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Safe Area Gorazde: The Special Edition

Joe Sacco
Fantagraphics Books (November 2010)
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It's long been an accepted truth that conflict is the engine that powers all of our dramas, real or imagined. So it should come as little surprise that war comics have historically been one of that medium's most enduring genres.

Still, as Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde* so powerfully proves, not all important tales from the front concern themselves with the actions of opposing combatants. The hard truth is that too often civilians are caught up in military skirmishes, becoming unwilling participants in an ages-old morality play they never wanted to be part of, and almost always with the most horrific results.

For those unfamiliar with his work, Sacco is a professional journalist who works in much the same way as other newshounds with one important exception: After he conducts interviews and takes photos to provide facts and context, he then writes and draws a comic based upon his findings.

And Sacco is very good at what he does. So good, in fact, that this volume garnered him a Guggenheim Fellowship shortly after it was first published a decade ago. The new expanded edition showcases his considerable talent as both scribe and artist, presenting the original story with a wealth of extras, including on-site sketches, related drawings, and photographs, along with transcripts and excerpts from Sacco's notebooks.

To create this book, Sacco spent four months between 1995 and 1996 in the besieged city of Gorazde, a largely Muslim enclave that was declared a "safe area" for that minority during the Bosnian civil war. Sadly, as Sacco and the rest of the world would soon discover, "safe" is a relative term under such circumstances, further proof that, if truth is the first casualty of war, the commonplace meaning of our very language is the second thing sacrificed upon the bloody altar of Mars.

Thankfully, reporters like Sacco combat that lack of clarity. And while it's true that he can find no workable solutions to the terrible situations he encounters personally or learns of second-hand from survivors and witnesses, the fact is that's not his job.

His job is to report what he and others experienced in an effective manner. Sacco's nuanced dialogue and ability to depict emotion with his lush brushwork provides real insight into the true human costs of warfare, delineating the toll that all violence exacts from what it touches.

The rest of the job, standing up to violence in all of its forms, is up to the rest of the world.

BILL BAKER (November / December 2010)

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