

Better Than Fiction 2

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Introduction

DON GEORGE



For most of the year, Lonely Planet's varied creations focus on the how and the where of travel; from guidebooks to apps, they're designed to help travelers decide where and when to go, and how to get the most out of their journeys once they get there. But once a year Lonely Planet also publishes a special literary anthology that focuses on the why: the rigors and the rewards that travel confers.

Three years ago, we decided to devote that anthology to true travel tales written by acclaimed fiction writers. We called the collection *Better Than Fiction*, and it was a resounding success. We were so pleased with that delightful and inspiring spectrum of stories that we decided to reprise the theme for this year's anthology.

At the beginning of the year I contacted a globe-girdling

list of notable fiction writers, a marvelous mix of esteemed literary stars and emerging prize-winners, and asked if they would like to write a true tale of an especially memorable travel experience – one that had profoundly moved, delighted, taught, and/or transformed them. I said we were open to virtually any kind of experience, in any setting around the world. Despite their demanding schedules, 30 of these writers responded with passionate descriptions of tales they'd love to tell.

While I was waiting for these stories to arrive, I began to worry that they might not meet the heady standards set by the first collection. But then the pieces began to trickle in, and I was transported. As I read each one, my picture-puzzle panorama of travel's infinite possibilities wondrously expanded, piece by piece – as yours will too, when you read them.

The tales assembled herein embody a moving microcosm of our modern world. The settings roam from Azerbaijan to Vietnam, with stops in Iceland, India, Italy, and Idaho, Samoa, Saudi Arabia, and Scotland, and some 20 more places around the globe. The themes vary widely as well, from youthful coming-of-age adventures, to middle-age misadventures and meditations on journeys past and to come, to wistful older-age homages to the most lasting of life's road-lessons. And the subjects encountered along the way encompass sex, romance, the end of romance, surfing, fear, potential kidnappings, a hotel that isn't a hotel, hitchhiking, a mysterious sadhu, a Kazakh flash mob, wrong turns, right turns, an almost-arrest on an English train, dengue fever, laughter clubs, fire jumping, healing along the Boudin Trail, and canyon gazing. As I wrote: a moving microcosm of our modern world.

While these pieces vary invigoratingly in setting, style, and subject, they all manifest two unifying lessons. The first is that

great fiction writers are also artful travel-tale-spinners: Just as they do when creating an imagined story, in recreating a lived experience, writers evoke a vivid sense of place with just a few finely chosen details, use dialogue to propel a plot and reveal the character of a person and a locale, and shape the arc of an adventure toward a meaningful end.

The second lesson is that whenever we venture into the world as travelers, our capacity for wonder, engagement, and growth is directly related to the capacity of our hearts. Wherever we may be in the world and in the pilgrimage of our lives, if we can wholeheartedly embrace the adventures we encounter, travel offers life-changing opportunities for discovery, renewal, connection and transformation.

Grounded in these truths, *Better Than Fiction 2* celebrates the power of storytelling and risk-taking, and the peril and promise that travel presents. The ultimate message these artful, heartfelt tales all convey is that stepping into the world alchemizes adventures even the most imaginative novelist could never foresee – and leads to resolutions that transmute our lives more rarely and richly than any of us could dream, even better than fiction too.

An Italian Education

KAREN JOY FOWLER



In 1966, when I was sixteen years old, I went on a trip to Italy. This was my first trip to much of anywhere without my parents. It was billed as educational. We would be enrolled at the University for Foreigners in the lovely hilltop city of Perugia to learn whatever Italian we could pick up in four weeks. Students from several high schools were participating; my English teacher was coming, along with three other girls from my English class – Carolyn, Janice, and Ellen, all friends of mine.

We students were lodged in a number of places, but on the cheap. My particular cohort of four landed in a convent. We shared a room on the second floor, spartan but bright, which looked down on the street below. There were bars on our bedroom windows, which we wondered about.

The nuns did not speak English and we, despite the dozen or so hours we'd eventually put in, did not speak Italian. We called

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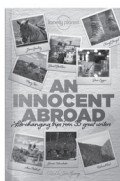
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