

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-

