

Travel Writing – Books for Brown in France, 2009

## RECOMMENDED READING From Catherine Watson

There is no *required* reading for this class, but I recommend that you read at least four from this list. My personal favorites are starred.

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### A MANUAL OF ADVICE

**“Travel Writing,”** by Don George (Lonely Planet, 2005, ISBN 0-86442-742-5). The best – THE best – and most complete handbook for travel writers, by a master of the art. It covers everything from personal mindset to marketing, with excellent examples, plus a list of Don George’s favorite travel books. A new edition is due out in 2009.

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### TRAVEL ESSAY COLLECTIONS

**“A House Somewhere: Tales of Life Abroad,”** edited by Don George and Anthony Sattin (Lonely Planet, 2002, ISBN 1-74059). This belongs to both travel writing and house memoir.

**“Wanderlust: Real Life Tales of Adventure and Romance,”** edited by Don George for Salon.com (Villard, 2001).

**“The Road Within: True Stories of Transformation,”** edited by James, Sean and Tim O'Reilly (Travelers' Tales Guides, 1997, paperback; ISBN 1-885211-19-8). The most spiritual of the many essay collections in the Travelers' Tales series.

**“Best American Travel Writing,”** a series of annual paperbacks, begun in 2000, by Houghton Mifflin. [One of the instructor’s essays is in the 2008 collection in this series.]

**“The Best Travel Writing: True Tales from Around the World,”** another annual series, begun in 2005, published by Travelers' Tales. [The instructor also has an essay in the 2008 collection.]

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### TRAVEL MEMOIRS

**“Serpent in Paradise,”** by Dea Birkett (Doubleday, New York, 1997; ISBN 0-385-48870-X). Well-written, highly detailed, on the oddest bit of real estate in the world: Pitcairn Island. It's also one of the few travel books that made me want to skip the journey. What (or who) is the real serpent here?

**“The Road to Oxiana,”** by Robert Byron (Oxford Univ. Press, N.Y., paperback; first published 1937, new edition 1966, current one 1982, still in print). A classic “search” book (as in the quest for the Holy Grail). It took the writer about three years of painstaking work to achieve that off-hand tone.

\* **“The Emperor's Last Island: A Journey to St. Helena,”** by Julia Blackburn (Vintage Departures, a division of Random House, New York; 1991, paperback ISBN 0-679-73937-8). One of my favorites,

but some people hate it. An odd and haunting book, it alternates between telling the story of Napoleon's last years and the writer's trip to the island of his captivity.

**“The Piano Shop on the Left Bank: Discovering a Forgotten Passion in a Paris Atelier,”** by Thad Carhart (Random House, N.Y., 2001; ISBN 0-375-75862-3). Don't be fooled by the Paris references. It's mainly a journey inside the writer, and it's interesting even if you don't know a sharp from a flat.

**“What Am I Doing Here?”** by Bruce Chatwin (Penguin, 1989; ISBN 0-14-011577-3). Sooner or later, every travel writer asks that question; few answer it this well. You have to be a little careful with Chatwin, though: His writing's wonderful, but often, as he admits here, “the fictional process has been at work.”

**“Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji – On Finding Myself in Japan,”** by Cathy N. Davidson (Dutton, 1993, paperback ISBN 0-525-93707-2). Essays on the bittersweet difficulties of fitting in, in a country where even residency isn't enough to teach a foreigner all the rules.

\* **“This Cold Heaven: Seven Seasons in Greenland,”** by Gretel Ehrlich (Vintage Books, 2001; ISBN 0-679-75852-6). Even though I read it in the midst of a Minnesota winter, this book made me want to go to Greenland. It's stunningly lyrical without being overdone.

\* **“The Great Plains,”** by Ian Frazier. (Penguin paperback, June 1990, ISBN 0140131701.) As fine an interweaving of history, landscape, travel narrative and personal encounter as you can find.

\* **“Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood,”** by Alexandra Fuller (Random House, 2001; ISBN 0-375-75899-2). A fascinating memoir of a dysfunctional family in too many dysfunctional landscapes. The author's parents farmed in Africa, and her childhood was fraught with fears, including death by terrorism. The title refers – not to dogs – but to her difficult mother.

**“Theatre of Fish: Travels through Newfoundland and Labrador,”** by John Gimlette (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005; ISBN 1-4000-4322-0). A complex account of a peculiar region, in the hands of a master storyteller. You may not care about these places to start with, but the writing will make you care. There are gems of language on every page.

\* **“The Royal Road to Romance,”** by Richard Halliburton. (First published 1925; subsequent hardbounds by Bobbs Merrill, with many hardbound and paperback editions since then.) For middle-class Americans in the 1920s and '30s – when mass travel was mainly immigration from the Old Country – Halliburton's name meant travel and adventure. The tone of this, his first and most popular book, will tell you why he captured their imaginations: He encouraged them to dream.

\* **“A Moveable Feast,”** by Ernest Hemingway (many editions, still in print; most recent is probably Touchstone Books, ISBN 0-684-82499-X). Papa remembers being young in Paris and teaching himself to write “one true sentence.” Still a classic.

**“Falling Palace – A Romance of Naples,”** by Dan Hofstadter (Knopf, 2006, ISBN 0-375-41440-1). The author is in love with both a city and a mysterious woman, and in the course of getting his heart broken, the two loves become symbols for each other. In other hands, this could've been chick lit; here, it's a window into a man's heart.

**“High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never,”** by Barbara Kingsolver (Harper Perennial, 1995; ISBN 0-06-092756-9). Some of these are fairly standard travel articles dressed up as travel narrative, but the best of them are haunting.

