ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Lie in the Dark
Dan Fesperman
Soho Press
978-1-56947-167-8

Sarajevo under siege in the 1992-1996 war is not merely the setting for Fesperman's novel about a murder investigator whose big case arrives during a conflagration, but a living entity.

Like its people, Sarajevo endures the war not with any particular grace or loftiness but with seedy desperation; gone are the pomp, the bright costumes and the colorful flags of the 1984 Winter Olympics. International television cameras now record barricades of crushed cars, buildings shelled to rubble, weary people trotting through bullet-laced intersections and blood pooling on the concrete.

Fesperman, a correspondent for the Baltimore Evening Sun, wrote this novel, his first, after reporting on the war in Yugoslavia. He places murder investigator Vlado Petric in the heart of the Sarajevo during the siege. His wife and daughter having sought refuge in Germany, Petric spends his days with his feet on his desk, accepting handouts of precious coffee from foreign correspondents and occasionally investigating the type of homicides that occur among drunks, spurned lovers and gamblers. He argues to himself there is a point to such investigations, that he is not a "plumber fixing leaky toilets in the middle of a flood, an auto mechanic patching tires when the engine burned to a cinder."

Around him the war grinds on at a deflated, desultory pace. Serb snipers, influenced by the availability of plumb brandy, either fire into the city or they don't. The city's currency is cigarettes, which are collected as pay by prostitutes, cabbage sellers and black marketers and by the teen-age boys who make nightly hikes with their boom boxes to the front lines and return to their girlfriends the next morning alive or dead.

Petric, a relatively inexperienced cop motivated in part by personal ambition, strives for equilibrium: "Those who burned too brightly, he knew from watching, never lasted. They were the ones whose passions eventually led them running into free-fire zones, screaming either in madness or in a final outpouring of impotent rage. But let your flame run too low, fail to coax it along, and you end up at the other extreme, spent and empty."

When Petrel's big case arrives in the form of the murder of a high police official, the investigation leads to the front lines of the war and to the criminal underworld, locations that

turn out to be one and the same. Fesperman has combined the genres of murder mystery and war novel. Despite the unfortunate ambiguity of the novel's title the result is a concise and compelling story about how the wicked and the good struggle to survive during the worst of times.

Rich Wertz