

yourself. This dreadful puce! And I really think that two drunken snails dipped in permanganate could have produced more aesthetically pleasing shapes...

Now for the agony. Not only is there no caption under any of the plates in Connolly's book; there is nowhere in the book that tells us, in any convenient way, who designed them and when. Yes, there is a list of designers and illustrators at the end; so, for example, under Bawden, Edward, we are referred to book titles on seven different pages; but if you wanted to know (and I did) who designed that fine jacket for Whittick's book on Mendelsohn, you'd have to look through the whole list of 118 artists to find the answer, which is (I might have guessed it) Berthold Wolpe.

What was behind the crazy decision (a) to have no on-page captions (beyond a ten-year timeframe for each design) and (b) no reference to a set of captions at the end of the book — which would itself have been a minor penance? Two possibilities occur to me. One is that the compiler and publisher did not know who designed all the jackets. The other possibility is more sinister: the ever-increasing power of the designer — I mean, in this case, the designer of Connolly's book. Designers simply hate the intrusion of words. You see that in the design of modern buses. We used to read, on both the fronts and backs of buses, all the places they were stopping at. The other day, walking along Victoria Street SW1, I came up behind a No. 24 bus. All it had on the back was the number 24 in a neat little panel — so you'd have no notion where it was heading. If you did a Linford Christie and hared round to the front of the bus, all you'd find there was '24 Pimlico' in a sans-serif type — no mention of where the bus would be stopping on the way. As John Betjeman used to mutter, gazing scornfully at some modern horror — 'Clean lines!'

Similarly, this book leaves us without a clue. As you will have already gathered, I am a fan of Joseph Connolly, who put it together. I would have credited him with more gumption. (This is more Forrest Gump.) But those designers are tyrants. They will reject an illustration, however germane it is to the author's argument, if it is not quite up to their crisp-as-a-matron's-wimple standard. (Forgive me, dear designer of this book, if you have not been tyrannical; but, if you haven't I am still waiting for an explanation of this ghastly horlicks.)

Designers are still mighty important. Speaking as an author, I want the jacket of each of my books to scream across a bookshop: 'BUY ME!' Too often they have been in dun colours with hard-to-decode titles. The worst ever was my picture book on John Betjeman; the jacket of the first edition could be politely described



Cover of *Classic Secrets of Magic* by Bruce Elliott, designed by Stanley Jaks

as chocolate brown and his indecipherable signature was used as title. Connolly's book shows exactly the difference a good or great designer can make. □

Black humour

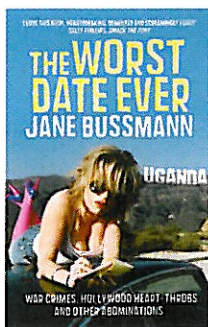
Michela Wrong

THE WORST DATE EVER
by Jane Bussmann

Macmillan, £11.99, pp. 372

ISBN 9780230737129

© £9.59 (plus £2.45 p&p) 0870 429 6655



'The trouble with most people,' a reporter friend of mine once remarked, 'is they just don't grasp the funny side of genocide.' He was a rather eccentric friend, possessed of a none-too-healthy fascination with guns

and violent death, but he had a point. As any soldier knows, horror lends itself to black humour. An uncontrollable fit of the giggles is often a spontaneous reaction to the utterly grotesque.

Gripped by post-colonial guilt, few Westerners have the nerve to admit this when it comes to Africa, which does a strong line in genocide, and the continent's non-fiction suffers from the kind of po-faced earnestness that would make a missionary yawn. Jane Bussmann is a gloriously irreverent, genitally-fixated exception to the rule. As I read her account of Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army, convulsed with sinus-clearing snorts of astonished laughter, I found myself marvelling that so few of us Africa hacks have thought to try her mould-breaking approach.

The book kicks off in Beverly Hills, where Bussmann, a north Londoner who once nursed hopes of a script-writing career, spends her days making up quotes for interviews with celebrities she rarely gets to meet. Her interrogation routine — 'You're in amazing shape, what's your secret?' — is hardly John Humphrys, but works a treat in getting Hollywood stars to 'relax and open up, like a bumhole on amyl nitrate'. She's stranded in Stupid Town in the Golden Age of Stupid. When even actor Ashton Kutcher, the 'bloke who took over from Bruce Willis on Demi Moore', lectures Bussmann on her lack of moral direction, she's forced to admit it's time for a change.

She longs to join the ranks of those she dubs the Useful People. Failing to win a job at Doctors Without Borders (the organisation wasn't recruiting celebrity journalists that year), Bussmann stumbles across the photo of a man who represents everything she craves: John Prendergast, former Director of African Affairs in the Bill Clinton administration, an expert on conflict resolution and a man who notches up frequent flier points to Darfur and eastern Congo. She develops a massive crush.

The conceit, sustained throughout the book, is that in a doomed attempt to impress the object of her passion, the smitten Bussmann sets off to investigate a crisis close to Prendergast's heart: the long-running war between the Ugandan army and the guerrilla movement led by prophet-turned-warlord Joseph Kony. Embarked on the 'worst date ever' — it's certainly one of the longest — she predictably fails to get her man, but finds her soul.

The (very funny) wisecracks and self-mockery do little to hide the fact that Bussmann is a scrupulous and compassionate reporter who checks reported truths first hand, badgers potential sources relentlessly, and is readier than most hacks to endure weeks in the kind of cheap African hotel where your electronics get stolen and breakfast comes with a side-servicing of amoebic dysentery.

Marooned in the northern town of Gulu, she deconstructs the myths associated with one of Africa's most consistently misrepresented stories.

She pins down the self-serving use to which Yoweri Museveni — still a donor darling despite every indication of wanting to become president-for-life — puts the crisis, logs a track record of cynically undermined peace initiatives and registers the healthy profits Uganda's colonels make from the war.

Perhaps the Ugandan army's failure to protect girls' schools signposted for imminent LRA attack — the girls are raped and taken as rebel 'wives' — should not be thrown in its face, Bussmann writes with heavy sarcasm, 'but at that point, it's a little unsporting to call yourself an army. Call yourself a group of similarly-attired young men sitting in a nearby building who happen to have some weapons and ammunition they won't be using.'

As for the supposedly 'protected villages' into which locals are unhappily herded, Bussmann discovers these are little more than 'cash 'n' carry brothels' for soldiers, where food is traded for sex. Noting the complacency with which international humanitarian organisations sustain the fiction, she swiftly loses her admiration for the smiley, lazy, Useful People. 'All the world's aid had come down to a porridge f***.'

The missing ingredient — and it's one that has been superbly explored by academic Tim Allen and *Financial Times* journalist Matthew Green — is any examination of the historical and cultural factors that make Kony, in the eyes of northern Uganda's Acholi people, nothing like as 'loony' or repellent a figure as the authorities would have you believe. Kony has only lasted as long as he has because his cause holds resonance with a population bitter at its marginalisation by a southern-orientated regime.

But Bussmann's skill at grabbing your attention and never letting go, even while one sick laugh follows another, makes this a passing quibble. In 15 years covering the continent, I've come to despair at the way conflicts of the LRA type, which those who report them know to be as passionately engaging as anything they will ever cover, get relegated to the kind of human rights report so dry and boring, to use the author's phrase, they have to be read with a finger.

This potty-mouthed, sarky, self-deprecating female journalist with no track record on Africa and a ludicrously inappropriate CV has succeeded where scores of doughty, better-qualified males routinely come a cropper. A small African war, headache of foreign editors and reluctant publishers, has never been captured to such hilarious and heart-wrenching effect. You go girl. □

The discount offers on books in this section remain open for three months from date of publication. Email: taggings@bertrams.com

Lust for life

Justin Marozzi

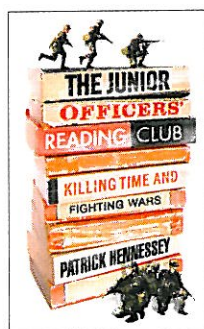
THE JUNIOR OFFICERS' READING CLUB: KILLING TIME AND FIGHTING WARS

by Patrick Hennessey

Allen Lane, £16.99, pp.352

ISBN 9781846141867

© £13.59 (plus £2.45 p&p) 0870 429 6655



Patrick Hennessey was one of the British army's self-proclaimed Bright Young Things, an Oxford graduate with a lust for combat and a literary bent. Born in 1982, he belongs to a generation of uniformed men and women who would,

as he puts it, 'do more and see more in five years than our fathers and uncles had packed into twenty-two on manoeuvres in Germany and rioting in Ulster'. Hard on the older generation, perhaps, but such have been the opportunities afforded by the War on Terror.

