

Friday Was the Bomb, by Nathan Deuel

reviewed by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [August 20, 2014](#) issue

In Review

FRIDAY WAS THE BOMB

FIVE YEARS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

NATHAN DEUEL



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By Nathan Deuel

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On Friday, October 19, 2012, a car bomb rocked central Beirut, killing a Lebanese intelligence official and two other people while injuring scores more. Against the background of a presidential campaign and the approach of Hurricane Sandy, the

story faded almost instantly from the awareness of even well-informed Americans. But it was a watershed for the once relatively peaceful city now on the doorstep of Syria's civil war, and it is the defining event in Nathan Deuel's collection of essays *Friday Was the Bomb*.

Deuel—a writer and the husband of NPR correspondent Kelly McEvers (as well as, I should note, a college friend of mine)—had bid farewell to a friend and fellow ex-pat when the bomb went off near where they'd just had lunch and near where the friend's family resides. Though Deuel and McEvers had lived for years amid the death and destruction in Riyadh, Baghdad, and Istanbul and had welcomed the birth of their daughter while living in the Middle East, the bomb jolted their family. The community of journalists, NGO staff, and internationally mobile Lebanese who had devoted themselves and sometimes risked their lives to tell the story of the Syrian war were shaken. "What had been a low boil of panic," Deuel writes in the book's title essay, "becomes an all-out grease fire."

Friday Was the Bomb shows us things few readers will have seen or guessed at. Through stories of fatherhood, of the vocation of reporting, of the distance between home and abroad, and of the small and great rips in social fabric created by the constant threat of violence, Deuel takes us to places that are familiar and yet unknown.

In Saudi Arabia the couple needed an exit visa to take their Saudi-born daughter out of the country before their own visas would expire a month after her birth. Through the window at Riyadh's immigration headquarters, Deuel saw a line of guest workers chained to an iron rod. Imagining himself shackled and his wife and daughter in immigration limbo, he cut to the head of the line and begged for help:

"My daughter," I said, showing him a picture. "We need to get her home in time for an important religious ceremony."

This was our trump card: baptism. I hadn't been to church voluntarily my entire life, but Kelly's grandmother had long worked in a convent, where Kelly's aunt was still a nun. My grandmother on my dad's side prayed for us all the time. For all of them, we'd decided to give the little girl her dunk in the holy water.

The man put down his cigarette. Religion meant something here, even if it wasn't Islam; faith commanded respect, and more importantly, action.

At no point does Deuel elevate his own experiences, colorful as they are, to the level of expertise; nor does he let his own family's trials eclipse the suffering of people who have no passports out of the region. He remained an outsider everywhere, but a curious and engaged one. "You totally deserve a big party," he told his wife's Iraqi bodyguard, imagining a 30th-birthday feast on a boat. "Birthdays are for children," the bodyguard responded. "I am happy to be alive."

Worlds open behind the worlds we see, and stories behind the stories we hear. The bombings are photographed, but outside the frame stand survivors, bystanders, and reporters. The essays on life in Beirut are particularly jittery and propulsive, mostly in the present tense with sharply observed details, and address the terrible pathos of child rearing. "If you don't bring me," the author's daughter says, overhearing a conversation about leaving Beirut, "I'll have no parents."

But this immediacy tends to leave the stories, compelling as they are, detached from any larger story about what is going on in the world and why it matters. The struggle for empathy is hard enough. What issues from the struggle in this work is nothing more formed and explicit than a dark, hungover humanism. "I'm not asking for much, just to have things blow up less frequently," Deuel writes of a dread-filled Beirut. "Or not at all. Or at least when they blow, maybe no one could be ripped to pieces?"

Deuel's record of his journey is moving and at times brilliant. An essay about a vacation in New York City shortly before Hurricane Sandy and one on leaving the Middle East stand out. The final notes are not optimistic. About his last flight home from Amman, Jordan, Deuel observes:

In some alternate universe, all the people on this plane and in this region could get along, eat the same foods, and we could all live in the Middle East forever. Instead, this flight was a petri dish of alliances and hatreds, of mass executions and military maneuvers. I couldn't wait to forget everything I'd learned. But I couldn't cue up the amnesia fast enough.

Any resemblance to American attitudes toward our long decade of military adventures in Pakistan, Libya, and elsewhere is presumably a matter of interpretation. These idiosyncratic stories of a world in turmoil are of little consequence when our talking heads and elected leaders are discussing the stakes of drone campaigns and military interventions. But it is the stories within the stories we do hear, and between the bombs whose tremors reach our news broadcasts and

Twitter feeds, that will shape us and our world forever, whether we choose to know them or not.