

better than fiction





# better than *Don* fiction

**True Travel  
Tales From Great  
Fiction Writers**

Edited by Don George



LONELY PLANET PUBLICATIONS  
Melbourne • Oakland • London

**Better than Fiction**

True Travel Tales from Great Fiction Writers

Published by  
Lonely Planet Publications

**Head Office**

90 Maribyrnong Street, Footscray, Victoria, 3011, Australia  
Locked Bag 1, Footscray, Victoria, 3011, Australia

**Branches**

150 Linden Street, Oakland CA 94607, USA  
201 Wood Ln, London, W12 7TQ, United Kingdom

**Published 2012**

Printed by Hang Tai Printing Company, Hong Kong  
Printed in China

Edited by Janet Austin, Kate James  
Cover Design by Roberto Devicq  
Design by Mark Adams  
Layout by Margie Jung

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Better than fiction: true travel tales from  
great fiction writers / edited by Don George.

1st Edition.

978 1 74220 594 6 (pbk.)

Voyages and travels.  
Travelers' writings.

George, Donald W.

808.8032

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**Don George** has edited six previous Lonely Planet anthologies, including *Lights, Camera... Travel!*, *A Moveable Feast*, *The Kindness of Strangers*, *By the Seat of My Pants* and *Tales from Nowhere*. He also wrote the best-selling *Lonely Planet Guide to Travel Writing*. Don is Editor at Large and Book Review Columnist for *National Geographic Traveler*, Special Features Editor and blogger for the popular travel website Gadling.com, and Editor of Geographic Expedition's online magazine, Recce: Literary Journeys for the Discerning Traveler ([www.geoex.com/recce](http://www.geoex.com/recce)). He has been Global Travel Editor for Lonely Planet, Travel Editor at the *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*; and founder and editor of Salon.com's Wanderlust. Don has received dozens of awards for his writing and editing, including the Society of American Travel Writers Lowell Thomas Award. He appears frequently on NPR, CNN, and other TV and radio outlets, is a highly sought-after speaker, and hosts a national series of onstage conversations with prominent writers. Don is also co-founder and chairman of the annual Book Passage Travel Writers and Photographers Conference.

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# Introduction

BY DON GEORGE



When I was preparing to settle in Greece for a year fresh out of college, in addition to my guidebooks, I packed two novels, *The Magus* by John Knowles and *Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis. As the year unfolded, in many ways the latter two proved to be the best guides of all, immersive, enlightening introductions to the landscape, people, and culture I was discovering.

As I have learned over and over in my wanderings, some of the best travel writing is fictional. And some of the best travel writers, going all the way back to Lady Murasaki, Homer, and the authors of *One Thousand and One Nights*, are the fiction-spinners who transport us to the worlds they create with their words.

This truth was the inspiration behind the anthology you hold in your hands. What would we get, we wondered, if we asked some of the planet's most acclaimed fiction writers to describe their most meaningful non-fictional journeys?

The answer is this treasure trove of surprising and inspiring tales: thirty-two stories that span the thematic spectrum from disorientation to revelation, disillusion to redemption, life-threatening risk to life-saving connection; in settings as varied as Antarctica, Alaska, and Argentina, Saudi Arabia, Sulawesi, and South Africa; written by a distinguished corps of contributors who have humbled us in their enthusiasm for this project.

Exhilaratingly varied in place, plot, and voice, these tales all share one common characteristic: They manifest a passion for the precious gifts that travel confers, from its unexpected but inevitably enriching lessons about other peoples and places to the truths – sometimes uncomfortable but always enlarging – it reveals about ourselves.

May your own life's journey be enriched and enlarged by these master storytellers' true travel tales!

# Going South

BY KURT ANDERSEN



I suppose it was inevitable. My family's annual vacations had always consisted of weeks-long summer driving trips, and almost exclusively *north*, to cool, tidy, familiar Minnesotas and Wisconsin and Manitobas. I had studied Spanish for ten years. I was 17 going on 18, out of high school a semester early, working a minimum-wage job and admitted to the college of my choice. And for three years my favorite book had been *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Tom Wolfe's iconifying 1968 chronicle of Ken Kesey and his dozen friends' pointless and profound coast-to-coast-to-coast 1964 trip across America in an old school bus. It was a moment, for people my age, when high adventure seemed not only possible but easy, not only easy but obligatory.

And so in the summer of 1972, five other Omaha boys and I bought a stubby old yellow school bus. It got atrocious mileage, even by the standards of that era, but gas cost only 35 cents a gallon. We ripped out most of the seats, built some crude wooden storage cabinets, installed a cassette tape player and speakers, tacked down 100 square feet of gold loop-pile carpeting, bought some maps, and – cell-phoneless, internetless – lit out for the territory. We were headed south, due south, way south, beyond the frontier, to Mexico.

**Kurt Andersen** is the author of *Heyday*, a *New York Times* bestseller and winner of the 2008 Langum Prize as the year's best American historical novel. His earlier novel, *Turn of the Century*, was a *Times* Notable Book and national bestseller, and his most recent novel is *True Believers*. Andersen is also the author of the nonfiction book *Reset*, about the 2008–09 financial and economic crisis. In addition, he is host and cocreator of *Studio 360*, the Peabody Award-winning public radio programme, and a regular contributor to *Vanity Fair* and *Time* magazines. Previously, he was a columnist for *New York* magazine and the *New Yorker*, as well as the design and architecture critic for *Time*. He also cofounded *Spy* magazine, and served as editor-in-chief of *New York* magazine and editorial director of *Colors*.