



# Going Native

*Stephen Wright*

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**Going Native** is Stephen Wright's darkly comic take on the road novel, in which one man's headlong escape from the American Dream becomes everybody's worst nightmare. Wylie Jones is set: lovely wife, beautiful kids, barbecues in the backyard of his tastefully decorated suburban Chicago house with good friends. Set, but not satisfied. So one night he just walks out, gets behind the wheel of a neighbor's emerald-green Galaxy 500, and drives off into some other life, his name changed, his personality malleable. In Wright's inimitable narrative, we're taken on a joy ride to hell, a rollercoaster of sex and violence and the peculiar mix of the two that is our society today.

## Going Native Details

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Author : Stephen Wright

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## From Reader Review Going Native for online ebook

### Jason says

It's been about 8 years since I last re-read this, so I can't/won't say much here except: read it. (Since Dan Chaon's excellent *Await Your Reply* goosed my memory of this Wright, I'm planning to re-read it again, too.) I picked up the original hardback cold in the bookstore, knowing nothing of its author, and took a quick look at its blurbs. Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Robert Coover. Whaaaa? The book managed to meet--confidently, swaggeringly exceeded--my expectations given that unlikely trio.

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### Alan says

still humming with this one, three/four days after finishing it. I said to a GR friend each section was like taking a different unknown drug, and waiting to see what the buzz was- and mostly you weren't disappointed. It's taken me a while to organise my thoughts on it, and the next book - Ellroy's *My Dark Places* suffered from being so different it was like reading another language (although I'm fine with it now). This is the opposite of Ellroy's minimal, staccato sentences: this is lush, hyper-real/surreal, trippy writing. I loved the marvellous re-creation of a drugged up night which starts:

*The smouldering pipe passed between them in a volitionless glide, like an object at a séance, each repetition a re-enactment of their meeting one bright windy afternoon, sizzling white clouds blowing past in pieces, carrying with them*

[but sometimes found it overblown - this sentence carries on:]

*for this one day at least, that late summer malaise of extended-mode lives and wilted options thousands of vacations were designed to avoid. (pardon?)*

It's not for the squeamish, there's serial murder, hard core porn, penis piercing, drug taking. It's funny, profound and weird too. There are many true moments of description:

visiting a lively porn star party:

*the house itself seemed to be excreting excess merriment; there were revellers perched like boisterous birds along the rooftop; a clumsy fellow in a rubber suit trying to clamber out the second-story bathroom window; the other windows dense with movement, flashbulb explosions, the caustic glare of camera lights, with loose faces rarely seen behind the penitential bars of nine-to-five; from an upstairs bedroom a lanky runway model in a floor length satin cape and not much else appeared to be blowing kisses.. at the front door a steady seepage of humanity in search of air, space, reduced noise level.*

(not that I've ever been to a porn star's party)

And character insight, in spite of the layers of irony that seem to cling to everything. Everybody is either somebody else - the hitcher is a killer, the motel worker a scriptwriter - or an actor, so wrapped up in playing someone else their own identity is submerged. The whole is dipped in Hollywood, movies & TV culture, particularly horror, road and comic-book films. Batman features in one scene near the beginning only to re-surface near the end as the film of choice of the Borneo tribe, visited by The Joker Jack Nicholson himself, which two B Movie actors visit to find/test themselves. Ironically the true savagery comes when they're back home in California.

Beneath everything there is this underlying savagery and selfishness, self centred people bomb around with very little connection to others (with some minor exceptions), relationships and families are fractured by

desire and greed.

However Wright is not immune to moments of beauty and connection and these come as marvellous relief to the parade of brutality and expediency, such as this moment in the jungle where a man observes his partner ahead:

*the entire back of her damp blouse from neck to waist was covered in a rich swarm of salt-hungry butterflies, a soft breathing coat of such intense color it seemed about to erupt into fiery applause.*

It took a while for this book to emerge with five stars for me. I was a little sceptical of the overblown nature of some of the writing, but Wright knows exactly what he's doing, and by the end I was completely won over, the last two chapters I read on a train back from London (been to a study day) and not even the beautiful woman sat opposite could distract me (for long).

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## **Krok Zero says**

First thing's, as usual, first: despite what his Goodreads author page indicates, Stephen Wright the novelist is not the same individual as Steven Wright the deadpan stand-up comedian. It would be almost inconceivably awesome if this were the case, but it is not. I have Goodreads librarianship so I guess technically I could fix this error, but I am a busy man\*, and do not have time for such menial tasks. (\*I am not a busy man.)

So. By way of forestalling my review of this great book, and to avoid making plain the fact that I don't really know what to say about it, I will begin by reviewing its blurbs. Yes, critics and authors of 1994 were evidently so blindsided by the twisted richness of Stephen Wright's hyper-stylized prose that they felt compelled to respond in kind, with some hilariously colorful attempts at describing the novel's disturbing, media-crazed perspective on life in the Gen-X fast lane. Let's look at a handful of these blurbs along with my evaluations of them.

