

According to Nobel, such gigantic structures are built for only two reasons: “to make money, responding to existing demand, or to advertise and flaunt the money one already has.” Tellingly, six of the 10 tallest buildings in the world are in China, and in booming Shanghai nearly 100 buildings over 500 feet tall were built in the past decade. The twin Petronas Towers, which took the world’s-tallest title from the Sears Tower in 1998, “were built primarily to make visible the roar of Malaysia’s Asian Tiger.” A planned new tower at the Shanghai World Financial Center, though it will not surpass the Burj Dubai, may reach 2,200 feet and snatch “Asia’s tallest” back across the Taiwan Strait.

The original catalyst for skyscrapers was population density, Nobel says. “Limited space to build forced land values, and therefore building heights, through the roof.” Such forces still drive some of the megabuildings in the high-

growth cities of Asia. Not so in the Middle East, where oil-rich countries such as Dubai are building big partly just to make a statement. But the Burj Dubai project will also make money. “It filled in three days when space went on sale several years ago,” says Nobel.

Commercial success often eludes such huge projects; the Petronas Towers, for example, “didn’t make a dime, and they still stand largely vacant.” Likewise the Empire State Building “so outstripped economic necessity that for years it was referred to as the Empty State Building.” More often, Nobel concludes, “we see the most primal motivation for skyscraper construction: to stake a claim, to mark the land, to show how your power (read: money) can change the world. . . . Nothing says ‘I am the master of the universe’—the natural, societal, and financial universes—more clearly than the erection of a tall building.”

ARTS & LETTERS

Mind Traveling

THE SOURCE: “Head Is as Good as Feet” by Mark Lawson, in *The Guardian*, Feb. 9, 2007.

“WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW.” IT’S the gospel preached in today’s many fiction-writing workshops. The reading public’s appetite for nonfiction—biography, memoir, histories of everything—also encourages novelists to rely on factual material. Imagination, once free to roam distant continents, is relegated to conjuring up the interior life of the odd character. Obviously made-up stories risk consignment to “slightly disreputable bookshops, or academic categories called ‘fantasy’ or ‘magic realism,’” writes *Guardian* commentator Mark Lawson.

Occasionally, however, a book tacks against the prevailing literary winds. This year, debut novelist Stef Penney won Britain’s prestigious Costa Book of the Year Award (previously the Whitbread Prize) for *The*

EXCERPT

Latin Divorce

A certain issue prowls the tricky by-paths of Latin American culture: the abysmal contradiction between its social and political reality and its literary and artistic production. . . . While cultural elites were modernizing, opening themselves to the world, renewing themselves by constant intercourse with the great intellectual and cultural centers of contemporary life, Latin American politics, with

very few exceptions, remained anchored to an authoritarian past of caudillos and cliques who practiced despotism, looted public funds, and kept economic life frozen in feudalism and mercantilism. A monstrous divorce resulted: Small redoubts of cultural life—tiny spaces of liberty left to their own fate by a usually dominant political power that disdained culture—stayed in contact with modernity, evolving and producing writers and artists of high quality, while the rest of society remained practically immobilized in self-destructive anachronism.

—MARIO VARGAS-LLOSA, novelist and former Peruvian presidential candidate, in *Salmagundi* (Winter–Spring 2007)

Tenderness of Wolves, a murder mystery set in snowy 19th-century Canada. Penney, a former agoraphobe, hadn't spent a minute on Canadian soil. She researched the story entirely at the British Library. And she isn't the first Costa/Whitbread winner to substitute a library card for a passport. For example, Sid Smith won the 2001 Whitbread First Novel Award for *Something Like a House*, set in China during the Cultural Revolution. Smith had never been to the country.

But there are limits to the imagination, Lawson says. Historical fiction must, of necessity, rely upon the mind of an author—often stocked with armchair research. However, “realistic contemporary fiction benefits from

We shouldn't be surprised when writers astound us with worlds they build entirely in their fertile minds.

having been there. A clever writer can fake it from printed sources—few readers could have guessed that Sid Smith was a stranger to China—but his writing style is impressionistic. A more documentary prose-stylist needs a few jabmarks in the arm.”

The disrepute into which Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* has fallen in some circles tracks a growing cultural prejudice against novels that depart from autobiographical or journalistic models.

Bellow had never been to Africa when he wrote the book, about a millionaire who finds spiritual inspiration among primitive African tribes. “Bellow's book, broadly accepted at the time of its publication in 1959, came to be regarded by some as contemptuous or even frankly racist,” Lawson writes.

The vivid, concrete fiction of “traveler-novelists” such as Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and their contemporary counterparts John Le Carré and Paul Theroux can't be duplicated with a sun-dappled imagination. But we shouldn't be surprised when writers astound us with worlds they build entirely in their fertile minds. Where their heads can take them, Lawson concludes, “is finally more important than where their feet did.”

OTHER NATIONS

Why China Won't Be No. 1

THE SOURCE: “The Sources and Sustainability of China's Economic Growth” by Gary H. Jefferson, Albert G. Z. Hu, and Jian Su, in *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, No. 2, 2006.

WILL CHINA OVERTAKE THE United States to become the world's largest economy? At \$2.2 trillion (in 2005), it is already the fourth largest, behind Germany, Japan, and the world leader, at \$12.5 trillion, the United States. If China can sustain its nine percent annual growth rate of the past two decades, versus the U.S.

rate of about three percent, it will catch up in 25 to 30 years.

Don't hold your breath, say economists Gary H. Jefferson, Albert G. Z. Hu, and Jian Su. China's surge is almost entirely the product of rapid gains in industries along the Chinese coast. That growth is likely to slow as their productivity catches up with that of the rest of the world. The remainder of China's economy is growing much more slowly.

China's growth is “being

driven by the ongoing reduction of two productivity gaps,” the authors say. One is the gap between industries in thriving coastal cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou and the international economy. The other is the gap between those booming industries and the rest of the Chinese economy, including non-coastal industries and the nation's large and lagging services and agricultural sectors. About 80 percent of China's workers are employed in this “other” economy.

Compared with South Korea and Taiwan at similar stages in their development, “China leans more heavily on its coastal industrial economy for overall catch-up,” Jefferson and colleagues say.