**“Blue Highways: A Journey into America,”** by William Least Heat Moon (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1982; ISBN for hardbound edition 0-316-35395-7). A travel book of the “foreign legion” type, where the trip is undertaken to get over a personal disaster. In this case, the writer loses himself in other people’s lives and stories on the nation’s backroads.

**“Time Was Soft There: A Paris Sojourn at Shakespeare and Company,”** by Jeremy Mercer (St. Martin’s Press, 2005; ISBN for hardbound, 0-312-34739-1). A young man’s account of literally living at the most famous English-language bookstore in the City of Light. Hemingway knew its founder, and it’s been a mecca for American writers ever since, though Papa might not recognize it now.

**“The Names of Things,”** by Susan Brind Morrow (Riverhead Books, 1997; ISBN 1-57322-027-2). About the author’s many sojourns in Egypt, why she loves it, the solace it gives her after grief, the strain it eventually puts on a brand-new marriage, and the tension between “home” and “away” that most long-haul travelers feel but seldom write about.

\* **“The Root of Wild Madder: Chasing the History, Mystery and Lore of the Persian Carpet,”** by Brian Murphy (Simon & Schuster, 2005; ISBN 0-7432-6419-3). This only seems to be about carpet-making, though it is a detailed but human account of every step from sheep to merchant (including the plant called madder which imparts a rosy red). Along the way, it is also a remarkable glimpse into daily life in contemporary Iran and Afghanistan.

\* **“Sea Change,”** by Peter Nichols (Penguin, 1997; ISBN 0-14-026413 2). Not all voyages are good ones. This single-handed sailing trip is very bad indeed. But the writing and pacing are splendid. Nichols even manages to be pull off sustained present tense, which normally is exhausting to read. This is also one of the rare sailing books that non-sailors can relish.

**“Me Talk Pretty One Day,”** by David Sedaris (Little, Brown; 2000 hardbound. ISBN 0-316-77772-2; paperback 2001, 0-316-77-6963). A collection of essays, mostly travel, mostly about France, mostly funny -- but also well-crafted, often with an edge.

\* **“The Caliph’s House – A Year in Casablanca,”** by Tahir Shah (Bantam Books; 2007 paperback. ISBN 978-0-553-38310-2). An excellent profile of Moroccan culture, told through the guise of a house memoir. It manages to be illuminating, disturbing and surprisingly funny. Simply a great read.

**“Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes,”** Robert Louis Stevenson. (Many editions; try The Marlboro Press/Northwestern, Evanston, Ill., 1996; paperback, ISBN 0-8101-6006-4.) Stevenson’s works include some of the best travel literature ever written. This one, about a youthful trek in France, is still a gem.

**“Beyond the Earth and the Sky,”** by Jamie Zeppa (Riverhead Books, 1997; ISBN 1-573-22-118-X). A young Canadian woman’s account of her teaching experiences in eastern Bhutan, this is a well-drawn portrait of culture shock and its consequences.

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## VICTORIAN LADY TRAVELERS

A sub-genre of travel books. Two of the best – and best known:

**“Travels in West Africa”** by Mary Kingsley (Everyman Press, paperback, most recent edition, 1998; ISBN 0-460-87394-6). She explored the region for the British Museum

**“Between the Desert and the Sown -- The Syrian Adventures of the Female Lawrence of Arabia,”** by Gertrude Bell (paperback, Cooper Square Press, reprinted 2001, ISBN 0-8154-1135-9). Once the highest ranked woman in government service, she played a major role in the creation of Iraq.

See also anything by Isabella Bird or Freya Stark.

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## TRAVEL PAIRS

These books can stand on their own, but I've paired them because they involve either similar subjects or similar approaches. If you read one, try to at least skim its mate.

\* **“The Great Railway Bazaar,”** by Paul Theroux (There are many editions of this classic; any will do.) The author sets out to travel around the world by rail. (Or come close.) Theroux avers that he wrote the book while he lived the trip. Do you believe him?

**“The Size of the World,”** by Jeff Greenwald (Globe Pequot Press, 1995; ISBN 0-345-40551-X). This is Paul Theroux's “Great Railway Bazaar” 20 years later: A surface trip around the world in the age of the laptop. Check the beginning and end against Theroux's. Greenwald must have enjoyed this stunt.

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**“A Time of Gifts,”** by Patrick Leigh Fermor. (Viking, paperback; ISBN 014-004-9479). A vivid account of a young man's journey on foot from Holland to Istanbul, just before World War II. Beyond fine writing, what makes this amazing is that it was written a lifetime after it happened. See also his sequel, **“Between the Woods and the Water: On Foot to Constantinople,”** based on a journal he lost on the trip – and got back by chance, *40 years later*.

**“On Foot to the Golden Horn,”** by Jason Goodwin (Henry Holt paperback, 1995, 0-8050-6409-5). As the previous pair proves, it's never too late to do the same book. But 60 years make a difference: This is a dreary journey, and the hikers, though young, lack the grace, enthusiasm and talent of their predecessor.

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## OF TIME AND THE WRITER

The passage of time makes a difference to all of us, travel writers included: Retracing a youthful journey late in life doesn't – can't – yield the same results. The places will have changed and so will the writer's mind, body, even soul. There's a palpable difference, for example, between Mark Twain's caustically exuberant tone in **“The Innocents Abroad”** and his later book, **“Following the Equator.”** There's a similar difference between Paul Theroux's **“The Great Railway Bazaar”** and his 2009 **“Ghost Train to the Eastern Star.”** In both cases, about 30 years elapse between each writer's first and second journey.

If you have time and want a really interesting contrast, read all four and compare Twain's personas with Theroux's. What do the changes in their public voices suggest about the private changes they have endured? Are they more or less self-focused, when older, than they were when young? Which is the more generous persona?