

My Wandering Mind

Barbara Ellis

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Barbara Ellis's breezy memoir *My Wandering Mind* compiles travel stories and fond experiences.

Born in Budapest and bit by “that old traveling bug” at a young age, Ellis vowed to explore as much as she could, though she was in her forties before she was able to begin doing so. Her vignettes are linked by their conversational tones, but stand alone as nostalgic forays. They cover trips both real and imagined. Ellis is seen visiting Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and penguins in the Falkland Islands, but she also looks back on flights of fancy in her childhood, as well as activities like dancing to Perry Como, church picnics, and laundering with a wringer washer.

The book includes reflections as of searching the internet for information about wrinkles, and of pulling reels out of storage. Ellis reaches to recreate her parents' voices; there are poignant observations about how only siblings can share in the full significance of a lost mother and father. Facets of what it means to grow old are considered, too.

Elsewhere, Ellis meditates on poppies, particularly on their prevalence in baking—and in European landscapes, art, and psyches. In such moments, the book fuses personal memories with popular information to engaging effect. But some vignettes stray too far afield, as with an entry on water that's tied to memories of trips involving waterfalls, but that slows too much in order to consider a river's progression: the river loses its “wildness and grow[s] old,” but the metaphor itself trails off, too. Other topics are more ably developed, as with an immersive story about Ellis's trip to Petra, which is marked by scenic details.

But the text is light on transitions. Its casual approach has the flavor of a random perusal of one's thoughts. The details of Ellis's life are conveyed in asides and are dispersed between other ruminations; a sense of her life beyond these select moments remains oblique. The book's mood ranges as well, from humor to gratitude, and from pain and joy. Ellis also pokes gentle fun at herself, weighing her daily decisions and questioning all. A recollection of a road trip in a temperamental car covers the frustrated conversation that ensued; while amusing, it's an abrupt conclusion to the winding text.

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KAREN RIGBY (March 23, 2022)

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