

Empire

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Sally Breen

Empire

Sally Breen is the author of The Casuals (2011) winner of the Varuna Harper Collins Manuscript Prize and Atomic City (2013) shortlisted for the Qld Literary Awards People's Choice Book of the Year in 2014. Her creative and non-fiction work has been published widely with features in Overland, Griffith REVIEW, Review of Australian Fiction, The Guardian London, The Conversation, Asia Literary Review, The Age, The Australian and Best Australian Stories. She is senior lecturer in writing and publishing at Griffith University and chair of Asia Pacific Writers and Translators.

In a Californian spiritualist's home in Mexico I am instructed to be grateful for things. Sunlight. Creativity. My strong body. Words written in the guidebook in the guesthouse where she's running from her country and her grief, a trauma the yellow highlighted passages in *Living Now* and *Buddhist Enlightenment* and Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* in her bookshelf cannot relieve. I am grateful for Amaretto flavoured tequila. That assholes sometimes lose. I'm grateful my body is not hostage to anything – a person, a drug, a past – cravings and desire so etched in they strip the fat. I am grateful I saw the middle aged ex-pat woman with the pinched face and skinny arms eating an enormous mound of ice cream alone in a noisy restaurant after the second sitting – for how sad she was or maybe angry and how the ice cream didn't seem to make any difference. I am grateful for stray dogs who sit on my feet in cafes and how I let them, trying not to think about fleas and ticks and tiny spiders and the dust of San Miguel crawling up my legs and lodging deep inside me. I am grateful the waiters let it go and let me take photos but chase the dogs out after I've paid but before I've left the building. I am grateful I don't experience the world from a thousand-dollar hotel rooms and still argue about stray margaritas on the bill. I am glad the set of my shoulders and the tone and volume of my voice is not a certain kind of American ... or Australian ... or German. I'm grateful for Mexican children, born into an endless sea. Sleeping in the front seats of pick-ups while their dads sell mangoes and coconut strips to tourists, curling into their grandmother's laps on street corners sucking on blankets casually as if they are the children of that New York family I visited on 5th Avenue propped up on a bulbous white couch watching Netflix.

I didn't want crazy single girl stories. I didn't want to do *this* and not do *that* and end my proclamations about all the sex I had in foreign countries with the word – PERIOD. I didn't want the travelogue of another dull young white man who thought he was wild because he'd

done a shit load of hash somewhere with someone. A capitalised and bolded AWESOME on the fifth page of his self-published book. I didn't want the bourgeois women gazing off bridges in Paris, smoking the cigarettes they wouldn't usually in cafes, visiting all the bars the writers did in the 1920s but arriving without a pen, posting a picture of themselves with freshly washed hair in a nice red dress on Instagram instead. I didn't want to write about travel like Alain de Botton chronicling his arguments with a woman named M over the crème caramels just to prove a point about how we are always, well ... *ourselves*.

And at first I couldn't figure out why Paul Theroux's work bugged me so much (work *The Observer* tells me, 'remains the standard by which other travel writing must be judged').

Remains and must.

And it wasn't just because his writing was fuelled with phrases like 'almost entirely' and 'involves a degree of' and 'at its most rewarding' it was because every single authority he quoted in his Tao was English or American and only one of them was a woman. His position 'exemplified' by Joseph Conrad's assertion that 'curious men go prying into all sorts of places' as if they're all secretly pleased the English are *demonstrably* good travellers – having built the biggest and most murderous empire of the modern era.

In the introduction to *Travel – A Literary History* Peter Whitfield, helpfully suggests the topic of travel writing is 'complicated... It touches intimately,' he writes, 'on the way we in Europe have understood and dealt with the rest of the world' (Whitfield 2012: xi).

We and dealt with.

A little carpet sweep for all the consequences.

The book's perspective is Eurocentric because the literature of international travel is predominantly European ... if this appears to be a convenient sleight of hand it does at least reflect the historical reality that it was the Western European nations who travelled to and observed the lands and peoples of America, Africa and Asia and not the reverse. (Whitfield 2012: vii)

Blood on the hands, blood on the trees.

