



The Fracture Zone: My Return to the Balkans

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A True Portrait of One of the World's Most Chaotic and Beautiful Regions That Explains Why Violence Has Always Occurred There--And Why It May Continue For Years To Come

The vast and mountainous area that makes up the Balkans is rife with discord, both cultural and topographical. And, as Simon Winchester superbly demonstrates in this intimate portrait of the region, much of the political strife of the past century can be traced to its inherent contrasts. With the aid of a guide and linguist, Winchester traveled deep into the region's most troublesome areas--including Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, and Turkey--just as the war was tearing these countries apart. The result is a book not just about war but also about how war affects the living. Both timeless and current, *The Fracture Zone* goes behind the headlines to offer a true picture of a region that has always been on the brink. Winchester's remarkable journey puts all the elements together--the faults, the fractures, and the chaos--to make sense out of a seemingly senseless place.

The Fracture Zone: My Return to the Balkans Details

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From Reader Review The Fracture Zone: My Return to the Balkans for online ebook

Dominic Carrillo says

I liked the topic, not the author. Winchester comes across as an over-confident Orientalist who sees the region as savage and backward. I want to read Balkan history by an actual Balkan historian.

Fiona says

I was so looking forward to reading this but ultimately it was hugely disappointing. Having read Robert D Kaplan on the Balkans and Brian Hall's excellent 'The Impossible Country', I thought this would also be an insightful journey. Instead, the first half is a very lightweight travelogue, lacking any depth whatsoever. Just as I was about to throw down the book in frustration, I came to two very interesting chapters on the Croatian coast and Montenegro which held my interest for a while longer. We then moved into Kosovo where we were treated to hugely detailed descriptions of troop movements. Part of this chapter is about the human tragedy of deeply rooted hatred and vindictive, brutal retribution and is accordingly very moving. It transpires though that the author was writing a piece for the newspapers back home at this point and so was clearly more focused on his writing. This also explains the obsession with the military.

The grammar throughout is lazy. Lots of - just to include information that could have been incorporated by using commas or a different sentence construction - dashes which often confused the meaning of the sentence. The proof reading is poor, something I really hate as I waste time filling in missing words or removing words that shouldn't be there.

I might just be pushed up to 2.5 stars because of the two or three better written chapters but no more because this pales in comparison to other works. Finally, Winchester argues that economic differences are as much to blame for the recent wars as ethnic, religious and historical hatreds. Having passed through Serbia and Croatia in 2012, I completely disagree as sadly even the younger generation continue to demonise each other.

Bill Lively says

Simon Winchester gives a good overview of the Balkans, its history and current situation. He gives an interesting description of his return to this area explaining why violence has always happened in this region and why it will probably continue for years and years into the future.

Holly says

As my third book in a series on the Balkans, I chose this memoir of a trip made by the author at the end of the 1990's, a troubled decade for areas like Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia, and Croatia. Winchester's journey from Vienna to Istanbul is an attempt to understand the Balkans and why the area seems so prone to ethnic hostilities. His thesis, while not original, is that the trouble goes back centuries -- and perhaps even further back than that -- to the endless tug of war between the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires that took place over this region. While one ethnic group may be in the news a lot these days as the instigators of present-day conflicts and endless horrors of war, the author points out many, many cases in the past in which the bad guys and good guys are reversed.

I really enjoyed traveling along for the journey -- and especially liked the author's attempts to demonstrate the unique characteristics of each country, both in its people and geography. Whether being chased by gun-wielding Serbs on the defensive against NATO forces or viewing the centuries' old skull of a Turkish vizier or listening to an explanation of "yogic flying" and its potential to magically erase all of the ethnic hostilities, Winchester entertains while showing the absurdity of these conflicts. He paints a picture of a beautiful land with proud people, but his prognosis is not good for an end -- at least not any time soon -- to the violence and war in this troubled place.

Calzean says

In 1999, Winchester relives a journey he made 20 years earlier. This time the various recent conflicts in the Balkans have either ended in the formation of new nations or had NATO armies invading or controlling peace.

A bit dated now, it contains some good parts on the backgrounds of the various people. It contained a short analysis that concluded the violence was economically driven but the atrocities were for revenge.

In part it read as a travel book. Various interesting characters were met and Winchester has a journalistic eye for detail. Not his best book.

Mark Noble says

I decided to read this book to find out more about the enigmatic tangle of countries that lie a half day's drive from our house, the Balkan's. I somehow missed this book when it was released; I am a big fan of Winchester's and try to read anything he writes. I expected it to clarify most of the questions that I wanted to answer. But unfortunately, it did not. The book reads as if it was written quickly and published even faster. I read the e-version, so I am not sure if the many typos exist in the print version. With or without typos, the writing is sloppy and the story is hard to follow.

