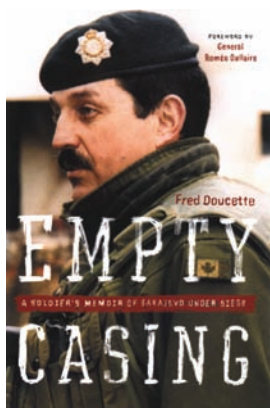


EMPTY CASING

DOUCETTE, Fred. Douglas & McIntyre Ltd. Vancouver, BC, 2008, hardcover, 228 pages, \$34.95, ISBN-10: 1553652916

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In *Empty Casing*, Fred Doucette writes about the time he spent in Bosnia-Herzegovina as a United Nations Military Observer (UNMO) in 1995–1996. He recounts what his daily life was like in Sarajevo and discusses the exceptional challenges that come with being a neutral observer, exposed to the horrors of an ethnic conflict but bound by a strict mandate of non-intervention. As he relates these experiences, Doucette also describes his difficult battle with post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS).

Doucette steers clear of the strategic and political aspects of the Serbo-Bosnian conflict and instead focuses mainly on his personal experience as a front-line witness of a daily battle for survival in Sarajevo, Gorazde and other towns in southern Bosnia. Perhaps even more striking than his descriptions of eluding sniper and artillery fire are his accounts of the extreme violence, contempt and hate that were part of everyday Balkan life in the '90s. In reference to what the author feels is the

media's voyeuristic attraction to war, Doucette collected some of his most shocking (read: sensational, appalling) anecdotes, placing these prominently in the chapters and subtitled them "War Porn." The attention to detail with which Doucette describes the events he witnessed, however horrendous, helps the reader to better understand the psychological trauma that such experiences can inflict on soldiers.

In addition to acting as a UNMO, Fred Doucette also had the opportunity to stay with a Sarajevan family for the greater part of his first year in Bosnia. UN observers are required to find their own accommodations in their area of operation, and the friendship that Doucette developed with his hosts and their neighbours is a major focus of the book. Doucette provides a first-hand glimpse of the Sarajevan mindset during the siege, and describes the brutal reality that Sarajevans were forced to contend with every day. Through reading about this friendship, the reader is able to better grasp the identification mechanisms that come into play and the feelings of guilt that can slowly grow when a soldier feels powerless to affect the fate of a people he is there solely to observe.

One fascinating aspect of the book is Doucette's description of the cycle of respite, guilt and extreme stress that was triggered by periods of leave, despite the fact that such vacations were meant to raise his morale. When he returned home from his first year in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1996 (he went back in 1999), the daily feelings of guilt that plagued Doucette gradually gave way to blind, unpredictable rages, leaving him vulnerable to painful flashbacks. It was during this period, which is covered in the second part of the book, that he began a several-year struggle with post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Some might deem the style in which *Empty Casing* is written to be deliberately provocative. Doucette's no-nonsense attitude leaves little room for political correctness when he writes, "[Some Serbian soldiers] were just f'ing [sic] animalistic cowards," or, "It is in Ottawa, at National Defence Headquarters, where the legal idiots who write our rules of engagement park their asses." Some people will no doubt recognize a soldier's frankness. The book project arose out of the journal that Doucette began keeping upon his return from Bosnia in an attempt to exorcise the demons that had been haunting him since 1995. One could argue that the profanity that peppers the story actually lends it a necessary degree of anger—anger that beleaguered the author for years after his return from Operation Palladium.

Regardless of what one might think of the style in which *Empty Casing* is written, Fred Doucette definitely has a rare ability to keep the reader riveted to the story. It goes without saying that this book also serves as a precious reminder of the fact that the spectre of ethnic violence in Europe did not disappear with the Second World War.