

# Hospital Clown Newsletter

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## Waving Flags of Love

Excerpt from Jo Wilding's *Don't Shoot the Clowns*

"In the hot, sticky tedium of a traffic jam in Iraq . . . a skinny, ragged child moved between the cars, offering newspapers, chewing gum, sweets, toilet paper, growing old as the minutes passed. Suddenly his sunken eyes swivelled back, new life amid the lethargy, to confirm what they thought they had seen. The man in the car took another ping-pong ball from his mouth. And another. The boy started to smile, to giggle, to laugh out loud. He called to other children, who abandoned their columns of cars to come and look. Another man in the car took a cloth from his pocket and made it vanish. A woman began pulling improbable faces and the children a small crowd of them now, reciprocated.

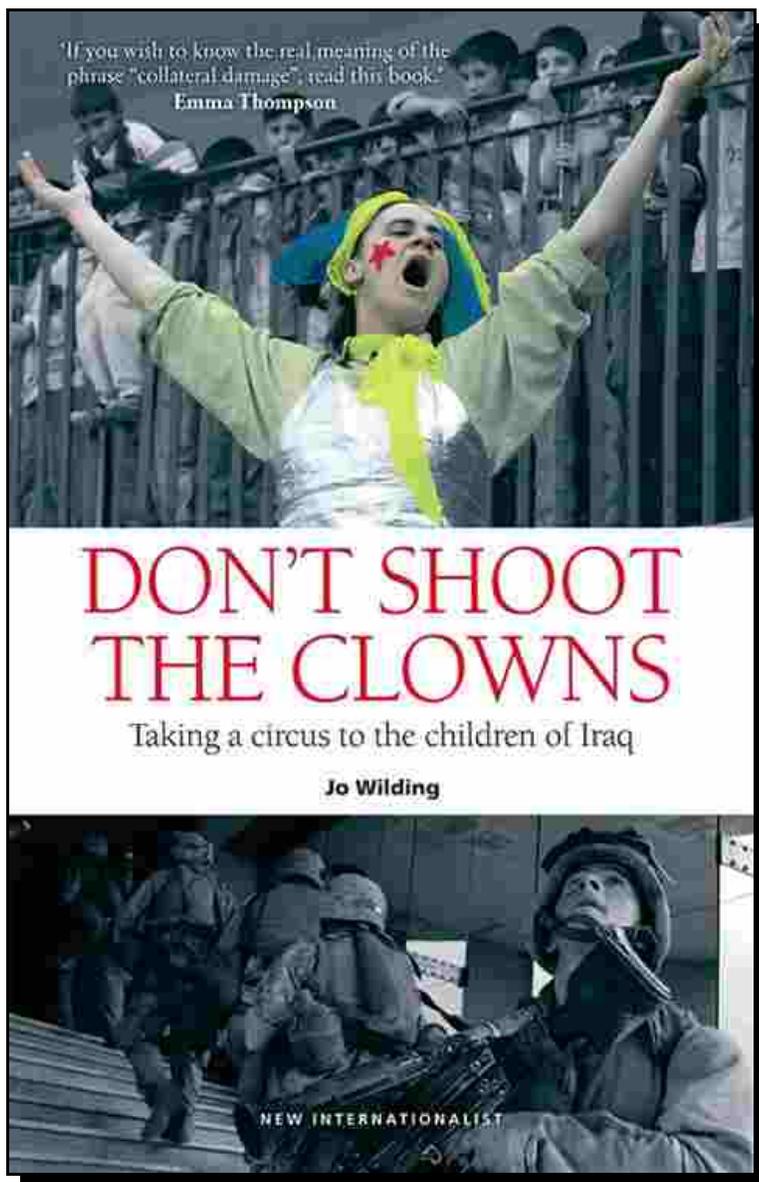
"Soon the people in the cars were looking too. And laughing. As the cars edged onwards . . . the children drifted away too, but with a bounce, a chuckle, a wave. It wouldn't feed them, but it would keep them going for another few hours . . .

"That's what our circus was all about. It carried people, just for little while, took the weight off them, shoved some of the violence and destruction from their minds and eyes for a moment. Without trivializing - as if it could - what they were going through, it oiled the daily grind with laughter, not only for the children"

I have given you excerpts from *Don't Shoot the Clowns* as I wanted you to experience the book and not just tell you about it. All text inside quotes are from Jo Wilding, except where indicated. - Shobi

"This book is about more than the circus. . . . It's a space for ordinary Iraqi people to tell their stories and experiences, in their own voices; it's a personal history of Iraq over the period from February 2003 to May 2004.

