



The Best American Travel Writing 2009

Simon Winchester (Editor) , Jason Wilson (Series Editor)

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Acclaimed writer Simon Winchester brings his keen literary eye to this year's volume of the finest travel writing from the past year. "Full of insights, humor, the exotic and distant, and the ordinary and near" (*Library Journal*) this collection finds "a perfect mix of exotic locale and elegant prose" (*Publishers Weekly*).

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Mara says

This compilation of American travel writing was disappointing to me. While there was something new and unique to learn from each story, I found it to be an overall plodding read. Not that anything was outrightly bad, just that the writing and topics didn't absorb me or pull me in as I had expected.

The notable exception was *Hotels Rwanda* which was both eye opening in its descriptions of a beautiful country of which the genocide is only one part of the story and intimate in its search for the real amongst the virtual.

Christy says

I won't describe all of the book's 25 essays here, but I will highlight the best of the lot. Strangely, it seemed to me that the best essays were located in the first half of the collection.

Not so surprisingly, the very best essay, Patrick Symmes' "The Generals in Their Labyrinth" is the first one. Even Winchester remarks in the introduction that Symmes' essay "is destined to be ranked among all-time great magazine essays."

In "The Generals in Their Labyrinth," Symmes visits the country of Myanmar (Burma) in April 2008. From the beginning of the essay, I was hooked and I'll show you why:

"There never was a man on the ferry to Pakokku, and he didn't say what he said. I didn't meet Western diplomats from three nations. Not for coffee. Not for drinks. Not in the official residence, with rain and palm fronds pelting down, just hours before the storm hit.

I didn't talk with the country's most distinguished astrologer or its worst comedians. Nobody from any NGO's helped me, either. If I had tea with a prominent intellectual or lunch with a noted businessman, nothing happened. I was just in Burma – sorry, I mean Myanmar – to play golf and look at the ruins.

The boy monks never cried and begged me to conceal their names. At the monastery in Pakokku, they never told me anything at all.

I wasn't there when the storm hit. There was no cyclone. I didn't see anything."

Whew. How could I resist such an opening? The rest of the essay details Symmes' observations of the repressive Burmese regime, and includes his visit to their newly built capital city, Naypyidaw.

One of my other favorite essays was Jay Kirk's "Hotels Rwanda." An excellent blend of humor and compassion flavors his writing. I also loved that he had, and wrote about, his travel companions – people who had previously been strangers. Here is a small excerpt from the essay about the group's first sighting of giraffes, a part that made me laugh out loud:

"With their black-and-yellow fur, their stubby horns like eye stalks, and the way they move, lurching almost aquatically, they look like gigantic, yet infinitely graceful banana slugs ... They are so strange-looking. Despite their apparent benevolence, it is not a stretch to imagine laser rays shooting from their eyes, scorching everything in sight."

Other notable essays include:

"Intimacy" by Andre Aciman (Rome)

"Who is America?" by Chuck Klosterman (Germany)

"A Dip in the Cold" by Lynne Cox (various Arctic locations)

"Mississippi Drift" by Matthew Power (the Mississippi)

"The Deeds" by Tom Sleigh (Lebanon)

"You Do Not Represent the Government of the United States of America" by Daniel Alarcon (Syria)

Cyndi says

Of course I didn't like every essay, but I'm glad I read it if only for the final essay in which a group of US writers go on tour in Syrian. So interesting to read, especially in light of subsequent events.

Gerald Sinstadt says

The tenth year of this anthology is a beguiling mix of insight and idiosyncratic exploration. The chosen contributions first appeared in publications both internationally prestigious (The New York Times Magazine, National Geographic, GQ, Esquire, etc) the locally perceptive (The Virginia Quarterly Review) and the electronic (Slate.com). The quality of the writing is generally estimable and the desire to communicate palpable.

There are pieces that verge on political analysis - Roger Cohen on Cuba, for example, or Dimitar Kenarov revealing more than enough about Bulgarian gypsies. And there are delightful excursions that might be flights of fancy were they not happily quirky reportage: salivate with Calvin Trillin's ode to Texas BBQ, thrill with Jay Cowan following the ski trails of James Bond, or empathise with Patrick Symmes as he struggles to build the cabin of his dreams in remote Argentina.

There is something - or somewhere - for every armchair escapist. And only the authors get bitten by mosquitoes.

Colette says

I always love these 'Best American' series. To call this travel writing is a bit misleading, since many of the

articles would be better called journalism. The essay on Burma was fantastic. Essays on Cuba, Lebanon and Bulgarian Roma were also pretty damn enlightening.

Adam says

Maybe I'm a little burned out on these anthologies - this was good, but took me forever to finish as I slogged through some of the more boring pieces. The ones on the Middle East and Africa were the most engaging; in particular, Daniel Alarcon's closing piece on then-peaceful Syria is a chilling prelude to civil war. A decent introduction to some of these writers if nothing else.

Mary says

Yes, I desperately need a vacation, but this entry in yet another series that I had been ignoring (at my peril) helped tide me over. Some favorite pieces: Seth Stevenson on the hidden meanings of Disney World, Jay Kirk on the precarious present of Rwanda, Caroline Alexander on a swamp full of hidden tigers in Bangladesh, Paul Salopek on the nature of the Sahel in Africa, and Mark Schatzker on the surprising differences between cruising the Pacific and the Atlantic. I liked this volume so much I'm following up with the 2008 volume.

Stephanie says

This collection of essays and magazine articles is interesting; I didn't love it, but I was interested to read at least half of the chosen pieces. I think having the accompanying photos (at least from the magazine articles) would have lifted my enjoyment level, but I understand how that's not feasible given printing costs.

I would try another of these collections, though I would not force myself to read each piece.

Manuel says

I have discovered a bias. I skip stories about Africa, they bore and depress me and I have trouble *caring*. I favor stories about Asia and America. Europe is hit-or-miss.

The Tigerland story was good. And the Cuba story was very good. And the one about the river country from the movie Deliverance. Good too. Otherwise, meh.

Jrobertus says

I wanted to see if Winchester was as goo at editing as at writing, and he is! There were a lot of interesting stories here. I particularly liked "Mississippi Drift", "Mecca of the Mouse", Bolivi a's Wrestlers", and "a Tale of Two Crossings". These essays are just the right length to read before sleep.

Brandy says

Eh. I figured the editor was a douchebag while reading his introduction to this book, and he really only reaffirmed that opinion throughout the course of the book. Not only did his glorifying of colonialism rub me the wrong way, but his idea of travel writing and mine are completely different. For me, travel writing is the exploration of a place (or places) through the traveler who pays attention to the juicy details and also the impact of that experience on him/herself. For this editor, sometimes travel was just a history of a place; sometimes travel was people self-exploring while paying no attention to the PLACE they were, and sometimes they were just plain boring or confusing. My travel companions need adventure; I'm living vicariously through them--duh! The only gem in this book was "Hotel Rwandas."

Lisa says

Excellent writing.

Cheryl says

Heh, 3.5 stars if GoodReads had such a thing

I tethered with the rating on this one because some of the essays were non-memorable and almost boring, not bothering to uncover the travel experience through narrator experience and setting authenticity.

Yet some were indeed memorable. Like:

1. "A Dip in the Cold" by Lynne Cox: first published in The New Yorker and catalogs her experience while swimming portions of the Northwest Passage, from Greenland to Alaska, using Roald Amundsen's (the endurance athlete who quit medical school to study polar explorations and in 1897, served as a second mate on the Belgian Antarctic Expedition) account of his journey as her guide. Cox, an endurance swimmer, wanted to test whether her body "could tolerate extreme cold." This essay takes you on her journey with setting, dialogue, people, experience.
2. Hotels Rwanda: interesting mixture of voice and scope, as well as juxtaposition of the Rwandan countryside and the tourist experience of the narrator and his group of friends. The descriptions were beautiful and authentic, the history of the country's most turbulent time carefully adhered to in this piece.
3. You Do Not Represent The Government of The United States: Seven American poets, novelists, and journalists traveled the Middle East. As part of Iowa University's International writers program sponsored in part by the U.S. State department, they were expected to tour various universities in the region and have brief meetings with other intellectuals in the area. Though they were clearly warned that in no way, were they to give the impression that they were representing the U.S. government. The most interesting part of the essay for me was the tone: interestingly light and factual, starting with Daniel Alarcon wondering if he even knew what he was doing on the tour, ending with his explanation of the tone he observed within the Middle East, and some facts surrounding places like, the Old City of Damascus for example.

Laura Jordan says

My favorite pieces from this volume:

Frank Bures, "A Mind Dismembered" (Nigeria)
Tony Perrottet, "The Pervert's Grand Tour" (France)
Lynne Cox, "A Dip in the Cold" (Greenland/Canada)
Matthew Power, "Mississippi Drift" (Mississippi River)
Seth Stevenson, "The Mecca of the Mouse" (Disney World)
Calvin Trillin, "By Meat Alone" (Texas)

Sarah Romero says

I teetered between giving this book three or four stars. I gave it four stars because it's an anthology, and, as such, it's going to be a mixed bag for all readers that will appeal and disappoint depending on what essay you're reading and your individual taste. Go into this book knowing you'll love some essays and hate others.

There are three essays in particular that caught my attention, for different reasons:

1. "Game Over, Perseverance, All I Want Is Everything," by Dimiter Kenarov. Writing about the Roma in Bulgaria, Kenarov's descriptions of this subculture's poor living conditions left me wanting to know more. Unfortunately, the end of the essay fell flat and didn't do the rest of his piece justice. The last few sentences make me think Kenarov was fast approaching his deadline and just needed something, anything, even a cliché, to end his essay.
 2. "The Cabin of My Dreams," by Patrick Symmes. Oddly enough, I just happened to read this essay while vacationing in a cabin near Yosemite, the same one that began my dream to live simply in a (somewhat) remote cabin nearly 6 years ago. The difference between Symmes' cabin dreams and my own is that I don't want to build mine with my own hands, and his essay reaffirms this for me.
 3. "A Tale of Two Crossings," by Mark Schatzker. Good travel writing, at least in my mind, fits into two categories: that which brings about social and political awareness; and that which inspires others to visit the place they're reading about. I find the former to be necessary and important; but I find the latter the most exciting to read. "A Tale of Two Crossings" was my favorite piece from this book, prompting me to quickly, and quite literally, add "take transoceanic trip on an ocean liner" to my list of things to do.
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