

Now, Voyagers

TRAVELS WITH A TANGERINE:

Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah.

By Tim Mackintosh-Smith. Welcome Rain. 351 pp. \$30

THE STONE BOUDOIR:

Travels through the Hidden Villages of Sicily.

By Theresa Maggio. Perseus. 288 pp. \$25

FATHER/LAND:

A Personal Search for the New Germany.

By Frederick Kempe. Indiana Univ. Press. 339 pp. \$17.95 (paper)

THE BEST AMERICAN TRAVEL WRITING 2002.

Edited by Frances Mayes. Houghton Mifflin. 351 pp. \$13 (paper)

Reviewed by Lis Harris

Is travel, as Mark Twain assures us, “fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness?” For Twain, it probably was. You have only to read his astonishingly adulatory essay about Versailles to grasp the mental gymnastics that must have gone into his peons-bedamned appreciation of the place. But the record shows that it is not travel per se but the traveler who creates a view of the world. Herodotus’ account of the wars between the Greeks and Persians, for instance, is rife with confirmations of the author’s prejudices. War may be a special case—the individuality of the enemy must be wiped from a soldier’s mind if he is going to kill. But even in less charged circumstances, I’ve had as many prejudices confirmed as dispelled in foreign places. Yet the power of travel to amaze, distract, solace, refresh, jumpstart the imagination, and transform Weltschmerz into Weltkitzel (world tickle) remains incontrovertible.

But travel writing is another matter. Travel writers often seem like spiders spinning out their lives from a constantly extruded thread of likes and dislikes. The genre has more in common with autobiography than other forms of writing, so no matter where your guide transports you, you soon grasp that you are not so much in any real Walla Walla as in a particular person’s Walla Walla—a place you might or might not find congenial.

A recent engagement with a spate of travel books only rarely induced in me a desire to pack up and seek out any of the mountain eyries, Saharan sands, or exotic bazaars described, even when they were lyrically evoked. When the caliber of the writing was high, however, I did sometimes find myself thinking that the writer would be good to know and that a conversation at a café in one of his or her favorite destinations would be rewarding.

One of the most congenial travel narrators of the recent crop is Tim Mackintosh-Smith, whose erudite and droll *Travels with a Tangerine: A Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah* follows the first leg (from Tangiers to Constantinople, now Istanbul) of a famous voyage undertaken by the great 14th-century traveler (and Tangerine, or person from Tangiers) Ibn Battutah, who supposedly traversed a distance three times that traveled by Marco Polo. IB, as the author refers to him, produced a lively account of his journey, which Mackintosh-Smith juxtaposes with his own observations of life nowadays along the sites of IB’s pilgrimage. A youngish Brit who studied classical Arabic at Oxford University, Mackintosh-Smith, like his mentor, headed east to the Arab world when he was 21; his first, much-admired book was *Yemen: The Unknown Arabia* (2000).

Sometimes the best traveling companion is a dead one, as the flap copy points out. Mack-

intosh-Smith provides a wealth of amusing quotations from IB, bringing to life his adventures in the Egyptian desert, at Syrian castles, in the Kuria Muria Islands of the Arabian Sea, and in urban centers of medieval Islam. IB traveled more than 25,000 miles by foot, mule, ox wagon, dhow, and raft, and his encounters with nearly every illustrious person of the age, as well as with shipwrecks, pirates, court cabals, and the Black Death, occupied 29 years of his life. Though the time frame of Mackintosh-Smith's journey is unspecified, he thinks of it, he tells us, as "a sort of Proustian inverse archaeology. Instead of recreating past lives by examining objects and places, I would start with a life—IB's—and go off in search of its memorabilia, fragments of existence withdrawn from time." His 14th-century model, a kind of scholar-gypsy, was more interested in people than places and was apparently blessed wherever he went by favorable receptions from sultans and sheiks (which was especially good when you consider what unfavorable receptions might have entailed). He rarely left a city without having bestowed upon him a camel or two, a horse, an extra travel guide, or a beautiful robe.

The tone of Mackintosh-Smith's journey is considerably grottier, to use one of the Britishisms that not-too-intrusively pepper the text. Instead of reading about the distinguished sultans, poets, geographers, and astronomers encountered by IB, we are treated to a wonderfully odd assortment of booksellers, mullahs, everyday Arab folk, eccentrics, and elderly keepers of shrines, tombstones, and the Islamic flame. Forewarned about the dangers of a certain body of water or political climate, he shortcuts his itinerary and travels by plane. But he never loses sight of his quarry's footprints, and when he comes upon the familiar-looking outline of a hill or the shell of a monastery wall or a medieval fragment incorporated into a mosque that he has read about in IB's narrative, he is exultant: 14th and 21st centuries in perfect confluence.

Though we are constantly at the author's side as he clammers over walls and tromps through rock-strewn fields, we nonetheless finish the book knowing very little about his background or the general shape of his life. This somewhat severe reticence results in occasional peculiar passages—for example, when a

generous and friendly older scholar asks if he is aware of the power of a certain aphrodisiac popular in the Arab world, Mackintosh-Smith replies that he wouldn't know since he isn't married. In a book with fewer acute observations and less depth, this Apollonian reserve might grate. Here, one merely notes it and pushes forward to the next magnificent citadel.