"It's also about empowerment, about what can be done with not much money, a bit of *cheek*, the determination to go where the UN and the news media will not, a laptop, a broom and a cardboard box."



Jo writes about the people telling their stories - constantly naming them, putting an added punch to our sense of the reality of war.

"A tiny boy cried and clapped his bandaged hand, calling 'Ummi' - *Mummy* - whenever he was left alone. Safe in the lap of an aunt, he drifted off into his own world, touching his finger tip to the still-damp blood on his sleeve, looking intently at it, putting the finger to his tongue, his ear torn, his face checkered with cuts. He was Mohammed and he was four." His "eyes glazed in shock, unresponsive to what went on around him."

Someone got out some bubbles and Mohammed's "eyes followed them drifting to the ceiling, rainbowed and shiny. Slowly he reached for one popping it with his finger, smiling as it burst, his eyes coming back to life as if a wall around him had started to crumble as well".

Jo had doubts about bringing clowns to Iraq, "not just because of safety, but did they really need clowns? They needed food, medical supplies, shelters." She received an email from Peat who described an experience when he clowned in Kosovo. "Peat described a scene of about 80 children around three play parachutes and, in the midst of it all, an old man, palms to the sky, wide smile, tears rolling down his cheeks, saying: 'Thank you, I never thought I'd see my grandchildren laugh again.'" She then remembered little Mohammed in the hospital and his reaction to bubbles.

Jo comments: "There were times when we were all so tired, felt so burned-out, so fed up with explosions splintering our sleep, that it was hard to crawl out of bed, hard to bear another traffic jam, hard to get into costume and up onto stilts, for all that we knew things had been much harder, for much longer, for the people around us. But from the moment that first *Boomchucka* of the morning bounced back at us, we revived, we felt ten feet tall, we felt like we really had all that joy to share."

They lived in the communities - one being the merging point between the Christian and Shi'a communities. When practicing a new skit with stilts and jump ropes, and needing a place tall enough, they went outside to the forecourt. "In minutes we had all the kids from the street taking turns to jump over the rope, one at a time, in pairs, then threes. . . .

"The women didn't come out on the street to join our game but laughed and waved from the balconies. Fatih, our opposite neighbor and his little girl Fadia hung out of their window cheering everyone on. Men tried to get each other to take a turn, each with an excuse for not having to go himself - 'I'm too old, I'm too fat,' until Coco braved it, managing six or seven jumps over the rope before getting caught in it, giggling to huge applause."

The clowns had to leave and get ready for a show elsewhere, "but when we left everyone was playing in the street, kicking a football between themselves, running about blowing bubbles, the men as well as the children. A bit of play transformed the street completely, transformed the faces.

"Then as we walked in the rain that night a small voice called from a doorway '*Bacher?*' he asked hopefully; tomorrow? Would there be another circus in the street tomorrow? And men popped out of other doorways to ask the same thing, still laughing, still playing. It was good"

*Jo Wilding performing on stilts at an Iraqi school*



### ***Boomchucka Circus***

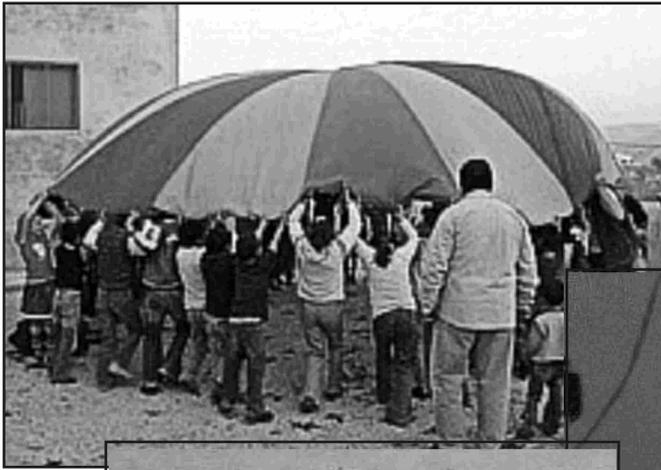
"I hadn't planned to be part of the circus, only to organize and coordinate, but Amber arrived with two sets of stilts and taught me to walk on them in our living room. I got the tailor down the road to make me a pair of extra long trousers, Peat devised us a simple act and I became a stilt-walking clown."

Here is one skit which seems to parallel the Iraqi children's struggle with destruction and hope.

