

The Collaborator by Mirza Waheed.
Viking 2011.

The Collaborator takes the reader to Kashmir, particularly that part of Indian Kashmir that borders Pakistani-controlled Kashmir along the so-called Line of Control.

The struggle in Kashmir, which has brought India and Pakistan to the brink of nuclear war on more than one occasion, is played out largely beyond the ken of the West, obsessed as we are with Afghanistan and, to a slightly lesser extent, Pakistan. But it is a bloody and brutal conflict and one that plays a significant part in the militancy of many young Muslims, both in the Indian sub-continent and elsewhere.

The Collaborator tells the story of a young Kashmiri Muslim, son of a tribal headman, who is paid by the Indian army to rifle through the bodies of Islamist infiltrators and freedom fighters who have been gunned down while crossing the line of control. It is a brutal and debilitating task, which saps his energies and poisons his mind; at home his village gradually disintegrates around him as the villagers desert to move somewhere more congenial following clashes between former townspeople and the Indian army.

The Collaborator is written so well that it is possible for the reader to see the village, smell the corpses, smell the sweat of the Collaborator's alcoholic Indian controller and feel the despair that is induced by the work that he does. This is also a story about friendship, and the strains that are put on it by external events, as well as the compromises that need to be made to survive.

The Collaborator, together with other novels about Kashmir, is a powerful reminder of a desperate running sore, the source of perennial trouble and tension between two powerful nations and a tragedy for those on both sides of the Line of Control whose lives, livelihoods and culture have been steadily destroyed.

This is a superb and haunting story.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh