

I borrowed "A Cruel Paradise: Journals of an International Relief Worker" by Leanne Olson and published, suitably, by Insomniac Press from the Selkirk College Library. The book is a gift for nursing students from Rita Moir. It's inscribed, "Marian Kabatoff told me there are very few stories about nurses working in war zones. I hope this book helps fills the gap."

What a marvellous gift for impressionable Canadians learning the ways of the world. The book describes tragically common events that most Canadians have been spared from experiencing. A lesson that emerges is the effect of a privileged individual who chooses to rise beyond personal betterment for the betterment of the less privileged.

Leanne is uncertain why she turned to relief work. She is a nurse. In 1993 she was working in Winnipeg. She had ten years of nursing experience, but insufficient seniority when the Canadian government started rabidly restructuring the health system. She lost a full-time position and found a part-time job that was soon to be axed. She applied to Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) or Doctors without Borders, a non-governmental organization that delivers medical relief wherever disaster impairs health services. MSF often begins work without an invitation from local governments because disaster too often means war and governments, if around at all during a war, may not make public health a priority. This means that by the time formal invitations for aid are delivered, many in the disaster-stricken area may have perished.

Those who work for MSF are called volunteers but are in fact well-trained doctors, nurses and nutritionists who receive a small salary. Most are young and serve for only a single, one year mission. Leanne served for four years, beginning in 1993 in Liberia.

Leanne recounts ghastly statistics; 5000 children died of starvation during a trade embargo imposed on Liberia which followed massacres and attempted genocides throughout the impoverished African state. MSF began to re-establish public health, vaccination programs, child feeding centres, and medical clinics amid the chaos of war. She faced corruption, suffered theft and avoided personal injury and death by luck and determination. Leanne became ill, returned to Canada, recovered, missed the satisfaction of relief work and returned to MSF - in Bosnia.

In Bosnia, Leanne found a deeper sadness and a ruthlessness inexperienced in Africa. She provides a perspective of the fighting in former Yugoslavia I hadn't read in the papers. Soldiers on all sides were committing atrocities, there were victims of all nationalities and religions, and the suffering will continue for generations. Carnage on this scale says that something is terribly wrong and efforts to negotiate a non-violent settlement are sorely lacklustre.

Leanne moved to Burundi and then in 1996 to Zaire, one of the world's poorest nations. Zaire also has the distinction of housing the largest refugee camps which held over a million Rwandans fleeing attempted genocide. Thousands in the camps died from cholera before aid brought some stability. Stability is relative. In late 1996 a civil war began in Zaire and Zairians began fleeing to Rwanda.

Leanne sees what none of us ought to see: the decapitated, the disembowelled and the burned. She was among the first to a Roman Catholic monastery in Mokoto, previously a sanctuary of peace, after a cold-blooded raid where everyone was butchered.

"A Cruel Paradise" is written as a diary. Entries contain incongruous descriptions of scenery, personal details, and slaughter. Leanne traces her changing relationship with her family, friends, and co-workers. Leanne's values and her faith in humanity are transformed. I was left chilled.