

Issue 2 Volume 2

Loreena's introduction

*By far the best companions I've had when travelling have been books and the enchanting, beguiling, confiding voices of the writers who created them. Not all these texts that I carry, dog-eared and well-loved and crammed into suitcases, have been books of travel writing, of course, but it is true that many of my most enjoyable journeys both actual and imaginative have been taken in the company of the great travel writers. One of my very favourite writers, the Scotsman William Dalrymple, provided great inspiration during the creation of my album *The Book Of Secrets* via his book *From The Holy Mountain*. Since then, I've eagerly delved into his many other excellent works and followed his engaging, erudite and compelling articles for British newspapers and magazines around the world.*

As much of what I attempt to do with my recordings is a kind of musical travel writing – evoking history, places, atmospheres, people and cultures via lyrics and music – I have always wondered how the great travel writers approached their work. I am happy to offer, via this website, an exclusive article from the pen of Mr Dalrymple himself, who generously offers his insights and advice on the craft to would-be travel writers as well as to the rest of us who are content to follow those intrepid literary travellers in our imaginations. I feel certain you will enjoy his account of the travel writer's art as much as I have, and hope that you will investigate his work further via his website and the shelves of your local library or bookshop. - LM

How to Write a Travel Book **by William Dalrymple**

In the summer of 1973, a minor American novelist named Paul Theroux asked his publishers if they would be interested in a book about trains.

Trains – a travel book: it was a novel idea (at least in 1973) and the publishers liked it. In fact, they liked it so much they gave Theroux an advance – his first – of £250. *The Great Railway Bazaar*, an account of a journey from London Victoria to Tokyo Central, was published in 1975. None of Theroux's novels had ever sold in any quantity. But *The Great Railway Bazaar* swiftly moved over 1.5 million copies in 20 languages.

The book did more than revive Theroux's flagging literary career: it kick-started what was to be the most important publishing phenomenon of the 1980s. The success of *The Great Railway Bazaar* inspired Bruce Chatwin to give up his job on *The Sunday Times Magazine* and to go off to South America. The result – *In Patagonia* – was published in 1977, the same year Patrick Leigh Fermor produced his great masterpiece, *A Time of*

Gifts. By the early 1980s, Eland Books were busy reprinting the great nineteenth-century travellers and Thomas Cook had announced its Travel Writing Award. Soon the travel sections in bookshops were expanding from a single shelf at the rear of the shop – somewhere near Photography and Do-it-Yourself – to a whole wall at the shop-front, flanking Fiction and Biography. The final breakthrough came in 1984 with the publication of the famous Travel Writing issue of Granta:

“Travel writing is undergoing a revival,” wrote Bill Buford, Granta's editor, “evident not only in the busy reprinting of the travel classics, but in the staggering number of new travel writers emerging. Not since the 1930s has travel writing been so popular or so important...”

Travel writing was suddenly where the action was, and it remained so for nearly ten years. Among writers the form became popular, for it re-emerged at a time of widespread disenchantment with the novel, and seemed to present a serious alternative to fiction. A writer could still use the techniques of the novel – develop characters, select and tailor experience into a series of scenes and set pieces, arrange the action so as to give the narrative shape and momentum – yet what was being written about was all true; moreover, unlike most literary fiction, it sold.

For the travel writers it was a dream period. At the height of the boom, figures like Theroux or Newby were able to simply jump on a train; on their return, after a quick reworking of their diaries, they could reasonably expect to have a Review Front serialisation and a crop of rave reviews; they might even have a bestseller. No more. A decade later, after several hundred sub-Therouxes have penned rambling accounts of every conceivable rail, road or river journey between Kamchatka and Patagonia, the climate has changed from enthusiasm to one of undisguised boredom.

Theroux was himself one of the first to express his dislike of the publishing Leviathan he had helped create: “Fiction is the only thing that interests me now,” he told an interviewer. “The travel book as autobiography, as the new form of the novel – it's all bullshit. When people say that now I just laugh.”

