

H-Net Reviews

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Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*. New York: First Feminist Press, 2005. 286 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55861-489-5.



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As I was reading *Baghdad Burning*, my mind wandered through free association to the conceptual art of Christo, the man who wraps big buildings, sets up umbrellas on beaches, and hangs curtains around Central Park. While I do not always “get” what he is aiming for, one thing is abundantly clear: Christo’s art is frozen in a moment. It is there, and then it is gone. It is not meant to hang around in a museum like the *Mona Lisa* or welcome the tired and poor for all eternity like the Statue of Liberty. Its importance to art is in large part because it is temporary.

I felt that same way about this book. The form was all wrong. The author, identified only by the name Riverbend, wrote her blog in the moment. As the conflict in Iraq intensified, this young woman blogged the story of her personal experiences living with her parents and brother in a middle-class section of Baghdad. Her blog creates as compelling an antiwar commentary as Picasso’s *Guernica* did during the Spanish Civil War. I found myself nodding in agreement when she asks (not in the book but in an online blog entry I sought out dated July 11, 2006): “Why don’t the Americans just go home? They’ve done enough damage and we hear talk of how things will fall apart in Iraq if they ‘cut and run,’ but the fact is that they aren’t doing anything right now. How much worse can it get?”

But unlike Picasso’s room-size abstraction in black and white that has come to symbolize the destruction inherent in all war, Riverbend’s blog is compelling in part because the reader lives with the author in real time. The reader is drawn into the mundane reality of life amid war as the author reflects upon the number of Iraqi casualties or the fact that women are always wearing the clothes of mourning because someone is always dying. The blog is current and all about right now, not about three years ago.

Thus, to me, a blog book is an oxymoron. A book is a book and a blog is a blog. The first thing I did after reading the book’s introduction was to go online and Google Riverbend, so I could make sure she was still alive and that she was still posting. Blogging compels me to be in the present. (By the way—yes, she is still alive, and yes, she is still writing, although not as frequently as she did before.) Then I started reading the blog online, backwards from the present, which again is the correct form for a blog, but certainly not for a book.

Baghdad Burning tracks thirteen months of Riverbend’s observations, running through September 2004. While daily newspapers chronicle the casualties and weekly magazines reflect upon trends, *Baghdad Burning* provides the reader with a window into the lives of ordinary Iraqis and helps us see the reality of living in a

war-torn area. Power failures keep Riverbend away from her computer. Intermittent Internet service dictates the rhythm of her blog. Funerals punctuate daily life. Even the most innocuous events are tinged by danger. Shopping for back-to-school supplies—a task usually filled with anticipation and excitement for small children—involved four adults running for cover as they entered a small stationary shop in downtown Baghdad to select Smurf erasers and Barbie notebooks, while the children remained behind locked doors at home. The contrasts between Riverbend’s life and normalcy are stark.

While her commentary is mostly personal and tracks the upheaval of domestic life in Baghdad, Riverbend dabbles in criticism of the American involvement. Her entry for April 9, 2004, describes the first-year anniversary of the creation of Iraqi “National Day,” as “the day the occupation became not a possibility but a definite reality” (p. 246). She describes huge explosions: “the hair almost stood on my head” (p. 246). And she chronicles what was “the longest day of my life. The day we sensed that the struggle in Baghdad was over and the fear of war was nothing compared to the new fear we were currently facing. It was the day I saw my first American tank roll grotesquely down the streets of Baghdad—through a residential neighborhood” (p. 249). Riverbend recounts how the Iraqi dead are being quickly buried in what used to be a football field. She scoffs that the American news stations avoid footage of the reality of this war for Iraqis. “They don’t show you the hospitals overflowing with the dead and dying because they don’t want to hurt American feelings ... but people ’should’ see it. You should see the price of your war and occupation” (p. 251).

From Christo to Picasso then on to Anne Frank. *Baghdad Burning* pulled me from one subject to another. The parallel to Anne Frank and the diary as book form is clear, but again I was dissatisfied because Anne Frank’s diary is, absolutely, a complete work. It chronicles the teenager’s life during World War II hidden in an Amsterdam attic with her family and another family. When I first read it in the 1960s, I was propelled forward through the text because I knew that Anne Frank’s story was complete within the pages and that her story would end with a jarring epilogue that described her death in a concentration camp in 1945. There was no Internet floating out there for me to Google her name, and which would lead me to thoughts that were newer, more current, and more poignant.

While this book does, indeed, provide the reader with a snapshot of a moment in time, now long past in blog terms, the book falls short as a teaching tool. Journalism professors lecturing on the converging media and making a case for blogs as the newest form of New Journalism are better served to send their students to the Internet. Historians seeking to analyze emerging technologies and their effect on war coverage in the twenty-first century (for example) need turn to the primary document for research: <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>.

That said, it is still a good read. And as a book lover, I think that is a good thing. Yes, the book is poignant. Yes, its vivid descriptions of domestic life amid war evoke interesting historical parallels. And after you finish the book, go directly to the blog and continue reading about Riverbend’s life as it unfolds.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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