

Contact Wounds - A War Surgeon's Education by Jonathan Kaplan.
Picador 2006.

Contact Wounds is an honest and honourable autobiographical account of the life of a man of courage and integrity.

Jonathan Kaplan tells his story from its start in South Africa to his time in Israel as a volunteer just after the 6 Day War of 1967 to his training as a doctor and specialism in medicine: leaving South Africa to avoid military service Kaplan travelled before fetching up in Angola at the height of its civil war. His hospital service in such a gruesome and gruelling context seems to have given him the habit and subsequent mission to pursue his vocation in some of the world's most dangerous and bloody places.

Kaplan comes across as a brave, honest, occasionally arrogant person, loving and loyal to his parents - his father was also a surgeon - and abidingly committed to his patients. Towards the end of the book the emotional damage that his exposure to the multiple horrors of war has done, and his almost addict-like attraction to them, is readily apparent, and one wonders whether he - like war correspondents such as Janine Di Giovanni - can ever truly know peace after what they have seen.

Reading Contact Wounds I was reminded of Clea Koff's excellent memoir The Bone Woman, which was similarly grim but equally uplifting and admirable. On concluding this extraordinary memoir it is beyond question that the world is sustained by men like Jonathan Kaplan, and a great deal better because of his presence in it.

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