FALLUJA

ColdType

APRIL 17 2004

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WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD
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The Author

JO WILDING is a 29-year-old activist, writer and trainee lawyer from Bristol, UK. She first went to Iraq in August 2001 with Voices in the Wilderness to break the sanctions as an act of civil disobedience and to get a perspective on what was happening for the purpose of advocacy work in the UK. In November 2002 she forced the UK Customs and Excise to take her to court for breaking the sanctions. It was the first time the legality of the sanctions had been considered directly by a British court.

She returned to Iraq as an independent observer in February 2003 and stayed for the month before the war and the first 11 days of the bombing, before being expelled by the Iraqi foreign ministry as part of a purge of independent foreigners.

Her writing about the situation for ordinary people in Iraq was published around the world: the Guardian online, the New Zealand Herald, Counterpunch (US and internet), Australian radio and in Japan, Korea and Pakistan.

Before going to Iraq, she worked as a mental health advocate for Bristol Mind and in the Immigration Department at Bristol Law Centre, as well as studying part time for a law diploma. She completed the diploma in June 2003 and will start studying for bar qualification in September 2004.

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Sergeant Tratner of the First Armoured Division is irritated. "Git back or you'll git killed," are his opening words. Lee says we're press, and the sergeant looks with disdain at the car. "In this piece of shit?" Makes us less of a target for kidnappers, Lee tells him. Suddenly he decides he recognises Lee from the TV. Based in Germany, he watches the BBC. He sees Lee on TV all the time. "Cool. Hey, can I have your autograph?"

Lee makes a scribble, unsure who he's meant to be but happy to have a ticket through the checkpoint from which all the cars before us have been turned back, and Sergeant Tratner carries on. "You guys be careful in Falluja. We're killing loads of those folks." Detecting a lack of admiration on our part, he adds, "Well, they're killing us, too. I like Falluja. I killed a bunch of them motherfuckers."

I wish Sergeant Tratner were a caricature, a stereotype, but these are all direct quotations. We fiddle with our hijabs in the roasting heat. "You don't have to wear those things any more," he says. "You're liberated now." He laughs. I mention that more and more women are wearing hijabs nowadays because of increasing attacks on them.

A convoy of aid vehicles flying Red Crescent flags approaches the checkpoint, hesitating. "We don't like to encourage them," Sergeant Tratner explains, his tongue loosened by the excitement of finding someone to talk to. "Jeez it's good to meet someone that speaks English. Well, apart from 'Mister' and 'please' and 'why'."

"Haven't you got translators?" someone asks him.

Sergeant Tratner points his rifle in the direction of the lead vehicle in the convoy. "I got the best translator in the world," he says. One ambulance comes through with us, the rest turn back. There are loads of supplies when we get to Falluja – food, water, medicine – at the clinic and the mosque which have come in on the back roads. The relief effort for the people there has been enormous, but the hospital is in the US-held part of town, cut off from the clinic by sniper fire. They can't get any of the relief supplies in to the hospital nor the injured people out.

We load the ambulance with disinfectant, needles, bandages, food and

water and set off, equipped this time with loudspeakers, pull up to a street corner and get out. The hospital is to the right, quite a way off; the marines are to the left. Four of us in blue paper smocks walk out, hands up, calling out that we're a relief team, trying to deliver supplies to the hospital.

There's no response and we walk slowly towards the hospital. We need the ambulance with us because there's more stuff than we can carry, so we call out that we're going to bring an ambulance with us, that we'll walk and the ambulance will follow. The nose of the ambulance edges out into the street, shiny and new, brought in to replace the ones destroyed by sniper fire.

Shots rip down the street, two bangs and a zipping noise uncomfortably close. The ambulance springs back into the side road like it's on a piece of elastic and we dart into the yard of the corner house, out through the side gate so we're back beside the vehicle. This time we walk away from the hospital towards the marines, just us and the loudspeaker, no ambulance, to try and talk to them properly. Slowly, slowly, we take steps, shouting that we're unarmed, that we're a relief team, that we're trying to get supplies to the hospital.

Another two shots dissuade us. I'm furious. From behind the wall I inform them that their actions are in breach of the Geneva Conventions.

"How would you feel if it was your sister in that hospital unable to get treated because some man with a gun wouldn't let the medical supplies through?" David takes me away as I'm about to call down a plague of warts on their trigger fingers.

Because it's the most urgent thing to do, we waste the rest of the precious daylight trying to find someone in authority that we can sort it out with. As darkness starts I'm still fuming and the hospital is still without disinfectant. We go into the house behind the clinic and the smell of death chokes me: the dried blood and the putrefying flesh evoking the memory of a few days earlier, sitting in the back of an ambulance with the rotting bodies and the flies.