Travel writers have found to their alarm that Theroux's feelings have increasingly been shared by the critics. While in the 1980s even fairly slapdash travelogues tended to get a warm reception, reviewers have now begun to pillory even the most engaging travelogues. The reaction has yet to filter down from the book pages to the bookshops: the likes of Bill Bryson, Tony Hanks and Dave Gorman continue to dominate the bestseller lists. But what is certain is that travel writing has lost some of its novelty and its chic, that in the fad-conscious eyes of literary London it has begun slipping down the slope from the literary high ground it dominated for a decade.

This backlash is not the end of the line, and it isn't as if this is the first time that travel writing has gone out-of-fashion. Travel writing will emerge from its current gloom, just as it did in the 1930s, but in the mean time the travel writing recession seems to have resulted in a weeding out, a concentrating of publishers' minds. For now that everyone

travels, writing travel books is a much more difficult business than it used to be, and while it's still fairly easy to write a travel book, to write a good travel book now takes real ingenuity. The market in travel books is currently fairly saturated and advising potential literati how to write travelogues is slightly like advising the people of Consett how to become steel workers. However fluent or witty your prose, it is simply no longer enough just to jump on a train, and writers have had to dress up their journeys in some pretty fancy packaging if they want to be taken seriously. Certainly your proposal must be that much more spectacular than it used to have to be: your idea should either be unusually difficult, unusually clever or unusually original.

For the travel book is potentially a vessel into which a wonderfully varied cocktail of ingredients can be poured: politics, archaeology, history, philosophy, art, magic: whatever. You can cross fertilise the genre with other literary forms: biography, or anthropological writing; or, more perhaps interesting still, following in Bruce Chatwin's footsteps and muddying the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction by crossing the travel book with some of the wilder forms of the novel. The result of this tendency has been a crop of one or two rather wonderful books by younger writers: Katie Hickman's travels with a Mexican circus- wonderful idea – Sam Weinberg's quest for the mercenary Bob Denard or Jeremy Seal searching Turkey for the anthropology of the fez. Perhaps the best hybrid travel book is John Berendt's immensely successful *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* – the book is half travel writing and half murder mystery, but wholly enjoyable. The same is true of Norman Lewis war diary, *Naples '44* – a cross between travel writing and military memoir.

To make an impact in a crowded market, these travel writers have been forced to go in deeper than their predecessors, learning the languages, seriously studying their subjects, extending their stays for longer periods: when doing the research for his last book *In An Antique Land*, the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, for example, spent two years in his village, learning not only fluent modern Egyptian Arabic, but going so far as to become one of a handful of living scholars able to read Judeo-Arabic, a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic written in the Hebrew script – and then on top of all that, spent about three years producing a superbly turned piece of prose

* * *

Anyway: enough gloom. Here are some hints on how you can beat the recession and get into print:

1. The concept:

These days you need some pretty fancy packaging: it's simply not enough any more to go off and write a book about travelling through France or Russia or Bolivia, and it's certainly not the time to start putting in proposals about taking a dustbin cart to Borneo, a tricycle to New Orleans or a pogo stick to the Antarctic: the killing-off of the Gimmicks School of Travel Writing is one of the more happy results of the recession – although

Tony Hanks' hilarious parody of that sort of book, *Round Ireland with a Fridge*, is of course one of the bestselling travel books of the last few years.

To write about a country in a very general and unfocussed way, you have to be very good: Thubron can do it, but you have to be very good indeed to write a getting-into-the-soul-of-a-country travel book. An easier, less ambitious – and more commercial- option is the *Relocation Book* – about setting off from London or New York and building a new life for yourself in Tuscany or Spain or Provence. Peter Mayle's *Year in Provence* kicked off a fashion for travel books of this sort and was followed by ex-Genesis drummer Chris Stewart's Andalucian memoir, *Driving Over Lemons* (and its sequel *A Parrot in the Pepper Tree*), Carol Drinkwater's *The Olive Farm* and Frances Mayes' *Under the Tuscan Sun*, all of which got little critical attention but nevertheless turned into major bestsellers.

There is also a more serious strand of travel writing that aims to delve into the soul of a city: my own book on Delhi, *City of Djinn*s was written in the tradition of studies of remarkable cities such as Jan Morris's classic, *Venice*, and Geoffrey Moorhouse's wonderfully apocalyptic *Calcutta*.

If falling in love with a small fragment of the globe is as good a starting point for a travel book as any, then other passions can also provide a good take-off point. Indeed, I think it's fair to say that to be a really interesting travel writer you've got to have some small obsession: Ryszard Kapuscinski loves revolutions and watching dictators fall; Redmond O'Hanlon likes birds, beasts and exotic diseases; Bruce Chatwin was on the lookout for ideas and for nomads. I don't think it really matters what your interest is: stamp collecting, trainspotting, whatever: as long as it's genuine and you can convey your enthusiasm for it, you've probably got the seed of a travel book there.

2. The research:

Increasingly important if your book is to have any sort of authority – although it obviously depends what sort of book you're writing, and in a comic travelogue your ignorance of the country you are travelling can provide the occasion for much humour). For myself: *City of Djinn*s was the product of a couple of years in libraries and archives; *From the Holy Mountain* eighteen months.

A card index is a very useful tool for keeping track of your research. For my last two travel books I kept two card indexes: one with anecdotes and references listed under places and one listed under themes. So for *From the Holy Mountain* one index contained a list of places I expected to pass through on and around my projected route (Istanbul, Antioch, Aleppo, Damascus etc) and the other a list of potential themes, which grew as I read (magic, monks, ghost stories, miracle stories etc). So when I came to write about a place or a theme, I had to hand a long list of the best stories I knew associated with each place.

One other thing: there is no better way to learn how to write travel books than simply to read other travel books. My own personal shortlist of the great travel books would include:

- Robert Byron: The Road to Oxiana
- Colin Thubron: Behind the Wall
- Redmond O'Hanlon: Into the Heart of Borneo
- Jan Morris: Venice
- John Berendt: Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil
- Bruce Chatwin: In Patagonia
- Patrick Leigh Fermor: A Time of Gifts
- Normas Lewis: Naples '44
- Bruce Chatwin: The Songlines
- Jason Elliot : An Unexpected Light
- Philip Marsden: The Bronski House
- Amitav Ghosh: In an Antique Land
- Eric Newby: A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush

3. The journey:

Everyone goes about writing a travel book in a different way. I can only speak for myself when I talk of technique: for me the biggest mistake was to try and keep a logbook when you are exhausted at the end of the day. I think it is absolutely vital to have a notebook in your hands, always, and to scribble constantly: not so much full sentences, so much as lists of significant detail: the colour of a hillside, the shape of a tulip, the way a particular tree haunts a skyline. Creating fine prose comes later- back at home in front of the computer. On the road- even in a rickety bus or a bumpy jeep- the key is to get the raw material down before it is lost to memory.

Getting it down is especially important when writing dialogue- the key to any half decent travel book: you simply can't remember the exact words even half an hour later, never mind at the end of an exhausting day. The travel writers I really admire all keep exceptionally detailed notes: Theroux, Thubron, Chatwin. So the first golden rule is: get it down. If you can't write down dialogue immediately, or openly, find some stratagem to get around the problem: I know one travel writer who pretends to have a bad stomach and therefore has an excuse to keep disappearing into the lavatory in order to get down dialogue in customs posts and police stations where openly taking notes would be impossible.

Dialogue is the heart and soul of modern travel writing, for if 19th century travel writing was about principally about place – about filling in the blanks of the map and describing remote places that few had seen – 21st century travel writing is all about people: exploring the extraordinary diversity that still exists in the world beneath the veneer of globalisation. As Jonathan Raban once remarked: “Old travellers grumpily complain that travel is now dead and that the world is a suburb. They are quite wrong. Lulled by

familiar resemblances between all the unimportant things, they meet the brute differences in everything of importance.”

The second golden rule is to try and enjoy yourself. If you lose interest in your own journey, the reader can tell it immediately and soon loses interest himself. I think this is what went wrong in Thubron’s *Lost Heart of Asia*. Travel writing is quite a lot about escapism, and no one really wants to read someone having a really dull and unpleasant time for three hundred pages (which isn’t to say that the reader doesn’t quite enjoy it when someone who has just been sitting on a paradise island surrounded by beautiful Gaugin girls falls down and breaks his leg.)