First, novelist Robert Coover goes straight-up bonkers: *A sensational prime-time novel...Imagine a pornographic twilight zone of beebee-eyed serial killers, drug-stunned pants-dropping road warriors and "marauding armies of mental vampires," a nightmarish country of unparalleled savagery, where there is no longer any membrane between screen and life and the monster image feed is inexhaustible and the good guys are the scariest ones of all.* Whoa! Sounds fucking awesome, but then you read the book and realize there are two problems: (1) Coover rips off several phrases directly from Wright (not just the quoted one about vampires, but also "monster image feed" and the kicker about the good guys being the scariest ones of all) and (2) Coover is kind of overstating the violence and horror of the book (a recurring theme of these blurbs): there's one serial-killer who appears in only one chapter, the marauding-vampire bit is only a metaphor, and there are in fact a number of "good guys" who remain more or less good (though many of them are women). But hey, bonus points for how excited the guy got about this book. You can tell he was popping a huge literary boner.

Now let's visit your friend and mine Don DeLillo, who offers a more concise fragment: *Strange, dark and funny, a slasher classic.* The phrase "a slasher classic" is gorgeously sonorous, and the fact that it's coming from DeLillo makes this a very satisfying blurb. But it's also pretty deceptive -- the book really *isn't* a slasher anything. I mean, there's a fair share of crime, and one of the book's eight chapters concerns a serial killer, and most of the characters are operating under the influence of violent-media saturation, but c'mon, we're not talking about blood-soaked grindhouse gore, we're talking about a very brainy, multitudinous postmodern

novel. Maybe I'm being stupidly literal here but I think the blurbist carries a certain responsibility and if you're going to induce people to read a book by saying words about that book then the words should probably make sense on a literal level. Still love you, Don!

The *Village Voice* chimes in: [*Wright*] broadcasts an English as electrically intoxicating as a mescaline slurpee...*Wright doesn't supply easy answers, just dark and rapturous neon reflections of the society of spectacle in this hilariously mordant and discombobulating book.* Mescaline Slurpee! If someone didn't name their band after this blurb they fucked up big time. Do you see what I mean about critics trying to match Wright's gonzo flavor with a little gonzo of their own? This one is pretty silly, really, "society of spectacle" and all that.

But this one's even sillier, from *Spin* magazine: *A phantasmagoria of roadside attractions: drugs, truckers, flophouses, movie stars, amateur porn—the miasma that rises from a red, white, and blue-balled pop culture.* This is just a list of items that appear in the novel followed by a faux-clever dirty joke, "red white and blue-balled," that means absolutely nothing in the context of the book. Dumb.

But look, what's that, it's Toni Morrison here to offer a sprinkling of praise that resists the hyperbolic urge: *An astonishing novel.* Hmm, a tease. You couldn't be a little more specific, Ms. Morrison? On the generic side, yes, but astonishment from Toni Morrison means more than astonishment from most people, so I'm coming down pro on this one.

It's no surprise that cyberpunk progenitor William Gibson dug this book: *Sure-footed, loose-limbed, lyrical, perverse, and deeply, alarmingly funny, Going Native is just about as dead-on crazy as the American novel so desperately needs to be if the form intends to survive the century. Stephen Wright is a major talent.* This is a strong blurb in that it avoids specific description while painting an accurate picture of the book's tone. Nice job, Mr. G.

I'll just do one more, from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, though I could keep going all day, there are so many of these: *Daring...a disturbing look into the nether world of American culture....Many of Wright's sentences haunt the reader's mind and demand contemplation....The work of an accomplished writer who may soon be regarded among the top echelon of contemporary American novelists.* This one's retrospectively poignant because Wright never really did become regarded among the top echelon of contemporary American novelists, at least not by major cultural gatekeepers. (In-the-know folks like Mike Reynolds know better, of course.) As for the "nether world of American culture" stuff, I mean, yeah, kind of, but there's gotta be a less annoying way to talk about that aspect of the book. I'll let you know if I think of one.

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The impression given by this massive hype machine is that *Going Native* is something like a non-retarded version of Oliver Stone's dumber-than-rocks "satire" *Natural Born Killers*. And in a sense -- a narrow sense, maybe -- that's sort of what it is: scenes of American fringe-dwellers and their frightening behaviors and milieus, filtered through the ubiquity of mass-media violence, very loosely taking the form of a road trip. But there's plenty of content here that strays from the blurbs' promise of lurid, psychotic wackiness. In fact, those looking for a pure dose of lurid, psychotic wackiness will probably find this novel entirely too austere and cerebral. Wright is just as attuned to subtle, internal human intricacies as any self-respecting literary novelist, but he's not afraid to color outside the lines, on an outsized canvas, in blood. (Oh fuck, now I sound like one of those 1994 critics. A crazy ride into the diseased heart of modern American excess! A gunshot to the face of America's sleaziest fantasies! An orgasmic fistfight in the back alley of the American nightmare!)

The book's structure would probably land it on Joel's "stories-no-wait-a-novel-no-wait" shelf, an approach that I have complained about on this website before. But while I dissed the novel-in-stories format in my reviews of David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, I had no problem with its deployment here. Is this just a case of Whitmanesque self-contradiction (I *do* contain multitudes, thank you very much), or is Wright doing something different that won me over? Hmm. There is one character who pops up in each chapter, linking them all on a literal level; it's possible to view this book as a road novel told from every perspective except the protagonist's. Furthermore, the chapters are linked by style. As disparate as their characters and situations are, each chapter bears the auteurist stamp of Wright's singular voice. And while you never know quite what you're gonna get when you start a new chapter -- I don't want to get into plot specifics with this book, because part of the fun is the surprise factor of its self-replenishing conceits -- you do figure out at a certain point what kinds of stories you're being told, and the book proceeds as smoothly as a novel. There's surprisingly little of the between-chapters whiplash typical of story collections or story cycles; it really does *feel* like one unified work, without any overly contrived "connections," even though it lacks a continuous narrative. So I guess I no longer believe this format is inherently suck, but unless you're as great as Stephen Wright, you still probably shouldn't try it.

