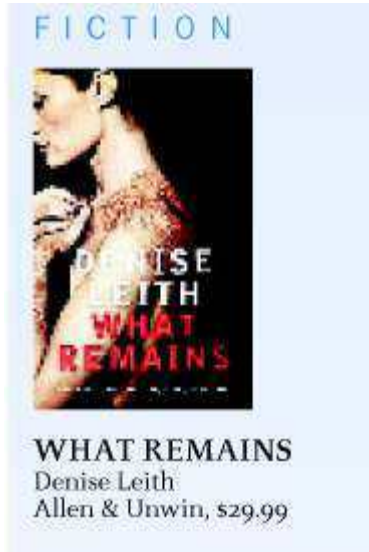




OFF THE SHELF



THE death of two journalists in Syria in the past fortnight has drawn attention to the risks faced by war reporters, a subject to which Denise Leith has devoted her fact-based novel. Young Kate Price is sent to the first Gulf War to do human interest stories behind the lines but she soon talks her way into a group of journalists off to investigate the highway of death. The stories she files win approval back in London and she is set.

Through the 1990s she moves from Iraq to the Balkans to Rwanda to refugee camps in Zaire to Chechnya and finally back to Iraq. There is a love story; one of her companions on her first career-changing venture is the glamorous Pete McDermott and they go on meeting at the various trouble spots around the world, never quite managing to get it together. Kate is brave and tough but the work takes its toll, not least by making ordinary life back in London seem unbearably trivial. Her characters are almost like addicts: the

habit is unsustainable, ruinous, but being straight seems worse.

Leith is a university teacher of international relations and you are never unaware that her novel has designs on its readers. It's not only a novel about journalists but journalism in the form of a novel, put together to show us how things are in the real world, and the writing throughout is unambitiously plain. One might sniff about good intentions not making art but Leith is always serious and respectful and she never cheapens the material.

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