

Brilliant War Journalist / Chaotic Private Life

In Extremis: The Life and Death of the War Correspondent Marie Colvin

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Few journalism students long to be copy editors. Nellie Bly, Ida B. Wells, Hunter S. Thompson: most students want to be a ground-breaking, truth-teller famous for being feisty, unorthodox, and brave. Marie Colvin (1956–2012), the most famous war correspondent of our time, had all of these qualities. Vivacious, bright, and fun, she was a rule-breaker, a chance-taker, and a dedicated partier. Colvin is who many journalism students aspire to be.

Colvin's life was filled with paradoxes. For twenty-five years she delicately worked her way in and out of combat zones but was incapable of using technology and had no sense of direction. She wanted to create a secure, loving home for herself, but was unable to make that happen. She lived and vacationed in some of the world's most glamorous cities but felt distinctly at home on the battleground.

In the hands of the wrong biographer Colvin would become a myth. Fortunately, *In Extremis: The Life and Death of the War Correspondent Marie Colvin* is written by Lindsey Hilsum. The international editor for Britain's Channel 4 News, as well as a friend and colleague of Colvin's, Hilsum is clear-eyed and anti-hype. Her first biography is dispassionate, nuanced, and anchored in facts. The writing is clear, precise, and historically sound. At its best it is artful, one literary journalist writing about another, as Hilsum explores the many reasons to admire Colvin and grimmer truths that a mythmaker might choose to ignore. What emerges is the compelling story of a brilliant journalist. It is also a cautionary tale.

Marie Colvin was born into an Irish Catholic family in the safe, quiet town of Oyster Bay, Long Island, a suburb of New York. Her ex-marine father was a high school English teacher, her mother a guidance counselor. Colvin thought Oyster Bay boring, but she did learn to sail. All her life she loved to sail, and the worse the weather the better. She thrilled to the danger and rush.

At Yale she signed up for a writing course with *Hiroshima* author John Hersey. By the end of the first class she had decided that this was the kind of journalism she wanted to do. Her father, who had died shortly before, and with whom she had a conflicted relationship, had had "frustrated dreams of writing." In that first Hersey class, Hilsum says, Colvin, at twenty, "realized she didn't just *want* to become a journalist; she *had* to" (35, emphasis in original).



After stops at United Press International desks in New Jersey, Washington, and Paris, she was ready for riskier challenges. Colvin became a war correspondent, traveling to the Middle East, Timor, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, North Africa, the Balkans, and, finally, Syria.

Literary journalists and literary journalism scholars will note that throughout *In Extremis*, Hilsun brings anecdotes alive with dialogue and sensory details. When Colvin first met Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, Hilsun writes,

The summons came at 3:00 a.m. . . . She noticed that Gaddafi was wearing French cologne. At the end of the interview, during which he said he was ready to hit U.S. targets anywhere in the world and described the conflict between the United States and Libya as being like the Crusades, he put his hand on her thigh and asked if he could see her again, as this if this were a date.

“Why don’t you call me?” Marie said.

A few days later, an aide did just that, and Gaddafi came on the line to say he wanted to speak to her again. This time the meeting was a little weirder, and more menacing. When she arrived at the bunker, a white dress and a pair of little green shoes had been laid out for her on a chair. She refused to put them on, saying they were too small. Gaddafi strolled in, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket. (73–74)

As Colvin gained experience and confidence, her writing evolved to focus on ordinary people, often innocents caught up in ghastly circumstances. In 1999 she wrote, “The human body, when burnt, is reduced to an almost childlike size. It is a horrible piece of knowledge that comes from reporting from Kosovo. In house after house, village after village, I have seen those bodies, so small that it seems they must be those of children, yet they are not” (184).

That same year Colvin was in Timor, in a civilian compound about to be abandoned by the United Nations, with a horrible attack by the Indonesian army looming. “Reporters and mainstream media left with the bulk of international UN staff and the local employees,” Hilsun writes. “As the last truck trundled away, Marie called [her editor] He asked who among the journalists had remained, and she explained that it was just Irena, Minka, and she.

“Where are the men?” Sean asked.

