



Man Mission: Four Men, Fifteen Years, One Epic Journey

Eytan Uliel

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Through its fun vacation scenes, the novel becomes a critique of commonplace definitions of manhood and a proposal of a healthier, more relational, and realistic model.

Eytan Uliel's novel *Man Mission* is a satisfying chronicle of macho "guycations" and an insightful meditation on men's life journeys.

The story is about four Australian men who "play, laugh, and swear" through often grueling and sometimes dangerous annual escapades over fifteen years. In Africa, the men come face-to-face with a lion. In the Pacific, they come upon a shark. They cross a Japanese mountain range by bicycle. On a remote island, they fall into a "Kava-coma" after drinking Kava root extract with a native chieftain. In Vietnam, they lodge in a hotel reserved for Communist Party officials. Their annual one-week mission is a getaway from their families and professional chores, and an opportunity to let it all hang out.

A professional as well as recreational traveler and travel writer, Uliel describes the action with the narrative authority of a man who has been there and done it all. Written in the style of memoir, an unnamed first-person narrator provides effective real-time descriptions of the exotic cultures, physical challenges, and guy-fun in spades. The dialogue captures the competitive candor of boys having fun. As Sam, one of the leads, discusses the narrator's wife, he jests: "And for reasons none of us can understand, the lovely lady seems to be genuinely in love with you."

The men's vacations are invested with rituals, from Sumo wrestling to a post-vacation victory lap: a steak dinner. A "Wives Committee" sanctions the trips, and a "Relationship Playbook" evolves as the men share ideas on how to keep their families happy. A commandment of the "Man Mission Charter" is "He who whines loudest wears the Pink Bracelet."

A secondary narrative, encompassing the narrator's backstory, balances the book's action with necessary context. As they age and their everyday successes and failures shape them, the book's characters demonstrate a facility for gut-wrenching self-revelation. In a kayak in the Andaman Sea near Thailand, the narrator realizes that he is "stalked by unease" as cracks in his family life and career become too evident to ignore. Eventually he experiences a devastating betrayal and divorce. His once-successful career succumbs to the inevitability of the business cycle. His journey from suffering to acceptance is tougher even than rowing in the open sea near Fiji.

These journeys, often accompanied by macho posturing, provide an excellent frame for the novel's thesis: a critique of commonplace definitions of manhood and a proposal of a healthier, more relational, and realistic model.

For the man who reads for kicks, *Man Mission* is replete with action and laughs. But for the man seeking growth and fulfillment as well, it provides revelations. As the book deconstructs the "man code," it also updates and revamps it. The boys play as boys must, but they also discover skills needed for living in the world.

JOE TAYLOR (January 30, 2019)

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