Wright's prose is stunning. This is the rare novel that's both highly demanding and absolutely pleasurable. Good luck spending less than four or five minutes per page; good luck trying not to immediately re-read certain passages, either because comprehension proved impossible on a first pass or simply to prolong the charged glow of a master's verbal manipulations. To anyone with even a basic appreciation for literary style -- particularly of the variety associated with postmodernism or maximalism -- Stephen Wright needs to be on your radar, yesterday. Though DeLillo is the most obvious point of comparison, Wright is more of an extremist; he often goes farther than his predecessor, embellishing ideas and pushing forward through narrative space where DeLillo would be content to offer up an elusive wisp of rhythmic aphorism. It's indescribably thrilling to be in the presence of such stylistic swagger.

After such effusion I feel obliged to provide an example. Tough to choose. Here's a full paragraph that gives you a sense of how knotty Wright's language is; most of this passage is an epic run-on sentence, followed by a startling button of relative brevity. Warm up your parsing muscles, this is a complex motherfucker:

*The birth was an event of unspeakable proportions, a wild ride among significances memory couldn't recapture without damage: the cosmos was knotted in ligatures of pain; unravel the threads, liberate the stars whose blossoms promise ease from the agony of time; astounding the revelatory force of torment that carried her, teensy squeaking her, up and up, through ceiling and roof, out into space, out of space, to the cold chamber of the dark queen with the patchwork face of old nightmares who leaned from her throne to tell Jessie something she did not want to hear, and as the thin blue lips began to move, Jessie shrank back in horror, spinning down onto a point so dense the soul's implosion was averted only by a nova cry of life surfacing, and she opened her wondering eyes upon the holy puckered countenance of a new daughter, in whose glow the visions of her mad journey toward this sight began evaporating as cleanly as morning dew. Life is death's amnesia, she thought, and forgetfulness a grace to which we cling.*

That's not necessarily representative -- it's probably the longest sentence in the book, and by necessity it's a bit ungainly -- but it shows you how far and how deep Wright's use of language goes to illustrate his themes. If I'm reading this section correctly, Wright is proposing that childbirth is a disease of horrifying memory-retrieval, the only cure for which is...childbirth. We create life to distract ourselves from the oppression of our own pasts and trajectories. See, those "mescaline slurpee" blurbs didn't exactly hint at this level of discourse, did they?

The book's reputation suggests that it's about conditions of strangeness. But *Going Native* is just as much

about filtering everyday mundanity through the cracked lens of extreme, hyper-intellectualized consciousness -- the same lens that Wright uses also, yes, for stories about pornographers, junkies and knife-wielding hitchhikers. In this way, something as simple and familiar as a dinner party, a bookstore browse, or a lover's spat becomes an occasion for profound crises of the self and takes on the same frightening, massive-scaled dimensions as does an act of shocking violence. For Wright, there is no longer any meaningful difference between these theoretically disparate conditions. Wright's vision of life in the postmodern era is defined not by a ubiquity of larger-than-life incidents, but by the feverish application of a larger-than-life perspective to life-sized events. If everything is a mescaline slurpee, then nothing is.

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I cannot comprehend why Wright remains so obscure, relatively speaking. *Going Native* has only 150 ratings on Goodreads. Even a second-rate DeLillo novel like *Mao II* has 2,300 ratings -- 15x as many as Wright's masterpiece. I'm not saying this guy should have achieved mainstream fame, but he deserves to be as well-known as other novelists in the postmodern canon. Maybe part of the problem is generational; born in 1946, Wright's too young to be part of the first wave of pomo torch-bearers (Pynchon, DeLillo, Barth/Barthelme, etc), but he's too old to hang with the Gen-X crew (DFW, Lethem, Whitehead, etc) -- two generations of postmodernists all of whom have gained wider and more enduring recognition than Wright has. Or maybe the answer has something to do with his sparsity of output. There are only four books to his name; I cannot wait to be challenged, creeped out, excited, flummoxed, turned on and word-intoxicated by the other three. And to re-read this one; though I basically never re-read books (already way more new-to-me stuff than one lifetime can accommodate), I'd be disappointed in myself if I never re-read this, both to gain a fuller picture of how its individual pieces fit together and to re-engage on a micro level with Wright's gloriously complex sentencework. Follow my lead, will you?

(FYI: Prominent/weirdo critic Larry McCaffery places *Going Native* all the way at #13 on his list of the top 100 fiction books of the 20th century. Check it out.)

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## **Ben says**

Stephen Wright is one of the best novelists in America. He's also not nearly as well known as he deserves to be. This is partly due, I assume, to his small output, just four novels in over thirty years: *Meditations in Green* (1983), *M31: A Family Romance* (1988), *Going Native* (1994), and *The Amalgamation Polka* (2006). Of those, only *Going Native* and *The Amalgamation Polka* are currently in print. Even in cult circles he's doesn't seem to be that well known; he's certainly doesn't have the following of Dennis Cooper or Kathy Acker, for example. Among those who have read him, though, he tends to be highly rated: postmodern literature scholar Larry McCaffery included *Going Native* in his "20th-Century's Greatest Hits: 100 English Language Books of Fiction" at number 13, just below *Beloved* and ahead of *Under the Volcano*. Wright could be described as a writer's writer; his novels have been blurbed by the likes of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, and Robert Coover.

So far I've read *Meditations in Green* and, more recently, *Going Native*. They are similar in many ways, and different in others, and taken together are proof of a powerful artistic vision. The first connection involves the Vietnam War, which Wright served in as an intelligence officer. *Meditations in Green* deals centrally with Nam, alternating between chapters taking place during the war and chapters following a veteran after the war. Nam is never mentioned by name in *Going Native* but the title seems to be a reference to *Apocalypse Now*, a film which is explicitly quoted by a character at one point ("Never get out of the boat.")

You could write a whole dissertation just on this possible connection, but suffice to say that Wright seems to be drawing some parallel between wartime Nam and contemporary American society, subverting the idea that Nam ever really ended.

One of Wright's defining characteristics is his postmodern experimentation with form and structure. In *Meditations in Green* each chapter is prefaced by an original poem, the chapters themselves alternate time periods (wartime, postwar) and point of view (third-person for the former, first-person for the latter), and one chapter is even written in the form of a stage script. *Going Native* features a structure that is in some ways more straight-forward and in other ways even more unusual. In the novel's first chapter, a seemingly ordinary middle-class man named Wylie disappears from his home in the middle of a cookout; the remaining chapters are each individually-contained episodes featuring entirely new characters and settings, but with Wylie appearing in each at some point. In this way Wylie serves as a through-line for the disparate episodes which comprise the book but in no sense can he be accurately described as the "main character." Throughout the course of the novel we learn almost nothing of his background and are provided almost no access to his thoughts; what we see of him is all glimpses. He is the ghost at the center of the novel, an enigma, the man who wasn't there.

Wright is a dazzling prose stylist. In *Going Native* his sentences sprawl and twist across the page, full of digressions and asides, conjuring one brilliantly original figure of speech or hyperreal image after another, moving between warped strangeness and moments of startling poetry. He can describe a scene with an almost tactile intensity or he can spiral out into vertigo-inducing flights of abstraction. He moves between razor-sharp humor and unnerving darkness with ease. In *Meditations in Green* scenes of nightmarish violence are juxtaposed with surreal humor to paint a searing portrait of the madness of Nam; likewise, the carnivaleque humor of *Going Native* only amplifies the novel's profound existential unease.

May Stephen Wright grace us with another novel sometime in the future. There are few novelists whose next work I so eagerly anticipate.

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## **Kylie says**

At first I absolutely despised this book. I was forced to read it for my Interpretation of Literature class. Originally, I found the writing to be incredibly pretentious. After reading further into the book and becoming more accustomed to Wright's writing I started to like the book.

I really enjoyed Wright's ideas about pop culture being a reflection of primal desires. Throughout the book there is many Hollywood references, and the reader can see just how influential pop culture is on the characters.

I have read better books than this, but it wasn't completely awful.

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## Drew says

America is dead; it just doesn't know it yet.

Or at least that's what Stephen "N.R." Wright would have you believe. And he mostly makes a convincing and eloquent case. The big strength of this book, at least according to me, is the frenetic, chaotic-yet-precise quality of the writing; the prose perfectly matches the ideas that Wright is trying to get across. And it's a good thing too, because I think the ideas themselves are a little tired. We've replaced meaning with entertainment? Learned that in high school. Alienation is making us crazy and violent? Yawn--all I have to do to verify that is take a quick look inside my own head. TV and the Internet are turning us into human islands? Come on, I'm a millennial; that shit is written into my DNA, I know it so unconsciously. Irony and cynicism are paralyzing us into an ill-advised sense of half-smiling, world-weary complacency? Uh....no comment.

That said, let me just stress again the quality of the writing here, holding the book together and preventing it from being a sloppy wannabe pomo mess. Or maybe I'll just quote a bit:

[on a certain Indonesian tribal art]: "Save your money . . . you will be trading a rather handsome sum of American dollars for the questionable privilege of viewing in situ dazed disorganized tribes in Western drag whose culture has been stripped and ravaged as thoroughly as the rain forest that once supported it."

[on tourism]: "Go home. There's nothing more to see. Even out here. It's all soiled bank notes, television, and death."

[on driving]: "Then, while chasing the sunset of one long and particularly melancholy day, the vanilla marbling in the sky going to raspberry red, holiday frosting dripping onto the stone jury of the mountains, she witnessed a remarkable sight: the flight of several thousand pounds of white Camaro through the clear liquor of a late desert afternoon, a movie image really\*, trailing the usual streamers of a ragged unreality, the car some hundred yards ahead suddenly catapulting up out of a knot of braking traffic, flipping twice over with a dolphinlike incongruity, then slamming backward into the median gully in an explosion of dust and smoke and splintering glass."

[on disappointment]: "Overhead in a dry wind fluttered the federal bunting, a clip on its swaying halyard clanging disconsolately against the tall hollow pole, the empty seasound of a ruined clock tolling a nonexistent hour, the extended shadow of the flagstaff falling diagonally across coupe and sedan, machine after master machine, on out into the lot, where at its tip a flapping black shape twisted furiously upon the hot cement like a small tethered animal trying to break free."

And so on. I could probably quote all day without finding the really good ones that I failed to mark, but hopefully that selection is illustrative. Yeah, you should probably read it.

One more note: somehow the most thematically appropriate and amusing little touch in this book is the repeated extra-level appearances of none other than Jack Nicholson--who could be either more decadent or more American?

\*Lots of movie images in this book, and he even writes this one in hyperbolic slow-motion, as you can see. But most of them I'd rather read than see, because his prose gets that good.

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## **Tung says**

Stephen Wright's (author of *Meditations in Green*) third "novel", if you can call it that. The book starts with an upper middle class suburban couple enjoying a barbecue with another upper middle class suburban couple. The description of this scene is a fantastic portrait of the banalities of such a life. One of the men disappears and can't be found and the scene ends. The next scene is a description of a boyfriend and girlfriend who are addicted to crack. The end of that scene involves the boyfriend's green Ford Galaxie being stolen – and we are led to believe that it was stolen by the man who disappeared in scene one. The rest of the novel consists of chapters that are well-described slices of life whose only connection to each other are random encounters by this fleeing man in the green Ford Galaxie who is traveling cross-country and taking up new identities. And while each chapter is a brilliant portrayal of characters and their lives, this structure is the book's biggest fault – this book seems more like unrelated short stories tied together by a thin thread rather than one coherent novel. This is especially true of one chapter that takes place almost completely in southeast Asia except for the last few pages where the couple touring southeast Asia return from their trip and encounter the Galaxie man back in the States. This chapter's connection to the rest of the novel seems largely irrelevant and forced. My guess is that 90% of the people reading this book will detest it because of its disjointedness. I rate it this highly because other than this one fault, it's brilliantly written. The prose in this book is as good as anything I've ever read. The Thailand chapter, for example, reminded me of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The chapters switch styles and some of the stylistic scenes (like the drug-tripping sequence in chapter two) are indescribably good. The mark of how good a writer Wright is can be seen in the fact that the frustration with the disparateness of each chapter is heightened by the fact that he describes the characters and scenes in each chapter so well, you want to see him continue each chapter rather than end it so you can see what happens to each of them – Wright is that good in establishing characters and scenes and moods and tensions and problems. In my opinion, this is one of the best-written book of the year from a prose standpoint, but from a holistic view of a novel, it suffers. I recommend it highly for folks who can get past the structure.

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## **William Adams says**

This widely praised novel is more like a collection of very loosely connected short stories. The writing is interesting, some of the sentences hallucinatory. That's the joy of reading the book. However, there is no plot, no significant character development, and no particular insights are revealed. It is just a series of almost unrelated scenes and characters.

Should it be read then as an anthology of stories? As stories, they don't work well. A recurring theme in the book is allusion to horror movies. Characters describe horror movies they have seen, or scenes are staged like scenes from horror movies, and maybe that's why the stories and scenes seem pointless, as horror movies themselves are. So maybe the book is supposed to be a high-concept parody of the horror genre. But if that's the game, it loses for being repetitive, unfunny, un insightful and, above all, not horrifying.

The writing is sometimes well-observed.

'Listen, Woodstock, the picture, ever see it?'

'I don't know. I guess. Sure.'

'Well, remember the scene where everybody's romping bare-assed in the mud? I'm the guy on the left with

the beard and the big dick. God, the times we had...’ He waggled his big head in disbelief. ... He looked over at his listener. And now I’m immortalized in celluloid, how about that?’” (p. 73).

The enduring topics are stifling everydayness punctuated by sex, violence, and drugs. Is that a novel? Call me old-fashioned, but I say it is merely writing for the sake of writing. Some readers might find reading that an enjoyable experience.

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### **Mala says**

4.5 stars

<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1742/...>

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### **Katherine says**

You have no idea how difficult it is for me to do, but I’m quitting this book midway. It goes against every fiber of my being. But I’m trying to embrace the advice of a coworker—sticking with a book that is not for you wastes time in which you could be reading the next book you’ll love.

Stephen Wright is a wordsmith to be sure. Something in his precise and thoughtful imagery makes me think of Denis Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son*. And that’s a high compliment in my mind. Still, while I pushed myself through a couple hundred pages, this novel never drew me in beyond the first chapter. It felt less like a novel and more like a writers’ exercise in character development. Each chapter could have been the first in a separate (and excellent) novel. And any of the chapters, had I read them independently, say in a collection of short stories by a variety of authors, would have blown me away. But trying to read them one after another, back to back, it was trying. After so many character studies, a gal wishes for a little plot, I guess.

This one is highly recommended for writers looking for inspiration in their own technique or for anyone who reads multiple books at a time and can break up the chapters of *Going Native* with other plot-driven works.

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### **Simon says**

Notwithstanding Mike's rave review, this is not for me. Someone describes the prose as maximalist. I'll say. (Though that's not why it's not for me.)

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### **Glenn Russell says**

"She was having thoughts and her thoughts were having thoughts, a regular birthing frenzy in the old

cranium tonight, strangled cries and organic mess and a horde of deformed infants crawling like advancing troops over the rocks and nails and broken glass in her head, and suddenly she couldn't seem to determine with any certainty which was more pressingly real, those bloodied babies hunting for a way out, or the besieged voice most anxious to preserve its status as the imperial "I" that was looking for a way in." - Stephen Wright, *Going Native*

Stephen Wright is one of America's finest novelists, however, at age 72, he has authored only four novels – most notably *Meditations in Green*, published in 1983, considered by many the best of novel of the Vietnam War and his masterpiece, *Going Native*, published in 1994, a road novel in the tradition of Henry Miller's *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. But with this dark and frequently disturbing work under review, the road traveled winds through the underbelly of the underbelly of the American dream.

Considering the current Methland and OxyContin dopesick epidemics, the alarming increase in gun culture and mass shootings, the skyrocketing number of cases of sexual abuse and websites devoted to hardcore pornography, *Going Native* with all its guns and violence, drugs and degraded sex, is even more relevant today than when first published twenty-five years ago.

The opening chapter holds many keys to ongoing themes and motifs. We are in drab American suburbia, an engineered community of street after boring street of single family homes complete with front and back yard, enough room for an outdoor barbecue but close enough where all your neighbors can see into your kitchen and living room and, unless you're careful, even into your bedroom, a world where men and women like wife Rho grind it out raising kids and commuting to dreary office jobs where their nerves are kept on edge by odious bosses and noxious coworkers, a world where there's a TV in every room and the radio blares out the latest round of perversion and violence, a world where you are continually fretting about the future (Rho is furiously peeling carrots for tonight's dinner with snooty, wealthy friends) and brooding over the past (Rho is shackled with memories of her demonic mother, an old witch right out of Macbeth) - so much agonizing about the past and future, the fullness of the present moment is obliterated. In a word, middle class hell.

In the evening when Tommy and Gerri come over, Tommy a blabbering boor specializing in celebrity impersonations and Gerri, a real estate agent and co-owner of a catering service, an overly judgmental self-appointed gatekeeper of 1990s affluent society, Rho must apologize for Wylie's tardiness. When her exhausted husband finally walks in, exchanges greetings, pours himself drinks and listens to Tommy-Gerri banter, not long thereafter Rho sends Wylie out to pick up charcoal for the grill. Tommy joins Wylie, never once giving his jabber a rest. Turns out, at the Feed 'n' Fuel, the cops just shot a thief – his scuffed Nikes sticking out from under a drop cloth. Damn! The boys have to drive over to the local 7-Eleven “where you don't have to step over a corpse to pick up your charcoal.”

Following steak dinner, Rho orders Wylie to perform his fabulous De Niro impression. Then when Tommy and Rho go off to wiggle a funky dance next to the garage, Wylie asks Gerri, “Would you excuse me for a minute.” After some time Rho, Tommy and Gerri retreat inside to escape the mosquitoes. Where's Wylie? They look all through the house; they cruise the neighborhood. “Like the present tense. Daddy was gone gone.”

Curiously, Rho always pictured Wylie as an average kind of guy - go to work, play with the kids, watch shoot, chase, crash movies on TV. Although Rho had to admit, as when after a shower, a naked, dripping wet Wylie chased her through the house snapping a towel, “he never knew when to stop!” Oh, dear wife and mother, truer words were never spoken.

Wylie doesn't stop. He doesn't even look back, not even once. The next seven chapters are separate short stories linked only by the appearance, usually popping up toward the end, of a stolen '69 Ford Galaxie and its driver, a heavysset indistinct figure with his pale gray eyes, a man starting out as Wylie Jones but assuming different names, including the name of that suburban house guest, Tommy Hanna.

And what stories – recall back there I said underbelly of the underbelly of the American dream. There's Mister CD and his lover calling herself Latisha Charlemagne, two drug-happy cool cats forever getting high when they're not watching violent movies and engaging in their own hopped up brand of nastiness and cruelty. By the way, Mister CD owned that Ford Galaxie Wylie made off with – serves him right, the woman-abusing sleazeball!

Subsequent stories feature shocking depictions of various slices of American society dropping off the cliff into a numbing void where there are too many guns, too much media saturation and way too much shallowness and mental imbalance. In order of their appearance: psychopathic hitchhiker wielding a knife, hotel owner obsessed with making his own combination horror and sci-fi movie, sexual pervert filming unsuspecting couples as his contribution to the flourishing XXX hardcore porno industry, two female sexual mystics dealing with the fantasies of Las Vegas brides and grooms (one of these gals provides a high point in the novel by her recognition that love from the heart is guaranteed indestructible), a husband and wife, two Hollywood actors, travel upriver to Borneo's heart of darkness only to return to LA to discover the deeper meaning of raw, senseless violence, a much married beauty living the high life in her oceanfront mansion.

Fans of such well knowns as William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo or David Foster Wallace will enjoy Mr. Wright's creamy rich language and crisp, spot-on dialogue. By way of example, a quote from one of my favorite scenes in that chapter about actors Drake and Amanda traveling in Indonesia: "Mrs. Harrelson began shifting around in her chair. "Christianity is the chain saw of the spiritual world," she remarked with some heat.

"Well, I'm not much of a believer myself," offered Drake, "but—"

The woman went on. "It cuts the vitality right out of the soul. Then erects in the center of the wasteland it has made, the brutal sign of its triumph and occupation – a grotesque instrument of human torture, need I remind you?-and moves on like a horrid vampire in search of the warm life it requires to sustain its own deathlike existence.""

*Going Native* is a true overlooked classic - again, it can not be emphasized enough, a novel speaking to us with more force today than back when first published. Also, perhaps not so coincidentally, 1994 was the year of release for two box office smashes: *Pulp Fiction* and *Natural Born Killers*.

American novelist Stephen Wright, born 1946

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## **Vit Babenco says**

"News of his infamous screenplay she had been listening to for the last five years at least and its chances of soon seeing the light of day, let alone the light of a cinema screen, were about as good as her roaring off in the accord with the packed suitcase that had been lying in wait in the trunk for most of a decade."

If aesthetics of pop culture cinema were applied to the everyday life the reality would've turned into a nightmare. What in the movie looks captivating in life would be horror.

But anyway:

“In the magical enterprise of contemporary movie-making even the least acolyte at the very bottom of the end credit roll was touched and redeemed and illumined by the dazzling wand of media technology, everyone was a knight.”

“The subterranean lair of the wily human relationship: a dark maze of pop-up demons, fun house mirrors, spooky dead ends, multiple false bottoms.”

When workaday living exhausts us we take a journey through the twilight zone of our consciousness.

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## **Garrett Zecker says**

Going Native is a novel of eight interconnected short stories that follow Wylie Jones across the United States after he leaves his family for no apparent reason but to escape the monotony of middle America. Careening across the interstate in a green Ford Galaxie, the enigmatic Jones changes names, destinations, personas, and motivations in a cacophony of violence, drugs, sex, consumption, and boredom. Wright's novel is a triumph of storytelling, reflecting an escape from the stifling prison of this American life in eight independent chapter-stories that each contain the ghost and repercussions of a protean character who is both at the center of and completely absent from each piece. Plot is perhaps the most compelling part of this novel, structured with an overarching story that covers the entirety of Jones' journey from within eight cyclical mini-plots that divide the eight chapters into separate miniature snow globes of narrative.

Essentially the plots all circle around the concept of Americanness being a constant search for a genuine life. The eight plots within the book each reflect this search, either through drugs when Latisha declares in a fit of lonely fear after coming down from a crack binge, "I am alive. I am a person. I am real," or through the thirst for human companionship to complete oneself on the open road as a truck driver's "mind lay perfectly open to the impress of the moment...awaiting a matching sign of recognition" whose only substance and evidence of his existence was appearing in the film Woodstock, (61, 71-3). These characters share our fears and our desires. The "intolerable horror" "that absolute strangers could arbitrarily impose themselves between you and those you loved" (191) and a "harmony under eternal besiegement by evil centrifugal forces" (159) is balanced with only one concrete dream to hold onto as we strive to be " wealthy angel(s) inhabit(ing) a mansion" (178).

Whether through stories of the mainland banality of everyday life, or the recounting of an experience far abroad, these tortured characters can only experience and justify a life through drugs, sex, cash, or violence in an emotional confusion steeped in a perpetual search for the American dream - identified by and almost defined by escape through these very experiences. These experiences allow for constant reinvention, yet an empty reinvention defined by indulging in these extrinsic experiences to ignore the inner work that would be needed to find one's identity. In examining this, each of the eight story's arcs showcase one or more characters in this elemental search for identity, and then skewers the goals of our characters, pushing them further and further from the goal they intended to reach. Perhaps the most blatant of these examples is when, instead of chemically, violently, or sexually leaving their boring lives in chapter seven, Drake and Amanda literally remove themselves from America to examine their personal and spiritual selves in a primal setting.

To experience the new, they disappear to the wonders of the tribal islands of Borneo and Indonesia. Rather than a bewildering spiritual experience, they are met with a tribe that offer them a mystical drink of Coca Cola, an evening entertainment of a VHS copy of Batman revealed from under a mystical cloth, and Drake's palang ceremony that involved the ritual killing of a caged pig and the adornment of a genital piercing. When they return to the United States, they regale their guests at a dinner party with their stories of wonder and adventure while feeding them native foods they brought back – none of which they mention eating while

they were away – and each of their awakening moments are somewhat humbled. After discussing the weight of returning to a supermarket and examining the process of American consumption as similar to the ransacking of a museum, the Indonesian civet cat coffee is decidedly not the ritualistic Coke they drank when exploring and the Durian fruit tasted like it was "getting away from" you and was flavored "almost whatever you want it to" be (266). Batman was already devalued by Mister CD and Latisha in chapter two, but their guest Jayce is following the dreams of her craft as an actress in a remake of a film that was already remade three times over as if the value of Hollywood is artificial at its very core and unable to be traced back to any origin. Finally, the palang piercing is brought up in conversation as the ultimate of souvenirs, an Indonesian rite of passage to acceptance and manhood (executed in an unceremonious moment that Drake kept to himself). While their guests begged to see it and would be allowed a "private viewing for a small fee in the bedroom after dessert," they pointed out that Drake didn't "have to travel halfway around the globe to get (his) organs pierced. There's a shop down on Santa Monica Boulevard that'll do it, male or female, thirty bucks a hole" (262-3). And even though the guests "can't believe (Drake and Amanda are) even the same people," it is in Amanda's final moments after the party is slaughtered by Tom Hanna (Wylie) and his new fling Kara that Amanda wonders about all of the things that they went on their spiritual journey to discover. After "the medical examiner had removed the duct tape from her lips forever, would her departing soul emerge from the chrysalis of her mouth in the shape of a rare enameled insect or as a fabulous bird on rainbow wings?" The truth for Amanda in questioning this at all, unfortunately, is that she doesn't know. That after Tom and Kara took her life at the end of her narrative, nothing happens. Her trip, her confused stumbling, her drunkenness, and her pantomime in the supermarket back home brought her no closer to an awakening than she was before, and it takes her final moment for us to realize that for her.

