

# This Is The Place To Be by Lara Pawson

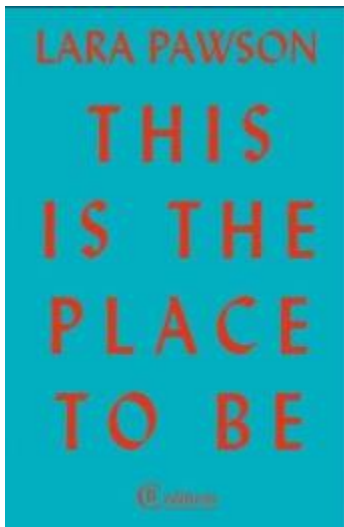
CB editions, 2016

## **An eye-witness account of life in a war zone**

How do you make the indescribable real to those who have never witnessed it? From dining with ambassadors to negotiating with armed guards, this uniquely revealing memoir provides a vivid insight into civil war in Africa from a very personal perspective. Written by a former war correspondent, *This Is The Place To Be* is a series of interwoven anecdotes and intimate snapshots of life in war-torn Angola and Ivory Coast; some funny, many unsettling, all written in a natural, spontaneous style.

*'I hate the way the news plasters over the rough edges of truth.'*

This is a fragmented account reflecting the chaos of war. The crossover between war and peace is explored, as some semblance of routine is maintained in a warzone whilst violence can and does erupt in times of peace. The writer, Lara Pawson, is like a voyeur witnessing both joyful and horrific moments in other people's lives while trying to make sense of her own. Fierce yet compassionate, her strong connection with the African nations she reported from emanates from every page. Having built cross-cultural relationships, she analyses the impact of the people who have entered her life and their imprint on her memory. We witness war's continuing effect upon her in present-day London as past incidents resurface, revealing the parallels that are present in life even under starkly different circumstances.



The reliability of the mainstream media is called into question and Pawson is open in her struggle to capture the whole story. Having previously worked for the BBC, she describes how she became cynical about the nature of journalism as the news is presented as a revelation of facts when in reality there is often no such certainty.

Uncomfortable truths about the UK are brought to the surface, exposing how little its citizens really know due to the media's ability to manipulate events. Her experience has obviously instilled in her the desire to communicate clearly and directly but her frustration is evident as it is simply not always possible to persuade people of the truth as you know it. Everything is open to interpretation.

Such an honest approach could potentially alienate the reader at times and it is inevitably not always easy to empathise. Declaring that she is 'no good at lying', at one point she even admits to feeling excitement at seeing children scurrying to hide from incoming shells. There is both an abhorrence of and exhilaration for the dangers involved in her job and she sometimes seems brave verging on reckless, expressing a certain thrill at coming close to death.

As a white, British woman in a male dominated role, Pawson describes her own internal battle for identity, exploring gender and race as concepts which can unite and divide and occasionally succumbing to the pressure society places on women to conform to ideals of femininity. She lunches with a governor who is 'generous and gentle' to her but later turns out to be a key perpetrator in a violent purge.

*'I'd been advised that it was worth showing powerful men a bit of leg.'*

This is an explosive book encapsulating the innovation characteristics of the contemporary small press scene. Despite her assertion that 'I don't feel brave, I feel angry,' Pawson demonstrates a courageous lack of self-censure and an unflinching desire to reveal all in this intensely powerful and compelling read.

*'Although I have come to understand that the violence of war affects families for generations, I continue to fear the apathy produced by peace.'*

## **About the publisher**

CB editions specialises in short fiction, poetry, translations and other work of value with a distinctive message. It is run solely by Charles Boyle and publishes unique new titles by brave and talented voices. The Guardian describes it as having 'the air of a guerrilla operation...great sincerity, good faith and almost quixotic single-mindedness.'

## **About the reviewer**

Becky Danks is an avid reader, creative writer, dog lover, poet and reviewer of books. Amongst other things.