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SNAP JUDGMENT: BOOKS

Jul 24, 2005 8:00 PM EDT

Since the end of the Balkan wars, there have been a rash of books dissecting Yugoslavia's disintegration with varying degrees of dry gravitas. Now Oliver, a former British Foreign Office staffer and the first "High Representative" for Bosnia, has written a riveting account of life as a diplomat following the signing of the Dayton accords, which ended the Bosnian war in 1995. Oliver's conversational style is accessible and he lays bare a fascinating insider's view of the intricacies, distresses and irreverent humor of nation-building. "War" is an important contribution to the historical record of the peace process.

Red Leaves by Thomas H. Cook

Do we ever really know anyone?" This question repeatedly runs through Eric Moore's mind as he explores every option as to who kidnapped 8-year-old Amy Giordano. Eric's son Keith was the last to see her; as suspicion of the 15-year-old quickly mounts, Eric can't entirely convince himself that his son is innocent. In this disturbing exploration of humans' true motives, Eric relives part of his own childhood through his desperate hunt to find Amy's abductor. Though slow in parts, the tale is haunting, and builds to a rapid and unexpected climax.

The City of Tiny Lights by Patrick Neate

Tommy Akhtar, a "Paki-immigrant-Ugandan-Indian-Englishman" and private detective in London, is hired by Melody, a black prostitute who wants him to find her missing Russian flatmate. Tommy's investigation leads him to a fiendish Saudi villain who has sinister plans for London. It's a multiculti homage to Raymond Chandler's 1930s detective Marlowe, without his stylized sophistication. In contrast to Neate's Whitbread Award-winning "Twelve Bar Blues," a bewitching tale spanning three continents, "City of Tiny Lights" is more of a shambling slog.

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