



## The First Two *Travel Bests*

### BOOK REVIEW

By Ed Rudin, MD



THE BEST AMERICAN TRAVEL WRITING 2000 by Bill Bryson, Editor.  
Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York. 2000.  
ISBN o-618-07466-x; ISBN o618-07-467-8

THE BEST AMERICAN TRAVEL WRITING 2001 by Paul Theroux, Editor.  
Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York. 2001.  
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In his Foreword to the first in this series, Jason Wilson, the series editor, explained his venture into publishing a series of literate essays on travel. It stemmed from his belief that the travel writer in the 21st century has the same job that Marco Polo and Charles Darwin had: to chart and report "this new world in all its rich detail."

Wilson also believes that beautiful travel writing simply picks a place and tells about it, trying not to tell too much. "Having a travel writer report on particular things, small things, the specific ways in which people act and interact," he writes, "is perhaps our best way of getting beyond the cliches."

Bill Bryson, who edited the 2000 edition, reminded us that for a long time U.S. travel books were really guidebooks. The rare travel narrative that attracted critical attention never appeared on the travel shelves of libraries or bookstores, but with current events, geography, or social commentary - unavailable to anyone "less than eight feet tall or lying supine in the aisle." Bryson first saw real travel books, with chapters and a story to tell, gathered in their own section in the United States in about 1990 in San Francisco. He wondered why it took so long.

Other collections of the "year's best this or that" have been around for years. Now, Jason Wilson and Houghton Mifflin are bringing to a nation of immigrants and migrants its first travel anthology. Travel writing by noted British writers has long been a mainstay of British publishing. This may now begin to happen here - just when travel takes us "far beyond the trampled paths of tourism."

Although Bryson personally prefers writings about simple places and ordinary people, his 25 selections in the 2000 volume included such exotic locations as Zanzibar, Cambodia and the Atlas Mountains of Morocco - along with a camping adventure in New York's Central Park.

My favorites were:

*The Nile at Mile One.* Mark Hertsgaard tells of his bus and bike trip tracing Winston Churchill's My African Journey with reflections on Churchill's imperialist views of the Nile Valley, modern technology versus the environment, and the impact of AIDS.

In *Spies in the House of Faith*, Isabel Hilton studies the sad, dangerous, Byzantine struggle between the Dalai Lama and atheist China to choose and anoint a reincarnation of the Panchan Lama, second only to the Dalai Lama. Current events as history.

*The Truck* is heavy with the endlessness of time and place as Ryszard Kapuscinski waits at an oasis in Mauritania and trucks his way across the trackless desert in the unchanging darkness of the night.

*Confessions of a Cheese Smuggler* spins a light hearted Parisian adventure as David Lansing searches for the very rare raw-milk cheese, Epoisses de Buorgogne.

*Inside the Hidden Kingdom* lets Jessica Maxwell describe in rich detail the gardens of the last independent Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas, with its nearly 800 species of birds plus southern jungle animals and northern forests and snow leopards.

*Winter Rules* takes Steve Rushin and us "deeper and deeper into a golfing Heart of Darkness" to play golf 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle, in Greenland. Typical of Rushin's adaptive descriptions: "their mittened applause sounded like a million moth wings flapping."

All this whet my appetite for the second volume and it did not disappoint. Paul Theroux, who edited the 2001 edition, believes that "without fear, travel has no meaning" and that anyone can travel well "if he courts difference and embraces fear and allows the world to work its magic while observing intently."

For Theroux, "Travel writing at its best relates a journey of discovery that is frequently risky and sometimes grim and often pure horror, with a happy ending: to hell and back." For the most part, these 26 stories meet those criteria. Some are also sidesplitting. All are informative. Only a scant few deteriorated into machismo and braggadocio.

A surprising number dealt with the Arctic. Gretel Ehrlich's *The Endless Hunt* recounts a trip with Greenland Inuit's on their spiritual and empathetic hunt for sustenance. Marcel Theroux's beautifully told tale, *The Very, Very, Very Big Chill*, begins with a hilarious encounter in the dark freeze of northeastern Siberia, where "chilly" begins at about minus 60° Fahrenheit and the thermometer this balmy February midnight registers a few degrees shy of minus 40°. Here, in a frontier town in a spaghetti western in the Arctic Circle, he witnesses and describes endless pranks based on the local diet of "frozen raw fish, frozen raw reindeer meet, frozen patties of whipped cream and blueberries, and frozen patties of raw pony liver."

Jason Wilson's *Dining Out in Iceland* is another culinary adventure. It features several Viking feasts of Thorablót, in honor of the pagan god of winter. Wilson tells us more than we ever thought we would want to know about these festive foods, but we enjoy every minute in the company of modern Vikings dealing with modern environmental ambivalence.

Besides the Arctic, we travel to Africa, Central America, Europe and Asia.

*Desperate Passage* tells of Michael Finkel's trip with his photographer and 41 Haitian citizens squeezed and entangled in the hold of a slapped together boat powered only by two sails. Suspense becomes fear as he makes his contacts, helps build the boat, and "books passage" - all before the grim and treacherous journey itself.

*View from the Bridge* opens with Peter Hessler discovering a thief in his \$10 a night, mid-range hotel room and chasing him through the mid-range Chinese city of Dandong, just north of the Yalu River. Thus begins a series of adventures with Chinese socialism sprinkled with capitalism, during which he witnesses the stylized play-acting of spectators on each side of the river, with neon and fluorescence lighting the set below the Yalu and darkness above.

In *Into the Heart of the Middle Kingdom*, Kathleen Lee draws miniature pictures on a huge canvas. The first time she traveled through the vast Sichuan (Szechwan) Province in China, in 1987, she was headed for India. Since then she has returned frequently and learned that, "Visiting a Chinese city is like deboning a fish: If you do it right, it's terrific;

if not, you eat bones." Her story is a boneless fillet of people, places and local events. It is garnished with such useful analogies as, "Long-distance bus travel in China is like Zen meditation: an exercise in uncomfortable concentration." She, however, concentrates us most pleasantly.

In *Miraculous Fishing*, Patrick Symmes is fishing for the wily Latin-American guerrillas out to thwart Clinton's war on drugs in Columbia. Ironies abound, from the bomb dogs in his hotel lobby in Bogota, "eager warriors ... dreaming of biscuits and sniffing for cordite" to a regularly scheduled flight from Bogota into southern Columbia to hire the first taxi driver who calls out, "Do you want to meet the guerrillas?" The informative adventure unfolds from there.

*Is Just Like Amerika* say the Czechs and other Europeans whom Brad Wetzler joins for high jinx beer and sausage weekends in the forests. They are "tramping"; re-living an 80-year history of rambunctious homage to western cowboys and Indians, depression-era hoboes and World War II GIs.

I thank Mariann and John Fisher, MD, who brought this series to my attention. Jason Wilson is their son-in-law, for which they can be proud and I can be grateful.

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