The Junior Officers' Reading Club charts Hennessey's four-year journey from the square-bashing of Sandhurst to front-line duty in Iraq and Afghanistan as a Grenadier Guards Platoon Commander and Operations Officer, and his subsequent departure from the army. If the journey itself is unremarkable — the usual suspects of barking Non-Commissioned Officers, a general disdain for Rear Echelon Motherfuckers or REMFs, high-octane thrills of men with guns and the camaraderie forged under fire are all present and correct — what impresses is the sheer candour and immediacy of his reporting. A literary soldier, especially one still in his twenties rather than a bewhiskered sixty-something general penning his memoirs, is something to be treasured.

We can therefore excuse the gung-ho tone of much of the book. This is a young man fortunate enough, unlike so many soldiers of a previous generation who missed out on a good war, to be doing just what he has always dreamed of. During one particularly intense fight with 'Terence' Taliban in Afghanistan, he says he wants to sit down with the Major who has come along for the ride and try to understand the adrenaline and euphoria of it all and ask what could possibly compare.

'...the winning goal scoring punch, the first kiss, the triumphant knicker-peeling moment? Nowhere else sells bliss like this, surely? Not in freefall jumps or crisp blue waves, not on dance floors in pills or white lines — I want to discuss with him whether it's sexually charged because it's the ultimate affirmation of being alive...'

The answer is very little or nothing can compare because war is uniquely different. It confers an experience that those who have not donned uniform can ever quite understand. As the Company Sergeant Major puts it in a dash of graffiti at the Sangin District Centre when the tour comes to an end, 'for those who have fought for it, life will always have a flavour the sheltered cannot taste'.

Hennessey's generation is naturally the most media-savvy there has ever been. The Inkerman Company's exploits are scrupulously and tirelessly recorded on camera so the officers and men can make video montages to impress friends and girlfriends back home.

'We went into battle in bandanas and shades with Penguin Classics in our webbing, sketch pads in our daysacks and iPods on the radio, thinking we knew better than what had gone before,' he writes. Hennessey is driven by the glamour of it all, from Sandhurst to Iraq and into deployment in Afghanistan. After the tedium of all that drill, the relentless boredom of waiting and hoping for action which is the soldier's lot, killing the enemy is 'fun', never mind the rights and wrongs of the conflict, which are not discussed.

There is an inevitability about the reality-check which comes of seeing comrades killed and grotesquely injured. Casualties become shockingly regular. We don't know whether Hennessey's virtual reading club included Herodotus, history's first war reporter, but the irrepressible Greek put his finger on it in lines that ring as true today as when he wrote them 2,500 years ago: 'No one is fool enough to choose war instead of peace — in peace sons bury fathers, but in war fathers bury sons.'

As Hennessey contemplates the carnage around him, the tone becomes darker, more measured and reflective, a welcome and sensitive contrast to the flippant banter, dripping with irony, that has come before. These passages are some of the most important and affecting in what ultimately proves to be a very fine book, a powerful despatch from the front line and required reading for the families of those in the armed forces. Let us hope his move into conflict and international humanitarian law will provide material for future books because he would be an amusing, probably caustic, observer of the field.

A final note. When I called the *Panorama* producer Hennessey accuses of being a little yellow under fire in Afghanistan to check the author's version of events, he disputed them with a chuckle. He also described Hennessey as the bravest man he had ever met. □

Justin Marozzi's The Man Who Invented History: Travels with Herodotus is published in paperback by John Murray next month.