And there he is, Mr Whitfield washing his hands, burrowed in his study on the English heath surrounded by his treasured volumes on Herodotus, Marco Polo, Columbus and Captain Cook, in the soft lovely glow of his fake oil lamps and his maps detailing the major trade routes of the world and his 19th century atlas, so hunkered down and diligent on that tiny powerful island he must never have gotten the memo. I guess he has never read Mahabari's *Indian Eye on English Life* or the pilgrimages of Lady Nijo or realised the Shah of Iran wrote about wandering down European corridors in 1873. Had he really never come across the travel accounts of a Persian prince or a Moroccan ambassador or a Japanese Monk? Did he miss the dewy number of the diary of Queen Emma of Hawaii or the memoirs of Emily Said-Ruete an African Arab Princess in Europe?

You can't break bread in a one-sided story.

I want someone to talk about how leaving our lives *is* and isn't possible. Someone who understands that states of being are simultaneous, how lines within a life can split and run parallel; the routines, the choices, the geographies inside us overlaid by all the new tracings we are making. I want Basho's poems written on the road, the double pink flowers, the festivals of dolls and the loneliness – single leaves from the Kiri tree. I never stared at a brochure on Barbados because I was bored of an English winter. Sometimes you need to wake up in a hospital to get the true measure of a country.

Perhaps I should write like Andres Neuman and Teju Cole. To write like I don't have a body to lose, to write without seeing, take my mother's maiden name of Patino and reclaim my Spanish heritage and write about the world as if it only exists in the shadow of my own cerebral sheen. To denounce the personal, to seek to *transcend* it even when my own position in the frame takes up nearly all the space. A 21st century desire not to leave a footprint. To write in fragments because it suits the times and cobbled together, all these random musings might resemble a book someone wants to publish. To have no pauses because *we no longer travel like that* and because how I feel about where I am, is everything. To unearth history and write through some wrongs.

And I'll be aware of all the contradictions and tell you I'm aware of them, just so you know. And I'm going to tell you I'm undoing the canon and the status quo. And I'm gonna count how many black faces are in rooms and this intent could be powerful but I'm gonna write to you in a voice you'll recognise because it isn't really mine. It's borrowed from the canon and all those dead white guys and you'll wonder why I'm being so careful, so meticulous with this language, why I seem to feel the need to use phrases like 'however modest' and 'provides some degree of solace' – endless well carved politeness. And when you're reading me you'll know what I've got to say matters and is necessary and needed but you'll keep waiting for rain to fall down the page. You'll keep waiting for the chink to break open in my non-personal face and for something to happen. Your mind will wander to what kind of snacks you wanna have and you'll pad out to the kitchen and eat and then go and throw yourself in the ocean just to feel something and you'll leave me all to myself, hovering there over the world in a net of formal words, where nothing can touch me, all my rage packed down into neat hospital corners. A man, who I must admit, probably slams doors.

When Neuman tells me Mexican women have small butts because they're tired of Mexican men slapping them I wanna slap him but at least I'm awake. And I want to tell him I never felt the need to turn a television on in Mexico City. Not once. And in paragraph after paragraph he's gonna switch that tele on, curl up in the fully funded glory of his eiderdown musing on who's worthy. And I bet his girlfriend reads his pages back to him in the morning but he never mentions it. Smart, smart men who write like they press their shirts and bring portable irons in their suitcases. Smart men who never behave badly except when they slip up. Smart men who are never late for anything, especially the planes that take them to their fellowship territories and the interviews mentioned in passing in their articles and books because they don't really want to talk about anything 'personal' or 'the tour'. Smart men talking to themselves and each other about other smart men's books, reference after reference

and ticking off the big bibliographies but to write like these smart men I'd have to grow a cock and then I'd have to pretend to not know where it was.

I want George Orwell to take me down the Ramblas with the workers shouting and the red and blue flags waving and not being sure he even likes it but he's going to the front line anyway because the revolution seems something worth fighting for. I want Martha Gellhorn taking no prisoners in those same hard times in Madrid and the hard stone of shock I felt when the little boy crossing the street holding his grandmother's hand dies right in front her when a tiny piece of grey shrapnel slides right into his neck. I want Hemingway writing about Lady Ashely's eyes in a taxi gliding along the light and dark patches of the Avenue des Gobelins in a Paris no-one can imitate and Tash Aw writing about where he got his face. I want Nick Cave's hallucinations on tour – his African American angel in a stars and stripes mini-skirt greeting him on a bridge in Louisville Kentucky and on a flush fingered morning in Vancouver British Columbia where the stars have morphed into a single Maple leaf. I want Marguerite Duras to show me around the dripping insides of the torn apart heart of Indochina. I want the Japanese Buddhist monk Ennin Jikaku Daishi to describe the five summits of Monjushiri on his pilgrimage to China in the 9th century as 'overturned bronze bowls' – each entry in his diary beginning something like 'Huichang, third year, sixth moon; 27th DAY' (Daishi 2006: 45).

Writers who move around the world inside their bodies and not just their heads. Writers who get their hands dirty. Listening to something other than the sound of their own breath. Writers who know this gig is less about place and ideology and more about what we can say about all the blood and mess and joy in strangers and the strangers we are to ourselves, the hands we want to hold, the shadows of those who made us and the people left behind. Not so convinced or assured of anything. Not so certain of who we are, the trace of our shadows fading in and out and hardly denting the frame. Writers who know about the people who haunt us and the power of those who aren't even there.

Jamaica Kincaid writes:

That the native does not like the tourist is not hard to explain. For every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere ... but some natives – most natives in the world – cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go – so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself (Kincaid 2000: 17-18).

Dear Jamaica Kincaid. I'm sorry for being a tourist. I'm sorry I left home. I'm sorry I can't really claim to be a native of anywhere and that I just keep moving around the planet fuelled on credit and the borrowed fumes of Western privilege. If I were a traveller and not a tourist, I wouldn't take the room with the air conditioning. Or dream of a shower that works or tap water I can drink. If I were a traveller, I'd have a small backpack and not a suitcase almost the same size as me. If I were a traveller, I would have got my money's worth out of the

Babble foreign language APP and not forgotten every lesson after I took it remembering only *mucho gusto* and *buenos dias*. I would have learned your language. If I were a traveller, I'd be wary of buying any clothing or hats or boots that might appropriate the symbols of your culture and I wouldn't wear cut off shorts at temples or show any skin. I'd wear brown and washed out purple cotton long sleeve shirts with a few raffia bracelets on each arm and appropriate walking boots even in the heat. I'd avoid cities and tourist traps and live among the locals. I'd eat with my hands.

If I were a traveller, I'd navigate the Brazilian jungle with a compass and grow a beard. If I were a traveller and not a tourist, I wouldn't fantasise about how beautiful your women are and fuck them in the backrooms of 24-hour bars with the red curtains in the doorways. I'd undertake a respectful and mutually beneficial relationship with a young woman and meet her family and come back and marry her in two years. If I were a traveller, I'd know what I was doing. If I were a traveller, I'd make a point of pride about shitting through straws and avoiding every Starbucks and KFC and all interactions with cartels. I'd still smoke lots of pot though because pot is a plant.

If I were a traveller and not a tourist, I wouldn't get drunk in hostels or make any friends, I'd volunteer my time at an elephant sanctuary or an orphanage instead, reading Paulo Coelho and *Shantaram* and weaving bamboo baskets and sticking to myself. If I were a traveller, I'd keep a journal of my thoughts, the wispy bits of feathers sticking out from the pages and pressed flowers inside and sketches of interesting plants. I'd be organised and non-digital and wouldn't have daily and hourly anxieties about the whereabouts of my iPhone, my passport and my wallet. I wouldn't get tattooed or forget to carry cash or try to buy the morning after pill with an American Express card. If I were a traveller, I'd know the words to your national anthem and the unofficial Latin American anthem, gringo go home. Jamaica Kincaid, I know you want to slit my throat. And I know why. But I'm not sure how that's going to help either of us.

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