



Greg Marinovich, Joao Silva. *The Bang Bang Club: Snapshots from a Hidden War.* New York: Basic Books, 2000. xiv + 254 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-465-04413-9.



Reviewed by Niranjan Karnik (Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University)

Published on H-SAfrica (June, 2003)

The Personal and Professional Price of Journalism

The Personal and Professional Price of Journalism

During the U.S.-led War on Iraq, the U.S. public received much of its news from embedded journalists accompanying the country's military forces. The "embeds," as they came to be known, presented the narrowest portrait of the war and were largely co-opted into the military structure. This is hardly a surprise. In Vietnam, the Friday Follies presented equally narrow and often misleading portraits of the war.

If some of these journalists had read Greg Marinovich and Joao Silva's book, *The Bang Bang Club*, they might have had cause to reconsider this approach and, more likely, their profession. Marinovich and Silva are two South African photojournalists with a vast degree of experience in covering wartime situations. This book is a chronicle of the violence surrounding the Apartheid struggle that took place in South Africa's townships. The book covers Marinovich and Silva's personal experience working on the frontlines, as well as that of Ken Oosterbroek and Kevin Carter, both of whom lost their lives to the violence of their profession in different ways.

It focuses on the final years of the Apartheid, and upon the township-based violence that characterized the 1990s. In the course of this work, the authors contextualize their experience by tracing the history of Apartheid violence. Its overall value is not as much in its use as source of history, but in how it openly exposes the way journalists suffer in the course of their work, and the heavy ethical and moral questions they face on a daily basis. Students of the media and aspiring journalists will find special value and significance in this book, for its unsparing and often graphic portrayal of events in South Africa. The bloody images that the world saw seem sanitized when compared with the detailed narrative of events that Marinovich and Silva provide.

The moral issues that bond four journalists together under the macabre name, "The Bang Bang Club," become the central theme of the book. The editors write:

"We discovered that one of the strongest links amongst us was questions about the morality of what we do: when do you press the shutter release and when do you cease being a photographer? We discovered that the camera was never a filter through which we were pro-

tected from the worst of what we witnessed and photographed. Quite the opposite—it seems like the images have burned on to our minds as well as our films” (p. xiv).

These moral and ethical questions underlie any work conducted in such extreme circumstances. The author’s wonder at what point does the requirement of humane concern for one another trump a person’s occupational obligations?

For example, Marinovich describes his horror at witnessing a mob beat to death an apparently random man for a perceived political transgression. When he questions the leaders of the mob as their minions are beating the individual and attempts to intervene, his own life becomes threatened. The ethical struggle comes to the forefront—intercede in an unjust situation that likely cannot be changed or document the horror so that others will know what happened.

The four journalists became known for the personal and professional risks that they took. They were all rewarded for their risky behavior by accolades from the profession. Carter, for example, won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for a photograph of a starving child that he took in Somalia in 1993. The famous photograph shows a small, emaciated girl curled over in exhaustion while a vulture sits a short distance away on the ground next to her. The photograph became the cover image for many humanitarian groups in their fundraising appeals. It also raised ethical questions about the limits that journalists will go to get an image. In this book we begin to understand the moral dilemmas Kevin Carter faced and witness his struggle with alcohol and drugs, as well as how the guilt related to his work later led, in part, to his suicide.

As is obvious, all of these men paid a price. Marinovich was shot on several occasions and nearly died in at least one of these instances. He was injured on the same day and in the same location where Oosterbroek

was killed in 1994, while covering a battle in Thokoza township.

The violence that Marinovich and Silva narrate is difficult to comprehend. The township violence, spurred by political forces trying to uphold the last vestiges of Apartheid, may seem remote to many people who did not experience it directly. The proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have done much to uncover the roots of Apartheid violence but the full story is likely to remain incomplete regardless of well-meaning investigations and historical analyses. This book lacks the academic and critical analysis that would be expected for most research in media studies, but as a perspective into the dynamics of wartime reporting it is valuable.

At the end of this book, I have several concerns about the future of this profession. I wonder if it might not be prudent to have a system for debriefing journalists after they serve in extreme circumstances. The exigencies of wartime coverage would favor having journalists go through a structured system designed to help them understand and cope with their experiences akin to what the International Committee of the Red Cross requires of its fieldworkers.

The Bang Bang Club is an important contribution to media studies and journalism. It captures a remarkable set of stories at a historic moment, and provides important lessons for those who plan to pursue careers in journalism. We are fortunate that Marinovich and Silva have taken time to share their stories and experiences.

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Niranjana Karnik. Review of Marinovich, Greg; Silva, Joao, *The Bang Bang Club: Snapshots from a Hidden War*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7780>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.