

Bad Trips

THE ART OF TRAVAIL IN TRAVEL WRITING

by John M. Edwards

Lately the trend in literary travel writing is that the best of times is the worst of times. We all secretly relish the bad trip, especially when it's somebody else's. The gist of anthologies—*Danger!* (Travelers' Tales, 978-1-885211-32-3), *I Should Have Gone Home* (RDR Books, 978-1-57143-107-3), and *By the Seat of My Pants* (Lonely Planet, 978-1-74104-606-9)—is that we prefer disaster stories of struggling to rescue lost luggage, haggling with crazy taxi drivers, battling golf ball-sized bugs, and eliminating nauseating food. In fact, the very word *travel* derives from *travail*: to suffer or endure.

From Homer's *Odyssey* to Homer Simpson, bad trips make us blow up with laughter and exhaust. As the Tarantino thriller *Hostel* showed us, mixing the European Grand Tour with *grand guignol*, it is now officially a dangerous world. Literary travel has become more edgy, sophisticated, self-referential, and way darker. Most good stories involve *frisson*: something goes wrong. My short-lived zine *Unpleasant Vacations: The Magazine of Misadventure* specialized in such dangerous delusions. In one apocryphal tale, I was rescued from a New Zealand mountain hut by a Brit with khaki Tintin shorts: none other than Bruce Chatwin! So a chance meeting made me stop traveling to collect countries, and start traveling to write about them. I had become, as Barton Fink crazed, "A Writah!" As in any *bildungsroman*, overcoming adversity is the spam and bugjuice of the postmodern travel essayist.

But please forgive me. I still haven't read *On the Road* or *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I am, however, rereading Larry Dean Olsen's *Outdoor Survival Skills*. Olsen, a proponent of Stone Age living, writes: "A survivor also possesses a utopian attitude....He makes even the most miserable existence seem like millennial splendor."

Brazilian Adventure, by Peter Fleming (James Bond-creator Ian's brother), is one of the best adventure travel books ever written. Every travel tome since the 1930s pays lip service to it. Fleming, in search of the missing explorer Colonel Fawcett, elocutes, "Otherwise, beyond the completion of a 3,000-mile journey, mostly under amusing conditions, through a little-known part of the world, and the discovery of one new tributary to a tributary to a tributary of the Amazon, nothing of importance was achieved." Understatement.

Road warrior Tim Cahill (*Jaguars Ripped My Flesh* and *Pecked to Death by Ducks*) says, "Danger compels us to commit philosophy, and in a big damn hurry to

boot!" No surprise then, when I met Redmond O'Hanlon (*In Trouble Again*) in New York, he displayed a souvenir from a malaria-mad Congo trip gone wrong (*No Mercy*): a preserved monkey's finger. This drives home the terrifying adage from the "The Monkey's Paw": be careful what you wish for.

As far as wish-fulfilling prophecies go, the saddest trip I can think of is *The Worst Journey in the World*, about Robert Falcon Scott's Antarctic journey, where he froze to death after becoming the *second* man to reach the South Pole. Meeting Sebastian Junger, owner of Manhattan's Half King Bar, I couldn't help but think the same thing about *The Perfect Storm*: the ultimate sense of tragedy comes from knowing in advance the unhappy ending.

And so what if Robert Young Pelton's *The World's Most Dangerous Places* is a hit. The new travel books are more "survival kits" than portraits of place. The point is: while braving bad food, head lice, genital crabs, dysentery, undependable transport, terrorist tour guides, and swarthy strangers demanding to "change money," we submit to an epiphany surviving fiascos. If Sherpa guides drag you toward sheer drops, dismemberment, or worse (spiritual oblivion), just flip through Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet* or Peter Mathiessen's *The Snow Leopard*. Fear is the ultimate aphrodisiac.

Even Paul Theroux—whose classic *The Great Railway Bazaar* coined the verb "duffill," *to be left behind on the platform by your train*—is guilty of being a danger addict. When not riding around on trains with "tourists" and "travelers," the intrepid Theroux pampers himself in the chic shangrilas of Cape Cod and Maui. Nobody remembers postcardy "dream vacays"—long days beachside with a P.G. Wodehouse novel, perfect weather, impeccable service. Bad trips drive home the fact that maybe (secretly) *agents provocateurs* would rather stay home on the couch with a pretend cold watching *Desperate Housewives*. ■

John M. Edwards has traveled worldwide (five continents plus). His work has appeared in CNN Traveller, Missouri Review, Salon.com, Grand Tour, Islands, Escape, Endless Vacation, Coffee Journal, Adventure Journey, Verge, North Dakota Quarterly, Borderlines, Michigan Quarterly Review, and North American Review. He recently won a NATJA (North American Travel Journalists Association) Award and a Solas Award. He lives in New York City.