

‘IT’S WHAT I DO,’ BY LYNSEY ADDARIO

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The modern battlefield can induce a peculiar strain of skewed logic among those sent to chronicle it. Upon a landscape where it is often mortally dangerous simply to stand in one place, how much worse can it be to venture a little farther, to get a bit closer? And having assumed the added risk of getting closer, how then to leave before you’ve taken the perfect image, conducted one last interview? What makes such calculations especially tricky is that most modern battlefields have no recognizable boundaries or rules of conduct; they bear less resemblance to any traditional war movie than, say, “Mad Max.”

In the opening of her affecting memoir, “It’s What I Do,” the photojournalist Lynsey Addario provides a harrowing account of just where such moth-to-the-flame thinking can lead. In March 2011, Addario was in Libya covering the civil war when she, along with a local driver and three other journalists on assignment with The New York Times, ventured into the exposed front-line town of Ajdabiya. (Although we have both covered conflicts for The Times, I have never worked with Addario, and we are only passing acquaintances.) Addario had feelings of foreboding from the outset, fears that amplified amid reports that loyalists to Muammar el-Qaddafi were encircling the town. Working against this, though, was the call of her profession.

“We are greedy by nature,” she notes of war photographers and reporters. “We always want more than what we have. The consensus in the car at that point was to keep working.”

As the only woman in that car, Addario felt further pressure to keep her concerns to herself. “I didn’t want to be the cowardly photographer or the terrified girl who prevented the men from doing their work.”

When at last the group decided it was time to get out, it was too late: Captured by Qaddafi’s soldiers, the four journalists were bound and blindfolded and taken away; their driver was dead, summarily executed or killed in the crossfire. What ensued over the next several days was a horrifying ordeal, as the journalists were paraded through loyalist towns, to be punched and hit with rifle butts — and in Addario’s case, sexually groped — by both soldiers and the crowd. In the most unforgettably ghastly moment, Addario remembers how one of the captors caressed her face and hair “like a lover,” while softly “repeating the same phrase over and over.” She assumed the man was trying to comfort her, until an Arabic-speaking fellow captive told her the truth: “He’s telling you that you will die tonight.”

Eventually transferred into the far gentler custody of the Libyan Foreign Ministry, the journalists were ultimately released and flown out of the country. In Addario’s case, her Libyan nightmare had at least one happy side effect: Acceding to an entreaty her husband had been making for years, she soon became pregnant with their first child.

Although there is no academic credential that boosts one’s odds of becoming a successful combat journalist (ironically, one of the more common traits in the profession is a dearth of journalism degrees), there surely is a personality type: plucky, adventurous, intensely curious, ferociously driven. From early on, Addario showed signs of possessing all these traits, and in abundance. The youngest of four girls

born to a fun-loving and rather bohemian Italian-American couple, Addario grew up in the affluent suburbs of Westport, Conn. She found her calling at the age of 13, when her father gave her a simple Nikon 35 mm camera to play around with. Immediately fascinated, she began to photograph obsessively, even if she never imagined it might lead to a career.

That started to change when, after graduating from college, Addario saved up her waitressing money to move to Argentina; along with teaching English she began peddling her photos to the local English-language newspaper at the princely rate of \$10 a picture. It was while attending an exhibit of the Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado that she experienced an epiphany. “Something I had perceived until that moment as a simple means of capturing pretty scenes,” she writes, “became something altogether different: It was a way to tell a story. It was the marriage of travel and foreign cultures and curiosity and photography. It was photojournalism.”

Moving back to New York, Addario scrambled for any assignment that might come her way, no matter how lowly or poorly paid. The club she hoped to join was very much a fraternity, and she felt the constant need to prove herself as single-minded and intrepid as any man. This came at a personal cost. As better assignments started coming her way, her relationships foundered time and again on her absolute devotion to her craft and her lengthy absences in the field.

As Addario points out, hitting it big in journalism often carries an element of luck, of being in the right place at the right time. For her, that came in the summer of 2000. Living in South Asia and eager to examine the role of women under the rule of the fundamentalist Taliban regime, Addario, under the cloak of a chador, spent several weeks insinuating herself into the lives of Afghan women, emerging with a remarkable portrait of a culture few outsiders had glimpsed. That portfolio might have received limited attention, until the United States went to war with the Taliban after the Sept. 11 attacks.

“Editors suddenly found news value in the Taliban,” Addario wryly notes, “in the plight of Pakistani women, in Afghan refugees living in Pakistan — all stories I had done while living in India.”

Amid the rush to cover the war, Addario was put on freelance “rotation” by The New York Times, a status that became all but permanent when the American military adventures in the region extended to Iraq. By the end of that tumultuous decade, and at extraordinary personal risk, Addario had covered conflicts across the Middle East and Africa for some of the world’s most prestigious publications. She also received the affirmation she had long sought, including a shared Pulitzer Prize and a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant.

In the photographs liberally scattered throughout “It’s What I Do” are clues to how Addario rose to the top of her field. The very best photographers develop an ineluctable bond with their subjects, an intimacy built on patience and trust; in the strongest photos here, such as her portraits of women rape victims in Congo, her ability to capture their strength and vulnerability is profoundly touching.

Yet the qualities that make for a brilliant photographer may not make for a brilliant memoirist. Only occasionally does Addario linger long enough to render the kind of fully sketched scene that makes the account of her kidnapping in Libya so riveting. Instead, she has a tendency to tell her story in a summary travelogue fashion, with people and places and events — even the succession of disappointing boyfriends — flitting by at such a rapid clip as to blur to dimness. What makes this doubly frustrating is that when Addario does slow down, she is incisive: In the acutely observed account of her negotiations with a young Taliban visa clerk, for example — a complex dance requiring her to shift constantly

between submission, flirtation and defiance — the reader is likely to learn more about the capricious nature of Islamic fundamentalism than from a dozen essays or position papers.

One also wishes for a bit more self-reflection. Like every combat journalist, Addario grapples with the psychic dissonance of inhabiting parallel universes, one in which unspeakable atrocities regularly occur, another in which children play happily in safety-tested playgrounds; yet she has little more to say on the matter than she has learned to live with it. But maybe such glibness is a necessary defense mechanism. In her uncommon ability to connect emotionally with her photographic subjects, Addario has been given entree into a world of sorrows and hardships that most would find too much to bear, and that require a certain amount of stoicism to withstand.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/books/review/its-what-i-do-by-lynsey-addario.html>