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In the Footsteps of Marco Polo: A Companion to the Public Television Series

Denis Belliveau
Francis O'Donnell
Hardcover $29.95 (256pp)
978-0-7425-5683-6

Consider the indignities suffered by Marco Polo: a member of a wealthy family of Venetian traders in fabrics and spices, he traveled the winding Silk Road from the Mediterranean port of Ayas in Lesser Armenia through Iraq, Persia, Afghanistan, Turkestan, and Tibet all the way to the poet-sung Xanadu of Kublai Khan, Mongol emperor of the Celestial Kingdom. Yet when Polo finally returned to Venice and told of the cities inhabited by millions of souls (at a time when the most populous European city could boast of no more than 200,000 residents), the Chinese granaries filled with millions of bushels of grain, of millions of bolts of precious silk, millions of gems…he was mocked. “Marco Milione,” he was scornfully called.

Imagine how gratified he would be to learn that two American adventurers have retraced his path across the largest landmass on earth, using his book, *A Description of the World*, as their guide and illuminating text. To their astonishment, his descriptions of places and races of people, and their customs, were proved true at every turn.

In the Footsteps of Marco Polo, an extraordinary travel book put together by photographer and cameraman Denis Belliveau and lecturer Fran-cis O’Donnell, documents a fascinating journey that already has provided the material for a public television series. The book tells of how the im-petuous young authors embark on an arduous, almost unbelievably dangerous, trek through several war zones, traipsing through fields of land mines, forging travel visas, bribing officials, crossing deserts and the frozen valleys of the Pamir Mountains. They depend on the kindness of strangers. They are fed and given shelter by people who can barely feed themselves.

Fast friends since art school, the authors share a brotherly bond that is tested by hardship. More than once their frustration and stress lead to fisticuffs. On one occasion they grapple, kick, and punch each other in the lobby of a four-star hotel. In the end, however, their love for each other is strengthened by the trials they undergo.

This youthful exuberance and optimism at times, unfortunately, verges on the puerile: they leer at beautiful girls and speculate at what may be hidden by veil and burka. In Tibet, as if in some dream-like, languid male fantasy, they are seduced and bedded by two comely women whose husbands are conveniently away. Younger readers will often find them reminiscent of those San Dimas surfers, Bill and Ted of the Excellent Adventure fill-in-name-of-country series of movies—the older set will be reminded of some hackneyed Hollywood “Road to…” film.

Nevertheless, this is a book well worth reading, filled as it is with adventurous stories and wonderful photographs taken by Belliveau. Most striking is the un-selfish nature of the people the authors meet on their way. Were it not for those who fed them or warmed with their kindness and ever-ready cups of hot chai, they would never had made it to Iran, let alone China. The book is a touching record of the beauty and charity of the human spirit, a charity undeterred by want, hunger, war, and grief. (December) [i]Arturo Mantecón
ARTURO MANTECON (December 15, 2008)

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