The third golden rule is to be open to the unexpected. Often one can set oneself a task – to go and search out some aspect of a particular place -- and not notice good material if it’s not what one is looking for at that moment. An example: in 1990 I went up to Simla to interview two old “stayers on” who had lived in Delhi in the 1930s and who would, I hoped, be able to recreate that lost world of the Raj for me. In the event, however, I arrived ten years too late: both the old ladies had gone badly senile and now imagined that they were being persecuted by Jewish prostitutes who popped up from beneath the floorboards and put dope in their food. I failed to get anything at all useable about 1930s Delhi, and left the old ladies disappointed and dejected that I had wasted an afternoon. It was only later when I told my wife Olivia about the meeting that she pointed out that the bizarre afternoon would in fact make an excellent sequence in itself. It duly became one of the very best – and much the strangest – sections in *City of Djinn*s. If the art of travel writing is at least partly all about spotting the significant moment and discarding the irrelevant, then you have to be constantly alert, and it’s often at the most unexpected moment that the crucial, telling incident takes place.

In the same way, you often come across the best stories when you last expect them: when you have ticked off your interviews and visits for the day and settle down to have a drink in a bar or have dinner. So often it’s exactly when you close your notebook and settle down to relax that you stumble across the most intriguing characters and funniest anecdotes.

A final rule: when you are taking notes, make sure you try to capture all the senses. When you write about place, don’t just give a physical description of somewhere: try to capture significant sounds and smells and the physical feel of a place. Also how your body responds to a particular location: in a hot climate, the roll of perspiration down the forehead, the grit of sand in your shoes, the grind of cicadas or the smell of frying chillies can recreate a sense of place much more immediately than a long physical description.

The same is true of building up a character: the way someone smells, or the timbre of their voice can help visualise a person much better than a lengthy physical description. Most important of all is dialogue: a well-chosen snatch of conversation can bring a person to life in a single sentence.

Here are some of my own personal favourites – examples of exceptionally good evocations of place or people.

For a short and perfect evocation of a city, look at Bruce Chatwin's description of Buenos Aires at the beginning of *In Patagonia* (p7). For a totally different approach – as wonderfully purple as Chatwin is sparse – see Patrick Leigh Fermor's description of walking through a German winter in *A Time of Gifts* (p117-8). Also by Leigh Fermor in the same book, see his spectacular description of Melk cathedral (p167-9) – one of the most amazing pieces of architectural description I know of.

For bringing a character to life in a single page, take a look at John Berendt's description of the Lady Chablis in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, p96-8, or two passages by Bruce Chatwin in *In Patagonia*: the hippy miner (p54) and the Scottish farmer (p66-7). Then there is Eric Newby's famous description of the explorer Wilfred Thesiger on p246-8 of *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*.

4.The writing:

Everyone has their own rhythm. When I am steaming away actually writing a book – a process that takes me anything between nine months and two years – I tend to be unusually disciplined: getting up early, finishing email and chores by 8.30am and at my desk writing by no later than 9.30 am. I break for lunch, go for a walk and then come back and go through a print-out of the morning's work at teatime, and continue correcting and planning the next day until seven-ish. My wife Olivia is incredibly good at making suggestions and telling me when what I have written is boring or could be improved. If your partner is no good at this, find a friend who is. Going over and over and over a piece of prose until it is as perfect as you can make it is as important as anything else in the formation of a book.

5.The selling:

Find an agent for this: never try to do it for yourself. If you know any writers, however distantly, ask them for an introduction to their agent. Otherwise look in the *Writer's Yearbook*. Send a well-written covering letter plus a four or five page synopsis of the plot with a little biographical paragraph about yourself, asking whether the agent would like to look at the finished manuscript. During the 1980s it was possible to get book contracts and advance payments before you had actually written your travel book. These days, that is less and less likely to happen, and the writing of a book is, by its nature, a big financial gamble. Only go ahead with the project if you are really passionate about it. But if you have something to say, don't despair and don't let early rebuffs from agents or publishers put you off: if you can make it work, travel writing is one of the most enjoyable and stimulating lives imaginable- especially when you are young and single and able to leave home for great chunks of the year. Go for it!

Exercise:

Spend a day on a bus or a train with a notebook and practice getting down as much detail, and using as many of your senses as possible. Get used to making conversation with your fellow travellers, finding out their life stories and writing down the conversation as they speak. Fight your own shyness: it's only by engaging with strangers that you will find out their stories: the heart of modern travel writing.

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