

War stories – how to bring the battle to the book

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Report on the [Polis Panel at the LSE Literary Festival](#) By Bjork Kjaernested

People have always been fascinated by war. But in the age of humanitarian interventions, multinational armies, governmental restrictions, intangible enemies and digital revolutions the world of the modern day war reporter is now considerably more complex than his historic counterpart. In such a complex environment, how can today's journalists get to and report the truth?



On the morning of the biggest offence in Afghanistan since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, Stephen Grey, Andrew Mueller and Ros Wynne-Jones offered their thoughts on war reporting.

They suggested that War reporting today is getting harder as journalists have now become targets – both for propaganda and bullets. Access to war zones is limited and physical danger a very real threat.

Often the only road possible is to travel with the military and therefore accepting their terms and conditions which can range from controlled access to speakers and areas to submission of articles to Ministry of Defense and military press officers for approval.

This situation is then exasperated by the 24 hour news cycle demanding instantaneous information. The illusion of access can therefore be a problem for viewers and readers alike. With high quality footage and reports from the eye of the storm, it is easy to overlook the limited ability journalists have to get oversight in the heat of the moment.

If this is true of conventional war journalism, our authors said that the book format offers a chance to become increasingly personal and detailed. From getting rid of pent up emotions, sharing humor and absurdity in the midst of tragedy, to pensive reflections on past events, the book offers its authors an opportunity to comprehensively share their experience with its readers.

The three panelists' three compelling texts covered the gamut of genres from dark comedy travelogue, through highly personal fiction, to a politically-infused narrative of a reporter's life.

They tell the stories of the trainee doctor discovering a land mine field in Sudan as she stands in the middle of it; a lone reporter sleeping under a star filled night in Afghanistan surrounded by soldiers waiting to launch at the break of dawn and thereafter narrowly escaping a bullet; and the Kurdish string quintet performing spontaneously for a group of soldiers and Iraqis at a town square.

These three books debate difficult questions about whether it is possible to ever stay neutral while witnessing sufferings and living on location. The life of the much hyped and sometimes envied war journalist is therefore not only fraught with excitement but feelings of guilt, attachment and sense of un-justice. These feelings war reporters have to live with.

Ros Wynne-Jones summed up these sentiments with the last word of the discussion:

“One minute you are comfortably at home then you get a phone call and before you know it you are at a flood area for 3 weeks sleeping in a tent, reporting people's sufferings. When you get back from you are sent to drink champagne at a Soho book launch.”

Perhaps they have simply been offered a rare understanding of how the world with all its complexities and injustices. An understanding we can hope to catch a glimpse of by reading their stories.

Stephen Grey is an award-winning British investigative journalist, author of [Ghost Plane: The Untold Story of the CIA's Secret Rendition Programme](#) and [Operation Snakebite: The Explosive True Story of an Afghan Desert Siege](#) |.

Andrew Mueller is a journalist and author of [I Wouldn't Start From Here: the 21st Century and Where it all Went Wrong](#) |. Among various misadventures in more than 70 countries, Andrew Mueller has reported on the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, the lifting of the siege of Bihac, the handover of Hong Kong, the invasion of Iraq, the wartime rock'n'roll scene of Sarajevo, an Elvis Presley festival in Tupelo and Ukraine's efforts to launch Chernobyl as a tourist destination.

Ros Wynne-Jones is a freelance journalist and author and formerly the *Daily Mirror's* senior feature writer. Her novel [Something is Going to Fall Like Rain](#) |, about south Sudan, is published by Reportage Press.

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