"WAAAAA" Jo stands there, screaming out loud, fist rubbing eyes. "WAAAAAAA" Around her 50 or more children listen, untroubled by her distress. "WAAAAAAA" In a second or two she stops crying and lifts the lid on the bin. The same bin that the other clown put her broken, smashed up and trampled music box in. When she opens the lid, the music will come from the bin, louder and better than before. With a big smiling happy face, she will skip once around the stage before leaving to loud cheers and clapping.

*Boomchucka* is not only the name of their circus, but they use it at the beginning of their shows, to gather and build energy.

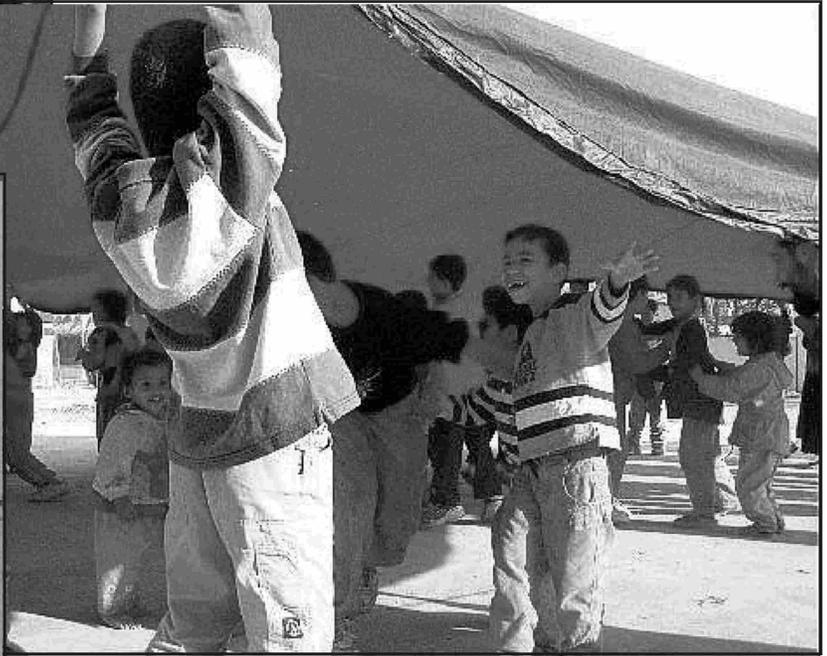
They start with "Hello" and the kids echo "Hello" Then "Wo-ho" all the kids yelled back "Wo-ho." Then "Boomchucka" the children repeated it louder and louder.



## ***Parachute Play in Shuala***

A colorful parachute became playhouse, trampoline, stage and a way of building community.

There are hundreds of stories in Jo's book, but to give you a look into the book, here is only a small part of the story of Shuala which is from pages 131 -141. Shuala is a squatters camp on a farm that used to belong to Uday, one of Saddam's sons. 125 families were using the animal sheds as housing.



### ***The Shuala Squatter Camp. 2003***

"Because they were internally displaced people and not refugees, it was nobody's job to make sure they had adequate housing, water, food, medical care, education or even blankets. There was no international intervention, nothing to trigger assistance from the UN." [The UN puts them into a category of IDPs - Internally Displaced Persons. Because they are still in their own country, they are not protected by the UN under the category of Refugees.]

"There was a tent up in the entrance: long and semi-cylindrical open both ends with people inside drinking tea, eating together on the ground sitting against the walls drinking chai (tea). It was a traditional Shi'a mourning tent for two-month-old Mariam. 'She died of the cold.' Abu Ahmed said simply."

### ***The Fairies and the Blankets***

"Asked what they needed, what they would like, most of the kids looked around for help before asking: 'What do you mean?' A lot of them had trouble expressing 'wanting' and 'needing.' Imad started talking instead about a fairy, a magician, who had come to offer each of them three wishes. What would they have the magician make for them?"

"The answer made me shiver. Blankets . . ."

### ***The Dream of a Drain***

These people in Shuala had the dream of draining the open lake of sewage and wastewater in the camp. There were no toilets.

Jo tells their story: "It has been raining the last two days and the

place was a quagmire of mud and shit, sluiced through the camp from the lakes it normally festered in. Barefoot and barely shod children waded through it with us, following Abu Ahmed to the spot where the pipes were to go. They'd managed to buy three six-meter lengths of pipe, and needed another three . . ." Jo goes on to explain how they were going to do the drain. The total cost being \$460 - the total cost for 125 families to build basic sanitation for themselves.

