” She describes how the “killers lounging around in the grass beside the piles of putrefying bodies were kids ... the waft of decay ... thick and greasy on our skin”.

There are some powerful set-pieces in the novel. The church in Nyarubuye, Rwanda, where hundreds of Tutsi women were raped and murdered; spending the night in a freezing house in Chechnya as Russian shells rain down. There is also a poignant visit to a hospital treating AIDS victims in KwaZulu-Natal (based on Leith's personal experience).

But particularly moving are the last chapters set in Baghdad, where McDermott and Price form a lifelong friendship with an Iraqi family. Already emotionally scarred by Rwanda, Price is further untethered in Baghdad. She is living on adrenalin; dead bodies no longer “crack her up”. Twelve years into the job and she has become “one of the cynical journalists [she] had so despised”. Yet, her professionalism kicks in when confronted with a suicide bomb in a market and she works throughout the night writing

her story about the innocent Iraqi victims killed.

Price is passionate. Sometimes she's over-the-top and this gets her in trouble. Her long-suffering, chain-smoking editor has to strike out the expletives from her stories more than once. Occasionally, her character development is uneven. Price starts the novel in her 20s and a few pages from the end reveals she is 40. Yet her voice – and her actions – do not always reflect that maturity.

It's as if Leith deliberately keeps Price at arm's length – from the reader, from McDermott and, ultimately, from Price herself. This is frustrating at times but you are rewarded in the final unfolding of the narrative.

A plot development lobbed in at the end, which forces her out of Iraq, also does not quite ring true. But these are minor issues.

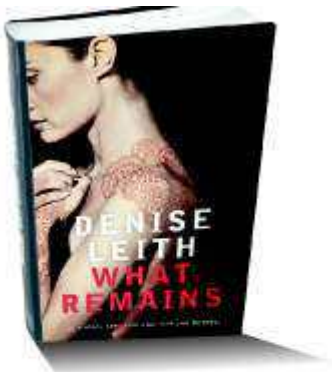
This is a finely crafted and cleverly framed novel. You think you know the ending at the beginning but that does not lessen the final climax. Leith is also the author of the nonfiction *Bearing Witness: The Lives of War Correspondents and Photojournalists* but her debut novel does what journalism cannot do. It gives you the story from the inside. It is not objective but deeply personal and all the more moving for it. This story of regrets, missed opportunities and life's precious moments seeps under your skin. It is about how journalists on the front line deal with what they see and deal less well with themselves when they return to the ‘burbs.

Despite being a love story, it is not romantic. Nothing is glorified here, yet hope ultimately prevails.





Brutal journey ... the novel touches on the conflicts in Bosnia (above), Rwanda, Chechnya, Palestine and Iraq. Photo: AP



Fiction

WHAT REMAINS

Denise Leith

Allen & Unwin, 384pp,

\$29.99