Strangest Journeys; Bali

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One.

I began to feel cautious or nervous when it was time to think about what I would say on a panel at the Writers and Readers Festival in Bali. The given topic was 'Strangest journeys – intrepid travellers share their tales'.

I thought about journeys, and what they are, and what makes us so interested in hearing about or reading about other people's travel experiences.

I would disappoint anyone who wanted dramatic and hilarious accounts of weird and scary moments among people who, I don't know, eat dogs, put bones in their noses, believe in weird gods or spirits – you know, I'm wary of the call to emphasise the foreignness and otherness, the exoticism and the mystery, the so-called spirituality or lawlessness of places other than those we are identified with.

It seems to me that there is something outdated as well as uncomfortable about presuming that kinship versus difference are categories that are stable and obvious and pretty much synonymous with things like nationality and ethnicity.

I've been increasingly interested in the changing relationship of self to other in an increasingly globalised

world where kinship versus difference can be played out *within* your own nation your own neighbourhood your own workplace … not only and not especially in the foreign places we seek out or find ourselves in.

To put is simply, there are big shopping malls in Queensland that feel a lot stranger to me than the market in Ubud.

And as one of my favourite quotations has it: '*The beauties of travel are due to the strange hours we keep to see them*.'

As for the intrepid thing, someone recently said to me, speaking of the long ago, *how about the way you just took off and went travelling on your own, how were you able to do that*?

I said, well, I just really believed nothing bad could ever happen to me.

And nothing really bad did.

Even though, if I think about it, I've lived and travelled in some wild places deemed dangerous, been threatened with robbery, rape and murder, been lost, delayed and deceived. But why think about it.

Nothing bad ever, I said, but then in Papua New Guinea I learnt fear.

I suppose I should also talk about that, about learning to be afraid.

Anyway, but the really scary thing for me would have been to travel in a couple or a group, to have someone else plan the order of my days.

Two.
If I have tales to tell they are in my writings. To talk of travel, then, is to talk about some of the ways travel has formed my writing. In my own case no doubt the most momentous and consequential trip I ever took was one I had no say in: when I came to Australia as a baby, with my parents, post world war two refugees.

And because I grew up in an Australia where to come from a non-Anglo background, to speak another language at home and not have an Anglo name was to be endlessly asked *where you were from* and *what nationality you were*, I had that other dimension to the usual adolescent issues about identity. The term New Australian meant Non Australian. Was I Hungarian, because my parents were, Italian because I was born in Italy? I found out that officially at birth I was categorised as a 'displaced person' and somehow I took this as some statement, even illumination, about my essential self. Displaced essentially. And as a consequence, having felt like a foreigner in my formative years, it was more familiar than strange to set out on my adult journeys as, once more, a foreigner abroad.

By now, I've been to a lot of places, and love very many of them very much, but I don't know any one place I want to be

in all the time. I'm a bit like that with people too. I keep writing 'I'll always be homesick wherever I am'.

When I was 14 (1964) my next big and influential trip abroad again was with my parents, to live for a couple of years on the island of Penang in Malaya.

I've written about returning there in the late 70s, and how my sense of myself having multiple lives began there, from being an RAAF officer's daughter (pink frocks, balls, mah-jong with the ladies), to frequenting low life dives, a bit of a continuing interest of mine, and smoking pot for the first time; exploring the solitary, intense self who 'would rather burn than marry', as well as the alternative social delights of French and English teenagers who provided the new music.

When I finally returned to Penang as an adult, I similarly varied my experiences; within a couple of days I had gone from staying in the most modest village house in Sumatra, sleeping on the floor, to, one night later, the E&O hotel in Penang with its old-timey colonial grandeur.

In other words, I welcome the emphasis on fluid identity that moving to different places gives you. We go somewhere else to be someone else.

I became an Australian by leaving Australia because then when people said, where are you from, what nationality are you, I had to say Australian. And also because somehow it's through separation and distance you also get to know a place (maybe people too).

I began my adult travels with the mythic 1970s trip to Bali.

I was such a believer in the whole perfect society enchantment aspect of Bali that that is what I found. Enchantment, magic, beauty, wonder: I wrote of all that and then later I wrote of why we experience, or construct, Bali as a paradise. Now it's a cliché to even talk about how that became a cliché.

I always travelled alone, and took off on a motorbike or on local buses. What looked brave or intrepid to others was just my preferred MO. See, it's not that I had some place I felt I totally came from or belonged to anyway.

By the time of my last trip to Bali, in early 1990, I was writing a novel set in Bali, so I was looking at everything for my characters.

This kind of travel, for the sake of the novel I was working on, became the driving reason for going places. It gives you a reason to explore further, risk more to see and experience more, in the service of the writing.

Research for a novelist is hard to separate from life. And I never wanted a life defined by the bourgeoisie oh dear no.

Anyway, The Edge of Bali was a novel about being on the outside of Bali, as its title attests, it's one that puts

the Western foreigner there at its centre, it's about the culture of tourism.

The novel is constructed as three linked novellas, each with a different visitor to Bali as its centre. One, Kuta beach: bars, drugs, bad boys. Two, Ubud culture groupie culture: art, mythology, temples. And three: never thought I'd come to Bali and find an eco-tourism movement. It all suddenly looks so dated, the novel's appeal so retro, partly because the October 2002 bombing ended another era, and partly because now it's suddenly 15 years later and I am returning to a new Bali.

Three.
Do we go abroad to find strangeness and otherness? Usually, only so long as we find the familiar too.

I remember having a look at someone's copy of the Lonely Planet guidebook to India way back around the time I first went to India in 1980.

It seemed to me it had as its main purpose information on where you could congregate with other travellers of your own kind, and eat food that was familiar to you.

The guidebook told you, for example, where in south India you could find a proper breakfast of eggs on toast, because, the book said, 'idlis don't feel like breakfast'.

That unfortunate phrase 'idlis don't feel like breakfast' exemplified, it seemed to me then, something I could not very much admire: people who go to foreign places only to

insist that these foreign places provide them with familiar comforts. Idlis, of course, do feel like breakfast to those who have been eating idlis for breakfast all their lives. Plus, once I tasted them there was nothing else I wanted for breakfast.

I now admit I have been glad of a jar of vegemite on one of my travels in India, for those fragile mealtimes when all you want is tea and toast.

In my novel Neem Dreams two antagonistic Australians finally bond when one of them produces a jar of vegemite, something the English character can not understand.

What is also true is that especially in the past decade the idea of a food being essentially of a single place has really been disturbed. Some Westerners in Pune (India) were scornful of my going to a Pizza Hut there one day, yet my experience was that it was an essentially Indian place. It wasn't only that the workers, the customers and even the pizzas were mostly Indian, it was that the meaning of eating in such a place was different there. To know how Indians live, one thing among many to see is the Indian version of a multi-national. I might point out that those who scorn such places as not being authentic enough for them would happily go off to a south Indian café in the north - idlis have caught on there. And that much so-called traditional food in India has specific origins in once foreign imports – potatoes, tomatoes, tea.

Food and travel are linked, very obviously, and in my early travels it seemed to me that to travel well you ate what and how the local people ate.

Now that is all very well where you love the food.

I adored wandering round Bali in the old days and eating at any roadside warung that took my fancy. And in India, too, I loved the street food, still do. And home food is best wherever you go. Travelling alone, taking local transport and eating on the streets, which I've done out of preference, are what earns you that rep for recklessness, eccentricity, or, more kindly, intrepidness.

All of this was entirely disturbed by my year in Papua New Guinea.

I got a book out of it. That's what people said, 'you got a book out of it', the compensation for everything that was tough and wild and dangerous.

I went to PNG to work as a volunteer. I was sent to a remote Highlands town. Tribal wars raged around it, roadblocks manned by outlaws were commonplace, brutal gang rapes were endlessly reported, police were known to be corrupt and vicious, and my job in women's development was entirely thwarted by the men in power, and what power they had.

The PNG experience was one of extreme foreignness, of a sense of ever-present danger. Not only that, but a lot of that.

Writing about my year in PNG was fraught with dangers of a different kind, but they too are extreme dangers: how one represents experience of cultures very different from one's own. And especially in a cultural moment where the West favoured narratives of the Other that showed the Other as inherently more wise, harmonious, exemplary and so on.

That's another story, or meta-story.

In more recent years, I've spent a lot time in India, again in many different and extreme contexts.

Yet the most dangerous thing I did, really, was to write a novel - Neem Dreams – with a central Indian character, to create her inner life. To write the Other was to tackle head-on all the fashionable ideas, the identity politics, that would make such an endeavour forbidden.

It seems then, that travel and writing yield best results through the refusal of safety and familiarity on the one hand, and an openness to the strong connections of essential humanity on the other. And that is a matter of attitude not necessarily place.

Four.
I turn up in Bali to give my talk.

I am met at the airport by a man in a white uniform who takes me to an air-conditioned car where I am given chilled scented towels and bottled drinking water in rattan holders before being driven up to Ubud.

As a guest of the festival I am put up in a new boutique hotel. Opulent. And beautiful, of course: Bali does beauty like nowhere else and this is one of its most beautiful new hotels, combining elements of classic Bali design with everything a well-heeled international traveller expects for comfort.

But it had been beautiful when on the very same grounds I had stayed, all those years ago, in a cheap bamboo and thatch hut, one of a few set in a sprawling garden that sloped down to the river. It was utterly simple, with a cement floor, a plain bed and in the bathroom a cement tank with a plastic ladle: a mandi, the traditional warm-enough cold-water bath. There was a verandah where I could hang my hammock and listen to the river. Someone would bring you your tea in a thermos, someone would be sweeping the paths, and they would sit and talk with you a while. I thought it was heaven and am glad a description of the place remains in one of my characters' experience. Now, in its luxurious new incarnation, among the architectural villas and walkways, the service, though impeccable and smiling, is distant, touched with the obsequious and formal. The enchantment is of a different order. Change can be worse than this.

It's all about *then and now*, this trip.

The first event I go to, immediately after my arrival, is the opening of a photographic exhibition, a cocktail party in a glamorous new New-York-designed open-sided bar (or warung, as it is whimsically named). As it happens, the

photographer, Jill, and I had been friends 40 years ago, Air Force brats in Penang and Butterworth. We hang out together in the next weeks. She hasn't lived in Australia for 30 years. She keeps saying 'you haven't changed a bit' and I'd know her anywhere too, but here we are, so much life behind us, less of it ahead. My memories of that long-ago time seem scanter and dimmer than hers, because I've written it and that's the effect of writing about it, the writing becomes the experience.

The new Bali now has good roads dense with cars (all SUVs); it's studded with 'spa resorts' and Ubud's streets no longer yield glimpses of nearby rice fields but are lined with air-conditioned shops, some selling international brand names. Rice fields give way to more designer villas and retreats. The expatriate population is huge, and a major part of the island's economy. These people often also live in at least one other place. There is new music being played here and it's really good. Tourists are returning after the bombing of 2002 effectively cleared the place. This is a relief for anyone who has to earn a living here. People sit in internet cafes and log in to the Lonely Planet message board for advice on where to go this morning for breakfast or for a good walk in the rice fields.

What is 'travel' any more?

To travel is to be in the present but to write is to re-present. The crucial journey of reflection, understanding, representation and creation begins when you feel you have, at least for a while, stopped travelling. Memory and imagination choose aspects of that experience, reform it,

create the reality you live with from now on. The strangest journeys are always in the mind.

The rest makes up fragments of dreams, chunks of the unconscious and lots of the forgotten. The writer finds that perhaps too fascinating. And then to be more wholly in the world, to take more account of the ever-changing present, to turn where you've just been into a story, it is time to go somewhere, to travel.

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