Jo continues: "That was more than they could collect by asking every family to contribute so we thought we'd try and give them a real present for Eid, as well as the show [*Eid el-Fitr* is the festival that marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan, the annual assertion of 'the spirit over the flesh']. It would mean a temporary wage for some of the men in the camp, improved health for all of them, but especially the kids, and it would be their project not something being done to or for them." Jo and Peat emailed friends for help.

"We weren't there to be a charity. Although there was a huge need for relief supplies, blankets and medical aid because the occupation forces weren't providing it, I felt strongly that Iraqi organizations like Ali's Malath Relief were best equipped to do that kind of thing; that this was a country of sophisticated people able to look after themselves with a little support.

"Play, laughter; a sense of community with the outside world and a bit of psychological healing, on the other hand, were things Iraqis were barely able to give one another so that was what we tried to bring.

"Charity is about doing things to the 'deserving poor', a

paternalistic ideal which is all too often dis-empowering for the ones to whom it is done. Mutual aid, on the other hand, is about supporting people, empowering them, acting in solidarity with them, letting them lead and being accountable to them for the things you do, not to some alien donor. This was a reconstruction project devised and planned by the camp residents, without Bechtel and Haliburton. This was funded by ordinary people, in solidarity with Iraqis who wanted health and education for their children and themselves.

“It was impossible to stand in that place, among the animal sheds they called home, and not help in any way possible, knowing that a drain would save some of their lives; knowing it, because there could be no doubt about it on a day like that when the sewage was flowing freely past a funeral tent for the tiny girl.

“The kids came running out to meet us, arms out, when we arrived to do the Eid show. The girls joined in with the parachute games this time, asked to be picked as cat or mouse, lying on the fabric to be lifted up and to run around on it. The women watched through the reed fence of the house next to the concrete square where we performed. We gave them the money for the drain at the end of the show and explained it was from ordinary people, in solidarity. The place was full of smiles: they would start preparations straight away and then get the digger in. It would be built within a week.

“We went a few days later to take some pictures for them, to give them a record of how they built their drain. Already the reed hut that used to stand at the edge of the water, its wendy-house shape reflected in the sludgy edges of the pool, was landlocked. There was but a puddle, several meters away. The drain wasn't completely finished yet but there was an enormous improvement.

“Within a couple of weeks they'd been able to take in the entire compound so there were no toxic ponds left at all. Still most families were quite a walk from a water source. There was one tap in the roofless farm building where some had made homes and one beside the bit of empty ground where we played with the kids, where they hoped to build a school.

“But for every glimmer of hope there was another piece of unremitting grimness. A man took me aside from the others and

asked me to come and see his son. He took me to a tiny part-breezeblock, part-canvas and raffia-mat square building, open to the elements in dozens of places, stinking of infected, rotting flesh like a warning before my eyes could adjust.

“Abbas was four, his legs a bloody, pus-oozing mess. He'd burned them three weeks ago on the paraffin flame from the stove that was their only heat source and he hadn't been seen by a doctor or a hospital yet. He lay under a blanket, naked from the waist down, eyes huge and glazed, unresponsive except when they creased and spilled silent tears.

“The doctor hadn't been for over a month by the end of February. There used to be one every two weeks, through the Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq, but once Layla wasn't there the doctor stopped coming. It only cost 500 dinars to be seen by a doctor in the hospital, but most of these hadn't got even that and the cost of a taxi there and back made it impossible to go. In any case, they couldn't pay for the medicine even if it was available to buy, so what would be the point?

“We went the next day taking medicine, antiseptic and antibiotic creams, but it was worse. We tried, but failed, to get a doctor to come to the camp in the morning. I had to go out to Jordan for a few days so Peat and Raed returned to take him to the hospital. They were turned away because the hospital was full with more casualties than it could handle from a bombing nearby.

“Eventually they found a doctor who could get out to the camp. He said Abbas was only days from losing his leg to the infections if they hadn't been treated. A week and he'd have died of blood poisoning. Within a few days, though, he was walking about, sleeping at night, smiling and laughing, wearing trousers, still whole, the look of exhausted agony and despair gone from his eyes although I doubt Peat or I will ever forget it. Alaa went with them to translate when Peat brought Abbas to the hospital and she couldn't sleep until she knew he was all right.

“Eight-and-a-half months and billions of dollars after the war had ostensibly ended, lives and limbs were still so precarious that they could still depend on a bunch of clowns arriving at the right moment.”





