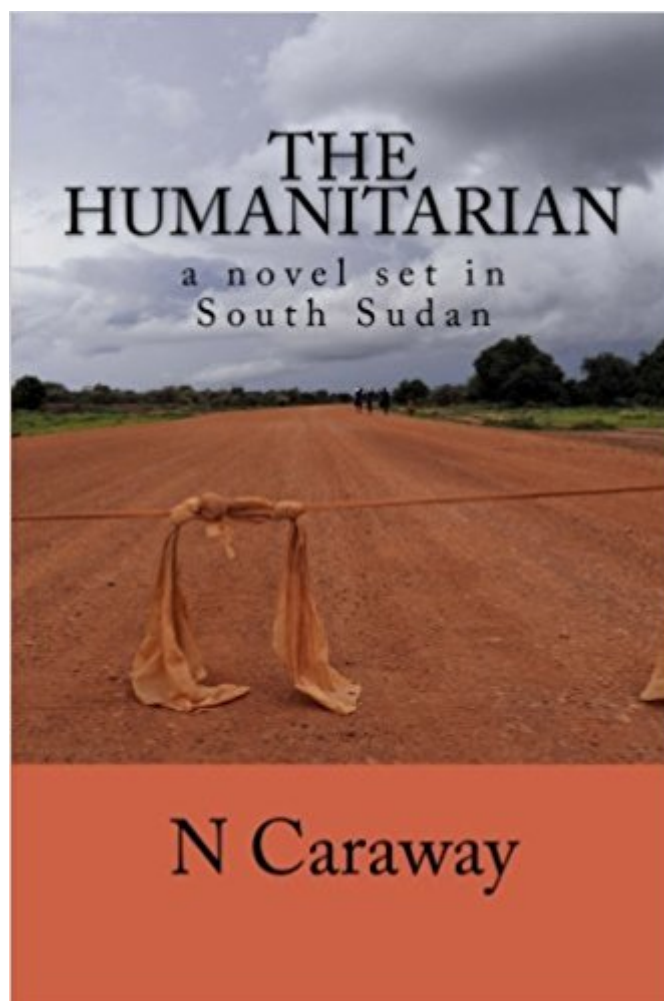


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The Humanitarian - A Novel Set In South Sudan



Synopsis

After decades of civil war a peace deal is in the offing for the ravaged land of South Sudan, where the United Nations and a plethora of non-government organisations have come together to deliver emergency aid to the thousands of displaced and homeless people scattered in camps and villages across the vast wilderness of swamps and scrubland, where rogue militias, cattle raiders and bandits roam. Richards is a UN official on his final mission, leading a small team to a remote region. For him it is not just the war which is ending, but the world he has come to inhabit. Detachment and isolation from all that is around him begin to take hold and memories of another life threaten to break through the thin walls he has built around himself. As he sinks deeper into inner darkness a chance meeting with a young priest seems to offer the hope of a way back to belief in humanity and meaning, but the road is rough.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

How do the powers that be bring aid to displaced and starving people spread over a vast continent? The answer is in ways that don't meet their true needs because these have long been either erased by or made irrelevant to the imperial incursions, power grabs, and internecine intrigues that go hand in hand with the delivery of the aid itself. The immediate merit of N. Caraway's *The Humanitarian* is that it doesn't dwell upon the depredations that are in play and that any informed reader will bring to the book. The horrors that continue on the African continent are well known and provide for much of our daily news consumption. As of his last writing, one of the locales remains a United Nations no-go zone. Instead, it is the internal monologue of the existentially conflicted aid worker who is allowed one final field

operation that conveys the lasting damage to the human spirit, damage that is so fundamental as to make Richards despair before the impossibility of establishing anything for those who are suffering commensurate with what they have lost: "We're pretty good at keeping them all alive nowadays, but we're keeping them alive so that they can live in shanty towns. [T]he model can only deliver its promise by turning people into numbers. However much he is driven by the need to find what lay at the heart of [his] world of suffering, in order to justify the planes, the tents, the food, the missions and the money, when he does find it in all of its simplicity and beauty it is little more than a pathetic and limited vision of a lost and irretrievable world: "We reached the dancers and stood and watched for awhile. There was nothing here but energy and sweat and the rhythmic clapping. It had no beginning or end, no shape other than the endlessly repeated upward thrusting into the night sky. His appointed task, however, has never been to understand and preserve what gives meaning to the lives of these people. He is to number them and to evaluate their nutritional needs so that they can be moved from place to place where they will receive their consigned air-drops of aid. The imperatives of the bureaucrats and those of the ones who do the exterminating of the people and the ravaging of the lands issue from a similar disconnection although their interests will merge and intermingle as each pursues its ends in the same territory. His disillusionment and despair find Caraway's protagonist in the position of being a cipher himself. His very awareness of how limited and marginal in effect is the aid that can be delivered makes it impossible for him to enter into the lives of those he is trying to help. Whatever his internal struggles and the operations he undertakes, he can find no correspondence within himself to what the people before him are undergoing and he forever remains outside their world that he can only view as lost and beyond recovery. "I simply felt sad and aware that I was not going to help the woman or her people. I would never even know how far she had come from and how long it had taken her to get to the bare patch of ground under the mango trees. It is noteworthy that the writing of *The Humanitarian* is sufficiently absorbing that the reader can wait until some three-quarters into the story for a real rise in narrative tension that culminates in a final and heightened crescendo of existential drama and exposed interests. Up until this point, a gradual acclimatization has unfolded such that one feels very much the experience of Caraway's protagonist who despite a lengthy career in the field is unable to identify with the eviscerated world that he had chosen for his life's work. Unable to step outside protected and managed zones, he records its needs as stipulated by the bureaucracy that is

far removed and busy with fitting the dispossessed to its plan rather than its plan to them. That the story unfolds through means of Richards's internal monologue effectively allows for correspondences between the state of being of the protagonist and of the world he confronts. It is the small epiphanies of life - themselves impoverished - that remain to give what meaning they can and to lead him on:

“[D]oves cooed in the trees of the compound, their call a liquid bubbling that tailed off like a coin vibrating to a stop on a wooden table top.

“[T]he only way to resist this dark suction into the abyss is to get up abruptly and confront the world of tangible objects.

“I had come in order to go for a walk in the bush, to be part of that other place, to feel the sun and gaze at the shimmering landscape, to smell the smoke of the fire and hear the frogs in the night and the drums at dawn and the high treble voices of the boys singing at the start of their school day in the schools without books. I had come because there was nowhere else I could go and I was as restless as I was tired.

“For all the goods that the aid worker can supply, it is an isolated missionary priest’s spiritual values that find a respondent chord in the impoverished people. Although he has little materially to offer, they reach out to him as one of their own and as one above them. Try as he might, Richards, the humanitarian worker, is unable to experience the transcendence that ordinary and respectful, everyday existence in itself can bring:

“Here in the misery and helplessness of this small, forgotten community the priest had found the need he could respond to, the answer to the question he had borne, the beloved for his love. But for me there was just dirt and sweat.

“The sweep of the tragedy that human action estranged from compassion and empathy can engender, however, is complete:

“Nothing was very permanent out here in the range lands and the toic, not even the hold a man might have on reality or perhaps even on things more precious still.

“This remarkable work by N. Caraway speaks directly to our times in its despair for what has been lost. Too often has humanity gone where its values are unable to survive. All of us bear responsibility as long as we refuse to withhold support for what our representatives choose to do or we turn away when we can further inform ourselves and so have a voice when the time comes to express ourselves.

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