The aerial bombardment starts with the night and we stand outside watching the explosions and the flames. No one can quite recall whether it's a theoretical cease-fire or not. Someone brings the remains of a rocket, unravelled into metal and wires, a fuel canister inside it, and it sits like a space alien on display on a piece of cloth on the pavement near the clinic while everyone gives it stares and a wide berth.

Someone comes round to give us a report: the Mujahedin have shot down a helicopter and killed fifteen enemy soldiers. During the evening's street fighting twelve American soldiers have been killed. Six hundred

were killed in an attack on their base but he can't tell us how, where or when. He says thousands of US soldiers' bodies have been dumped in the desert near Rutba, further east. I don't doubt that the US is under reporting its casualties whenever it thinks it can get away with it but I suspect some over reporting this time. Someone whispers that he's the cousin of 'Comical Ali', the old Minister of Information. It's not true but it ought to be.

The cacophony of planes and explosions goes on through the night. I wake from my doze certain that rockets are being fired from the garden outside our room. Rhythmic, deep, resonating, the barrage goes on and the fear spreads in my belly anticipating an explosion from the air to stop the rocketer. I can't keep still and wait for it so I go outside and realise he's at least a couple of streets away.

The noise quietens as if soothed by a song of prayer from the mosque. Someone says that it's a plea to stop shooting. I don't know if it's true, but every time I hear different songs from the minaret I wonder what it means, whether it's a call to prayer, a call to arms, something else, maybe just someone singing the town back to sleep.

In the morning, the cease-fire negotiations begin again, centred, like everything else, in one of the local mosques. For eight days, people say, the

US army has fought for control of a town of 350,000 people and now, with the fighters still armed in the street, they're trying to negotiate the terms of a cease-fire.

A body arrives at the hospital, a wound to the leg and his throat sliced open. The men say he was lying injured in the street and the marines came and slit his throat. A pick up races up and a man is pulled out with most of his arm missing, a stump with bits sticking out, pouring blood. He bleeds to death.

Two French journalists have been admitted to the town, under the protection of the mosque, and for their benefit the body is swaddled head to foot in bandages, carried to a van with no back doors and driven away by two boys including Aodeh, one of the twin boys we met on the first trip. Earlier a little girl was brought out, a polka dotted black headscarf around her face, pink T shirt under a black sleeveless cardigan with jeans, sparkly bobbles on her gloves, holding a Kalashnikov.

She was clean, her clothes were fresh and she was very cute, eleven years old, and after the photo one of the men, her father I think, took her away as if her job was done. I hope and believe she was only being used as a poster child, that she wasn't really involved in the fighting. She's no younger than the lad from the other day who I know is involved in the

fighting, but I wish he wasn't either. While we wait, we chat with the sheikh in the mosque. He says the hospitals have recorded 1200 casualties, between 5-600 people dead in the first five days of fighting and eighty-six children killed in the first three days of fighting. There's no knowing how many have been hurt or killed in areas held by the US. A heavily pregnant woman was killed by a missile, her unborn child saved, the sheikh says, but already orphaned.

"Falluja people like peace but after we were attacked by the US they lost all their friends here. We had a few trained officers and soldiers from the old army, but now everyone has joined the effort. Not all of the men are fighting: some left with their families, some work in the clinics or move supplies or go in the negotiating teams. We are willing to fight until the last minute, even if it takes a hundred years."

He says the official figure is 25% of the town controlled by the marines: "This is made up of small parts, a bit in the north east, a bit in the south east, the part around the entrance to the town, controlled with snipers and light vehicles." The new unity between Shia and Sunni pleases him: "Falluja is Iraq and Iraq is Falluja. We received a delegation from all the governorates of Iraq to give aid and solidarity."

The ceasefire takes effect from 9am. Those with vehicles are loading stuff

from the storage building opposite the mosque and moving it around the town. The opening up of the way to the hospital is one of the terms of the deal, so we're not really needed anymore. As well it's starting to feel like there are different agendas being pursued that we could all too easily get caught up in, other people's politics and power struggles, so we decide to leave.

At the corner of town is a fork, a paved road curving round in front of the last of the houses, a track leading into the desert, the latter controlled by the marines, who fire a warning shot when our driver gets out to negotiate a way through; the former by as yet invisible Mujahedin. The crossfire suddenly surrounds the car. David, head down, shifts into the driver's seat and backs us out of there but the only place to go is into the line of Mujahedin. One of the fighters jumps into the passenger seat and directs us.

"We're hostages, aren't we?" Billie says. No, it's fine, I say, sure that they're just directing us out of harm's way. The man in the passenger seat asks which country we're all from. Donna says she's Australian. Billie says she's British.

"Allahu akbar! Ahlan wa sahlan." Translated, it's more or less, God is great. I'm pleased to meet you. The others don't know the words but the

drift is clear enough: “I think he just said he’s got the two most valuable hostages in the world,” Billie paraphrases.

We get out of the car, which in any case feels a bit uncomfortable now there’s a man with a keffiyeh round his head pointing a loaded rocket launcher at it. They bring a jeep and as I climb in I can’t help noticing that the driver has a grenade between his legs. I’m sure it’s intended for the Americans, not for us, but nonetheless it’s clear there’s no room for dissent.

Still, it’s not till we turn off the road back to the mosque and stop at a house, not until David and the other men are being searched, not really until a couple of the fighters take off their keffiyehs to tie the men’s hands behind their backs, that I accept that I’m definitely a captive.

You look for ways out. You wonder whether they’re going to kill you, make demands for your release, if they’ll hurt you. You wait for the knives and the guns and the video camera. You tell yourself you’re going to be OK. You think about your family, your mum finding out you’re kidnapped. You decide you’re going to be strong, because there’s nothing else you can do. You fight the understanding that your life isn’t fully in your hands any more, that you can’t control what’s happening. You turn to your best friend next to you and tell her you love her, with all your heart.

And then I’m put in a different car from her and I can only hope they

take us to the same place and try in vain to notice where we're going, recognise some landmarks, but the truth is that I'm without any sense of direction at all and have trouble remembering left from right, even on a good day, but in any case there's no one on the streets but fighters, nowhere to hide.

Donna, Billie, David, Ahrar and I are delivered to another house, cushions around the walls of a big room, a bed at one end of the room beside a cabinet of crockery and ornaments. A tall, dignified man in a brown keffiyeh sits and begins interviewing Donna, her name, where she's from, what she does there, what she's doing in Iraq, why she came to Falluja.

He decides to separate us, has the others move me, David and Billie into the next room under the guard of a man in jeans too loose for his skinny body, trainers and a shirt, his face covered except for his eyes. It's not much to go on but I doubt he's beyond late teens, a little nervous, calmed by our calmness. After a while he decides he shouldn't let us talk to each other, signals for silence.

Billie's not well, hot and sick. She lies down on the cushions, head on her arm. The fighter brings a pillow and gently lifts her head onto it, takes all the stuff off the cushions so he can fold the blanket over her. The other one brings a cotton sheet and unfolds the blanket, covers her with the sheet

and then replaces the blanket around her: tucked in by the Mujahedin. It's my turn next for questioning. I feel OK. All I can tell him is the truth. He wants to know the same things: where I live, what I'm doing in Iraq, what I'm doing in Falluja, so I tell him about the circus, about the ambulance trips, about the snipers shooting at us. Then he asks what the British people think about the war. I'm not sure what the right answer is. I don't know what the national opinion is these days. I try to compute what's least likely to make him think it's worth keeping me.

If people oppose the occupation, he says, how is it that the government could carry on and do it. He's genuinely interested but also sarcastic: surely the great liberators must be truly democratic, truly governing by the will of the people? Instead of the extended version of Jo's rant about the UK constitution he starts asking about Billie. I know what her answers will be so it's easy. I dodge the issue when he moves on to David and hope he won't press me. I don't know him very well, I say, because I don't know if he wants to mention that he's also a journalist. I tell the man I've just met him. I just know him as Martinez.

He thanks me and we're done. David's next. Donna, Billie and I talk quietly about the interviews and the boy guarding us doesn't object. Someone asks if we want chai. Warm giggles come from the kitchen;

maybe the two young men imagining that their mates could see them now, masked, Kalashnikov-wielding, brewing tea for a load of women.

David's interview is short and when I come back from the outside toilet, still alert for an escape route, as improbable as I know it is, the others are all back in the main room again and the tea is ready. Billie's bag comes in to be fished through, a camera, a minidisc recorder. The man goes through the pictures on the camera, the missile outside the clinic and a few from Baghdad, listens to the interview with the Sheikh on the minidisc.

Donna's camera has similar pictures of the missile, some of the street kids, some from around the flat. The tape in the video camera is from the opening of the new youth centre in Al-Daura, backing up her testimony that she's the director of an organisation which sets up projects for kids. The other tape contains a performance by the Boomchucka Circus, backing up mine that I'm a clown.