*Above Peat introduces Woodbine (puppet) to children in Samawq, southern Iraq*

“. . . my name is Peat - Devilstick Peat. I'm a real live, honest to goodness fool! That is to say that I wear a red and yellow costume, complete with bells and horny hat, and use humor to make a living. I also use it in my work with what I call "conflict kids" i.e., youngsters whose lives are affected by war, genocide, domestic violence . . .

"According to a UNICEF survey, over 40% of children in Iraq . . . can't see a point to life. No child should feel like that. Children should have hope, they are natures optimists. In ten years time, what happens when those *no hope* kids are men? . . . You see it's my personal belief that if we don't do something for them today, while they are young, then what will they do for us tomorrow, when we're old? And that folks, are some of the reasons why I'm off to Iraq."

– from *Circus2Iraq.org*

Because the *Boomchukka Circus* often found themselves in the middle of a fight sometime being fired on, sometimes escaping in the back of a pickup.

While waiting for their pickup in the middle of a battle, Jo writes: ". . . the marines watch from one side through binoculars, the local fighters are [watching] too.

"I've got a disappearing hanky in my pocket so while I'm sitting like a lemon, no where to go, gunfire and explosions all around, I make the hanky disappear, reappear, disappear. It's always best, I think to seem completely unthreatening and completely unconcerned, so no-one worries about you enough to shoot."

#### ***A Little Child Soldier***

[Upon leaving Fallujah] "Saad comes onto the bus to wish us well for the journey. . . I hold his [hand] in both of mine and tell him 'Dir balak," take care, as if I could say anything more stupid to a pre-teen mujahid with an AK47 in his other hand, and our eyes meet and stay fixed, his full of fire and fear. Can't I take him away? Can't I take him somewhere where he can be a child? Can't I make him a balloon giraffe and give him some crayons and tell him not to forget to brush his teeth? Can't I find the person who put the rifle in the hands of that little boy and tell him what that does to a child? Do I have to leave him here where there are heavily armed men all around him and lots of them are not on his side, however many sides there are in all of this? And of course I do. I do have to leave him, this little child soldier."

"At hospital bedsides, on the street, in their homes, people asked often that I take their stories with me and tell them all over the world. They asked because they were isolated . . . the sense of invisibility was pervasive.

"Now I am one of those distant friends and I am telling those stories I've been given Please pass them on until everyone know the real meaning of war."

Reprinted from **Circus2Iraq.org**

"Things to think about if you're considering applying to join Boomchukka Circus on a trip . . . [See last paragraph]

"It's a war zone. Not to be patronizing, but if you've never been in a situation where you hear a lot of explosions, where you're a target because you're a foreigner, where there's no functioning system of law and policing, think long and hard about how you'd deal with that. Of course, you never really know how you'll react to situations like that till you're in them and we all had a first time, but it's important to think through.

"Foreigners do get kidnaped. So far (August 2004) they've been mostly contractors, mercenaries and military personnel that have been taken. No hostage has been killed yet who was working for an NGO and there are cheeky angels who look after clowns but they don't offer guarantees. "

#### ***Women's Issues***

"Women can get a lot of hassle from Iraqi men. It helps if you dress in a tent and appear to be completely shapeless and you definitely get less shouted at with a head scarf on, partly because people are less certain that you're a foreigner that way. There are loads of arguments against wearing them as well, which I'll happily discuss at great length with anyone that wants to, but whatever, you need to dress modestly – that goes for men as well.

"At the same time it seems really important to have women in the group. We found last time that the girls loved seeing a woman on the stage. As they get less and less freedom, seeing a 9 foot tall woman in a shiny frock made them really happy and they were more willing to join in parachute games and stuff when there were women there."

#### ***Boomchukka Circus Pulls Out of Iraq***

"After having seen two of their NGO friends kidnaped (but fortunately returned unharmed), they realized the environment in Iraq had become too risky.

"Although we feel like the worlds biggest cowards for saying it, the fact is we are not prepared to risk the lives of good friends (both Iraqi and Western) by taking them into Iraq in this present climate. And so, it is with deep regret, and tears in our eyes that we have to inform you all that our planned tour is postponed until further notice. They put all the money they raised for future Iraqi trips in the bank which is funding trips to Palestine and other war children countries."

The British public funded the Circus2Iraq trips through donations.

Don't Shoot the Clowns may be purchased through <http://shop.newint.org>  
Jo's website:<http://www.jowilding.net/>