

Blood and Sand by Frank Gardner. Bantam Press 2006.

I liked Frank Gardner from the first time I saw him on BBC News. He was calm, authoritative, wholly credible and seemed a thoroughly decent person. When the news of his shooting in Saudi Arabia in June 2004 broke I was horrified, and searched for news of his welfare for weeks afterwards. When the news of his recovery was aired, and especially when he spoke on the radio, I was hugely relieved, though appalled when I discovered the extent of his injuries. I am sure that many thousands of people shared my emotions.

Blood and Sand is an autobiography of rare quality, and it exhibits a sense of self-effacement that is all too rare when someone is writing about themselves! Frank Gardner tells the story of his life, and especially his journey into journalism, and the particular specialism for which he became famous and much-respected, with humility, and in the most engaging and readable way.

But at the centre of the story is the episode in 2004 which cost the life of his cameraman Simon Cumbers and almost Frank's own; Gardner writes about the incident and its aftermath in minute and occasionally stomach-twisting detail, and he never shies away from expressing his anger at the men who tried to kill him, and succeeded in killing his colleague. He rages against the mindless nihilism of the act, and what it cost him, his parents, his wife and children and Simon Cumbers' family, and he is entitled to do so.

But though Frank is angry he does not seem to be bitter, and his courage in returning to work is described in a quiet, non-self-congratulatory way, even though the response to it from colleagues and viewers was nothing less than ecstatic.

You may well finish Blood and Sand, especially the afterword and acknowledgements, in tears, as I did. But when the immediate emotion is ended you will be left with several lasting impressions; of huge respect for the author of an excellent autobiography, of sad disbelief at the way fundamentalist, nihilistic Muslims hate Westerners to a degree that they would kill even those who understand and explain them best, and of admiration for a true professional and all-round *mensch*.

This is the best autobiography of 2006 by far.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh