

The Zanzibar Chest – A Memoir of Love and War by Aidan Hartley.  
Harper Collins 2003.

This is a multi-layered story, as beautifully crafted and as intricate as a Chinese ivory ball within a ball. The scion of classic British colonial stock, Aidan Hartley tells the story of his parents, particularly that of his father, an heroic larger than life man who bestrode the lands of Africa and Southern Arabia like the proverbial colossus, and of his own upbringing in Africa and Britain.

Interwoven in this is the tale of his father's closest friend, Peter Davey, whose footsteps Hartley sets out to retrace and the precise circumstances of whose violent death he endeavours to discover.

But at the heart of this stunning memoir is Hartley's own experience as a Reuter's journalist covering conflict and war, most especially in Somalia and Rwanda. For those of us who recall the horror of the disintegration of Somalia and the troubled involvement of the United Nations and United States forces in that benighted country, Hartley's intimate knowledge and close connection with the events and people that splashed across our newspapers and television screens renders the details more terrible and crushing in their arbitrariness and cruelty. His descriptions of Rwanda after the civil war, and the sights he witnessed, are almost unbearable and impossible to forget, and his writing is reminiscent of the descriptions of the Nazi massacres at Babi Yar in Kiev written by Anatoly Kuznetzov.

Aidan Hartley writes with disarming frankness about the life of frontline correspondents, and the ways in which these men and women compensate for the sights and experiences that fill their working lives. He writes poignantly too of the sacrifice that many make – including the ultimate sacrifice – to get the story in all its detail and transmit it to us through whatever news medium for which they work.

All of us who are avid followers of current affairs should read this book; it is eloquent testimony to the amoral cynicism of international politics; the interference in other countries by Western powers pursuing their own ends; the innate goodness, and wickedness of human beings, and the torment engendered in the hearts of journalists from whose professionalism we all benefit in ignorance of the price they pay.

Aidan Hartley is now happily married and living in Kenya with his wife and two children. I hope he has found the peace he deserves. His beloved father, were he alive to read The Zanzibar Chest, should be very proud of him.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh