

A novel way to

ADV REVIEW DATE: 5-MAY-2007 PAGE: W-14 ED: STATE COL: C M V K



Out of South Africa... children in Blambay.

SOMETIMES the trips not taken are better than those that one actually takes. Do you not agree?" Thus Alexander McCall Smith, speaking through one of his characters. McCall Smith himself has been one of a multitude of novelists who have illuminated the world for me without my even having to leave home.

With passionate partiality, insight and humour, he has instructed me in the manners and mores of Botswana, on the one hand through *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* and of Edinburgh on the other, through prim, nosy Isabel Dalhousie's Sunday Philosophy Club and the marvellously mixed tenants of 44 Scotland St.

One of the greatest compliments we can pay a novelist is to congratulate them on their sense of place, on the way in which they have managed to build up the experience of a locality so that the reader takes it away with them, assembling an array of images, an angle of light, an atmosphere that continues to come into the mind when that locality is mentioned or that particular book remembered. It is something, I guess, that travel writers hope to achieve. For me, it comes far more powerfully from novels.

It started in childhood. My most enduring images of the English countryside come from *The Wind in the Willows*, and my best-loved place in North America, thanks to early exposure to *Anne of Green Gables*, is Prince Edward Island, although my desire to see it for myself is so far unfulfilled.

Australian places came a little later. A slim book by Dymphna Cusack and Florence James called *Four Winds and a Family* was immediately memorable as a rare picture of my own holidays in a cottage in the Blue

Armchair traveller KATHARINE ENGLAND has ventured far from home to the places conjured in works of fiction.

Mountains, right down to the terrifying, gum-leaf-fed chip heater over the bath.

Nan Chauncy's novels - *Tangara* has just been re-released as a UQP Children's Classic - introduced me to the Tasmanian wilderness: a damp, green impression of tree ferns and tangled rainforest foliage that lasted into adulthood, to be reinforced by Richard Flanagan (particularly in *Death of a River Guide*) and Julia Leigh (*The Hunter*). Leigh adds button grass and snow gums, a pine-rimmed lake and the last Tasmanian tiger; Flanagan myrtles and flowering leatherswoods, Huon pine loggers and the tumultuous world of the Franklin River.

The rainforest of Far North Queensland, on the other hand, comes courtesy of Janette Turner Hospital, decked out in staghorn ferns and cobalt-coloured quandong berries, tree orchids that festoon the stilts of a tropical house like burning, and wet-season downpours that make it seem as if you're living in a grotto behind a cascade. Sugar cane colonises the playground in the growing season, and mists the air with molasses as crushing time so that the local children "lick sugared air from their tips" (*Orpheus Lost*).

Central Australia has been painted for me quite recently by Meme McDonald (*Love Like Water*) and Jo Dutton (*Out of Place*) in terms of heat, desert, distance and the dry Todd River with its Aboriginal flotsam camped in the warm sand. The vast emptiness of the Nullarbor was brought to life through the eyes of a railway fettle - his gaug's tiny presence in that immensity memorably described as a couple of untidy scrawlings on a thin straight line - in an unusual 1986 novel called *The Camberran*, by Rupert Parsons.

while the alien landscape of the West Australian desert from Perth to Kalgoorlie has been brilliantly realised in *The Drowner*, Robert Drewe's haunting homage to the great water engineer C.Y. O'Connor.

Drewe's main characters are a young couple newly, joyfully in love, and he conveys them to their future in the desert by way of an Africa contrarily replete with water and water imagery. He quotes Philip Larkin among his watery epigraphs. *If I were called in / to construct a religion / I would make use of water...* and sets a whole water symphony against the dryness that is to come, invoking the ancient irrigation terraces of Inyanga, Livingstone's great Victoria Falls, plunging "in a thick unbroken fleece into the deep fissure"; water vapour glimmering in lunar rainbows, and the comforting, habitual patter and gurgle of streams reproduced with the humbly on little hollow-boxed water pianos.

My first glimpse of Africa was born in the achingly beautiful prose and heart-breaking circumstances of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, read first at school and many times subsequently and never without a lump in the throat: *There is a lovely road that runs from Lepopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it. The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carisbrooke, and from there, if there is no mist, you look down upon one of the fairest valleys in Africa.*

A more recent but no less disturbing picture - often weighted with allegory - can be found in the South African novels of John Coetzee.

East Pakistan, now Bangladesh - its sights, sounds, weather and smells - has a place in my personal geography thanks solely to WA

This week's selections

From Argentina on horseback, to Beijing's avant-garde art scene, the racetracks of country Australia and a safari



On a Hoof and a Prayer

Memoir ★
Polly Evans, Random House \$24.95

What starts out with the promise of a high-spirited romp through Argentina turns into a laborious stint in the saddle. At 34, Polly Evans ventures to the land of gauchos to learn how to ride a horse. She overcomes initial fears and sore bones to become quite the cowgirl but you don't feel the highs and lows of her trots or the freedom of her canters. Mostly her book is a detailed history lesson and a diarised account of where she goes, what it looks like and who she meets along the way. Unfortunately, not much is brought to life despite overdone, flowery descriptions. There are many references to the ordinary events that may have touched Polly's heart at the time but that add little colour or character for readers. Much time is spent lamenting the fact that she can't find any horses to ride.

CJ



Unforgettable Islands to Escape to Before You Die

Travel ★★★
Steve Davay and Marc Schlossman, Random House \$49.95

If you have ever dreamed of escaping from reality to an exotic island (and who hasn't?), this is the book to get your hands on. The latest in the successful *Unforgettable* series, is a collection of 40 islands from around the world, supported by some breathtaking pictures. Some of the more unique islands include Mount Desert Island in Maine in the U.S., Socotra in Yemen and landmark Mount Saint-Michel in France. The book details the history of the French tidal island, which looms over the Normandy countryside and is dominated by a steeped church and a Benedictine abbey. High-profile political prisoners were kept here during the French Revolution, but today you will be more likely to find the alleyways full of tourists.

JH



Meetings with Remarkable Muslims

Travel ★★★
Edited by Rose Baring and Barnaby Rogerson, Eland \$39.95

The starting point for this intriguing collection of travel writing was the protest marches in London against the invasion of Iraq. Appalled at the "half-truths and manufactured fears" used to justify the war, and media images of fanatical Islam, Rogerson and Baring felt compelled to "offer a broader, truer picture". Despite the anti-war sentiment that was the impetus for the project, there is no political agenda evident in the pieces themselves. Nor are the subjects political. Rather than leaders, preachers and revolutionaries, we meet ordinary people who are extraordinary for the impact they had on the writers. They offer memorable insights into the world of the millions of Muslims who do their best to lead normal lives in troubled times.

DB



China Travel Set

Travel guides ★★★★★
LUXE Asia Ltd \$37.95

Sassy, stylish and - best of all - small, the LUXE guides are available singly or as boxed sets like this one. Each city is covered in a concertina of 10 pocket-size, cardboard pages crammed on both sides with small-print tips that distill the best - or, so the publishers promise - of the 21 mostly Asian cities they cover. Like the Wallpaper guides, these are not aimed at budget travellers - "people who wear their luggage". While the attractions are necessarily urban, it's not all hotels, bars and restaurants. The Hong Kong guide, for example, notes that more than 40 per cent of the city is protected parkland, and lists guided walking and kayaking tours, even picnic caterers - to help you enjoy it. There are detailed guided shopping tours - even names of who to ask for when you get to that special shop.

DB