

Error and arrogance are this journalist's travel companions

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On June 18, 1987, while traveling by car through the outskirts of Beirut, American reporter Charles Glass was captured by Lebanese terrorists.

The event struck many observers as odd, for Mr. Glass had made a name for himself as the Western journalist who had done the most to ingratiate himself with the Shi'ite militants. According to Barbara Newman, a former colleague at ABC News, Mr. Glass was kidnapped right after interviewing the (pro-Iranian) Hezbollah's "spiritual guide," Ayatollah Muhammad Fadlallah.

The story became even odder 62 days later, when Mr. Glass turned up in Damascus, telling a dramatic story about having escaped from his kidnapers in the dead of night. Questions about this episode persist: Why would the Shi'ites abduct a friend? Did Mr. Glass escape, or was he released, as many maintain, in response to Syrian pressure?

While the full truth about this episode is never likely to be known, Mr. Glass has made the most of his experience. It transformed him into a personality in his own right, perhaps even a hero, and permanently lifted him out of the ranks of ordinary reporters. Thus, a television doc-

umentary he narrated about Lebanon was called "Pity the Nation: Charles Glass' Lebanon."

"Tribes With Flags: A Dangerous Passage Through the Chaos of the Middle East" needs to be seen in the light of this change of status. The book is an artifact of supreme egotism thinly disguised as a travel memoir. At base, it represents a tribute by Charles Glass to himself.

Start with the dust jacket. The author's picture is not in the usual place, modestly on the back flap. Rather, it dominates the front

cover - a handsome color portrait of Mr. Glass, facing right, hand on chin, showing just a hint of 5 o'clock shadow, gazing reflectively into the distance.

Against an unrecognizable brown background, wearing a black turtle-

neck, he seems to melt, somewhat mysteriously, into the surroundings. Had I not known better, this astonishing cover would have told me that the author is deeply learned or remarkably accomplished - or perhaps the hero of a romantic novel.

The text abundantly confirms the impression that Mr. Glass is self-infatuated. Even in this era of celebrity journalists, very few of them would have the audacity to

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Reuters News Agency
Charles Glass on videotape given to
a Beirut news agency in July 1987.

**TRIBES WITH FLAGS: A DANGEROUS PASSAGE
THROUGH THE CHAOS OF THE MIDDLE EAST**

By Charles Glass

Atlantic Monthly Press, \$22.95, 510 pages

REVIEWED BY DANIEL PIPES

GLASS

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think, as does Charles Glass, that his every move holds fascination. Here is the sort of self-indulgent writing that fills too many of the 503 pages of text:

"No one in the hotel spoke anything other than Turkish, but a young man and young woman behind the reception desk struggled to recall a few words of English. I wanted to telephone the tourist office to see whether I could obtain a car and guide to show me around Alexandretta.

"I telephoned the number listed in the 'Fodor Guide,' which turned out to be the house of an irate woman speaking only Turkish. The receptionists found another number. It was the tourist office, but the man at the other end spoke no English. The receptionists suggested I walk to the tourist office and assured me someone there would speak English."

Interested in more of this fast-paced action? You'll find plenty, for Mr. Glass is not shy about informing us who on his way spoke English and who did not: "He spoke a few, very

few, words of English." "A man sat at a vintage telephone switchboard behind a low counter. He spoke only Turkish but understood a few words of English." And so forth.

In contrast to his oft-acknowledged ignorance of Turkish, Mr. Glass is proud of knowing Arabic, reminding the reader every so often of this accomplishment. But then he makes so many mistakes in citing Arabic words, one has to wonder just how much he actually knows.

In one amusing sequence, Mr. Glass tries to explain his profession as a writer to his driver; trouble is, the word he uses, "kutub," means not "writer" but "books." He thinks that *aga*, a traditional title, is a family name.

Time and again, Arabic words come out wrong: "Crazy," for example, is not "majoun," as he writes, but "majnun." Inconsistent spellings and mangled names confirm the impression that Mr. Glass' Arabic, while adequate for ordering food, is not enough to get conversation, information or nuances right.

As most of the book's contents deal with the author's travels and conversations, there are not many opportunities to get facts wrong. But when providing background infor-

mation, Mr. Glass often does purvey faulty data. He states that the Alawi community in Syria, from which President Hafez al-Assad comes, makes up 25 percent of the Syrian population. In fact, it constitutes about 12 percent. And Christians do not make up 30 percent, as he asserts, but some 14 percent.

Mr. Glass repeatedly cites earlier travelers, without ever providing a reference or a footnote. Again, this bespeaks arrogance, as though no one need check on his scholarship. Yet here, too, inaccuracies abound, for he is cavalier about punctuation and spelling. Further, a check on several extracts (from Alexander Kinglake, Mark Twain and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt) shows that small or large portions of text have been dropped and that words are sometimes added.

Looking beyond this miasma of ego and error, what about the substance of "Tribes With Flags?" The book consists mostly of reports on conversations, interspersed with revealing, if random historical facts and quotes from texts, very much in the style of V.S. Naipaul. Mr. Glass is a perfectly competent writer and one capable of insights and even a turn of phrase now and then, but he

lacks Mr. Naipaul's depth and wit. The occasional nuggets are nearly obscured by a thick dust of commonplace detail.

In the end, "Tribes With Flags" cannot be understood apart from Charles Glass' having been kidnapped. Without the two months in captivity, would his portrait so glamorously adorn the dust jacket? Would his editors have allowed him to write so much about himself? Would a general audience be expected to purchase yet another journalist's vision of the Middle East? Most unlikely.

The abduction had another effect; it caused Mr. Glass to abandon his planned trip less than halfway through. Had he continued on to southern Lebanon, Israel and Jordan, and had he kept up the same ratio of pages to miles, he would have produced some 1,300 pages of travelogue! We can be grateful, anyway, that that behemoth never got written.

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