

Between Mountains by Maggie Helwig.  
Chatto and Windus 2004.

Few of us will easily forget the terrible wars that ripped apart the former Yugoslavia and brought back medieval brutality onto the streets of Western Europe for the first time since the Second World War.

Between Mountains is a moving and powerful first novel set against the backdrop of these events, both during and after them. Its main protagonists are a Canadian journalist based in Bosnia and a Serbian-French interpreter, working at the war crimes tribunal in The Hague.

The tortuous and pain-filled path of their relationship and their lives in general echoes those of Bosnia and the other former Yugoslavian republics as they imploded under cynical nationalism. Daniel, the journalist, stayed in Sarajevo during the siege and, though, irredeemably damaged by his experiences returns to the region as to an addictive drug. Lili, the interpreter, has to balance her private feelings against the professional career that she has worked so hard to build up, as well as wrestling with demons from her childhood.

This is not a long book but it is as intricate and beautifully crafted as a Chinese puzzle ball and extremely powerful. It would also make a superb film, provided it was directed by a Frenchman!

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh