



A Sense of Place: Great Travel Writers Talk About Their Craft, Lives, and Inspiration

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In *A Sense of Place*, journalist/travel writer Michael Shapiro goes on a pilgrimage to visit the world's great travel writers on their home turf to get their views on their careers, the writer's craft, and most importantly, why they chose to live where they do and what that place means to them. The book chronicles a young writer's conversations with his heroes, writers he's read for years who inspired him both to pack his bags to travel and to pick up a pen and write. Michael skillfully coaxes a collective portrait through his interviews, allowing the authors to speak intimately about the writer's life, and how place influences their work and perceptions.

In each chapter Michael sets the scene by describing the writer's surroundings, placing the reader squarely in the locale, whether it be Simon Winchester's Massachusetts, Redmond O'Hanlon's London, or Frances Mayes's Tuscany. He then lets the writer speak about life and the world, and through quiet probing draws out fascinating commentary from these remarkable people. For Michael it's a dream come true, to meet his mentors; for readers, it's an engaging window onto the twin landscapes of great travel writers and the world in which they live.

A Sense of Place: Great Travel Writers Talk About Their Craft, Lives, and Inspiration Details

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Kim Malcolm says

These interviews and the way Shapiro sets them up are an inspiration for any type of writing but also any type of travel. The authors, many of whom do not want to be pigeon holed as "travel writers," talk about the philosophical and emotional components of their art as the essence of good story telling, whether to describe a meal with a Belgian family or an encounter with an angry bear. Very impressive that Shapiro could get interviews with authors as celebrated as Peter Matthiessen and Isabel Allende!

Rebecca Wilkins says

This is my second time to read this book. I read it in 2005 before I had traveled to Europe or been to all 50 states. I love the cat on the cover in a meatloaf position. It makes me miss my cat. Cats are everywhere it is true but hardly anyone travels with a cat so an odd thing for the cover of a book about travel writers. Shapiro talks to 18 travel writers in their homes. He asks all of them primarily the same questions. These interviews took place in the very early years of the 21st century under the presidency of George W. Bush. Again as I read things from the past I am taken by what was being said then about those in positions of power and what is happening now. Peter Matthiessen says of GWB: "Our president wants to grow up to be a redneck. A redneck is not somebody who is ignorant but somebody who is proud of it. How tragic to have such a person as head of the free world." It seems there is little difference between 2002 and 2017. Rick Steves says that it is easy for Americans to get dumbed down and he wants them to understand that "travel is not a shopping trip." Nearly all of these writers insist that they are telling the stories of people not the stories of a place. Pico Iyer says: "People are much wiser and more tolerant and open-minded than their governments." Jeff Greenwald adds: "It is my conviction that the vast majority of people on this planet would like to be left alone to live and work in peace, to raise their families and to exist in a generous and rational way." Brad Newsham says "They could never have cheered the death and destruction if they had known the people involved." Travel writers tell us stories about people in other places so that we can understand that we are all human and "at the end of our lives all we will have left behind is our stories." We are living more and more in a global world and having less a sense of one place and maybe that will be a good thing if we are willing to use the best from each place to create a better world.

Michael says

Michael Shapiro's interviews with some of the world's leading writers of travel are enlightening and entertaining as he strives to gain a deeper understanding of their approach to travel, writing, and life. Most of those interviewed don't care for the adjective "travel" in describing their vocation (travel writer), and that's understandable since their writing is more than about travel -- it's about the experience, the people they meet, and what impacted them on their journeys. The writers talk about their craft as well as their observations on social, political, and environmental issues. And they discuss travel and what it means to them. Shapiro, a veteran journalist and "travel" writer, asks meaningful questions to bring out the thoughts and beliefs of his subjects. This book may be of more interest to writers or those interested in writing rather than travel, although general readers could find it fascinating to discover what attracted these writers to travel the world.

Leah says

Reading Challenge Category: A book at the bottom of your to-read list

I added this one to my Goodreads shelf in July 2012, putting it squarely at the oldest end of my Goodreads list. It's not that I was putting off reading it . . . it's just that so many other new books came along to steal my attention. At any rate, I finally checked *A Sense of Place* out of the library. It was a longer, slower read than I expected, probably because I read all the way through from start to finish without skipping a single interview, even when I had never heard of several of the featured writers. If I had it to do over I might just focus on the authors who interest me most--Frances Mayes, Isabel Allende, Rick Steves, Arthur Frommer, and Bill Bryson. Also, I was a bit put off by the overtly political commentary in almost every interview. The writers' opinions on post 9-11 Bush era politics dated a book that would otherwise be a more timeless discussion of not only the craft of writing, but what it means to be both a writer and a traveler.

Melanie Faith says

Excellent interviews with a widely varied, motley assortment of writers-- from Bill Bryson and Francis Mayes to Rick Steves, Tim Cahill, Arthur Frommer, and Pico Iyer. The various approaches to their craft make for interesting reading if you aspire to write of your own travels near or far. This book makes me want to write more personal essays--always a good thing. For extreme beginning writers or writers who are not interested in the personal lives of authors, this book might be a stretch (or a bit dull in spots). For other writers (especially essayists), a hearty recommendation. :) I found out about this book while researching for a workshop I recently gave on travel journaling; I'm glad I did. :)

Kerry Hennigan says

Imagine sitting down with some of your favourite travel writers and talking about the way they work, their favourite places in the world, their scariest experiences, their most inspired moments and the most unforgettable people they've met on their travels?

In this book Michael Shapiro gets to do that with some international superstars of the genre – the likes of Bill Bryson, Tim Cahill, Pico Iyer, Peter Matthiessen, Jan Morris, Eric Newby and Simon Winchester to name a few.

Presented as a series of conversational interviews, each chapter introduces us to the people behind some of the best travel writing ever published. In talking about their work and their travels, the interviewees tell us much about themselves; what they love or loathe about places they've visited, and those they live in, and how they go about their writing.

There are adventures in Borneo, the Amazon, the Congo and on a fishing trawler in the high seas (and that's just Redmond O'Hanlon's books!) There are discussions on politics in post 9/11 America and the long memories of the Palestinians in the Middle East as encountered by Jonathan Raban.

By reading Shapiro's interviews I gained much clearer understanding of what makes these great writers tick - as writers and travellers. There is no single formula they all follow, no style of travel they all prefer. Some journey with a companion or in an expedition, while others find solo travel the only way they can reach out and meet new people and experience new places sufficiently to write about them afterwards.

They are as unique 'in person' as are their narrative voices in the books and articles which have earned them their credentials. For anyone aspiring to the profession of travel writing, there is a lot to be learned from the people who fill the pages of 'A Sense of Place'.

For they have truly 'been there, done that' and lived to write about it.

Christina Pilkington says

I'm a travelholic. I admit it and embrace it whole-heartedly.

After getting back from a month long trip from Australia with my family, I was in the mood to read a book where travel writers were interviewed about their craft. I was not disappointed in picking up this book; it satisfied just the right itch I had at the time to learn more about people who are able to travel as part of their job.

It was amazing to me how many of the writers' observations about travel and life echoed each other. Each writer had been permanently changed and shaped by living a life that explores other cultures and places.

One of the biggest takeaways of the book for me is to not go into travel with any preconceived notions about what it will be like but to soak up the experience with fresh eyes every time. I also learned that the best way to write about travel is to let the travel itself become a character in your story instead of a dry recitation of facts.

I'd highly recommend reading this if you are curious about the life of a travel writer or if you enjoy hearing other people talk about travel.

*4.5 stars

Leah says

I stumbled upon this book at a thrift store and what a find it was! I love travel writing. I think it's become my favorite genre because even though I am stuck neck deep in home repairs, I am still able to get out and see the world through the eyes of some incredible writers. This book is a conglomeration of several of my favorite writers, but the cool twist is that it's full of personal interviews with them.

The questions give such insight into their views on travel and how it has shaped their lives. Some of my favorites like Bill Bryson and Frances Mayes were in there, along with others who I am really anxious to read now based on their interviews, Tim Cahill, Pico Iyer, Graham Greene...it was all so enlightening. I mean, these are people who have seen the world, the lovely parts of it and the ugliest depths of it, and what

an incredible perspective they have.

I want to surround myself with people like this, whose view isn't limited to their immediate surroundings, but those who explore and inspire others to be better because of that. I don't know how many copies this book sold, I can't imagine very many, but it is a treasure for anyone who loves to read about travel.

Raghu says

This is a good book where Shapiro interviews some of the most intrepid travellers of the modern day. It has interviews with the pioneers of independent travel like Arthur Frommer, adventurers like Tim Cahill and Redmond O'Hanlon, scholars like Paul Theroux and Jan Morris and people like Pico Iyer who have lived in so many different cultures.

I was pleased to see that many of the experts like Frommer, Rick Steves and Cahill espouse the following about independent travel:

That the less you spend, it so happens that the richer are your travel experiences. They suggest that you stay in campgrounds, hostels and eat in cheaper places to get a real feel for the places you go to. Travel is not about monuments and nature alone. It is more about the people you see and meet in far-off lands and the experience of being amongst them. Some other snippets of interest:

Brad Newsham has started the concept of the Backpack Nation. He believes in funding 100 backpackers everyday of the year with \$20000 to spend. Because he believes travel is a much better way for us to be compassionate towards one another than any other. He writes: "To deploy 100 backpackers every day for a year and to fund each one with \$20,000 will cost \$730 million. That may sound like a lot of money, but when considered in its proper context \$730 million is mere peanut shells -- it computes to roughly \$2.50 per American per year. The U.S. Defense Department currently spends more than \$1 billion every day, more than \$400 billion every year -- roughly \$1,300 per American -- and never has the populace felt so threatened, so vulnerable, so poorly defended. The correct question isn't Can we afford to do this? but Can we afford not to? "

Paul Theroux believes that travelling alone is the real way to travel.

It was interesting to see that Sara Wheeler's famous travelogue on Chile actually had fictitious characters!

She puts it nicely by saying , 'I am after the truth, not facts!'. It was a true account, but only mostly!

Isabel Allende thinks that there is no fun in travel without room service!

Overall, it is a book worth reading. It is bound to increase one's interest in all these authors.

Kristina Simon says

This is a great writing book, period. It's not just for travel writers. One for the keeper shelf.

Linda says

Ever wonder what makes people take to the road for out of the box adventures? Michael Shapiro, one of our best travel writers himself, shares with us what makes people who choose a lifetime of travel over the comfy

confines of home tick. From Tim Cahill, whose adventures get him into outlandish situations, to Frances Mayers who followed her "wistful dreams" to civilized Tuscany, we find out what motivates their quests. I loved learning what our best contemporary commentators have in common and what they do not. Bill Bryson of "Walk in the Woods" fame says he is just paying his mortgage with his writing, while Peter Matthiessen, famous for his search for the elusive "Snow Leopard," says that the act of writing clarifies his view of reality. Each unique interview of these authors is conducted with extreme care for their privacy as Michael asks thoughtful, informed questions. A Sense of Place is insightful, fun and a must read for anyone contemplating the outsider's lifestyle.

Linda Ballou adventure travel writer and author of
Wai-nani, High Chiefess of Hawaii-Her Epic Journey
www.LindaBallouAuthor.com

C C says

I learned travel writers resent being labeled as traveled writers because being labeled as such lumps them in with the tourism industry. Paul Thoreaux, in particular, seemed rather TETCHY about the subject. I've already decided to adopt one of three personas for when people interview me about my travel book. I will be a neck-face like Thoreaux, taking umbrage with every question, getting all huffy and shit, so the interviewer knows I've got huge hairy balls. The other persona will be like Desmond O Hanlon. That dude was seriously amiable in that Northern English Seaside Fishing Village way. The last persona I will adopt will be culled from Pico Iyer. His dispassionate, assured, measured discussions of his craft were very likeable. Still waters run deep. Plus, Pico's been doing it with a Japanese girl for the past fifteen years. In Japan. Props.

Brenna Flood says

Horrible, terrible pap. I'm not sure if any of the following things outweighed any of the other in tallying my 1-star rating:

- The book takes a fascinating subject and makes it the dulllest, shallow, hollow "analysis" on the subject matter that I've ever read.
 - Was forced to accept this book as a 'Bible' college book reference while studying at Evergreen.
 - It reads like fanciful, whimsical, high-school teeny-bopper fiction.
-

Chrissy says

The author interviews about 20 well-known travel writers including Rolf Potts, Pico Iyer, Arthur Frommer, and Rick Steves. While some embrace travel writing, others like Isabel Allende don't always like the idea of a travel writer. They each are asked personal questions and they talk about how they got into travel writing.

Some stories are really funny, like those from Frommer and Bill Bryson, and others may come off a little more snobby. From cheap backpacking trips to fancy beaches and novels, it's an interesting read for any traveler or writer.

Nash Tysmans says

This was a gift. It came second hand right out of a friend's own shelf. She had loved it so much that she passed it on hoping to inspire me to read, write and travel. In many ways this books has shaped the way i travel and informed the stories i write on account of those adventures.

It's a collection of interviews done by Mr. Shapiro. There's a story behind his mission too and it's a beautiful one. But really, to have Jan Morris, Pico Iyer and other great travel writers speak in a volume? wow.