Theresa Maggio's *The Stone Boudoir: Travels through the Hidden Villages of Sicily* is a more familiar sort of narrative. The author, an American of part-Sicilian descent, seeks out long-lost relatives, falls in love with the remote mountain towns of her ancestors, and settles in for longish sojourns far below the tourist stratum. Her status, somewhere between besotted amateur ethnographer and tolerated foreign intruder with blood ties, grants her special privileges. Unlike most of her cloistered female relatives, who even today remain shuttered in houses or in narrowly prescribed jobs, Maggio is allowed to jump on motorcycles and venture, pencil in hand, wherever curiosity takes her.

If Mackintosh-Smith's delight in the sights and sounds of the desert and the metropolises, however genuine, is secondary to his pleasure in romping around in his own mind, Maggio lingers longer with people, displaying so much affection that she all but effects a chromosomal exchange with them. Still, her narrative remains informative and extremely well written. She is best at capturing the locals, particularly those who live on the slopes of Mt. Etna, and their hard life, ancient superstitions, and strong customs, such as assuming that everyone has a right to *prendere cinque*, or "take five," which conveys, in local parlance, that once a day anyone can totally lose it and let off steam.

Arriving at Polizza Generosi, she remarks that it "felt like an old-growth forest: silent living things with deep roots." The tiny town is high up a sheer cliff, and just as she repairs to a local bar to take in the view, a cloud envelops the mountain and she is "lost in luminous mist." Most of the places she visits are a lot earthier, and so are the people, such as the relative who insists on teaching her, on the first day of her visit, the nonsense verse "*Meroda friottai alla baraobai di chi l'ha scriottta*." Take out all the o's, he tells her, and you have: "Fried shit on the beard of him who wrote this."

The new tension between the travel writer's rather anarchic mission to sniff out the curious and compelling, wherever it lurks, and our increasingly disturbing global perils, does not necessarily change the imperatives of the genre. But it does make a book such as Frederick Kempe's *Father/Land: A Personal Search for the New Germany*, which is not exactly a travel book but rather a thoughtful memoir and meditation on the new and old Germanys, particularly welcome. Kempe, an American editor and associate publisher of *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, instructively interweaves his family history (his parents were born in Germany) with a kind of spiritual voyage around Germany and among Germans, young and old, to learn how modern history has affected the county and how the past provides some sense of the nation's future. Kempe's strong reportorial skills and firm grasp of the historical background make this a fascinating book.

Perhaps the excellent *Best American Travel Writing 2002* features two essays explicitly dealing with the events of September 11 out of its editor's concern that, without them, the anthology might appear to be ignoring the tragedy. One of them, by Scott Anderson, about his experience as a volunteer grunt near the World Trade Center, is cliché-free and moving; the other, by Adam Gopnik, aestheticizes the day's events to no apparent purpose. Neither, however, has *any* real claim as "travel" writing. But the collection does include nearly every sort of true travel writing: high culture, low culture, adventure stories, spiritual quests, political journeys, and on and on, demonstrating that the field for good writing in this genre is no longer, as it was for a very long time, monopolized by the British.

André Aciman's "Roman Hours," a celebration of the deep satisfactions of his own private Rome, nicely elucidates what every site-dazed traveler has eventually learned—that "despite untold layers of stucco and plaster and paint slapped over the centuries on everything . . . despite the fact that . . . so many buildings are grafted onto generations of older buildings, what ultimately matters here are the incidentals, the small elusive pleasures of the senses." "Postcards from the Fair," by Kevin Canty, provides a funny, warm appreciation of Mississippi's Neshoba County Fair, the world's

largest and oldest campground fair—part family reunion, part old-fashioned carnival with rides, part six-day drinking party, part political stumping ground, and part Wagnerian barbecue pig-out. In "Forty Years in Acapulco," Devin Friedman renders homage to the travel customs of a passing cadre, those elderly, sun-worshipping folks "not of the SPF generation." Friedman wittily and affectionately describes the gear and routines—30 pairs of new swim trunks with matching tops, five pairs of white shoes, an insistence on staying in the same room every year—of his 89-year-old grandfather, Mort Friedman (otherwise known as Mort the Sport, the Window King of Cleveland), Mort's elderly girlfriend, and their *copains*, they of the deep tans, flowing pool gowns, and \$100 trays of salami and pastrami.

D. H. Lawrence complained three-quarters of a century ago about the galloping herd of travelers who had the most superficial grasp of where they had been: "Poor little globe of earth, the tourists trot round you as easily as they trot around the Bois or round Central Park. There is no mystery left, we've been there, we've seen it, we know all about it. We've done the globe and the globe is done." The more we know horizontally, he suggests, "the less we penetrate vertically." Lawrence believed that earlier generations, with their capacity to feel awe before new sights, were really better off. The *Best American* collection would have heartened him, however: There's awe here aplenty, and such essays as Kathleen Lee's lyric, beautifully pared-down explorations of Hanoi and Saigon, "The Scent of Two Cities," and Edward Hoagland's "Visiting Norah," which sensitively reveals the world of an elderly Ugandan woman and the five orphaned grandchildren in her care, sink heart and soul into their subjects.

These essays, like much of the best travel writing—and unlike the handful in the collection that are either Byronically self-romanticizing, unfocused, or spiritually pumped up—remind us of the world's vastness, of what we can't possibly know except firsthand. They also bring home the reality that we're as likely nowadays to scrutinize the headlines for itinerary guidance as our grandparents did their Baedekers.

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