No one brings in my bag or David's. I think it's best not to mention this, in case there's anything to offend them in either of them. In particular I think it's best they don't notice anyone's passport in case it encourages them to look for all our passports because Billie's contains a stamp from Israel. It's from when she was working in Palestine but it's better not to spark the suspicion in the first place. Ahrar, the questioning over, is close

to hysterical. She's more frightened of her family's reaction to her having been out all the previous night than of the armed men holding us. We cuddle and stroke and pacify her as best we can, tell her we'll tell her family it wasn't her fault. The trouble was that, by the time we left Baghdad to come here, it was already too late for her to get home the same evening, and now she's afraid it's going to be a second night.

I quietly start singing, unsure whether that's allowed. The others join in where they know the words. By the end of the song her sobs have stopped and her only word is, "Continue," so we do, song after song until the prayer call begins and it's impolite to sing at the same time.

Ahrar gets tearful again. Donna tries to comfort her. "I have a big faith in God," she says. "Yes, but you don't know Mama," Ahrar wails.

Before the war and before we came to Falluja the first time I remember feeling that it's impossible to know how you'll react to something like being under fire. I couldn't have imagined either how I'd react to this, this unpredictable situation, these masked and armed men, the fear, the uncertainty. Repeatedly they tell us not to be afraid, "We are Moslems. We will not hurt you."

Still my instinct tells me I'm going to be OK. Still my mind wanders to the question of whether they'll shoot us against a wall or just open fire in

the room, whether they'll take us out one by one or we'll all be killed together, whether they'll save the bullets and cut our throats, how long it hurts for when you're shot, if it's instantly over or if there's some echo of the agony of the metal ripping through your flesh after your life is gone.

I don't need those thoughts and I push them out of my way because I know the others are going through the same thoughts: what's this going to do to my mum? What's going to happen? What's it going to feel like? It wouldn't be fair to mention it aloud so there's be nothing to do but sit and stew with it and there's nothing we can do about this situation but wait it out and keep our heads together.

But what I tell myself is this: I can't change the course of this at the moment and if they do point a rifle at me or hold a knife to my throat and I know it's the last moment of my life then for sure there's nothing I can do then I'm determined not to beg or flinch because I was right to come to Falluja and to try to evacuate people and get supplies to the hospitals and to die for trying to do that isn't ideal but it's OK.

They bring our bags in and I make a hanky disappear. The guard, a different one now, is unimpressed. It's black magic. It's haram [sinful]. It's an affront to Allah. Oops. I show him the secret of the trick in the hope he'll let me off. Instead I make a balloon giraffe for his kids, who he's taken away

to the safety of Baghdad.

"My brother was killed and my brother's son and my sister's son. My other brother is in the prison at Abu Ghraib. I am the last one left. Can you imagine? And this morning my best friend was killed. He was wounded in the leg and lying in the street and the Americans came and cut his throat."

That was the one who came into the hospital this morning. Oh shit. Why wouldn't they kill us?

But the day goes by and we carry on breathing, dozing, talking. They bring food, apologise for not bringing more, promise again that they're not going to hurt us. As it gets dark, behind the windows partly blocked by sandbags, they light a paraffin lamp. The room gets hotter and hotter and it's a relief when they take us out to the car to move again, although change feels somehow threatening at the same time.

The new house is huge, with electricity. The four women are shown to a room and David has to stay in the main room with the men. This was his biggest fear all along, being separated from the rest of us. We take off the hijabs that we've kept on all day. One of the men knocks on the door and, looking at the ground, tells us they've checked everything and, Inshaa Allah, we'll be taken back to Baghdad in the morning. They can't let us go now because we'll be kidnapped by some other group. They feed us, bring

us tea, supply us with blankets and we find pretexts and excuses to nip through the main room to check on David, bringing him half an orange, a chunk of chocolate, so he knows we're still thinking of him. He's more vulnerable than us because we've got each other to laugh and sing and talk with. Everything that's happened, although you can never be sure, says they're not going to hurt women. David's not so comfortable.

The night is filled with the racket of what sounds like a huge dodgy plumbing system somewhere beyond the house, a rhythmic series of explosions in quick succession like an immense grinding noise: apparently it's the sound of cluster bombs. Billie and I hold each other's hands all night because we can. In the morning there's still a knot of doubt in my belly. They said they'd take us home after the morning prayers, more or less at first light, and it's been light for ages. Maybe they just told us we'd be released to keep us calm and quiet.

But they do let us go: they take us to one of the local imams who says he will drive us home. At the edge of Falluja is a queue of vehicles, some already turning back from the checkpoint. The passengers say the US soldiers fired as they approached. We get out of the car, hijabs off, and start the whole rigmarole again, loudspeaker, hands up, through the maze of concrete and wire, shouting that we're an international group of ambu-

lance volunteers trying to leave Falluja, we're unarmed and please don't shoot us.