Essentially, Wright achieves an aural portrait of America's soul. The manner in which he does this is to tell a series of stories that reflect the mirror of ourselves through the snowy colored-hamburgers of a cathode ray television screen. The stories each capture our attention in much the same way the static on the surface pulls our arm hairs toward the violence depicted on the nightly news, or the dreams of a screenplay, the film made from the screenplay on repeat in the early hours of dawn, the long distances between cities, the freeway, pornography, the voyeuristic allure of bizarre sex behind closed doors, and of course, the broken promises of a rewarding relationship and parenthood. These shattered, shallow dreams can only be baptized with the blood of the innocent or chased away with the illicit chemical alteration of reality... and still, at the end of all of our lives we are left contemplating, just as Wylie/Tom/Will does "in a shroud of befuddlement...Who's (face) is this? Could it actually be his...or just another pagan image? Where was the glass to show him the truth?" and ultimately takes his current fling's tube of lipstick and resolves to "wr(ite) upon his forehead in crude letters that read correctly in their reflection but backward on his skin the single word BOGUS" (303). Our lives are only that of the "reality of our ancestors mov(ing) within and still available to us today through any of three separate doors: sex, art, and murder. And each of these separate acts, curiously and appropriately enough, partakes of equal elements of the other two" (147).

In essence, there is nothing more American than this definitive hazily bordered search to feel something of an identity, and it takes a lifetime of running, mass murder, drugs, theft, and a nightmarish gash of ruining lives scratched across the whole country to realize that the extrinsic search for identity is a fruitless endeavor. In these eight stories, Wright holds that very "glass" to our own visage, allowing us to peer into the deepest of our own motivations and emptiness. Rather than asking what happened to Wylie Jones, the better question is, what thin veneer is even keeping us from breaking through to indulge in our own liberating, yet pointless, American nightmare?

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## Unbridled says

The book's cover features a quote from Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times: "An uncompromising 1990's version of *On the Road*...chilling and often brilliant." With this blurb, however out of context this blurb might be, Ms. Kakutani, who has never been a favorite of mine, has earned my eternal contempt. Often brilliant? *On the Road*? Has she read *On the Road*? *Going Native* is to *On the Road* as Kakutani is to Lionel Trilling (which is not fair to Trilling) - i.e., not at all.

Like the amateur, this book poses and poses before the mirror, as if it poses one more time, it might start to look irresistible - overwrought sentence after overwrought sentence, look at me, look at me, you can't resist \*me\* big-boy, I can string together words that sound great to my self-satisfied ear - if, at the end of these sentences, I've said exactly nothing, gibberish in fact, what of it?, I'm beautiful and brilliant!

I had a terrible sense I was in trouble when I read the opening sentence: "Rho is at the kitchen sink, peeling furiously away at a carrot when she draws her first blood of the day, and, of course, it's nonmetaphoric, and her own."

Of course it's nonmetaphoric. Nonmetaphoric? Bad, bad ear. But I suppose that's obvious from the structure of the sentence.

Another example of Wright's fatuous, self-satisfied, and boring prose: "The inertia of success had insured the office would retain its original look, so evocative of Kenny's personality, even as success waned, to the inevitable day of the bulldozers and the painful transformation into fun singles' playland or grand shopping nexus, whichever happened to be most lucrative at the time, a time whose shadowy lineaments were already discernible in the abstracted face of the man now behind the desk with the razor burn on his neck and the erection in his pants. He was Emory Chace, owner, operator, and present-day keeper of Kenny Carson's vision, this morning's obvious tumescence an agreeable nudging sensation out on the rim of cognizance, it would die, it did, he no more aware of the erotic's comings and goings than he was of the trickle of departing guests with their jingling keys and impatient credit cards and forced pleasantries."

Shadowy lineaments are becoming discernible in my abstracted face; but, regrettably, I have no obvious tumescence to nudge out on the rim of my cognizance.

Oh, but that's not enough, because this style of writing started to insult me: "But if her mother were a slut and her father a bastard, as indeed they were, then she must be a nobody, as indeed she was. Or a no body or a know body or a noh body or a no buddy. Then her brain filled up again with black worms and she could feel her pulse like driving bird wings in the mild air and she thought about flying over the rail but that might be crazy wouldn't it? and she was determined never ever to be crazy again - even if she really were."

Maybe the birds can eat the black worms? Her pulse like \*driving\* wings in the \*mild\* air? You can see where he's going - what he means to evoke, but it's so flabby and precious that you just want to skim your way out of there. No body or a know body or a noh body or a no buddy? Seriously? Are you stoned? (My guess - yes.)

And one more, because if I had to read the whole thing, maybe you can tell me how wrong I might be: "Mrs. Fyfe enjoyed her work, its petty concerns enough to distract her from the self she had only to confront at night in the twisted space between the extinguishment of the television and the wobbly flight of consciousness down the tunnels of sleep, that mummified self wrapped in the resinous linen of stale



memories growing ever more distinct, more detailed, more frightening, under the paradoxically magnifying lens of the years."

Is this book as bad as I seem to suggest it is? Probably not. I just found it so pretentious and poorly written that I started to resent reading it - I wanted to quit. The story itself was boring too - ooh la la, there are people across the country who do harm to tiny lives of desperation in a TV consuming society. Visionary. I won't get started on the 'snappy' smart-aleck-one-voice dialogue.

Let me end by saying that I wasn't disgusted with the 'Indonesia' section, probably the longest link in this chain of stories masquerading as a cohesive novel. In fact, there were even a few moments that I really liked in this section; it ended like a bad scent, but the book had its best moments in the jungle. That's the best I can say for the book - it wasn't gut wrenching awful. It's not James Patterson bad, but that's what I find so offensive about it too - James Patterson writes what he writes, no pretense involved. Wright is groping for 'Literature' and he blunders like an amateur.

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