



TRAVELING LITE

WHY WOMEN'S TRAVEL MEMOIRS GET SOLD SHORT

BY RACHEL FRIEDMAN | ILLUSTRATION BY YINA KIM

In 1863, British writer Lady Helen Dufferin penned the satiric *Lispings from Low Latitudes* after a trip up the Nile with her son (the title was a play on his own travel account, *Letters from High Latitudes*). In it, the Hon. Impulsia Gushington effuses:

A delightful thought has struck me; it has positively illuminated the blank of existence! Why should I not follow in the glowing footsteps of Eothen [Alexander William Kinglake's popular 1844 book on Eastern travel]? Why should I not bask in the rays of Eastern suns, and steep my drooping spirits in the reviving influences of their magical mirages? The idea was an inspiration! I instantly rang for my faithful [attendant], and bade her prepare for Eastern travel at the shortest notice.

Dufferin intended her character to mock the middle-class tourist in general and the juvenile enthusiasm of the female traveler in particular: a pretentious woman with silly impulses toward exploration and, once she is abroad, trite observations. Gushington served not only as a parody of the female traveler but also of the female travel writer, who was fast becoming a recognizable figure of the times—to say nothing of a cautionary tale.

A feature article in an 1863 edition of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* meant to mock female travel and travel writing focused on the fictional heroine; Lady Dufferin's piece was titled "An Unprotected Female in the East" and revealed the dangers in Gushington's bit of bored housewife fun: The naive dilettante is eventually robbed, swindled, and abandoned during her journey. In the 2007





book *Traveling Economies: American Women's Travel Writing*, Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman analyzes the work this way: "The mobility and autonomy to which women gain access through travel challenge status quo gender norms, particularly for white, middle-class women. Harper's and its audience, larger American society, attempt to neutralize the threat by discouraging other would-be Impulsias." Like many women before and after her, Gushington is thoroughly punished for her efforts to grasp a bit more freedom than society deems her appropriate lot.

This negative portrait did nothing to slow the steady stream of Victorians venturing abroad. By the mid-1800s, travel had become infinitely more accessible, thanks to advancements like steamships and railways, along with the increasing availability of group excursions initially popularized by the enterprising Englishman Thomas Cook. Some of the most well-known female travelogues were produced by authors like Isabella Bird, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Mary Kingsley during this golden age of female travel.

As ridiculous a figure as Gushington presents, I've lately been thinking about how she resonates today. Gushington encounters physical and psychological dangers as a solo female traveler. It's no different now. In addition, the writing she produces about her journey (which, granted, is bad, but which was meant to parody all female travel writing, some of which was very good) is dismissed simply because it is penned by a woman. One hundred and fifty years post-Gushington, is the situation for female travelers and travel writers so very different?

In 2011, I published a book about backpacking with an Australian friend around Ireland, Australia, and South America in my early 20s. My hope for the project was simple enough: I wanted readers—young women in particular, and even more specifically young women like me who keenly felt societal and parental expectations—to act on their desires to see the world, should they have them. I tried to convey that

"SO TELL ME MORE ABOUT WHEN YOU MET YOUR HUSBAND IN PERU," WAS A COMMON REFRAIN OF RADIO-SHOW HOSTS, ONE GOING SO FAR AS TO CALL OUR ENCOUNTER THE "REWARD" OF MY TRAVELS.

travel was well within reach for many (I funded mine with a series of waitressing jobs) and that it would—and unfortunately there is no way to say this without sounding tragically cliché—change their lives. I also, of course, hoped to tell a good story, and mine revolved mainly around the intense and complicated friendship I developed with my female travel companion. Most readers, as well as some interviewees, understood these aims, but I was surprised by how many people focused on elements of the story that, to me at least, felt tangential.

