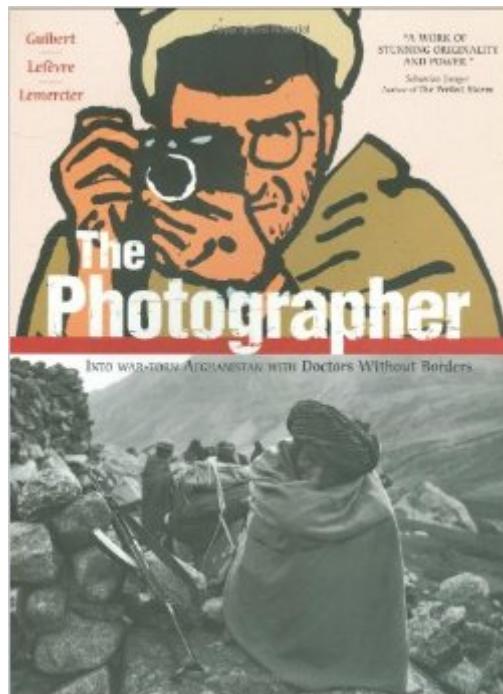


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The Photographer: Into War-torn Afghanistan With Doctors Without Borders



Synopsis

The Photographer Into War torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders by Guibert, Emmanuel. Published by First Second,2009, Binding: Paperback

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Customer Reviews

It's not what you think. That's the thing that came to my mind when I began reading this photography book. It's not really a photography book, it's an essay, it's a comic, it's contemporary, it's graphics, it's an illustrated adventure from 1986 and it's a true story.I began reading it as I had requested it from the publisher for review. Most of the time I browse books, assimilate the essence of it, write about it and move to the next project. Not so this time.First of all I have great respect for Doctors Without Borders/MÃ©decins Sans FrontiÃ¨res (MSF), an organization that I supported when photographer Fernando Bengoechea (one of my photographers) vanished in the Asian Tsunami. The work that they do can't be put into words. I pay my respect to any nurse or doctor who will agree to be smuggled into a country torn apart by war (Afghanistan) so that they can set up hospitals and provide medical care in the most rudimentary conditions. To go places where the locals might not even have a word called "healthcare" is an undertaking far beyond my Westerner imagination. This is the work of pure love, dedication and it holds a sense of purpose that most people might not ever find in a lifetime. This comes through clearly throughout the book.Photojournalist Didier LefÃ©vre joined a team of Doctors Without Borders in 1986 and followed them into Afghanistan to illustrate their efforts to help ease the suffering of the people by providing

medical services. The country was literally torn apart by the war between the Soviet Union who invaded Afghanistan and the Afghan Resistance supported by America and other Western Countries. You know one part of this story. One Arab player rose through the ranks helping Afghanistan freeing itself from the occupant.

First, if you want to get the most out of this book buy a magnifying glass (mine cost \$1 at CVS) - there are very small reproductions of contact photos containing great detail. Second, "graphic-novel" seems a misnomer, as this is not a novel. Perhaps graphic-photojournalism better describes this memoir of the second author's experiences traveling to Afghanistan with MSF in 1986, the wonder and the horror captured by B&W photos when they exist and by the first author's drawings when they do not. The book has 3 parts: the trip in, the medical mission, the trip out. Each part features, for me, a particularly moving photo. Part 1 begins in Pakistan where the photographer, Didier, acculturates first to Peshawar and the MSF team, then to the Afghans and the stark landscape in which they live, captured in the photo of the donkey and its rescuers recuperating on a rock in the middle of a shallow rushing Afghan river (see promo material above). Part 3 follows Didier's near catastrophic attempt to walk back to Pakistan without the MSF team, culminating in the nightmare photos of his beleaguered horse and the landscape in which he expected to die. Part 2 is harrowing in its depiction of human suffering in the Badakshan MSF clinic. Most moving to me is the two-page sequence of the emotions of a young girl treated for a burned hand. Other photos straight-forwardly document more ghastly injuries. Babur wrote of his campaign into Afghanistan, as did some 19th century English explorer/soldiers, but there is a recent canon of writings of westerners traveling here: R Byron, early 30s; E Newby, late 50s; D Murphy early 60s; P Levi early 70s; J Elliot, late 70s-mid 80s; R Stewart, 02; and (though it's a different sort of book) S Chayes, 02-05. To this add *The Photographer*.

Beyond the headlines, behind the countless stories of war in Afghanistan, and what it means to live there now, lie millions of stories. Human stories, personal histories, and day-to-day activities that can be downright banal if not for the war, religion, and politics that constantly affect everything and everyone living there. There is always the question of how we got here, how Afghanistan reached this point in its history, and what we in North America don't understand about the country. *The Photographer* does not exactly sum up everything, but that's not its job. Its role is a deceptively simple one. It's "merely" the story of a photographer, Didier Lefèvre, hired to document the work of several physicians working for Doctors Without Borders in Afghanistan in July 1986. To say it's

informative is an understatement. What Lefèvre experienced--beginning with adjusting to the heat, followed by learning to acclimate socially in this conservative country--is epic in scale, and the book's heft gives proper exposure to Lefèvre's life. *The Photographer* was originally published in Lefèvre's native France, where it's sold 250,000 copies. Now a worldwide phenomenon, its U.S. release is an event, as it should be. The story deserves it. Lefèvre deserves it. It's hard to describe what Lefèvre went through in a short synopsis. He returned with 4,000 photos, substantially fewer teeth and less body weight, and a severe case of exhaustion. In the book, he goes through a cute "initiation" from the doctors, earns their trust and respect, and then becomes part of this culture and society that is at once so fascinating and so foreign to him.

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