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The Best American Travel Writing 2015



Synopsis

In his introduction, guest editor Andrew McCarthy says that the best travel writing is that of the anonymous and solitary traveler capturing a moment in time and place, giving meaning to his or her travels. • The stories in *The Best American Travel Writing 2015* demonstrate just that spirit, whether it is the story of a marine returning to Iraq a decade after his deployment, a writer retracing the footsteps of humanity as it spread from Africa throughout the world, or looking for love on a physics-themed cruise down the Rhone River. No matter what the subject, the writers featured in this volume boldly call out, "Yes, this matters. Follow me!" • *The Best American Travel Writing 2015* includes Iris Smyles, Paul Theroux, Christopher Solomon Patricia Marx, Kevin Baker, Benjamin Busch, Maud Newton Gary Shteyngart, Paul Salopek, and others ANDREW MCCARTHY, guest editor, is the author of the *New York Times* best-selling travel memoir *The Longest Way Home*. He has served as an editor at large at *National Geographic Traveler* and been named travel journalist of the year by the Society of American Travel Writers. He is also an actor and director. JASON WILSON, series editor, is the author of *Boozehound: On the Trail of the Rare, the Obscure, and the Overrated in Spirits* and the digital wine series *Planet of the Grapes*. He has written for the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Philadelphia Daily News*, and many other publications. He is the founding editor of *The Smart Set* and *Table Matters*.

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Customer Reviews

This year's collection of "The Best American Travel Writing," brings together twenty-four travel essays that will take the reader from Alabama to Timbuktu, and carry them there by train, ship, skis (in North Korea) and on foot. The book is edited by Jason Wilson and Andrew McCarthy (yes, that one) who states in the foreword that while reading travel writing, his reaction is: "Tell me a story, don't sell me a destination," and for the most part, the essays included do that admirably. Personal favorites include: "The Happiness Metric" by Madeline Drexler. A look at Bhutan's conception of "Gross National Happiness," how this is used to settle daily debates on what is best for the country, and how it coexists (surprisingly to outsiders) with more Western materialism. "Daughters of the Springs," by Lauren Groff. A look at a Florida water park and the women who perform as mermaids there also becomes a meditation on the origin of mermaids and the ways people are uncomfortable with women with power. "Tales of the Trash," by Peter Hessler. The author profiles an Egyptian trash collector, Sayyid Ahmed, who is illiterate but keeps track of over 400 customers by memory alone. "Mr. Nhem's Genocide Camera," by Lauren Quinn. The author describes how she (mistaken for a rich American) is invited to participate in the funding of a Khmer Rouge genocide museum featuring Pol Pot memorabilia. "Behind Closed Doors at Hotels" by Gary Shteyngart. After noting the phenomenon that he only hears enthusiastic sex next door when he's traveling alone in hotels, the author explores the differences in various chains he's stayed at. (This was the only piece I found too short.) "Ship of Wonks," by Iris Smyles, describes how a physics-themed cruise the author took partly in hopes of finding romance, turned out differently. "Soul of the South" by Paul Theroux takes the reader into the Deep South and focuses on the topics of civil rights, unemployment and civic service by interviewing many of the people he encounters there. Overall, a collection worth reading and re-reading.

Every year I look forward to this series. It makes for pleasurable winter reading for an armchair traveler. This year was no exception. It was a bit of a surprise, though, to discover the author of "21st Century Limited" to be so left-leaning as these essays tend to be apolitical. "Berlin Nights" was an eye-opener and "Tales of Trash" took me on a fascinating journey through the streets of Cairo. The final essay, "Soul of the South" is a poignant tale of a road trip through the rural South. It was beautifully written with insight and love. It was my favorite.

This year's travel writing is guest edited by Andrew McCarthy and it's a fat collection of over 300 pages, many of the pieces quite long. It's mostly from the usual sources, several articles from The New Yorker and Outside, a few from The New York Times Magazine, Smithsonian, National

Geographic. Only one of the pieces is from an online-only publication (JMWW), which seems odd in 2015. I understand that the guest editor selects from a larger list of essays that the series editor provides, and this larger list contains all of two articles from online-only publication. In any case, this volume has a nice variety of articles, ranging around the world and featuring travelers rather than adventurers, so it's light on tales of derring-do or voyages to the bottom of the sea and such. Instead we get Peter Hessler profiling his trash collector in Cairo, Kevin Baker travels around the U.S. by train, Stephen Connely Benz makes us glad we are not in Moldova, Patricia Marx sets sail on an anti-luxury cruise aboard a freighter, Tim Neville goes to a ski resort in North Korea. Tony Perrottet visits a vineyard in China, Rachael Maddux returns to Dayton, there are two articles exploring Timbuktu, and Gary Shteyngart stays in his hotel room. Paul Theroux previews his latest book *Deep South*. And my favorite was the short and elegant essay about Iris Smyles' science-themed cruise. Enough variety to satisfy most travel writing fans.

I've grown leery of "best of this" and "best of that" books, but this year's best of travel is a pretty terrific collection. Timely and trimmed of excessive, selfie digressions, most stories tap into key global issues that get ink on newspapers' front pages. The best of the lot use personal narrative to fill in gaps that simply can't be filled by front page journalists -- the writers synthesize past and current experiences into then and now scenarios with greater wisdom for having known both. On the downside, every story is written to sound the same (syntax, cadence, etc). It removes writing from art and makes it craft with strict guidelines; it gets tiring if you read cover to cover. Also, one writer is jarring in her romanticization of a group of desert people that charmed her (conveniently omitting that group's role in modern day slave trade). That said, this year's batch is still a catch. One feels richer for having spent time between the pages.

Did not know what to expect, but McCarthy chose well. He has earned his second career, and could clearly have made it his primary path. Pieces on the middle east mix with fluff about hotel sex, and it all works. Up there with Kincaid and Mayes for readability and flow of the selections.

I have read many travel books and this is the worst travel book I have ever read! Especially awful was political shaming of the rail system in America. How low can one go? Don't label this a travel book- it's an "axe-to - grind" book, and a terrible one, too.

Dissappointed that this tome includes stories I had read in "Best Women's Travel" yet it includes

stories I would not have chosen for myself. Being able to see the world through another's eyes, opens the mind to possibility.

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