

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Marie Colvin: Lindsey Hilsum's revealing biography of courageous war reporter is compelling stuff

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Marie Colvin, who died after being targeted in a shell attack in Homs, Syria, in 2012. Wikipedia

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For Marie Colvin, it was Lebanon's War of the Camps that brought home the power of journalism. In April 1987 Burj al Barajneh, a Palestinian refugee camp, was besieged by Amal, a Shia militia backed by the Syrian regime.

Colvin and her photographer Tom Stoddart paid an Amal commander to briefly hold fire while they ran into the camp across no-man's land. The assault on the camp was relentless and women were forced to run a gauntlet of sniper fire to get food and water for their families.

One young woman, Haji Achmed Ali, was shot as she tried to re-enter the camp with supplies. As she lay there wounded, no man dared pull her to safety. But then, Colvin reported:

Two [women] raced from cover, plucked Achmed Ali from the dust and hauled her to safety. It is the women who are dying and it was women who tired of men's inaction.

Despite the best efforts of volunteer medics, Achmed Ali would not survive. At the hospital another woman appealed to Colvin to tell the world the young woman's story.

War on Women, the powerful piece Colvin wrote, was splashed across the front page of the *Sunday Times* on 5 April 1987. "The facts were clear and brutal," writes Lindsey Hilsum in *In Extremis: The Life of War Correspondent Marie Colvin*, "as Marie had seen it with her own eyes".

The effect was almost immediate. Three days later the Syrian regime ordered its proxy militia to stand down and for the first time the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was able to enter the camp. A herd of journalists soon followed. “In a few days the War of the Camps was over,” writes Hilsum.

Complexity

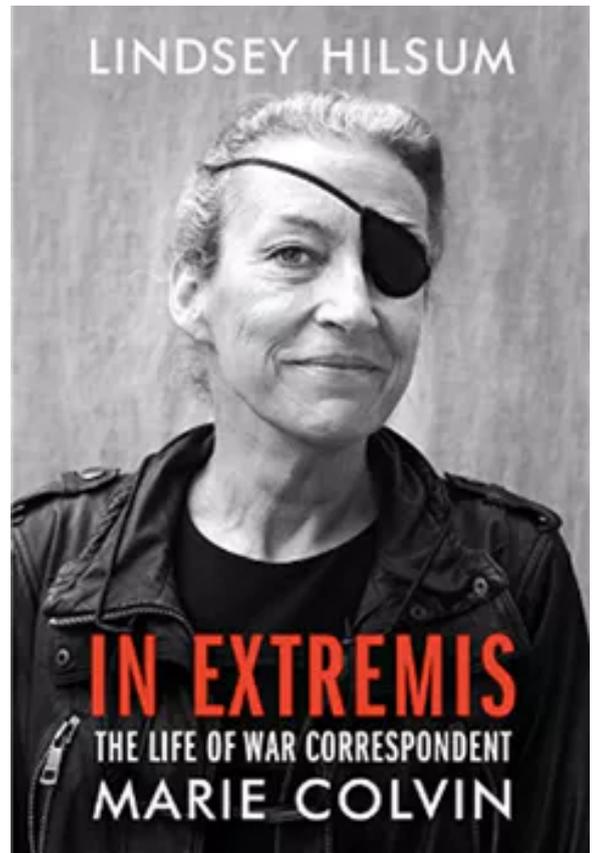
In Extremis is Hilsum’s riveting story of how Colvin went from a carefree idealistic youth in Oyster Bay, NY, to an audacious war correspondent who reported from sites of merciless violence in Lebanon, Palestine, Chechnya, East Timor, Sri Lanka, the Balkans and Libya. Until her death at the hands of the Syrian regime, Colvin remained indefatigable, never losing her idealism or youthful energy.

By eschewing hagiography for complexity, Hilsum has created a captivating portrait. The Colvin that Hilsum reveals is shaped by the loss of a beloved father, by the spirit of competition, by being a woman in a male-dominated field, and, above all, by a moral commitment to bearing witness and a natural affinity for the underdog.

By casting Colvin’s triumphs against the demons that pursued her – the turbulence of failed romances, the struggles with alcohol, the traumas of war – Hilsum gives a truer sense of the challenges that she faced. By capturing Colvin’s vivacity, generosity, humour and affability, Hilsum also shows how this inveterate raconteur came to be loved and admired in equal measure.