"So tell me more about when you met your husband in Peru," was a common refrain of radio-show hosts, one even going so far as to call our encounter the "reward" of my travels. "We'd love to see more of your romantic relationship in the book," my publisher politely requested when we first met. And more than one reader has asked: "When are you writing the sequel about your marriage?" The part where I meet the man who eventually became my husband takes up a grand total of five of the book's 321 pages, yet it came up so frequently afterward that I sometimes wished I'd left it out altogether.

Would I have been asked about my relationship so much if I were a man? Is the question somehow indicative of our expectations regarding the narrative arcs of women? If so, what are those expectations? And are there prominent distinctions between the travel writings of men vs. women? I decided to take a journey of the reporting variety to find out about the current state of female travel writing.

There have always been intrepid women travelers: Explorers, housewives, settlers, missionaries, and thrill-seekers from diverse economic and racial backgrounds have contributed to travel writing throughout history. Still, there is no mistaking that women, especially solo travelers, take certain risks. And many feel these risks are gender specific.

Elisabeth Eaves, author of 2011's *Wanderlust: A Love Affair with Five Continents*, thinks that as a woman there's an extra dimension of caution that you're always aware of. "Is this person sitting too close to me? Is he following me? Men have to worry about physical safety too, but as a woman you're always conscious of this sexual dimension. I'm sort of looking forward to being an old woman because it will be interesting to experience life and travel with that element gone."

Mary Morris, author of numerous books, including 2007's *The River Queen*, thinks that women are more circumscribed than men in their travels. At the same time, there are of course a select group of intrepid women tackling the same peaks, treks, and trails as men. The recent success of Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012) offers a powerful example of the writing that can emerge from such journeys. Morris says: "Strayed implies that women have the power to write another narrative. We have other stories we can tell. Ones that [don't] include fear."

The fear women harbor surrounding travel is often revealed by the questions they ask writers. Lavinia Spalding, editor of the 2011 anthology *The Best Women's Travel Writing*, says that women often tell her they want to travel but are afraid to go alone. They seem to be asking for permission, whereas, says Spalding, "A lot of men say: 'Fuck it. I'm just going.'" Stephanie Elizondo Griest, author of 2004's *Around the Bloc: My Life in Moscow, Beijing, and Havana*, has experienced a similar phenomenon, remembering, "I prepared for my book tour like a politician. I really knew about policy. [But] nobody ever asked me about Putin or Castro. Everyone wanted to know: Was I scared? They wanted me to convince them to do what I did."

Although there are specific risks inherent in traveling as a female-identified person, there are also distinct advantages. Eaves, Spalding, and Griest all noted that women have a unique access afforded by the very fact that they're generally not considered a threat. Women are more often invited into homes of others, more likely to be looked after by protective strangers, often other women. This "makes up for



the physical risks of constantly being on display or questioned," says Faith Adiele, author of 2004's *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun*.

In response to the fears her readers expressed, Griest began leading workshops for women on how to travel. Huge audiences turned up. And though Griest initially expected participants to be young women like her, she was surprised that most were actually in the 45-to-65 age range. Many had recently experienced important life events: a divorce, say, or the death of a parent, and looked at travel, Griest recalls, as a "transformative experience...a way to complete themselves."

Regardless of their motivations for travel, men and women alike have, of course, been accused of cultural objectification in their travel writing, of turning the act of travel into an act of consumption. One reaction to this seems to be a recent trend in marking the distinction between tourist and traveler: Tourists are those icky consumerist types, while travelers seek an authentic experience. But this attempt at conscientiousness is inherently problematic. "It comes from a good endeavor, but there is a way in which we refuse to believe that a place is changing that comes from the colonial fantasy. The native is pristine and simple and shouldn't change because I want to go take a break from my overly electronic life. It's a canned sort of performance," says Adiele. She and other writers work hard to explode the explorer/conqueror mentality and decolonize the imperialist vocabulary employed for centuries in travel writing.

Spalding has observed that "a lot of travel writing by men is focused on what I saw, did, ate, where I went, what goal I accomplished. Whereas with women, it's who I met, what I learned, how I felt, [how I] changed." If men and women travel for different reasons, if they travel differently, full stop, are these nuances revealed in their work? And do those differences impact the reception of that work?

Ayun Halliday, author of 2003's comic travelogue *No Touch Monkey! And Other Travel Lessons Learned Too Late*, believes that for a female travel writer to achieve a bestseller, she has to position herself as having had some sort of transformative epiphany, often of a romantic/spiritual nature. "Whereas a guy can just be really, really funny," she notes, adding, "If you're a funny female travel writer, it's sort of incumbent upon you to mention how awful you look at some point." And, while both women and men tell personal stories in their travel writing, women do seem to be judged more harshly for it, "as though it's overly self-indulgent," Eaves says, "whereas no one complains when Peter Matthiessen (in *The Snow Leopard*) or Paul Theroux (all over the place) writes about their loves and emotions and sex lives."

It's in the marketing of books that the gendered angle comes most sharply into play. Strayed, for instance, notes that male readers really like *Wild*; it resonates with them. "But so many male radio interviewers say how much they love it before the interview and then they go on to say in the interview: 'Well, this is an inspiring book for women!'" For Strayed, the response speaks to a larger issue. "Men's stories are seen as universal, women's as particular. What women are up against is the battle to not be marginalized."

Female travel writers of color have another layer of marginalization to contend with. Adiele, for one, wishes her work had been taken more seriously as a travelogue. Instead, it's marketed as "African-American studies," which she finds frustrating. "I'm an anthropological artifact, and I'm not even African-American," she

says. Elaine Lee, who published 1997's *Go Girl! The Black Woman's Book of Travel and Adventure*, the first travel book by and for African-American women, sees a dearth of opportunities in general. "Where is a black person going to get their stories published? There are very few outlets."

"MEN'S STORIES ARE SEEN AS UNIVERSAL, WOMEN'S AS PARTICULAR. WHAT WOMEN ARE UP AGAINST IS THE BATTLE TO NOT BE MARGINALIZED."

This particularizing has little to do with content and much to do with marketing. The writers I spoke with were especially cognizant of their books' covers—often a reader's first impression of a text—and how some books get lumped into a nebulous, pastel-hued chick-lit arena regardless of the story. Strayed thinks that her input into the packaging process—most notably, a vocal insistence that the cover be gender-neutral—is a key reason her book has found a broad audience. "My real theory is that men would enjoy most stories from women [if the marketing encouraged it]. There is nothing in particular about *Wild* but how it was positioned. The cover was really important. I wanted men to be able to read it on the subway."

Not every writer wins this battle, though. Tamara Sheward, author of 2005's *Bad Karma: Confessions of a Reckless Traveller in Southeast Asia*, lost big time when it came to the cover. "The original Aussie cover features a *Devil Wears Prada*-esque closeup of a pair of red platform shoes covered in Chinese script. *Bad Karma* is a mud-and-beer-on-boots book, and there sure as shit wasn't much Chinese script in Southeast Asia. It was a case of nervous first-time author vs. Big Publisher clichés, and the lip-biting greenhorn lost out. I think a lot of publishers just see a female name on the manuscript and instantly think pink." (My own book weathered a pink cover discussion; I felt as though I had managed a Herculean feat when we settled on yellow.)

Yet, while many writers of all genders lack influence in the packaging of their books, I was heartened to hear mostly positive experiences when it came to the editorial process with writers who, overall, felt supported by smart and invested editors. Strayed, for instance, had "an amazing editor who backed me up. She was very supportive of the idea that a book doesn't have to have a romantic lead."