“They’ve gone,” Marie replied and, without missing a beat, added, “I guess they don’t make men like they used to” (192).

Colvin was funny, articulate, and attractive, and people were drawn to her. Yet even while her career star was rising, her personal life was often a shambles. She longed for a home, children, and a loving partner, to return from her escapades to solid family life. Instead she moved through a long series of relationships, almost all of which her friends knew were doomed. She fought bitterly with former and current partners, and she suffered two miscarriages after she was forty. Her last lover, an international playboy, was an especially poor choice.

And so, comes the realization, obvious when it is finally revealed, that Colvin, like so many war correspondents, suffered from PTSD. She was diagnosed in 2004, three years after losing an eye in Sri Lanka. (She wore a special eyepatch with rhine-

stones to parties.) Shrapnel from that grenade attack remained in her face and chest. Her final years were poisoned by nightmares, insomnia, and a failing ability to make good choices. The drinking, always legendary, began to start at breakfast. (The number of pages that mention her drinking come to forty-four, almost one in eight.) Her life was unraveling, leading to a final tragedy.

As so often, Hilsum offers concise insight. “Marie was easy to love and hard to help,” she says. “Marie reacted to advice on drinking as she did to advice on relationships—she listened, brow furrowed, head to one side, and then ignored it” (275).

Not all was bleak. Colvin stayed close to several girlfriends, some for more than thirty years. She was also close to her youngest sister and stayed in touch with other members of the family.

Martha Gellhorn, another pioneering U.S. female journalist who settled in London, was fueled by anger at warlords, dictators, defense secretaries, and other “monsters” who, if journalists were not watching, “would get away with anything.” Colvin, while a great admirer of Gellhorn, was driven by empathy. She spoke of the importance of bearing witness, especially to the plight of helpless civilians. “Marie never practiced partisan journalism,” Hilsum says, “the kind that adopts a cause and reports only the facts that advance it. Having no ideology, she never flinched from reporting stories that cast a bad light on people for whom she had sympathy. She was simply drawn to the underdog. . . . For her, context mattered, but the experience of individuals in war, whether fighters or victims, was the essence of the story” (185).

Hilsum has said that she worries about contributing to the “myth” of Colvin and the glamorization of war correspondents. Indeed, after the book was published some students on Twitter gushed; in a *Financial Times* article one was quoted thanking Hilsum for “immortalising” Colvin. This says more about the comprehension skills of some youthful readers than it does about the book. Hilsum helps us understand the attraction, the deep seductive power of reporting on war. She also lets us feel and smell and taste how horrifying it actually is. *In Extremis* is inspiring, but it is also sobering and dark.

One final unfortunate decision led to Colvin’s death. She had been smuggled from Lebanon into Syria, to the city of Homs, and then to the neighborhood under siege by the Syrian army. She arrived, wrote a brilliant story, and got out of the neighborhood—which was expecting an all-out assault. Once out, however, she changed her mind. Without telling her editor, family, or boyfriend, she went back. The next day, thanks to an informant, the building was attacked. Colvin and a French photographer were killed running out of the building.

The last photo of Colvin ever taken, Hilsum says,

shows her, back to the camera, wearing her thick black jacket and jeans, hair pulled into a scrunchie. She is writing, the bright white of her notebook a contrast to the dun-colored debris of war in the ruined house around her: dirty, crumbling walls sprout tangled iron rods, pots and pans are scattered, a green blanket lies on the ground next to crumpled, rusting iron sheeting. It’s easy to imagine Marie in her final moments, rushing out of the shattered building in her warm, dark clothes, caught in flight in a freeze-frame, forever pushing forward, notebook in hand. (352)

Going to war zones and reporting first-hand is vital work, crucial to the journalistic mission of shining light in dark places. It can come at a terrible price to its courageous practitioners, one that is only starting to be fully appreciated. Like Gellhorn, Colvin's ashes were scattered in the Thames.

Too often our heroes turn out to be terribly complex people, brilliant and professionally accomplished, but living damaged and unhappy lives. So it is with Marie Colvin. Considered by skilled biographers, heroes come tumbling off their pedestals to shatter at our feet. Shall we blame our heroes? The biographers? It is, after all, we who build the pedestals.