Eventually we can see the soldiers; eventually they lower the guns, tell us to put our hands down, they're not going to shoot us. "My bad," one says. Apparently it's US slang for acknowledging your own mistake. "We're not going to fire any more warning shots." We tell them we've got two cars to bring through and ask about the rest of the cars. They agree to open up the checkpoint to women, children and old men. The trouble is, most of the women don't drive and so can't leave unless their husbands are allowed to drive them. We persuade them to let through cars with a male driver even if he is 'of fighting age, if he's got his family with him.

The fear in Falluja is that, when most of the women and children are gone, the town is going to be destroyed and everyone killed, by massive aerial bombardment or with a thermobaric weapon or something. Ahrar tries to explain that the men who want to leave are the ones who don't want to fight.

"Oh, we want to keep them in there," the marine says. "There's fighters coming from all over Iraq into Falluja and we want to keep them all in there so we can kill them all more easily." But these are the ones who want to get out, those of the locals who don't want to fight. It doesn't matter

though: we've got all we're going to get out of them. We tell the crowd of anxious refugees and leave another local imam as the go-between. The road is quiet but for our small convoy until another roadblock. The imam talks to some locals, tells Ahrar there are Americans ahead. Hijabs off again, we heave ourselves out of the car for another round.

In the sickly, hot silence there are a few cracks but no responses to our shouts. Dust erupts from a house a way off and we wonder if we're walking into a battle. Shouting in English, trying to be as obviously foreign as possible is the only tactic for walking into marines' lines but it's a bit of a risk when the lines are not clear. We keep yelling for them to give us a wave if they can hear us. There's no response.

"Wait a minute," David says. "Are those marines or are they Muja?"

Oh shit. Tell us we're not walking into a Mujahedin line. We hesitate. Maybe we need to go back to the car and get the imam to come instead.

"No, I think it's OK. I think they're marines."

"Decide! Tell us!" As if he's got any more information than the rest of us.

The men we can see start gesturing, big arm movements, pointing to their left, our right, go towards the bridge. It's a signal, which we've been asking for, but it doesn't mean they're not another group of kidnappers. Finally one yells. They're green berets, which is why they didn't quite look

like the marines we'd got used to. Billie and I go back towards the cars to signal for them to come. No one fancies walking the aching gap between us and them again, but for time and time and time the cars don't move, despite our arm waving, my roaring through the megaphone. Finally they shift and we scurry back into the relative cover of the bushes around the bridge.

"Are you crazy?" asks one of the soldiers.

I feel a bit closer to insanity than I did before that walk into the unknown, I have to confess, as mortars thunder out of their encampment. He tells me not to worry, they're outgoing. Of course there's some comfort in this. An outgoing mortar is preferable in many ways to an incoming one, but it seems at the same time like a bit of an invitation, RSVP written all over it.

Past them, the second car leaves us. David hugs the driver like he'd just brought him back from the dead and joins us in our car. There's still Abu Ghraib, still Shuala, still who knows what between us and home. Ahrar wants to stop and phone her mum from a roadside booth in the middle of Shuala and even the imam is looking panicky as the call drags on, his carload of foreigners just sitting waiting for someone to notice us. Exhausted and exhibiting the early symptoms of tetchiness, we drag her

back to the car and escape.

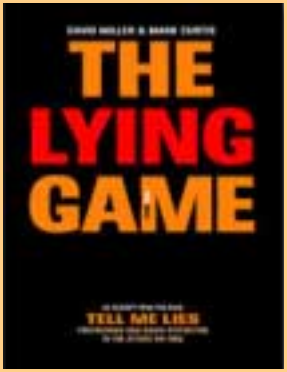
It's only when we walk through the door of our apartment that we're sure we're coming home, all of us yelling and talking at once, telling the story, laughing over the surreal moments, hugging each other, retrieving hidden passports from underwear.

"We're laughing about it now," Billie says, "but there were moments …"

On the news they say Nayoko and the other Japanese hostages have been released, that Watanabi, the Japanese photographer who hung out with us when we took the circus to Samawa, has disappeared with a colleague. They say the cease-fire is holding in Falluja. Harb comes round to tell me off, but I'm unrepentant. I still think it was the right thing to do.

They took us because we were foreigners acting strangely in the middle of their war. They found out what we were doing and let us go. On the way out we were able to open up the checkpoint which meant people were able to get out of Falluja to safety. If that was all we did it would still have been worth it. But still in a quiet moment later on I whisper a thank you to the cheeky angels who look after clowns and ambulance volunteers.

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD



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