

CHAPTER FIVE

Feature Section Specialties

Jim Molnar, a travel editor at *The Seattle Times*, makes a distinction between travel writing and travel guide writing. The 1980s brought us the resurgence of travel writing, which at its best is feature writing that makes the leap to great literature. Just as in any other kind of writing, it demands hard work and research, plus an extra dose of integrity in a field where special interests are constantly trying to exchange freebies for favorable writing. Of course, the best guard against this is to reject the freebies and write it as you see it.

The Art of Travel Writing

Jim Molnar

Of all the romantic myths surrounding the role and work of the travel writer, the most mistaken is the one that supposes that she or he is somehow exempt from the responsibilities of other journalists and from the travails of other travelers.

While travel writing does allow—in fact, demand—greater flexibility in form and style than, say, conventional feature writing in most contemporary newspapers, it's bound by the same compulsions: accuracy and fairness, thoroughness of observation and research, and conciseness of expression.

And while travel writers with legitimate markets may find more

doors open to them than average tourists — government bureaus and the tourism industry are only too willing to curry good press — the best writers find that only by traveling as their readers do, or would like to, can they develop the kinds of features that meet the highest standards of their craft: the kinds of features that sell.

Successful travel writers must realize that the avocation requires two basic skills, neither of which is easy to master and the effective combination of which is rare.

First, and truly foremost, they must know how to travel. That doesn't mean just going on vacation. It doesn't mean just finding a good hotel or restaurant in a foreign capital. It doesn't mean simply venturing off the beaten track any more than it means toeing the line that tourism promoters have drawn to standard and manufactured attractions. It doesn't mean insisting that the world meet one's expectations. It doesn't mean sifting, like some itinerant miller, the wheat of a trip from the chaff, then baking it into some idealized memory for a movable feast.

Traveling is a way of thinking and seeing, a way of relating honestly to the world and the people in it, a way of accepting the world on its own terms.

Second, obviously, travel writers must know how to write — not just gather information, not just observe, not just describe, and not just put together a lucid sentence.

Writing, travel writing in particular, is a way of evoking an experience in the world. It's a way of re-creating in literate and literary prose not a place, but a thoughtful and intimate appreciation of a place, and the physical, social, political and cultural forces that form it and distinguish it.

All good writing implies an intensely personal relationship with a reader, an acknowledgment at least of the writer's and reader's mutual humanity. A good travel narrative focuses that consanguinity on a shared desire to understand not just a particular destination, but our place in the world at large.

Any travel writing undertaken without those skills and that sense of responsibility, I think, is doomed to disappointment.

Freelance Opportunities

Certainly, making a living as a travel writer is easier when you can arrange and finance your trips from a desk at an established maga-

zine or metropolitan newspaper. Especially now, as more publications ascribe to ethics policies that preclude features subsidized to any degree by a tourism bureau or the tourism industry, the freelancer faces an uphill journey.

But why should a travel writer, any more than any other professional in literature or journalism, expect an easy, uncomplicated or lucrative future? This is a tough way to make a living — a tough field to break into.

I was a writer long before I could afford to become a traveler. I struggled academically with poetry and prose, playwrighting and story telling, then taught literature and writing part-time. I stumbled accidentally into journalism as a way of financing the peanut butter and beans I needed to stave off starvation. After working at a series of small daily newspapers as a reporter covering education, politics, the arts and general features, I became a city editor and a writing coach. A couple of years on a metropolitan newspaper's copy desk put me in position to compete for a rare opening in a travel department with a staff of three.

Making proposals for perhaps a half-dozen major trips a year, I can expect assignments for two or three of from two to three weeks' duration each, based on the needs of my newspaper, schedules and budgets. Each trip yields from two to four lead articles accompanied by color photographs, plus any number of secondary features and columns. Turnaround time, from the date of my return until a story's publication, can range from a few days to several months.

In any given week at *The Seattle Times* travel desk, we receive more than 30 unsolicited manuscripts from freelance travel writers. Some are trying to make their living at the craft; most are casual, at best occasional, writers and photographers who have packaged the events of a vacation for sale. *The Times*, with its two travel sections a week, represents a standard market in metropolitan dailies of regional scope. We publish an average of three to six freelance features a month, including those by our own staff reporters from other news and features departments — about 3 percent of what we receive. The pay, based on onetime publication rights, is competitive: generally from \$200 to \$375, extra for photographs.