The book reinforces the long history of friction between Asia and the west, and the pivotal location of these lands. Winchester recounts the early history of the Ottoman's near successful attempt to capture Vienna and the Hapsburgs victory in driving the turks back to Asia. The explanations of the fracturing of the countries in the Balkans, the development of the various christian, Greek orthodox and Muslim cultures and the resulting situation is much less clear. I guess we will have to make that relatively short drive in person, if the political situation ever stabilizes enough for us to feel safe, if we want to begin to understand what is really going on in these neighboring countries. There are parts and passages in the book that are vintage Winchester, especially the visit to the Vienna museum to view some old Ottoman artifacts (including a severed head) and

the travel log portions of the drive from Vienna to Istanbul. This book may provide another small piece of the mosaic that can explain the Balkans, but it is not a very rewarding read.

Kes says

This is a light travelogue; you're not reading this for any detailed analysis through the Balkans, just one guy going: "oh, I went through the Balkans, and this was what it was like."

I liked his description of the use of fixers in the war zone, but I feel like some fact-checking was needed - one of the footnotes mentioned that Japan and Montenegro were at a state of official war from 1905 to 1995 (even though it was not a de facto war), but I don't think it's true? Since Montenegro had not declared independence until 2006.

So that made me take the book with a grain of salt.

The writing is light, though, and is an easy read.

Lynne says

dated, but interesting

Chris Wares says

Simon Winchester is one of my favourite authors and I was excited to discover that he had written about travelling in the Balkans, the current focus of my literary explorations. A rare book that barely gets a mention in his bibliography.

Written during the Kosovo War he revisits Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey. It's not one of his best books. The chapters on Montenegro, particularly his description of the ancient pre-communist capital, and of Istanbul were informative and his description of General Michael Jackson helped to connect his travels to the TV news reports I once watched but it lacked the clear narrative that make his other books so exceptional.

Bob says

A wandering account of time spent in the Balkans. A sad, sad account of up close impressions from traveling in this tragic part of the world.

Ole Phillip says

This to me was a disappointment. The author has produced better and more convincing work, the appears almost like an attempt to cash in on a then popular subject, the Balkans and the mess it was. I only gave it two stars because it does come with some interesting bits and pieces...

Love says

A great travel book and the first one I have read by Simon Winchester and it will not be the last since I absolutely loved this book. In it Winchester travels from the heart of the former Habsburg Empire Vienna to the center of the former Ottoman Empire Constantinople, or Istanbul as it has been formally called since the rule of Kemal Atatürk. This journey takes him through the Balkans where the Germanic Christian civilization of the Habsburgs met the Oriental Islamic civilization of the Ottomans. There a bloody war is being fought over the southern Serbian region of Kosovo and Winchester visits this soon to be independent country as well as the other republics that up until recently made up Yugoslavia.

This book offers a great overview of the history of the region, told through an exciting travel narrative. As the book is written in the late 1990s so many of the places Winchester visits are suffering from or have recently suffered ethnic cleansing and NATO bombings.

J says

I'm giving this 2 stars because I couldn't bring myself to read enough of it to justify giving it less. I've read and loved a number of Winchester's books, but this one is a massive yawn. Next!

Leanne says

I don't love the way he writes but this was an interesting book in the end. I've had it sitting on my shelf for years and started reading it a couple of times but couldn't get it to in until this time. I'm surprised as I usually like books written by journalists. Well I mean I usually find them well written. I liked this book, but found some of the writing ambiguous or convoluted.

In 2003 I did a similar, but a bit more detailed and squiggly, trip through the Balkans so I enjoyed retracing my steps throughout the book. I think that was my favourite thing about it. But it did ring true and he has some interesting insights and tangent footnotes. I didn't learn much but what I did was good stuff.

Dennis says

This is the seventh Simon Winchester book I've read, and the first time I've been disappointed.

I thought *Crack in the Edge of the World* (centered on the 1906 San Francisco earthquake), *Krakatoa*, and *The Meaning of Everything* (about the creating of the Oxford English Dictionary) were outstanding, and *The Professor and the Madman* (born from the last) almost as good.

While not quite as good, I enjoyed Outpost and The Man Who Loved China

This book is about the Balkans and the long history of conflict there, written during the late 90's conflict. There is plenty of history in here, but it seems less compelling than the others that I've preferred - that may be more a reflection on me than on the book or the region it covers, I think.

In any case, I still have plans to continue working my way through Mr. Winchester's works, and I expect I have plenty to learn before I am done.
