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Memoir/Essays

## Oh, what a lovely war zone

Jane Bussmann's account of leaving behind LA's glitz to follow a peace negotiator to Uganda is tender and unexpectedly funny

### JAMILLA LONG

**THE WORST DATE EVER: War Crimes, Hollywood Heart-throbs and Other Abominations** by JANE BUSSMANN  
*Macmillan £11.99 pp374*

Imagine *The Last King of Scotland* written by Shazzer from *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and you'd still only be halfway to appreciating Jane Bussmann's funny, incongruous and artlessly perceptive account of ditching the day job to pursue a chisel-jawed peace negotiator into the heart of a child-corpse-strewn Ugandan war zone, Topshop diamante knickers and Gucci luggage in tow.

Bussmann is languishing in Hollywood when we first meet her, supposedly writing the next great sitcom/Restoration drama/science-fiction epic – the reason the former writer of *Brass Eye* and *The Fast Show* is there in the first place. While struggling with scripts, she has temporarily fallen back on vacuous interviews with celebrities, such as Kate Winslet. (“Kate, about the movie. How did you get in shape for the role of Iris Murdoch?”) Her withering portrayal of a deranged, celebrity-obsessed city during

what she calls the “Golden Age of Stupid” includes leaking lipo wounds, “celebrity eating” (starlets consuming a high-calorie meal in front of a journalist to prove they don't have food issues) and NutraSweet addictions. Given ludicrous commissions by editors (“We were thinking of going on Geri Halliwell and her breast cancer fears.” “She's got breast cancer?” “No, she just fears it”), she sometimes doesn't even speak to the celebrities, or gets grad students to write for her. An editing error in an Ashton Kutcher interview brings the whole show to a shuddering stop.

Time for a dramatic change. Flicking through *Vanity Fair*, she spots John Prendergast, a gorgeous conflict-resolution worker. On the vague pretext of an interview (the commission is “dating out of your league”), she meets him in Washington, and finds herself following him to Uganda, where he is trying to negotiate a peace treaty between the government and a religious fundamentalist warlord, Joseph Kony, who has, to date, kidnapped 25,000 children and made them his soldiers and sex slaves. Except Prendergast doesn't show – he's in LA talking movies. So she waits for him in a cheap hostel filled with trustafarians. And waits. He still doesn't show, so she decides to do some fieldwork, teaching at an Aids orphanage and meeting some of Kony's victims. In a creepy but beautifully

written scene, she witnesses the dusk evacuation of singing children out of the villages to sleep in safety in government-protected camps, among them “a little girl in a crispy pink ballgown seeming to float”. Here is a place, she realises, every bit as weird as LA.

Such fragile material sounds like an unpromising basis for a humorous memoir. But this is one of the funniest books I've read for a long while. The first 70 pages in LA are a tour de force of whip-smart quips and acidic observations,

and her “romance” with Prendergast is self-deprecating satire at its finest.

But her tone seems appropriately tender even against the bittersweet backdrop of Uganda. Occasionally, a joke falls tastelessly flat, and there are others that are lucky to be hilarious, but generally her daffy register is curiously effective. One of Kony's victims is a schoolgirl who is so nervous she can't stop smiling, “like Paris Hilton, but pleasant”, before describing how she was forced to murder her best friend with a machete. The juxtaposition is uncomfortable and powerful.

Bussmann's skills with self-obsessed celebrities also come in handy. She deftly spears Prendergast's floppy-haired vanity and Kony's eerie, cultish sway – and only Bussmann could extract from a corrupt colonel that he prefers to buy his “pants from Next”. In among all the manic gagging, there is only a whiff of personal development, however. You're not entirely sure what the message is, apart from “everyone's bonkers!” But who better than Bussmann to spell it out.



**Bussmann:**  
artlessly  
perceptive

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