To understand what *The Times* — and most other publications — are looking for, it can be helpful to look at travel writing in an historical and literary context.

Historical Roots of Travel Writing

A hundred years ago, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, travel writing was one of the most respectable, distinctive and distinguished forms of popular literature. As both a journalistic and literary form, it reflected a new energy flowing through Western civilization. For the first time, traveling was the province of not only the upper classes and of explorers patronized by aristocrats and merchants and colonial powers, but of an increasingly affluent middle class with leisure time flowing from society's democratization and industrialization.

The most respected poets, novelists and essayists of the day were among its practitioners, and created what still rank as classics of the travel-writing genre: Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry James, D.H. Lawrence.

Like Tennyson, in the voice of Ulysses, these writers were possessed of a need to fling themselves and their readers into a wide world newly vulnerable to general inquiry and observation—"I cannot rest from travel: I will drink / Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed life / Greatly . . ."

Like Mark Twain, the common people found themselves in the role of "Innocents Abroad." Both from their libraries and living rooms and in the embrace of tour groups devised by Thomas Cook and other entrepreneurs in the vanguard of mass tourism, they could experience a world that previously was a realm of fantasy. Honest shock and enthusiasm were common tones in the "literature of place," as in this passage narrating Twain's cruise into the Golden Horn and his first impressions of Constantinople:

Ashore, it was—well, it was an eternal circus. People were thicker than bees, in those narrow streets, and the men were dressed in all the outlandish, idolatrous, extravagant, thunder-and-lightning costumes that a tailor with the delirium tremens and seven devils could conceive of. . . .

The shops here are mere coops, mere boxes, bathrooms, closets—anything you please to call them—on the first floor. The Turks sit cross-legged in them, and work and trade and smoke long pipes, and smell like—like Turks. That covers the ground. Crowding the narrow streets in front of them are beggars, who beg forever, yet never collect anything; and wonderful cripples, distorted out of all semblance of

humanity, almost; vagabonds driving laden asses; porters carrying dry-goods boxes as large as cottages on their backs; pedlars of grapes, hot corn, pumpkin seeds, and a hundred other things, yelling like fiends; and sleeping happily, comfortably, serenely, among the hurrying feet, are the famed dogs of Constantinople; drifting noiselessly about are squads of Turkish women, draped from chin to feet in flowing robes, and with snowy veils bound about their heads, that disclose only the eyes and a vague, shadowy notion of their features. . . . A street in Constantinople is a picture which one ought to see once — not oftener.

In that so-called Golden Age, the Western travel writer's voice came to carry exotic sights and sounds and odors from the perspective of a culture settling into a world it had just about finished colonizing. The writer didn't simply observe and reflect, she or he tended to evaluate, compare and judge. The writer sometimes became a contentious and aggressive consumer of foreign places and cultures — someone at often uncomfortable odds with a new and very big world.

From the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, mass tourism began to shrink the world. Guidebooks proliferated: Baedeker and Fielding, Fodor and Frommer. But these presented less travel writing than catalog journalism: lists of attractions, hotels and restaurants with a tad of history and a smattering of practical advice for tourists who were starting to leave the tour buses but still covering the same old ground.

As tools for tourists they had — and still have — their merits, but guidebooks never have been the medium for true travel writing. They simulate travel writing, as, says historian/essayist Paul Fussell, tourism simulates travel ("It is to travel as plastic is to wood."). Guidebook prose doesn't evoke a sense of place; it tends to subordinate the individual, both the traveler and the native of the host culture, and the ideal of personal experience to broad-brush, panoramic description; it tends to elevate the familiar, the conventional, the common experience.

As tourism became more subject to the exigencies of mass marketing, only a relative few practitioners of the travel-writing craft persisted, writers such as Hemingway, Capote, Kazantzakis, Lawrence Durrell, and Jan Morris — and they found only a limited outlet in a handful of magazines.

Whereas travel dispatches had been a staple feature of major newspapers before World War II, from the late 1950s through the

early 1970s newspaper travel sections became extensions of advertising departments. The stories became largely promotional pieces wrapped around ads and often subsidized by airlines, hotel chains and tourist bureaus.

But all that has been changing. The successful travel writer is one who is responding to those changes, and in some senses leading them.

Surveys during the past several years have indicated a number of trends: Travel and tourism have become one of the largest, if not the largest, industry in the world — employing one in every 16 workers in the world and accounting for more than \$3 trillion in revenues annually, according to the World Tourism Organization.

More people are traveling independently than ever before, choosing more adventurous itineraries to more remote and exotic destinations as Third World nations open their doors to visitors. Domestically, the affluence of middle-class professionals who compose the bulk of the traveling public, combined with their more stringent schedules, has created a trend toward more, albeit shorter, holidays. Americans are more often turning away from urban destinations toward beaches and less-developed areas, such as national parks and forests.

At the same time, more high-quality travel writing is being published now than perhaps ever before, both for tourists and armchair travelers. Travel books — novels and personal narratives — are a booming trend. And, with a raft of new travel-oriented magazines and the refocusing of many newspaper travel sections, travel writers are starting to find a more active marketplace. As author and travel writer J.D. Brown puts it: “. . . the '80s may well be remembered as both the Era of Travel and the Era of Literary Travel.”

Travel Writing Guidelines

What does all this mean for the would-be travel writer? How can she or he catch a corner of the wave? To what are publishers, editors and readers responding?

Here are some guidelines:

First, remember that your writing must be very good. Standards are high these days, in part because there is so much writing to choose from.

Quintessential practitioners such as Jan Morris, Paul Theroux

and the late Bruce Chatwin have gone to lengths to disassociate themselves from the term "travel writer," hoping to distance themselves from the standards and guidebook formulas of the 1950s and 1960s. They want to be known and judged simply as writers who employ the devices and conventions of the novelist and storyteller in the "literature of place."

A good travel story is just that: a story, with all the plot and tensions and sophistication that it implies. A story is, for all that, a simple thing. It generally is about a person reacting to circumstance, to a place, to other people. For the travel writer, that main character is often her- or himself. It is through the writer's emotional response to a place that the reader becomes involved, gains insight, and is able to savor a taste of a destination.

Travel writers who overreach, who attempt to define a place based on a few days or even weeks of observation and experience, tend to lose their own perspective—not to mention the reader—in a bog of generalizations. Just tell what happened, what you saw and felt. As in the Twain passage on Constantinople, that means using detail to evoke rather than simply describe: to show rather than tell. As any good writer knows, the successful travel writer learns that his most effective tool is the verb, not the adjective.

Take this passage from a piece on Ireland by Mike Nichols, humor columnist with the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*:

Geographically, Ireland is an island rumped and ridged. It is an island of sharps and flats—the topography rises and falls, like the notes of an Irish jig. . . . You can drive north to south, tip to tip, in a day.

But that would be living on American time. On Irish time, the same trip takes longer. So slow down. Match your metabolism to the pace of a gray old squire as he strolls along some village high road, walking cane in hand, glen-plaid cap on head. Match your heartbeat to the 4/4 time of an Irish ballad. . . .

Pack a poet's paraphernalia in your bags when you go. Take a trope or two for the road: Metaphor, simile, eponym, metonymy, even a judicious hyperbole now and then—they all have their place in this literary journalism. Let a single detail create an entire panorama.

Because a story without people in it usually isn't much of a story, the travel narrative that depends on descriptions of buildings and landscapes, city streets and bus routes, becomes plodding. Populate your stories with the people you meet along the way.

Often, the most successful travel feature is a simple account of a serendipitous encounter with a character you have met—a dialogue that encapsulates and illustrates your impressions of a place, evoking an emotion or spirit that lets the reader share your relationship with a land or culture.

Bob O'Sullivan, a highly successful travel writer frequently published in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Seattle Times* and other newspapers, focuses his narratives on other tourists. The technique, applied sensitively, gently, emphatically, can allow readers to see themselves—their virtues and their foibles—in relation to places they travel.

Most of my trips for *The Times* have been to Europe. The stories I've been happiest with have centered on people: the peasants I stopped to talk with in a sugar-beet field in Romania, who shared their lunch with us under the chestnut trees that lined a dusty Moldavian road, who gave my young son a ride on the back of an ox; the Gypsy women in Sofia, Bulgaria, who, keening wildly, chased me several blocks through the marketplace for suggesting that I take their photograph; Shamus, the grizzled, pipe-chewing Irishman who explained that it could take as long as a day to contemplate the perfect stone to fit into the wall he was building along a County Mayo pasture; the Greek olive farmer on the slopes of Mount Parnassus who insisted on giving me a ride back to town on his tractor because he couldn't understand why anyone would choose to walk for recreation.