The elephant in the room of women and contemporary travel writing, of course, is Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India, and Indonesia*. Whether you love or hate the 2007 bestseller-turned-blockbuster (and it seems those are the only two options), there's no question that it almost single-handedly exploded the market for female travel memoirs, including mine. However, my editor, Marisa Vigilante, believes that *Eat, Pray, Love* would be much harder to publish today than it was five years ago. "It was a very glamorous, glitzy view of travel that would feel very off in today's post-recession world. Instead, we get



memoirs like Strayed's *Wild*, an austere experience of scraping by on tuna jerky and rice and beans as she backpacked for months. It's sort of like the difference between *Sex and the City* and *Girls*—both very much products of their respective times."

Women travel writers are thankfully no longer the punch line of overtly sexist parodies like *Impulsia* Gushington—though it's clear that we are still, like her, marginalized and stereotyped in ways male writers are not, our messages often simplified in the packaging and marketing of our work. And questions of equal opportunities for female travel writers still remain. The writers interviewed in this piece have all published books, but many of them, along with scores of others, also work as freelance writers, churning out essays and articles for newspapers, magazines, and websites. And this travel-writing scene is still somewhat dominated by men.

Jessica Colley, a young freelance writer who has written for the *Toronto Star* and *New York* magazine, feels editors believe men will take on any assignment, no matter how adventurous or quirky, whereas it is sometimes assumed women wouldn't be interested in writing about topics that, for example, are physically demanding. "Men also are sometimes more [able] to form bonds with editors during social situations like a night of drinking. It can be hard to know where women fit into this world—are we there drinking and connecting professionally, or are editors drawing conclusions based on our attractiveness and not our writing?" Elaine Lee acknowledges that it's simply harder for women travel writers to get work. "The three people I know who make a decent living from travel writing are all white men. Most women travel writers have other jobs, husbands, trust funds, or pensions to support them."

If travel writing is still in some ways a man's world, a cadre of female editors is working to change that, and among them is Julia Cosgrove, editor-in-chief at *AEAR* magazine. "I'm in this position where I can be cultivating young female writers, and want to be.... I'm always depressed if we publish an issue, and out of the four feature stories, [only] one is from a woman." When I asked her the reasons behind this imbalance, she noted that the magazine doesn't receive nearly as many female-penned pitches for feature stories as she does for shorter, front-of-book pieces. Why, exactly? Are we more cautious? Do we lack confidence? Maybe the element of fear is something our community needs to address not only as travelers but also as writers. It is clear that female travel writers (women in general, for that matter) continue to face certain gender-specific challenges we must perpetually struggle against, but we might also consider how putting our work out into the world just as aggressively as men could help our cause. Maybe there is some lesson to be learned from the wild *Impulsia*, after all, who would surely stop at nothing to reach her desired goal—whether abandoned, swindled, or robbed along the way. We might say it's all part of the adventure. 

Rachel Friedman is the author of *The Good Girl's Guide to Getting Lost: A Memoir of Three Continents, Two Friends, and One Unexpected Adventure* (Bantam Books, 2011). She has written for the *New York Times*, *National Geographic Traveler*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *New York* and *Bust* magazines, among others.



THE MEANING OF FREEDOM: AND OTHER DIFFICULT DIALOGUES

Angela Y. Davis
(CITY LIGHTS PUBLISHERS)

Perhaps it's unfair to hope that a book penned by one of the most important feminist public intellectuals of our time—and with an ambitious title to boot—would comprise a flawless collection of speeches. *The Meaning of Freedom*, after all, is Davis's 10th book and it touches on the same narratives she weaves into her previous, more polished work: feminism, politics, and dismantling the prison-industrial complex.

This collection of speeches delivered between 1994 and 2009 is not without some

imperfections, but it doesn't disappoint. While it has been several years since the publication of her last work, much in the collection is relevant to today's political climate. When she said, in 1994, "We seem to have forgotten how to assume stances of opposition and resistance," it rings true for 2012.

But there are some missteps, including an odd chronology and multiple typos. (One typo is easy for reviewers to overlook, but the presence of several suggests the editing of a book was a slapdash effort.) It has to be said, too, that in Davis's case, such errors are more obvious because they undermine the intentionality and importance of her messages.