Like Ernest Hemingway, Colvin had invested in her own legend and sometimes strained to live up to it. But there was nothing inauthentic about her capacity for empathy or her commitment to the truth. Though in times of peace she struggled to distinguish herself, in times of crisis she unfailingly outshone her peers. While the Middle East remained her main beat, she also ventured farther afield, from Chechnya to Sri Lanka and East Timor.

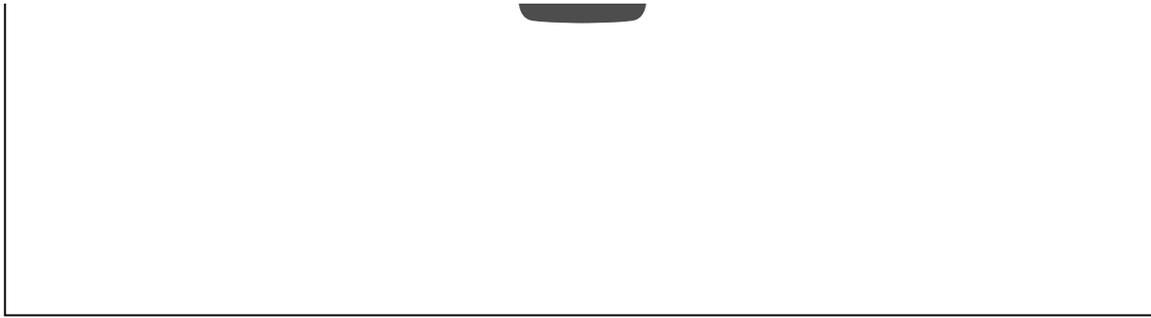
But if East Timor was the site of her **greatest triumph** (her defiant refusal to abandon trapped refugees eventually led to their safe evacuation), Sri Lanka became the site of her **greatest trauma**, losing an eye to a soldier’s grenade while returning from a visit to the Tamil-controlled north. But while the trauma would haunt her and briefly sapped her confidence, she remained undeterred. She courted greater danger in subsequent years and turned the eye-patch into part of her legend.



Penguin

Marie Colvin on Channel 4 News





Colvin's last report from Syria, hours before she died.

The making of a legend

By the time Colvin entered Syria in 2012, the reporting landscape had changed. Israel and Putin's Russia had demonstrated that journalists could be targeted with impunity and killers elsewhere had taken note. Before Colvin entered the besieged Syrian enclave of Baba Amr with photographer Paul Conroy, they had been warned that regime soldiers had orders to summarily execute journalists found in the area.

But Colvin and Conroy agreed that the story was worth the risk; they crawled through three kilometres of a drainage pipe to infiltrate. They found Baba Amr's only functioning hospital inundated with the dead and the dying; they met nearly 150 widows and orphans in a crowded basement sheltering from the regime's shelling. **Widows' Basement**, Colvin's haunting last story for the *Sunday Times*, was also her most poignant.

What happened next fused Colvin's life and legend and placed her convictions beyond any cynic's doubt. Five days before her death, Colvin had made it safely out of Baba Amr. But having seen what she had seen, she felt a moral compulsion to return. Conroy had misgivings, but he shared Colvin's sense of commitment.

HARDtalk - Paul Conroy - Photographer.wmv



The regime meanwhile had tightened the siege and an informer had alerted it to the journalists' presence. Colvin was conscious of the risks but made a fateful choice: hoping that her reporting would once again stir the international community into restraining a killer, she spoke to the BBC and CNN,

emphasising the urgency of the situation. The regime used the signal from her satellite phone to pinpoint her location and killed her with artillery. The regime would lay many more sieges and no western journalist would dare enter another.

At a 2006 **Frontline Club** (a London hub for foreign correspondants) event about the killing of Russian journalist **Anna Politkovskaya**, Colvin interrupted the panellists' abstract digressions and encouraged everyone to ask the more pertinent question:

Who killed Anna? That's the best thing we can do ... That's what we can do as journalists.

Now Colvin's family is trying to establish the same about her killers. And this is also the best thing we can do as citizens: support the investigation and ensure that Colvin's killers don't enjoy the impunity that Politkovskaya's did. Until we resolve to protect our truth-tellers, truth will remain fragile and justice will be denied.

For all her emotional turmoil, personal flaws and misjudgements, Colvin was an exemplary friend, human being and journalist. She maintained an unwavering commitment to showing "humanity in extremis" – with truth, empathy and responsibility. Hilsum has written a book as compelling as its subject.



Middle East Syria war reporting Homs



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