

From the Heartland

To the land of illusion

ACTS OF FAITH by Philip Caputo. Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. Hardcover, \$26.95.

The ongoing slaughter in the Sudan is frequently depicted in our media as a civil war, which calls up images of two equal armed forces fighting with conventional weapons. But in Philip Caputo's new novel, the war on the ground in the South (Darfur) is anything but equal. The Muslim government in the North uses tactics disturbingly familiar to those who study genocide. Recently, even Condeleeza Rice got a dose of reality in Sudan. Bodyguards surrounding the official she visited roughed up members of her party and a journalist. Neither Rice's position in the U.S. government nor the color of her skin protected her from thugs long deadened by a policy of murdering their own dark-skinned countrymen and women.

Acts of Faith looks at the situation in the Sudan through African, American and European characters who have come to the desert South, where the Sudanese People's Liberation Army continues to fight against the government in Khartoum, despite the lop-sided nature of the conflict. These transplanted aid workers living in the Kenyan border town have come with the best of intentions, whether they represent international relief organizations, the United Nations or Christian communities in the U.S.

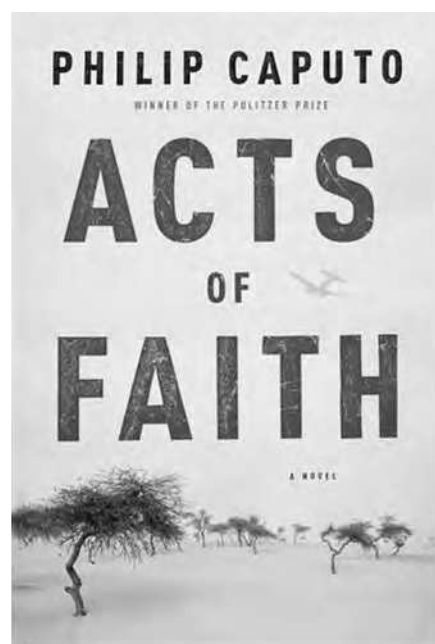
Caputo also draws out a more shadowy population that comes to its calling to make great profits while doing good — renegade pilots and small airlines that fly the "no go" zones the U.N. honors and handle contraband cargo others reject, such as weapons. Caputo shows the self-serving hypocrisy behind the book's main characters' avowed good intentions as well as the moral conundrum war money breeds.

Additionally, the novel is peppered with colorful African characters from both sides of the Sudan conflict — Muslims, Christians and animists — for whom faith is part of community life. This rich, teeming novel fills in the background of the battle between the remote government and the natives who have always lived in and worked a living from the land. Until war broke out, the southerners had viable relationships with northern Muslim farmers and ranchers. Religious extremists and terrorists fuel the war from Khartoum, while the south is supported clandestinely.

Caputo is a Vietnam War vet, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, and the author of

six other works of fiction and two memoirs. *A Rumor of War*, his Vietnam memoir, is widely acclaimed, as is his first novel, *Horn of Africa*, which came out of a journey 30 years ago across the deserts of the Sudan and Eritrea on foot and by camel. Caputo's African travels now reveal a region much changed by a long, bloody disaster for its civilian inhabitants.

The gift of the novel is to make the conflict in the Sudan somewhat intelligible.



But Caputo reaches farther with this cautionary tale. Look what happens, he says, when there is so much cold hard cash to be made by helping those less fortunate. Questions raised resonate for the reader. This compelling 669-page novel casts a spell you cannot ignore. **EW**

BOOK NOTES (Aug. 25 through Sept. 8): **MacKenzie Bezos** (*The Testing of Luther Albright*) reads at 7:30 pm on 8/25, Powell's on Burnside, Portland. ...**Edie Meidav** (*Crawl Space*) reads at 7:30 pm 8/25, Powell's on Hawthorne, Portland. ...Eugene writer **Shirley Tallman** (*The Russian Hill Murders*) reads at 2 pm on 8/27, Barnes & Noble, Eugene. ...Syndicated radio host **Thom Hartmann** (*What Would Jefferson Do?*) reads at 7:30 pm on 8/29, Powell's on Burnside, Portland. ...Biographer **Charles L. Cross** (*Room Full of Mirrors*) reads on the 35th anniversary of Jimi Hendrix's death, at 7 pm on 9/6 at Powell's Books on Burnside, Portland. ...Literary agent **Arielle Eckstut** and writer **David Henry Sterry** (*Putting Your Passion Into Print*) demystify the publishing process at 7 pm on 9/7 at Powell's Books in Beaverton. ...Novelist **Bret Easton Ellis** (*Lunar Park*) reads from his new book at 7:30 pm on 9/7 at Powell's on Burnside, Portland. ...Novelist **Tom Spanbauer** (*In the City of Shy Hunters*) kicks off the Mid-Valley Willamette Writers Speakers Series with "Dangerous Fiction: What Is It?" at 6:30 pm on 9/8 at Baker Building, 975 High, Eugene; \$10 non-members. ...Biographer **Sara Halprin** (*Seema's Show*) speaks about the fascinating life of cultural and political icon Seema Aissen at 7:30 pm on 9/8 at Powell's on Burnside, Portland. ...**Floyd Skloot** (*A World of Light*) reads from his new memoir at 7:30 pm on 9/8 at Powell's on Hawthorne, Portland.

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