Finally, be aware that, especially now as tourism assumes a greater economic profile in the world, travel is surrounded with issues that reach beyond the sphere of the individual tourist. Tourism has profound impacts on the social, natural, cultural and economic environments of the places that embrace it. Deforestation, waste and pollution, energy depletion, exploitation and erosion of native traditions—they all are issues that the tourism industry and individual travelers are just beginning to be aware of and that the travel writer should not ignore.

A travel writer must pay close attention to the environment she or he is writing about. The days of composing idealistic travelogues that foster tourists' sense of isolation from the complexities of the often dark and desperate lives that swirl about them seem to be drawing to a close.

Readers can sense shallowness in a story, just as editors can sense a writer's ignorance and lack of perspective. I usually spend triple or qua-

druple the time researching the culture, history, politics, economy and environment of a destination that I spend on the trip itself.

A 1,500- to 2,000-word feature—the longest stories that will find a warm reception from most newspaper and magazine editors—should have a veritable library of research to support them and give them context.

In the end, travel is hard work. Travel writing, I think, is even harder work. And both, for our readers, touch the same chords.

As Paul Fussell says: Travel has a touch of the illicit to it; it “triggers the thrill of escape from the constrictions of the daily . . . from the traveler’s domestic identity.” But it is no less a humbling experience, a desire for growth and a pursuit of understanding: “It is as learners that explorers, tourists and genuine travelers . . . come together.”

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Perhaps the biggest revolution in the United States during the last 30 years has been in what we eat. In the 1950s we were primarily a white bread, meat loaf nation with the occasional take-out container of chow mein. As we became more of a polyglot nation and a better traveled one, thoughtful food writing became a necessity for readers. How else would we know what was being served to us each day? We learned to eat with chopsticks and how to make our own pasta. At the same time we were all paying attention to our health. Again we turned to the food pages to find out what was best for us. During this time there emerged a host of food writing superstars and among them is Mimi Sheraton. Here, using her years of experience, she provides advice for the novices who wonder if food writing is right for them.

Eating My Words: What It Takes to Be a Good Food Writer

Mimi Sheraton

Now that eating is “in” and chefs so often achieve the status of superstars, food writing has become a glamorous profession. Barely

a month goes by during which I do not receive two or three letters from young (and not so young) hopefuls each asking, "How can I learn about food?" It is a temptation to answer, "If you have to ask, you're never going to make it." But remembering what it felt like to be young and hopeful, I resist and instead write an expanded version of, "You have to know how to write well and you must know food."

In fact, the first answer would be more accurate, for I really believe that a passionate love of food is essential to success. The best practitioners in the field are those who ate first and wrote later, who followed a natural inclination to learn all about dishes and ingredients, who loved visiting food markets and buying cooking utensils and who found their way to the literature of food, all at considerable expense of time and money. Finally, such dedicated eaters came to their rewards: They were paid to do what they like to do best.

All would be to no avail, of course, if these blessedly obsessed buffs were not able to transmit their enthusiasms and findings to readers. That is where writing well comes in, but that is the talent most easily understood by anyone who will be reading this, and so needs no elaboration.

Passion, then, is the first essential and to that add a lively curiosity that drives a reporter to eyes-on research. "How do they make smoked salmon anyway?" he or she might wonder, just enough to find out, thereby learning the different quality points. Originality and ideas are needed because believe it or not, with all of the food articles around, there are hundreds of ideas that have never been explored.

Add to the above generous handfuls of cynicism and skepticism, the twin allies of any good reporter, and the dish known as a food writer begins to jell. With luck there will be a healthy sprinkling of personal disinterest, prompting the writer to report on findings, letting the chips fall where they may. Too many food writers are corrupted not by money, but by the desire to be popular with each other, or with restaurant owners and shopkeepers and anyone else who can ease their paths with plenty of cushioned red carpet.

In fairness to writers, it should be said that too often their editors and publishers are susceptible to the same blandishments and so short-circuit or discourage copy that tells the whole, unadorned truth. Which brings us to the subject of advertisers and their role in all of this, which should be no role at all. They should just pay the bills and go away quietly. Reviews and reports slanted for advertisers lose credibility, and it takes a

